Research Paper

Importance of Body Image for Teenagers – Impact, Challenges, and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional research study aimed to investigate the importance of body image for teenagers, challenges they faced in maintaining a positive body image, and impacts of negative body image. A structured dichotomous (Yes/No) questionnaire comprising 30 questions was designed to assess various aspects of body image concerns among teenagers and possible solutions to this issue. This was answered by 160 respondents who were school and college students aged 13-19 years (both inclusive), across 14 Indian states and 6 countries (including India, China, Jordan, Italy, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom). The results revealed that an alarming 81.3% of the surveyed teenagers reported experiencing body image issues. 59.4% respondents did not usually feel 'physically attractive', and 57.5% respondents were affected by others' opinions on their bodily appearance. More than half (51.9%) respondents exercised because of negative body image and 62.5% dressed a certain way in order to camouflage their disliked features. These findings highlight the significant prevalence of body image concerns among adolescents and emphasise the need for targeted interventions and support to address these issues and promote positive body image development during this critical stage of life.

Keywords: *Body Image, Teenagers, Social Psychology, Self-Concept, Social Norms*

The perception of body image plays a significant role in the lives of teenagers, influencing their self-esteem, psychological well-being, and overall quality of life. Adolescence is a vulnerable period characterised by physical changes, societal pressures, and the increasing influence of media and social networks. Understanding and addressing body image issues among teenagers is crucial for promoting their mental health and fostering a positive self-image.

This study aims to explore teenage body image issues through the administration of a survey and in-depth secondary academic review. The survey is designed to assess various aspects of body image concerns among teenagers, including self-perception, reasons for body dissatisfaction, appearance-related behaviours, and the influence of media, peers, and parents. By utilising an online survey format, the study aims to collect a diverse range of responses

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from a wide geographic area, enabling a broader understanding of the prevalence and patterns of body image concerns among teenagers.

The central objective of this study is to gain insights into the extent and nature of body image issues faced by teenagers. By examining the survey responses, we aim to determine the percentage of teenagers who experience body image issues and identify common themes and factors contributing to these concerns. The findings will provide valuable information for developing interventions and support systems to promote positive body image and psychological well-being among teenagers.

By shedding light on the challenges faced by adolescents in relation to body image, this study aspires to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on teenage body image issues. It is hoped that the findings will aid in the development of effective strategies and interventions that can address the negative impact of body image concerns and promote a healthier and more positive body image among teenagers.

METHODOLOGY

Participants
The sample included 160 teenagers living in metropolitan, tier 1, and tier 2 cities from 6 countries & 14 Indian states, between the ages of 13 and 19 years, both inclusive. 4 of these respondents were aged 20 years and above but were included in analysis since they were college students.

Measures
This cross-sectional study was conducted online. A structured questionnaire was developed using Google Forms. The online self-reported questionnaire included 30 dichotomous (Yes/ No) questions, related to personal demographic details, self-perception of body image, impact of conventional beauty standards, and suggestions to solve the widespread problem of negative body image amongst teenagers.

For example: Question 1: Have you ever had body image issues?
- Yes
- No

Procedure
The link of the survey was shared through WhatsApp and Instagram with school-students from English-medium schools aged 13-19 years (both inclusive) and the students were encouraged to share the survey with as many teenagers as possible. Thus, the survey was distributed to individuals other than the initial point of contact. On receiving and clicking the link the participants were automatically directed to a set of 30 questions.

Data collection was initiated on July 13th, 2023, at 16:45 IST and closed on July 24th, 2023, at 21:33 IST.

Statistical analysis
Numeric representations were used to present categorical variables. The chi-square test of homogeneity was employed to compare qualitative variables. A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant. The data was inputted into an MS Excel spreadsheet and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0. Descriptive statistics have been used in the study to analyse the findings.

H0: The proportion of teens having body image issues is the same across both sexes.
H1: The proportion of teens having body image issues is not the same across both sexes.

The link to the data spreadsheet: Body Image in Teenagers - Data Spreadsheet

RESULTS

a) 0 cells (0.0%) have an expected count less than 5.
b) Computed only for a 2x2 table.

