

Searching for the ‘Perfect’ Body: Experiential Voices on Perception of Body Image in Young Undergraduate Women

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Abstract—Research on body image has often concentrated more on the ‘body’ per se rather than how women actually experience their body. The body and experiences of the body are closely interlinked. An intensive study on body image was conducted on 80 young women undergraduates of 18-21 years. The respondents were divided on the basis of their negative (dissatisfied) and positive (satisfied) body image scores. These two groups responded to the query. Using thematic analysis the two data sets were captured in terms themes of body image perceptions, and coping strategies often used by young women to counter their negative body image and acceptance of positive body image. Overall results indicate that the young women reported as being satisfied with their body image, but those with negative body image state socio-cultural pressures to conform to a ‘perfect’ body size and report about disturbing negative affect and its influence on their self and relationships with others in the social milieu. Physical appearance in terms of height, weight, facial outline, flat stomach and the like emerged to be of immense concern to the young women. The influences in terms of distress, anger, frustration as expressed by the young women participants reflect the angst of maintain external appearances. The study has inputs of awareness and promotion of health, youth psychology, counseling and identity politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Body image refers to how we visually perceive our bodies and what we feel about our physical appearance. It also refers to a sense of how others might view our appearance and how they might think and talk about it. It refers to the level of connectedness of one individual to their body. Body image is a complicated aspect of an individual’s self-concept, which has a constant preoccupation of thoughts of an individual. Females of all age groups are particularly concerned about this aspect, which increases the vulnerability of this topic. Researchers have, thus, called female’s concerns with their physical appearance as a “normative discontent,” which implies that body dissatisfaction affects almost all women at some level irrespective of the age group [1 and 2].

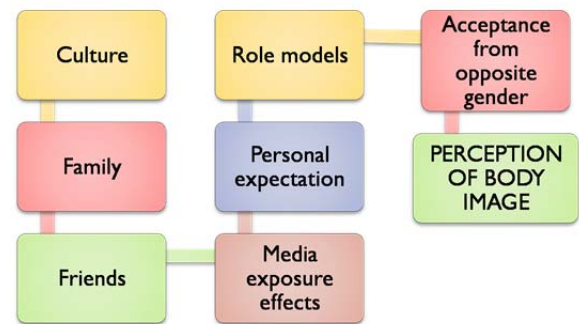


Fig. 1.1: Multiple sources provide perception of body image to the young adults.

Fig. 1.1 details the multiple sources that provide inputs and the young female adults come to form ideas about their body. Females are found to experience higher level of dissatisfaction with their physical appearance at a much higher rate than males [1], and women of all ages and sizes display various body image disturbances. Thus it seems that body dissatisfaction is closely linked to appearance-related cognitions than the physical realities. People are vulnerable to display disturbed body image if they hold dysfunctional beliefs and thoughts about their physical appearance, regardless of body mass [2]. Various studies have verified that one’s subjective evaluation of their own appearance has a powerful impact on an individual’s development and psychosocial experiences [2]. An intense form of negative body image is the Body Dysmorphic Disorder, in which individuals are so obsessed with the perceived flaws of one’s appearance that it starts affecting relationships as well as the professional front of an individual. It also leads to anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. However, this disorder is curable through a combination of medication and therapy. Joan Brumberg the author of *The Body Project*, commented that the idea of femininity being linked to the notion of thinness, have become unrelenting [3]. Studies done at the Stanford University and the University of Massachusetts found that

70% of college women say they feel worse about their own looks after reading women’s magazines, which led to risky behaviors. Furthermore, pressure from family and friends is not about imparting and strengthening the belief in thinness as an ideal. Rather, the pressure arises so as to become integrated into the culture. In the book *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep*, Becky Thompson says that, “The culture of thinness in models has been used, erroneously, to dismiss the eating problems among women of color based on the notion that they are not interested in, or affected by a culture that demands thinness.” [4]

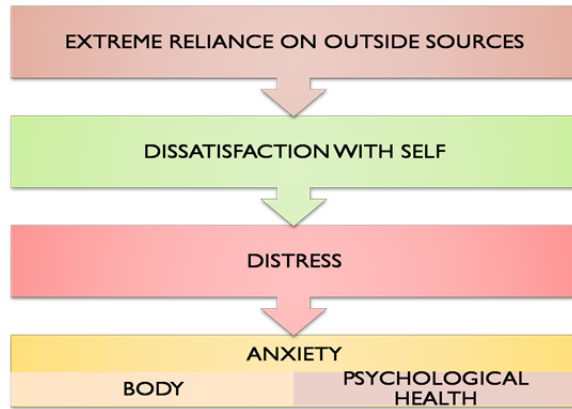


Fig. 1.2: External sources leading towards perfect body internalization

Unrealistic images of thin women dominate the media largely so much that females who fulfill this standard become the norm and others become the exception. This is the Cultivation Theory, which states that repetitive exposure to such portrayals influences women’s cognition and perception about oneself. Many woman view thin as “normal” and thus state that those women who do not fit in that standard are “abnormal” [5 and 6]. Sands and Wardle, propounded the Self Schema Theory, which states that women use three reference points to form perceptions about their body and its appearance, i.e., the social notion of the ideal body, the objective body and the internalized ideal body [7].

2. OBJECTIVES

To find out the role of external sources in determining an individual’s perception about her body and appearance.

