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Exploring Social Dimensions of Compulsive Staring Behavior among Men in the Light of Gender Schema Theory

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: In this research, we aimed to apply Gender Schema Theory by Sandra Bem (1983) to investigate compulsive staring behavior among men. This study investigates how gendered behaviors are influenced by cognitive frameworks and cultural standards. Compulsive staring is often accepted and ignored, and it is influenced by internalized gender-based expectations, which shape how people perceive and engage with others in their daily interactions. We are also eager to explore how, in the local context, the nature of the combination of psychological or subconscious desires and social conditioning reinforces compulsive staring behavior.

Methodology: The qualitative research approach utilized in this study consisted of two research techniques. A) Focus group discussions and B). In-depth interviews with students from the most populous universities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Boys and girls from different ethnic backgrounds were included in the research. The perspectives of both boys and girls were gathered regarding the nature, impact, and habit of compulsive staring among men towards women in public places.

Findings: Compulsive staring is not merely an impulsive activity; rather, it is an accepted gendered behavior that is reinforced by social networks, according to thematic analysis incorporating axial and open coding. The findings also indicate that people's perceptions of staring as a regular or appropriate activity are encouraged by gender schemas, particularly in patriarchal contexts when visual objectification adheres to established gender roles.

Conclusion: The study calls for the urgent need for awareness efforts, legislative measures, and educational programs that promote more equitable social interactions, thereby helping to challenge rigid gender stereotypes in society. Future research should investigate how media, upbringing, and institutions further reinforce gendered visual practices.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Harassment, Gender Theory, Staring, Cognitive Framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

The gender schema theory contends that from an early age, infants automatically acquire their cultural norms about both genders. These categories encompass a broad range of sex correlations, including behavioral characteristics, societal roles, and symbolic associations linked to gender, as well as biological differences. Beyond merely absorbing gender-related content, children learn to actively take in and categorize incoming information through the lens of their growing gender paradigm. This cognitive framework shapes their views of themselves and others, reinforcing the socially constructed gender distinctions (Bem, 1983). A lengthy and strong fixation on a person, frequently going over acceptable time limits, is known as obsessive staring, and it can cause uneasiness or distress in the person being stared at (Hout, 2008).

Shoukat and Zaman (2025) observed that objectification plays a crucial role in the development of compulsive staring behavior among men. Psychoanalysis theory and reports that a person's social environment also plays a significant role in the development of this behavior. The current paper aimed to explore the different foundations of compulsive staring and to have a detailed analysis of the gendered phenomenon. While considering the social environment, it is important to start from the family, parenting styles, and childhood, because if a behavior becomes compulsive in adulthood, there are chances that it was developed in childhood or has some roots in that age bracket where child just imitate their elders.

According to Sandra Bem's (1981) Gender-Schema Theory, children acquire knowledge about gender roles and cultural expectations through cognitive frameworks known as gender schemas. These schemas direct attention, memory, and interpretation of gender-relevant stimuli by organizing information according to gender. Lorber (1994) also mentioned, gender is an institution that underlies all social processes in both social groups and daily life. Staring has social, psychological, and gendered connotations that influence how people interact with one another; it is more than just a simple visual act. According to research, staring can convey anger, dominance, or interest which frequently makes the person being stared feel uncomfortable (Ellsworth et al., 1972). Cultural differences contradict this notion, since certain societies could perceive a smile as encouragement rather than discomfort. However, some contend that positive social cues, like smiling, can counteract its intensity. This demonstrates how socially formed gender schemas influence how people perceive and react to visual behaviors.

According to the Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981), people internalize cultural norms regarding both genders, which affects how they act or perceive actions such as staring. Compulsive staring is normalized by traditional gender schemas, which frequently portray men as active spectators and women as passive subjects. Long-term staring is categorized by studies on sexual harassment (SH) as a subtle but widespread kind of SH that undermines autonomy, especially in societies where objectification is accepted (Burn, 2018; Ali et al., 2015). Often disregarded, compulsive staring has a significant impact on women's mobility and public safety since it is ingrained in gendered power dynamics (Sowmya & Sumithra, 2024).

Ponterotto (2016) challenges Western notions that shape women's self-concept and agency by conditioning them to adhere to limited standards of femininity that are imposed by patriarchal organizations and the media. According to Mulvey and Stratton's fetishism theory, the male gaze and pornographic representations of women in Sarah Daniels' Masterpieces are a reflection of internalized gender norms that uphold objectification and domination. These social cues help people—especially women—see themselves through a culturally constructed and frequently oppressive perspective by reinforcing gender schemas.