S. No.	Question	Males		Females		Chi-square tests	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	p-value	Pearson chi-square
1	Have you ever had body image issues? * Sex	33	14	97	16	0.021	5.322
2	Do you feel physically attractive (most times)? * Sex	24	23	41	72	0.083	3.006
3	Do you feel your disliked feature is noticeable to other people if you do not camouflage yourself with clothes/makeup/shoes? * Sex	29	18	79	34	0.313	1.020
4	Do you think looking a certain way (conventionally good-looking) will make you more popular among friends/ family/ teachers? * Sex	27	20	81	32	0.080	3.066
5	Do you think physical features are important to consider while dating? * Sex	30	17	63	50	0.346	0.890
6	Do you sometimes (knowingly/unknowingly) engage in body shaming others? * Sex	28	19	40	73	0.005	7.939
7	Do your family members/ relatives repeatedly taunt you about the way you look? * Sex	25	22	69	44	0.357	0.848
8	Do your friends repeatedly comment on your body (rudely or jokingly)? * Sex	21	26	36	77	0.123	2.380
9	Have you been trolled about the way you look, on social media? * Sex	10	37	9	104	0.018	5.621
10	Does the opinion of others on your body matter to you? * Sex	15	32	77	36	<0.001	17.826
11	Do the unrealistic beauty standards on digital media affect your view of yourself (physically)? * Sex	18	29	92	21	<0.001	28.724
12	Do you wear/ avoid certain types of clothes to camouflage your disliked features? * Sex	17	30	83	30	<0.001	19.684
13	Does having a poor body image have negative side effects on your academic performance? * Sex	5	42	19	94	0.319	0.993
14	Does your body image affect your social life/ friendships/ relationships? * Sex	23	24	61	52	0.560	0.339
15	Have you been on any diet because of lack of body confidence? * Sex	15	32	56	57	0.041	4.186
16	Do you workout because of lack of body confidence? * Sex	21	26	62	51	0.240	1.380

S. No.	Question	Males		Females		Chi-square tests	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	p-value	Pearson chi-square
17	Do you avoid having photos/ videos taken because of your disliked features? * Sex	20	27	71	42	0.018	5.565
18	Do you spend more time thinking about what you dislike about your appearance, than what you like about it? * Sex	24	23	71	42	0.167	1.906
19	Do you often compare your physical features with others'? * Sex	33	14	91	22	0.155	2.027
20	Do you use health apps to count daily calories? * Sex	6	41	14	99	0.948	0.004
21	Do you use makeup to hide your disliked facial features? * Sex	3	44	25	88	0.017	5.697
22	Would you like acceptance from friends/ family of your appearance, to make you more confident? * Sex	29	18	95	18	0.002	9.525
23	Do you want a platform to share your experiences with others who have similar concerns? * Sex	20	27	74	39	0.007	7.204
24	Are you willing to openly share your experiences with your family/ relatives? * Sex	16	31	33	80	0.545	0.366
25	Are you willing to openly share your experiences with your friends? * Sex	31	16	68	45	0.493	0.470
26	Is there sufficient representation of all body shapes/ sizes/ complexions etc. in media (movies/ TV shows/ social media) today? * Sex	18	29	19	94	0.003	8.618
27	Do you think representation of all body types & skin tones in the media will make you confident about yourself? * Sex	31	16	96	17	0.007	7.318
28	Will awareness creation/ public acknowledgement by celebrities/ influencers help you overcome body negativity? * Sex	21	26	88	25	<0.001	16.844
29	Will awareness campaigns/ workshops at school/ college help reduce body negativity? * Sex	29	18	93	20	0.005	7.777
30	Will you contribute to body image awareness campaigns if hosted at school/ college? * Sex	36	11	99	14	0.080	3.055

Thus, according to the analysis, 15 of the 30 questions had a p-value < 0.05 and suggested that the proportion of teens having body image issues is not the same across both sexes.

