



Experiences of discrimination based on the physical appearance of university students

Experiencias de discriminación basada en la apariencia física de estudiantes universitarios

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Abstract

University students continue to be discriminated against based on their gender, race, ethnicity, sexual preferences, mental health conditions, religious beliefs, and other factors. Discrimination based on gender and physical appearance, such as skin color, race, or ethnicity, stands out as the one to which the most experiences of discrimination are attributed. The purpose of this research is to understand how experiences of discrimination based on physical appearance influence the academic experience and emotional well-be-

ing of university students. Students (12 in total) from a private university in the metropolitan area of Monterrey who indicated that they had experienced discrimination were interviewed. A grounded theory approach was used for their analysis. Different forms of discrimination based on physical appearance were found, such as discrimination based on skin color, weight, height, and/or the use of tattoos that are interpreted as a stigma of social status. These influence students' self-esteem and stress, in addition to having negative academic effects such as demotivation and lack of concentration. Students have limited personal resources to address these actions, and they do not find a close link to request help from university staff. These findings are discussed in light of other studies of discrimination based on physical appearance in universities.

Keywords: Discrimination, university, educational discrimination, coping, socio emotionality.

Resumen

Los estudiantes universitarios siguen siendo discriminados por su género, raza, etnia, preferencias sexuales, condiciones de salud mental, sus creencias religiosas, etc. La discriminación por género y por la apariencia física, como color de la piel, la raza o etnia, destaca por ser a la que más experiencias de discriminación se atribuyen. El propósito de esta investigación es comprender de qué manera influye esta discriminación por apariencia física en la experiencia académica y bienestar emocional en los estudiantes universitarios. Se entrevistó a 12 estudiantes de una universidad privada del área metropolitana de Monterrey que señalaron haber vivido discriminación por apariencia física. Se siguió el enfoque de teoría fundamentada para el análisis cualitativo. Se encontraron distintas formas de discriminación por apariencia física, tales como la discriminación por color de piel, peso, altura y/o el uso de tatuajes que se interpretan como un estigma del estatus social. Estos influyen en la autoestima y estrés de los estudiantes, además de tener efectos académicos negativos como la desmotivación y la falta de concentración. Además, se identificó que los estudiantes tienen limitados recursos personales para afrontar estas acciones recibidas, además de que no encuentran un vínculo cercano para solicitar ayuda al personal de la universidad. Se discuten estos hallazgos a la luz de otros estudios de discriminación por apariencia física en la universidad.

Palabras clave: Discriminación, universidad, discriminación educacional, afrontamiento, socioemocionalidad.

INTRODUCTION

In Mexico, discrimination and violence are part of the institutional culture of universities. Indigenous students face discrimination that results in lower rates of access to and completion of higher education compared to other ethnic groups (Aguayo Rousell & Piña Osorio, 2016; Solís, 2017). Furthermore, male and female students still fall far short of equal opportunities (Gómez Bañuelos et al., 2022).

Globally, discrimination in university settings has taken practically the same forms as in other social settings. The scientific literature reports discrimination against university students based on gender (Biurrun-Garrido et al., 2024; Moreno-Cubillos et al., 2013; Gökçe, 2013; Vazquez Laba & Palumbo, 2019;

Vásquez Torres & Flores López, 2019); race/ethnicity (Bucchianeri et al., 2016; Gamba et al., 2024; Gökçe, 2013; Torres Fernández & Montalván Caicedo, 2018; Zambrana Balladares, 2021); sexual preferences (Moagi et al., 2021; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2020); due to mental health conditions (Zhang et al., 2020); clothing style; religious attitudes; political leanings; hometown or nationality; age; and even IQ levels. Furthermore, it can present itself as cyberbullying (Prieto Quezada et al., 2015) and even be perpetrated by teachers (Gökçe, 2013).

Previous research on discrimination in universities shows that it can have significant negative effects on mental health, including depression and distress (Benner et al., 2018), stigmatization and victimization (Moagi et al., 2021), and anxiety (Woodford et al., 2014). Discrimination in young university students can also affect students' self-esteem (Kim et al., 2023) and their academic performance (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010).

Discrimination has also been identified as having physiological effects, such as elevated blood pressure, which can lead to serious physical health problems. Similarly, discrimination based on physical appearance influences students to adopt unhealthy habits such as drug abuse (Kendzor et al., 2014), alcohol consumption, and an increase in sedentary lifestyles, i.e., poor stress management (Hua et al., 2023).