However, when examined through the lens of gender schemas, gazing is seen to be a behavior reinforced by acquired social roles rather than merely an individual urge. Staring limits women's freedom in public places and is used as a surveillance and dominance tactic in patriarchal societies. Staring at others of the opposite sex raises arousal and causes self-identified adverse feelings. According to Buck and Strom

(1979), these individuals are perceived as less smart and as simultaneously exhibiting higher levels of anxiety, stress, embarrassment, and inactivity. Kulkarni (2020) claims that compulsive staring is a mental habit linked to obsessions and compulsions, often serving as a kind of psychological check triggered by neurotic confusion. According to Fowle and Boschen (2011), obsessive staring may lead people to doubt what they see, much like repeated checking makes one doubt their memory.

Within the framework of gender schema theory, which helps to understand how strict gender roles and expectations of society are ingrained in people, the findings from Benjamin et al. (2016) and Anne, et al. (2019) show how gender norms affect staring behavior and perception of oneself. Benjamin et al. found that staring at the women, especially in a sexually assaulted way, is greatly affected by internalized ideas of masculinity, sexist beliefs, and casual sexual activity. By reflecting gender schemas that associate manhood with exploitation and power, these behaviors reinforce the notion that women are passive targets of masculine focus. Similarly, Anne M. et al. (2019) highlighted that women engage in compulsive staring behaviors related to body image, which are often fueled by social connections and ingrained beauty norms. These behaviors are the result of gender schemas that associate a woman's worth with her appearance, leading her to continuously scrutinize herself and experience dissatisfaction. The two experiments show how staring behavior is socially and personally conditioned, reflecting and reinforcing culturally determined gender standards.

According to Jingru (2023), male gaze on Chinese social media, like Weibo, reflects deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs. Men often show power and desire towards women through critical and confrontational remarks in an effort to maintain existing authority systems. These internalized stereotypes regarding different gender negatively impact women's jobs by treating them more like objects of curiosity than professionals in their field. The study argues that these harmful presumptions must be challenged with the objective to encourage women and fight systemic gender discrimination.

There are some serious effects of compulsive staring mentioned like low-self-esteem; mental distress, devaluation and discomfort or uneasiness, so compulsive staring is considered as type street harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018). According to Gender Schema theory, women are instructed from the very beginning to tolerate any strange behavior from men and men are indirectly permitted to do anything which he wants regardless of this fact how damaging it is for women (Ben, 1918). Charlotte 2011, in his research claimed that gender power and objectification of women is strengthen or reinforces by men when they stare particular parts of women body. In 2002, Skeleton mentioned in his research that power disparity usually reinforced by patriarchal standards which turn women into objects to visualize when any one wants regardless of their independent human beings in terms of male gaze.

Sometime societal norms are unwillingly discouraged when women are portrayed as submissive member of society and male as authoritative (Schuh et al., 2014; Carli, 2001).. McMahon et al., 2023; Muazzam et al., 2016 mentioned in their research that if any society needs to be more safer and eradicate behaviors like compulsive staring, than there is a dire need to have egalitarian spaces for public, proactive safety measures, public awareness campaigns and accountability at social level as well.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To explore how early gender socialization shapes or reinforces compulsive staring as a learnt behavior.

2. To examine the ways in which gender stereotypes impact social hierarchies, power relations, and discomfort when interpreting eye contact.

2. METHOD

Current research followed a qualitative interpretivist paradigm, aiming to investigate the behavior of compulsive staring in social, cultural, and psychological situations through focus groups and interviews.

To ensure a variety of viewpoints, undergraduate and graduate students from universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad were selected using a convenience sample technique.

2.1 Participants, Procedure & Ethical Considerations

Data were gathered by conducting 31 interviews with students boys and girls included both. The age of respondents range from 21 to 35 years. Most students were studying for BS-level degrees. However, only two were enrolled in MS- level degrees. Four focus groups were conducted, with 6 participants in each focus group. A total of 24 students participated in online focus groups from various higher educational institutions in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, enrolled in different subjects. The age range for the participants of FGDs was 22 to 30 years. The majority of the FDG participants were married. Only six were unmarried. The data were collected between March 11, 2024, and May 10, 2024.