3. PRESENT STUDY

Prime research concerning the issue of body image and basically its effects on women has been initiated by Butters & Cash (1987) - [2], Cash & Pruzinsky (2002) – [8], Striegel-Moore & Franko (2002) –[1], Tiggemann & Slater (2004) – [9]. Research on the topic of body image and its effects on young women have been limited in the national context, thus creating a gap in the literature. In today’s time when India has the highest population of the youth, making their concerns of

prime importance would ultimately lead to a step towards enhancing the society. This study is a part of the intensive study done on 80 female undergraduates within the age limit of 18-21 years. Qualitative method of analysis was used to identify the emergent themes for both positive and negative body images.

3.1 Sample

The study was conducted on 80 female undergraduates within the age group of 18-21 years. The sample was chosen from within the University of Delhi.

3.2 Measures

The respondents were asked to answer a semi-structured questionnaire, which aimed at understanding the personal experiences of individuals with regards to the perception of body.

Question: Are you satisfied with your physical appearance? Please narrate your personal experiences where your body image has had an effect on your behavior.

4. PROCEDURE

The question was administered to females within the age group of 18-21 years from within the University of Delhi. After the data collection, qualitative analysis was done which led to the accumulation of various codes and themes that answered the question raised for the study. The reason for studying both positive and negative perception of body image was undertaken as it was observed that even female participants with positive image were influenced by socio-cultural factors.

5. RESULTS

Table 1.1: Emergent themes for body image for young female adults

COMPLETELY SATISFIED	Feels good about body size, Happy with features, Physical appearance don’t bother much, No need to change, Acceptance, comfortable, doesn’t affect day-to-day activities.
VALUING ONESELF	Proud of what God has given me and made me like, Inner beauty, Perfect
PRIORITIES	Looks don’t matter, Secondary option
PHYSICAL ASPECTS	Short height, Weight gain, Weight loss, Facial texture, Belly fat, dark circles, Fat line in abdomen, frizzy hair
PERSONAL BELIEFS	Requisite for a better personality, Appearance is a hindrance to people taking one seriously, enhances personality, Leads to positive behavior.
BEHAVIOR	Shy to meet new people and guys, comfortable with females only, feel confident when look good, Feel inferior when don’t look good, Hard to be social, make efforts, Affected interaction with others.

EMOTIONS	Anger, Depressing, frustrated, Negative thoughts, Self-embarrassment, uneasy feeling, Irritated, disheartened, distress, self-respect and self-esteem is affected.
ROLE OF SOCIETY	Social effects, Comments, Hypocrisy, socially dissatisfied, taunted by family, Made fun of, called names, mocked at, stares or praise from the opposite gender, Special occasions (Weddings, Birthdays, Parties etc.)
COPING	Ignore situations where birth marks can be noticed, Focus on positive aspects of the body (like, smile and dimples), Compliments leave a positive impact.

6. DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to find out the external sources and the ways in which these sources have an impact on an individual's perception of her body. Through thematic analysis various codes and themes emerged which focuses on the notions of positive body image as well as negative body image, the sources of the internalization of body image perception and coping strategies used by women. The society or culture in which an individual is situated influences her family morals, which further traces down to friends and role models with the same set of ideals. This leads to internalization of thoughts and develops personal expectations, which are further confirmed through media exposure and the beliefs hold by the opposite gender. These judgments and notions color one's perception about the body.

Such outside sources create an illusion of a perfect body, which in reality cannot be generalized. Thus, trying to reach upto that notion of a perfect body leads to dissatisfaction and anxiety, which affects the physical health (effect on intake of food and health) and psychological health (effect on self esteem and quality of life) of an individual. The society has a dual effect on perception formation. Not only does it effect the initial stages of perception formation about the body, but it furthermore leads to confirmation or imbalance of thoughts through either accepting or negating an individual's perception through the notion of societal demands.

Through the study it was found that, Coping not only occurs for those who are dissatisfied with their body image, but, even individuals with a positive body image uses coping techniques to further strengthen their positive notions about their body and appearance. Negative body image issues can be countered through understanding that, perfection is an illusion and beauty has individual connotations. For this, Self-Awareness is required, to find happiness and meaning of self-existence and thus stream thoughts towards achieving positivity in life by enhancing the self, rather than focusing on the narrow notion of perfection. Through the study it could be concluded that, the body and the self-co-determines each other, thus, they should co-exist, rather than one concept overpowering the other. The society, family and peers should aid in increasing an individual's self-belief and help transform the notion of perfection towards being a better individual.

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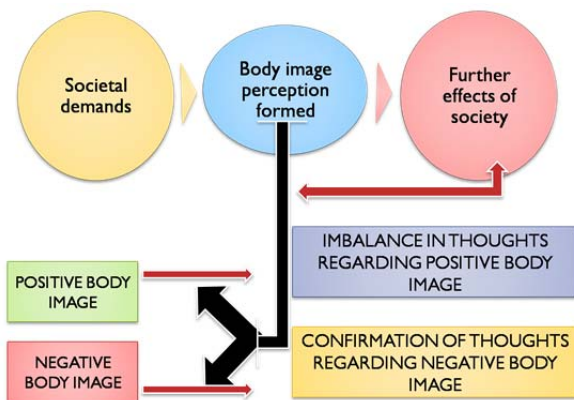


Fig. 2.1: The dual effect of society on an individual's body image.