Discrimination based on physical appearance at university

Several studies have investigated the prevalence and effects of physical appearance-based discrimination among college students (Canache et al., 2014; Gökçe, 2013). For example, one study conducted in the United States aimed to estimate the extent of self-reported discrimination experiences among a large sample of American respondents and to explore their perceptions of why they felt discriminated against. The results showed that approximately one-quarter of participants reported experiencing discrimination based on their physical appearance (Boutwell et al., 2017).

Considering data from Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru, Canache et al. (2014) identified that skin color and racial and ethnic self-categorization strongly correspond to perceived discrimination. Meanwhile, socioeconomic status (wealth), personality (kindness), and the composition of a person's regional context were iden-

tified with more modest additional effects. At a public university in Bolivia, for example, various expressions of collective discrimination by university students and faculty were identified. These are set against the backdrop of the validity of negative stereotypes about indigenous ethnicity (Zambrana Valladares, 2021).

A study of university students in Turkey revealed that a large proportion of them have witnessed or been victims of discriminatory acts based on clothing, religious beliefs, political leanings, gender, nationality, age, and even IQ (Gökçe, 2013). Although there are studies worldwide, it is important to mention that in Mexico, there is a lack of studies that analyze the reasons for these discriminatory acts, important aspects to consider, and the role that educational institutions play in these actions. For this reason, it is of utmost importance to analyze the problem from a qualitative perspective.

Qualitative research provides insight into the causes, risks, and context in which discrimination occurs within the educational environment. This can be beneficial for creating awareness and discrimination prevention programs within the university. Furthermore, the results of qualitative research can help the educational community identify the various forms in which discrimination can occur and thus implement interventions that consider both the victim and the perpetrator.

The General Law on Higher Education (LGES) states that education is a right that contributes to the well-being and comprehensive development of individuals, and therefore, inclusive, equitable, and violence-free environments should be fostered (Chamber of Deputies of the Honorable Congress of the Union, 2021). Although anti-discrimination protocols have proliferated in Latin American universities (COPRED, 2022; Muñoz et al., 2021; Tronco Rosas & Ocaña López, 2011) to support individuals in reporting acts of violence or discrimination, greater efforts are still needed to achieve more favorable results.

Aim of the research

This research aims to understand how experiences of discrimination based on physical appearance influence the academic experience and emotional well-being of university students at a private university in Mexico. To this end, the research question is: What is the experience of discrimination among university students?

METHOD

This qualitative study consisted of 12 interviews with 11 university students and one alumnus who reported experiencing discrimination based on physical appearance at a private higher education institution located in the Monterrey metropolitan area. A grounded theory approach was followed when analyzing the participants' interviews. The structured interview was used as the instrument for data collection, and the intervention lasted approximately one month.

Selection of participants

The participants selected for the research are students from the university where the study was conducted. University students who have experienced discrimination were considered, as the goal was to learn about the experiences of those who lived through them. In addition, one former student was included due to his close knowledge of specific cases. Table 1 describes some of the main characteristics of the study participants.

Table 1

Characteristics of the study participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Bachelor's degree
Student 1	Male	23	Mechatronics
Student 2	Female	21	Psychopedagogy
Student 3	Female	22	Marketing and Creative Strategy
Student 4	Female	21	Interior design
Student 5	Female	22	Fashion design
Student 6	Female	21	Business Management
Student 7	Female	21	Law
Student 8	Male	24	Robotics and Intelligent Systems
Student 9	Male	23	Communication
Student 10	Female	22	Psychopedagogy
Student 11	Female	23	Administration
Former student 1	Male	33	Graphic design

Data collection procedure

The initial goal was to establish contact with potential participants. To do so, a snowball sampling approach was used, asking university students if they knew anyone who had experienced discrimination. When contacting students who had experienced these experiences, they were invited to participate in an interview. All students who were asked to be interviewed agreed. A date and time were then set for each of the semi-structured interviews.

Instruments for data collection

A semi-structured interview was used, which primarily focused on identifying the facts surrounding the discrimination based on physical appearance that students experienced, the various forms in which it was presented, and the effects it had on the university experience, both academically and on the students' emotional well-being.