Participants were encouraged to discuss their perspectives, experiences, and solutions related to excessive staring through a semi-structured interview guide. Open codes were refined into major themes by data analysis, followed by Braun and Clarke's (2016) thematic analysis. This paper is part of MPhil thesis and the Ethics Committee at FJWU granted ethical permission, guaranteeing voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality with protections for the safety of participants.

3. RESULTS

Table 1: *Social Factors*

Themes	Verbatim
Impact of parenting styles	*"If someone is not asked by family about actions or behavior it might encourage them"*
Imitating elders	*"In our society it is very common to consider men more powerful than women who have the right to control them. It is something inserted in people mind from childhood to feel himself superior. This is gender inequality"*
Peer influence	*"Look! How beautiful she is"*
Men as a powerful figure	*"I think they (men) have freedom to observe the surrounding. So, in my opinion we can't snatch their freedom"*
Unhealthy marital relationship	*"In context of factors that seems the trigger of this behavior compulsive staring is caused by unhealthy marriage relationships when someone can't fulfill his*
	desires positively than he tries to find a way that could help him to do for self-satisfaction. People feel pleasure while doing this that's why this behavior is usually displayed by unmarried or unsatisfied married man"
Influence of media	*"Social Media exposure is the leading cause. Vulgarity is promoted through social media content. Our youth is getting addict of it. Some movies or scenes promote vulgarity, which is negatively affecting the mindset of our youngsters"*
Socio-economic Background	*"This behavior is usually displayed by those people who have no work or nothing to work on in their lives, they stare more" "Mostly male stare and check the reaction of girl (if she becomes afraid) than they try for other forms of harassment like touching and rape etc."*

| From staring to harassment | ”*Mostly male stare and try for harassment*” |
| Role of bystanders | “*There will be no impact on starer if no reaction comes from staree or by-standers*” |

Researching the behavior of compulsive staring under the lens of gender schema theory emphasize the role of social factors in a person's life. During the analysis of data obtained from research participants role of family and peers is highlighted as it is stated that child brain is a blank plate which is filled by the norms or traditions of family. He learns and imitates behaviors reinforced by the family. If this type of behaviors are not considered wrong or discouraged than there are chances that this behavior prevails. Most important point to discuss here is if someone in a person's family is doing such type of activity than there are chances as because it gives a sense of satisfaction that he is not the only one who is involved in it. One of the respondents mentioned in interview:

> *"I think family and friends are very important, if one friend does this, he will ask others too to exhibit same behavior. Family is also very important in context of parenting, education, awareness, if parents spend enough time with their kids and educate them about different social issues they might inform about different behaviors that can hurt others. But if parents are ignoring this could be the reason"*

Friends are also very important contributing factor in case of reinforcement of this behavior or discouraging this behavior. Most of the respondents in interviews and in focus group as well mentioned that most of the time a person who is not involved in this type of activities start taking interests as almost all of his group members are doing this. Likewise, in a case where a perpetrator of this behavior joins a group of friend who all consider all these things as wrongdoing may stop this behavior as he don't want to stand out or consider odd in his circle.

Role of marital relationships is highlighted by most of the respondents and most of them agreed to this point that unhealthy marital relationships are the leading cause of this type of behavior and this varies from staring to harassment. Participant 6 from FGDs stated that:

> *"Marital relationship is important more than anything else. I think in love marriage there are less chances of involvement in this type of activities. Rests all are secondary. Those who are unmarried also do this because their needs aren't going to fulfill"*

In public places, compulsive staring is prevalent and frequently results in harassment. Most of the respondents mentioned that many males test boundaries by gazing at women and then escalating based on their reactions. In densely populated, less educated areas like Rawalpindi, where societal norms support the notion that males can stare while women have to come up with or adapt, this type of behavior is more prevalent.

4.1 Workplace, employment and Power Status

Some men stare more than others, and this is largely due to factors like employment position. This behavior was associated with unemployment, certain occupations, such as security guards, drivers, and merchants, most likely due to boredom or a sense of control over public areas.

According to several respondents, staring is a sort of dominance that makes women feel helpless and uneasy in public. Because objectifying women is accepted in society, men frequently don't think it's bad.

It is very important to discuss where this type of behavior is displayed and what the reaction of bystanders is. As it is somewhat the demand of the situation to intervene, but risky, and a bit hesitant at the same time. As there is no physical involvement, there are chances that the perpetrator will deny displaying this behavior, claiming that the bystander is making a false judgment on him. Sometime, there is a risk of negative comments and quarrel too due to which respondents think it is difficult to intervene in this of situation. But beside all these things it is important to consider that ignorance from bystanders serves as

reinforcement for this social issue.