Females, on average, reported greater incidence of body image issues and opinion of others on their body and unrealistic beauty standards on digital media affected a greater share of females than males. A greater proportion of females than males wear/avoid certain types of clothes to camouflage their disliked features, have been on diets due to lack of body confidence, avoid having photos/videos taken because of their disliked features and use makeup to hide their disliked facial features.

A greater percentage of females than males would like acceptance of their appearance from friends/family to make them more confident, a platform to share their experiences with others who have similar concerns and do not think there is sufficient diverse representation in the media which would make them feel confident about themselves. A greater fraction of females than males also think that awareness campaigns at schools and colleges and public acknowledgement by celebrities and influencers would help reduce body negativity.

An interesting point to note is that a greater proportion of males than females knowingly or unknowingly engage in body shaming others and a greater percentage of males than females have been trolled about how they look on social media.

Besides these statistically significant factors, it is important to note that feeling physically attractive, thinking being conventionally good-looking will make you popular, importance of physical features while dating, feeling your disliked feature is noticeable if you do not camouflage yourself, taunting by family members, negative side effects of poor body image on academic performance, effects of body image on interpersonal relationships, working out due to lack of body confidence, spending more time thinking about disliked features than liked features, comparison with others, counting calories, openly sharing experiences with your family and relatives and willingness to contribute in body image awareness campaigns at your school or college are independent of the sex of the person, that is, these factors approximately have an equal incidence in both males and females.

The authors of this study suggest that further research is conducted on these categories to have a clearer idea of the prevalence of body image issues in teenagers and the role sex of the teenager plays in various personal and social aspects of body image issues to be able to produce better solutions and preventive measures in the future.

DISCUSSION

Empirical data of this study very strongly indicates that negative body image is a prevalent issue amongst teenagers. As per studies conducted by WHO, one in six people are aged 10-19 years. Adolescence is a volatile & fascinating time in any human's life. During their teenage years, people undergo many physical, emotional, and social changes, and are very vulnerable to mental health problems. [1]

Many teenagers today struggle with body image issues, primarily influenced by unrealistic beauty standards propagated by digital media. The prevalence of fad diets and intense workout trends has had detrimental effects on their mental well-being, leading to self-deprecation and, in some cases, body dysmorphic disorder. Social media exposes teenagers to an abundance of 'ideal' body types, portrayed by fitness influencers, self-proclaimed dietitians, workout trainers, and other content creators who promote the notion of a conventionally perfect physique. At an impressionable age, young minds find it challenging to distinguish between 'reel' life and 'real' life, consequently negatively impacting their body image.

Research has indicated a connection between the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) and body image dissatisfaction as well as disordered eating behaviours. Certain activities on SNSs, such as browsing and posting photos, and receiving negative feedback through status updates, have been identified as particularly problematic in this regard. Additionally, some studies have found that appearance-based social comparison plays a mediating role in the relationship between SNS use and body image and eating concerns. [2]

One can try to limit exposure to content that reinforces social bodily norms, but never be completely shielded from it. Where there are adverse effects of such content on teenagers, there are also steps to minimise these effects. Some suggestions are: -

- Schools and colleges must organise awareness campaigns about the unrealistic teenage image in visual media and unnatural photos on social media platforms, and actively promote body positivity
- Students should spend several hours at a time away from social media, either by leaving the phone in another room, activating airplane mode, or turning off notifications. [3]
- While watching teen-centric shows, students should look up the lead actors' ages, and remind themselves that an actual teenager would not look flawless like on-screen characters
- Parents should hold conversations about unhealthy body images, and explain that the health of a body matters, not looks, and that it can be very unhealthy to strive for a so-called 'perfect body'
- Students should also unfollow those pages on social media that post idealised/ 'romanticised' content.