Rapport with the interviewees was established by demonstrating closeness. Once rapport was achieved, they were asked to share their experiences of discrimination, followed by questions that ensured they covered several areas where discrimination could have had an impact. The following topics were considered:

- experiences during their university life related to discrimination based on physical appearance;
- feelings that were triggered by this experience;
- how the experience affects their academic performance and emotional well-being;
- receiving support from a member of the institution.

Data analysis

The data analysis procedure was based on the grounded theory of Strauss and Corbin (2016), who propose a process consisting of three phases.

- The first phase is based on open coding, that is, the data collected in the interviews are named to create labels from the most significant findings in the interviews.
- The second phase involved axial coding, in which the previously identified labels were related. This is how the emerging categories were identified.
- The third phase involved selective coding, in which the relationship between the proposed categories and the underlying theory was discovered through the creation of a conceptual map.

RESULTS

Figure 1 presents the categories that emerged from the analysis of the interviews about experiences of discrimination at the university, along with the most prominent labels for each. The following categories were identified:

- types of discrimination;
- socio-emotional effects;
- academic effects;
- coping strategies;
- institutional support.

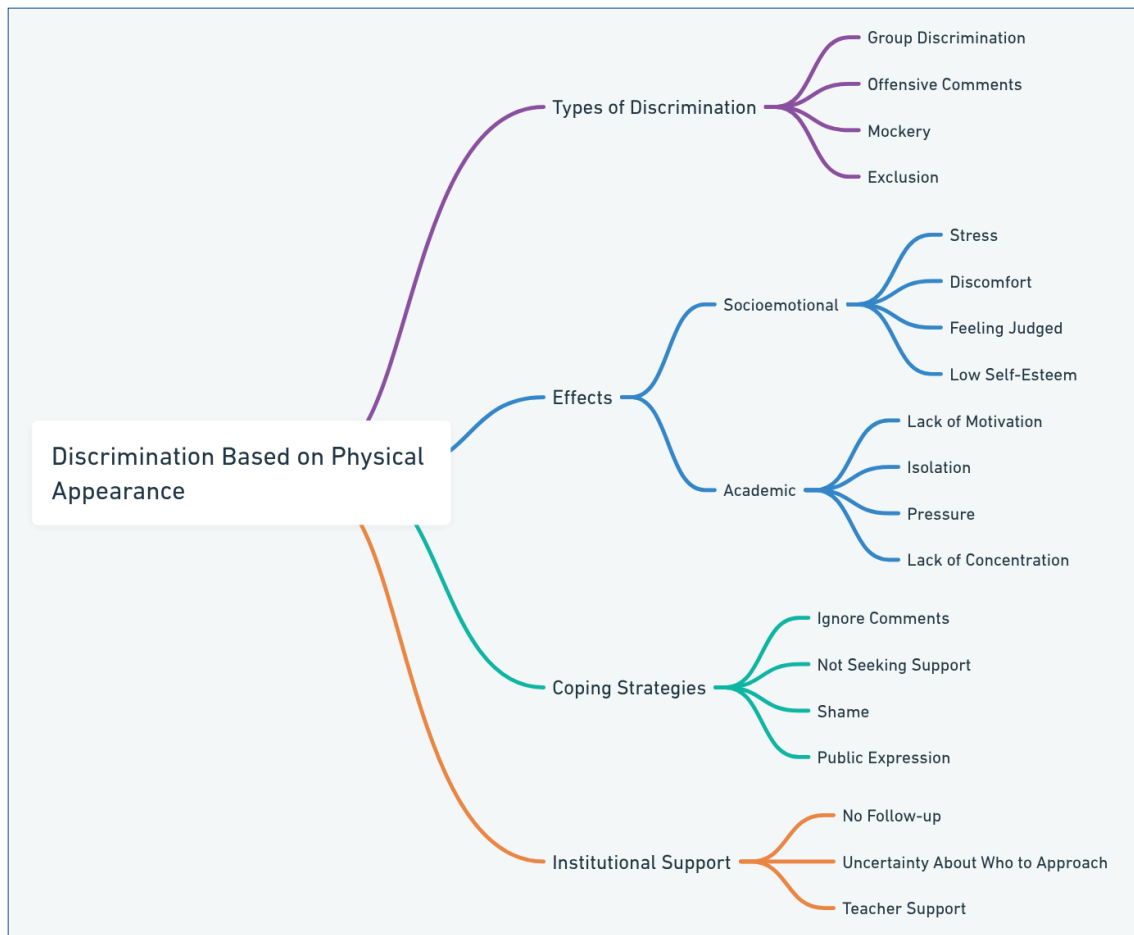


Figure 1
Discrimination based on physical appearance in university students.