One of the respondents in interview 1 gave a suggestion as:

> "*Bystanders shouldn't intervene to fight or embarrass but to counsel the perpetrator as this behavior is damaging for society*"

3rd respondent from 1st FGD mentioned:

> "*There will be no impact on starer if no reaction comes from staree or by- standers, they will encourage by this ignorance thinking that no one can let them stop*"

Some of the respondents recommended a solution to stop this behavior that social media posts and awareness campaigns could be a powerful means of combating these negative habits and influencing people's views toward equality and respect.

5. DISCUSSION

The evidence from this research suggests that compulsive staring is a learned behavior that is influenced by peers, family, and social norms.

According to Thomson (2009) and Gobel et al. (2015), compulsive staring is socially motivated and can be used as a source of information as well as a nonverbal communication technique, like making eye contact during conversations or explanations. Most of the respondents in focus group discussion commented about the role of family. It was mentioned by them that, Participation from parents is essential for influencing a child's behavior, especially keeping an eye on their online and social connections. Problematic behaviors can result from inattentive or authoritarian parenting, particularly when caretakers are raising the children. Family influence is also important since it normalizes incorrect behavior by exposing people to it from authoritative male figures. It is challenging to modify this learnt habit when it gets so ingrained. Men's power in the home frequently silences criticism, which feeds negative habits even more.

The focus on how social norms constrain behaviors based on gender roles is in line with gender schema theory. Men's compulsive staring was primarily associated with power and control; respondents mentioned this notion that compulsive staring behavior is very common in those societies where men are considered as a powerful figure that has the right to do such things. This supports previous studies on gender schemas, which claim that femininity is linked to submission and masculinity is often associated with dominance (Bem, 1981). Respondents supported Bem's (1981) assertion that gendered behavior is influenced by early gender schemas.

Peer influence was also emphasized, as respondents explained how male friends urge those who object by claiming that as long as we are not touching someone, staring behavior is not problematic one as it is harmful. Friends have a big influence on behavior; by normalizing and supporting compulsive staring, they may sometimes put pressure on others to engage in it. It can be challenging to resist when peer groups utilize bullying or humiliation to pressure non- participants into fitting in. "Everyone does it" and "admiring beauty isn't wrong" are justifications that serve to further solidify this behavior. Friends can, however be helpful by opposing such conduct and encouraging adherence to human rights. The respondents underlined that since friendships have the power to mold a person's personality and moral principles, parents should keep an eye on their child's social group.

Additionally, this study found that men from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds engage in compulsive staring, refuting the notion that only uneducated or lower-class men do this behavior. Respondents pointed out that middle-class people might stare compulsively more than others. They may not have the greater degree of education and social sophistication typically associated with the top class, but they do not struggle as much for basic resources as the lower class does. Some actions, such as inappropriate staring, may be influenced by the spot between two extremes as a means of amusement

or social expression. This shows that excessive staring is ingrained in gendered socialization across classes and is not just a result of socioeconomic challenges. Compulsive gazing is also influenced by one's employment situation and type of work. According to the respondents, obsessive staring is more common among males in low-stress occupations like sales or shop keeping than among men in high-stress occupations.

The study also emphasizes how victim blaming reinforces gender stereotypes in society. According to a number of respondents, when women are harassed, their behavior or clothing is questioned instead of the actions of the harassers. This is consistent with cultural narratives that hold women accountable for controlling men's behavior through modest clothing or avoiding particular situations. The study supported the idea that women need to control their appearance in public places by using the example of the motorway rape case, in which the victim was held accountable rather than the offenders. Likewise, some participants admitted that some women misuse or play women card by making unfounded accusations against men. Although these instances are uncommon (Crosby, 1987), they nonetheless constitute a prevalent narrative that undermines legitimate allegations of harassment. This provides validity to the Gender Schema Theory's assertion that gender roles, which tend to favor perspectives of men, influence how society interprets their actions.