Types of discrimination

Interviewees report various forms of discrimination based on physical appearance, such as discrimination based on skin color, weight, height, wearing certain types of clothing, and tattoos. Regarding skin color, it was identified that this can be a reason for exclusionary attitudes in which discriminated students feel like they don't belong in the local environment. Student 1 commented:

They could also tell from my physical appearance that I didn't come from an environment like theirs.

In the context of a private university with students from families of high socioeconomic status, comments can be identified that provoke segregation due to this social situation. In the following case, of a dark-skinned, low-income scholarship student from a state in the south-central part of the country, a former student who accompanied her commented:

She decided to leave [the university] because the comments were to such an extent that she couldn't team up with anyone, because practically no one wanted to team up with her. There were comments... referring to her as the servant (Former student).

Discrimination based on physical appearance sometimes occurs in a group setting, through offensive comments, mockery, and/or exclusion, as can be seen in the following quote,

I went to the club with my group of friends, and I was the only one who had trouble getting into the club [have access because I have dark skin], so that led to a lot of mockery from my classmates (Student 8).

Another student also referred to exclusionary comments that one of her classmates received:

And I had to listen to a lot of people, mostly men, who said, 'Oh, you can see her nipples or something like that,' in a kind of disgusting way, that it's not right, like why can't she wear a bra, or why did she shave her head (Student 2).

Socio-emotional effects

The socioemotional effects caused by experiences of discrimination based on physical appearance are mostly associated with feeling constantly judged. Students who have experienced discrimination mostly agree that they feel their peers are continually observing them and making negative judgments about their physical appearance, whether through comments made previously, directly, or indirectly. Some of these socioemotional effects, which were repeated throughout the interviews, were feelings of discomfort, decreased self-esteem, and increased stress.

Regarding the insecurity that can be triggered by experiences of discrimination based on physical appearance, one student shared that:

Feeling uncomfortable creates insecurities and makes it difficult for you to fit in; many times, you feel insecure about how you look (Student 5).

Additionally, several participants mentioned that they experience or have experienced a constant feeling of judgment:

I no longer socialized with them as much for fear of, well, that they were going to judge me or something like that because of my appearance. The truth is that for a while, what I did was more like covering myself up so as not to give them an excuse or a reason to judge me (Student 4).

Finally, living through these experiences can also have other types of socio-emotional effects, such as stress and anxiety, which are expressed in the distress of students who decide to avoid this discriminatory environment to the point of dropping out of university:

And there came a time when she reached a level of stress where she said I no longer wanted to go. There came a week when she said, I no longer want to go, and we could no longer help her (Former student).

Academic effects

Academic effects refer to how a person who has suffered or is suffering discrimination performs in the classroom, how this experience limits them in this regard, and, therefore, how negative academic repercussions are triggered. Some negative academic

effects are related to how this experience impacts a student's ability to perform processes that enable them to reach their full potential, such as motivation, concentration, and participation inside and outside the classroom.

Experiencing discrimination affects how students perform at university, as they often decrease their participation in activities both inside and outside the classroom:

I didn't feel very comfortable joining groups because I knew the situation was going to be the same; wherever I went, the situation was going to be similar. And I don't blame all those people, but anyway, it did prevent me from joining, from enjoying all the things that the [university] has to offer (Student 1).

I no longer wanted to try to apply for any position in any other management [of the career board] or even belong to any [student] group... I no longer wanted to participate because I was afraid of being discriminated against again [for using tattoos] (Student 4).

In addition, there are other types of academic consequences associated with student motivation. Some comments that demonstrate these effects include:

I entered the program very motivated, because I know that the [university] is a very good institution, but, well, for the same reason I told you, I started to feel less motivated during the first semesters; I think even during the first few months or weeks (Student 1)

My motivation to be in everything went completely down (Student 4)

I'm focusing more on my appearance than I should, instead of focusing on my studies, taking some of the energy away from studies and focusing it on things that shouldn't be an issue (Student 5).

Coping strategies

Regarding the coping strategies developed and used by students who have experienced discrimination at university, there is a prevalence of those students who say they have not found any type of coping strategy to address this situation. Although a few students mention feeling embarrassed about seeking support from someone else, more simply have not sought to use any specific strategy.

However, some of the interviewees pointed out actions they have taken to cope with the situation, in their own perception, in the best way possible. In most cases, this way of coping involved downplaying the opinions of others or ignoring the situation:

I pay much less attention to other people's comments or attitudes about me (Student 4);

I ignored them and thought it was just a comment and that they only did it to look good among themselves (Student 9).

Some students not only mention that they ignore offensive comments, but also show a positive attitude toward themselves and their beliefs, as this student points out as a coping strategy:

Focus on my goals, be sure of them. That is, what I want to do and what I want to achieve, and well, everyone has their opinion, and well, you continue on your path to achieve your goals (Student 6).

Institutional support

The interviewees agree that, due to the lack of promotion and knowledge about student support spaces, many of these students did not have the opportunity to approach someone from the institution to resolve the situation they were experiencing within the university:

Well, the truth is no, and I don't know of any of these groups that could help me. I would hope that my course director would direct me to a group like that, but the truth is I don't know (Student 8).

On the other hand, other students prefer to face discrimination without help:

Well, since I didn't communicate it with any teacher, any advisor or anything, well, the truth is that I do know that there are people who could have supported me, but I didn't feel safe enough to do it then, well, no (Student 4).

Furthermore, some interviewees indicated that when they sought help from teachers, they spoke with the aggressors, without referring specialized university personnel to those who were discriminated against:

Once she came to seek the support of the teacher who taught that class, and I think that the teacher gave a speech to the class about how that is not done, and so on (Student 2).

I think the topic was discussed with the students who raised the issue of bullying, but it didn't go beyond talking to them (Former student).

Lack of awareness and promotion of these resources results in a gap between students and the available support services, which could have helped alleviate their academic, personal, or emotional difficulties.

DISCUSSION

To discuss the results of this study regarding discrimination based on physical appearance, it is important to consider that physical appearance is associated with many other forms of discrimination. Physical appearance is a means of expressing one's ethnicity, nationality, religion, and other diverse preferences. In many cases, discrimination based on physical appearance arises from the observation of a "social stigma," that is, an attribute that makes a person different from others, less likable, and inferior (Goffman, 2006).

Just as Gökçe (2013) and Gamba et al. (2024) identify aspects of physical appearance such as the way of dressing and skin color, as well as those expressions of ethnicity and religious identity, which are grounds for discrimination, this study identifies that weight, height, clothing, and the use of tattoos are features of appearance and physical characteristics for which university students are also discriminated against. This highlights how aspects of physical appearance, such as skin color and dress, are a source of stigma in high socioeconomic university settings.

Regarding the effects of discrimination, the results of this study are consistent in terms of the emotional impacts on mental health (Benner et al., 2018; Moagi et al., 2021; Woodford et al., 2014) and self-esteem (Kim et al., 2023). Regarding mental health, the stress and anxiety caused by constant judgment stand out, in addition to the consequent negative effects on the academic performance of the affected students (Huynh and Fuligni, 2010).

The study also identifies that both the socioemotional and academic effects vary greatly in each case, depending on the form of discrimination and the students' coping capacity. However, certain patterns can be found in the consequences of discrimination. For example, in the case of socioemotional effects, some of the most prevalent consequences have been insecurity, decreased socialization, and a constant feeling of being judged. Meanwhile, in the case of academic effects, the predominant patterns found have been decreased participation and attention.

CONCLUSIONS

Discrimination based on physical appearance is a reality in university settings, with a significant prevalence among students. The impact of discrimination on students' university life is evident. Discrimination based on physical appearance negatively impacts the psychological and emotional well-being of affected students. This can manifest in high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Furthermore, discrimination based on physical appearance can also affect students' academic performance.

This study highlights the need to enhance the dissemination and promotion of institutional services, ensuring that students are well-informed and can easily access the help they need, thereby mitigating the difficulties they face during their academic career. This requires training of those involved, including teachers, who can support the detection and referral to specialized personnel within the institution.

To this end, the implementation of institutional strategies and policies to address discrimination on university campuses is suggested. These interventions could include awareness programs, anti-discrimination policies, and psychological support services for affected students. Recognizing and addressing physical appearance discrimination in the university setting will foster an inclusive and supportive environment for all students to develop successfully and comprehensively during their university years.

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