The study found that gendered behavior is significantly shaped by media consumption. Ads, movies, and music videos that use hypersexualized images help men internalize the idea that looking at women is socially acceptable (Calogero & Tylka, 2014; Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2018). Because women are portrayed in the media as sexual objects, participants observed that excessive staring is perceived as harmless. Because women are portrayed in the media as sexual objects, participants observed that excessive staring is perceived as harmless. Galdi & Guizzo highlighted in their research that when exposed to media most of the men are about to commit sexual harassment. It is important to understand that Yang, 2016 provided another way to eradicate negative behaviors and stop their reinforcement sources too by hashtag activism which is also a good way of using social media platforms.

Women who are victimized by compulsive staring experience serious psychological distress. The fact that respondents expressed feeling unsafe underscores how such behavior interferes with women's day-to-day life. Moreover, social surroundings and education have an effect on compulsive staring. Because of increased human rights consciousness, there were less examples of this behavior in university settings, supporting the idea that education may change gender schemas. However, because bystanders rarely step in, gazing was more prevalent in public places like bus stops and markets. Negative gender stereotypes continue to exist because of this lack of accountability.

Compulsive staring is also associated with relationship dissatisfaction, which supports the idea that gendered behaviors are shaped by a combination of social and psychological variables. In order to establish repressed impulses, a man may indulge in compulsive staring if he and his spouse are at odds or if he does not feel sexually fulfilled at home. Benjamin et al. 2016 supported this claim by showing how masculine staring behavior is affected by their attitudes and beliefs about casual sex that are sexist.

Usually it is noticed that compulsive staring transforms in other forms of harassment. Ali et al., 2015 highlighted in their research that staring behavior can be the first step or base towards extreme negative behaviors which starts from verbal to physical or sexual abuse. It is important to mention here that this claim is supported by respondents of this research also as they said perpetrators of compulsive staring behavior starts staring at first to cause discomfort and check the reaction and then proceed towards more complicated behaviors. Here this notion is supported that women bodies are objectified and this concepts is normalized as gender schema due to which this type of behaviors persists in society. . Harassment is also reported from workplace, the respondents stated that before stepping up their attempts, offender's first use staring to evaluate a woman's reaction. The Gender Schema Theory posits that these practices are socially acceptable because men are often socialized to view women as passive objects of masculine focus. These findings confirm this theory.

Gender stereotypes are either challenged or reinforced by bystanders. Many respondents said they were reluctant to step in when they saw compulsive staring because they were afraid of social confrontation or reprisals. Negative gender stereotypes are sustained as a result of this passive acceptance. The respondents emphasized the lack of awareness and societal reluctance to intervene, despite the fact that the 5Ds of bystander intervention (Milani & Carbajal, 2023) offer ways for resolving harassment.

Because male solidarity frequently takes precedence over keeping people accountable, gender schemas inhibit males from criticizing the actions of other men. The silencing impact of patriarchal gender standards may be furthered by women avoiding conflict out of fear for their safety. Broader attempts to stop harassment will encounter opposition as long as compulsive looking is socially acceptable. To address obsessive staring, it is necessary to reconstruct deeply rooted gender assumptions through educational interventions. Respondents underlined the necessity of media-driven campaigns, moral education initiatives, and awareness campaigns to counteract the normality of staring. It is very important to practice in our conversations with men about the negative consequences of compulsive staring and how much damage this behavior can do to the person being stared at. This point was highlighted by the research respondents.

This study also shows that compulsive staring is rooted in gender schemas that promote female objectification and masculine entitlement. The resilience of this behavior is influenced or impacted mainly by cultural norms, different psychological aspects and social hierarchy as well. It is illogical to consider gender schemas as rigid or something that is unable to change, we can easily bring change by providing awareness and education. Findings of this study shed light on the importance of making changes in gender perceptions by taking collective actions. These collective initiatives will make public spaces more safe and equitable for everyone. By putting in place educational initiatives, enabling candid conversations about gender roles, and supporting intervention techniques, societies can combat toxic gender stereotypes and minimize excessive staring.

6. CONCLUSION

In this research, gender schema theory in social aspects assisted to explore the behavior of compulsive staring. It is revealed by that a person's family, their up-brining or socialization plays very crucial role about the development of different gender based perceptions. Depending on the customs or norms followed by adults, family and friends may support or oppose this practice. The type of work, marital status, and employment position all have a significant impact on how this behavior develops. The significance of bystander involvement discourages the prevalence of this behavior. According to gender schema theory, compulsive staring is a result of deeply embedded gender assumptions rather than an individual habit. The development of a gender-equal world may be fostered by awareness-raising initiatives and educational reforms.

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