Interactions with friends and family at home and in school/ college play a crucial role in shaping teenagers' body image as well. Positive and supportive relationships can foster a healthy body image by promoting self-acceptance and embracing diversity. Conversely, negative or critical remarks from peers or family members regarding one's appearance can contribute to body dissatisfaction and diminish self-esteem. Some such impacts are: -

- **Impact of parental attitudes and behaviours on teenagers' body image**
  - Parents who engage in body-shaming comments, dieting behaviours, or focus excessively on physical appearance may inadvertently contribute to their child's negative body image.
  - Research suggests that parental support, positive body image modelling, and promoting a healthy relationship with food and exercise can help protect teenagers from developing negative body image.
- **Communication patterns and their role in shaping body image perceptions**
  - The frequency and quality of conversations related to body image and appearance, can influence teenagers' body image perceptions.
  - Fat talk and weight-related bullying during adolescence contribute to an overemphasis on appearance as well as development of negative body image. [4]
- **Intergenerational transmission of body image attitudes and beliefs**
  - Research suggests that parents' own body image concerns and body dissatisfaction may impact their children's body image. Internalisation of the thin-ideal and appearance comparison fully mediates the relationship between parental influence and body dissatisfaction. [5]
  - Family environments that emphasise appearance as a primary source of self-worth may perpetuate negative body image attitudes, and disordered eating patterns across generations. [6]

It is important for parents and families to be aware of their influence on teenagers' body image and to create a reassuring environment that promotes positive body image, healthy attitudes towards food and exercise, and open communication about body image concerns. By

promoting body positivity, self-acceptance, and a focus on overall well-being, families can help mitigate the negative impact of family dynamics on teenagers' body image.

Although making external conditions more conducive to promoting healthy body image is a helpful way to overcome the challenges of negative body image, consistent efforts by teenagers themselves are required to unlearn the ideals they have internalised. A few ways to do this are: -

- **Body positivity and self-acceptance**
  - Body positivity involves embracing and accepting one's body as it is, regardless of societal beauty standards. It involves focusing on self-love, appreciating the body's functionality, and celebrating its unique qualities.
  - Practicing self-acceptance involves challenging negative self-talk, cultivating a positive body image through affirmations, and surrounding oneself with body-positive messages and influences.
  - Engaging in body-positive communities, following diverse body-positive influencers, and participating in body-affirming activities can help individuals reframe their perception of themselves and develop a more positive body image.

- **Building resilience and coping skills**
  - Building resilience is essential for overcoming body image issues. Developing coping skills can help individuals navigate societal pressures, negative comments, and comparisons to others.
  - Building resilience involves cultivating a strong sense of self-worth, developing healthy coping mechanisms (such as mindfulness, journaling, or creative outlets), and seeking support from trusted friends, family, or professionals.
  - Learning to challenge negative thoughts and beliefs, setting realistic expectations, and focusing on holistic well-being rather than solely appearance can contribute to developing resilience and a positive body image.

- **Access to support systems, therapy, and counselling**
  - Friends, family members, or support groups can provide understanding, empathy, and a safe space to express concerns and emotions.
  - Seeking professional help through therapy or counselling can be beneficial. Therapists can provide guidance and evidence-based interventions to address underlying issues contributing to negative body image.
  - Online resources, helplines, and specialized organizations focusing on body image and mental health, such as the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), can offer additional help and information.

Since the aim of our survey was to assess the importance of body image for teenagers, challenges they faced in maintaining a positive body image, and impacts of negative body image, we opted for an online survey given the limited resources. Our study sample consisted solely of urban adolescents and is not a true reflection of the beliefs of the general population. Due to ethical consideration of anonymity and confidentiality, we did not collect contact details and personal information of respondents.

REFERENCES
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APPENDIX

Q1: Have you ever had body image issues?

Q6: Do you sometimes (knowingly/unknowingly) engage in body shaming others?

Q9: Have you been trolled about the way you look on social media?

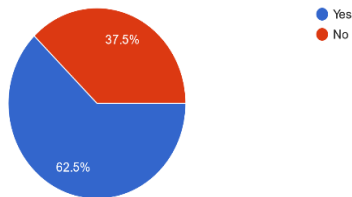## Q10: Does the opinion of others on your body matter to you?

Q11: Do the unrealistic beauty standards on digital media affect your view of yourself (physically)?

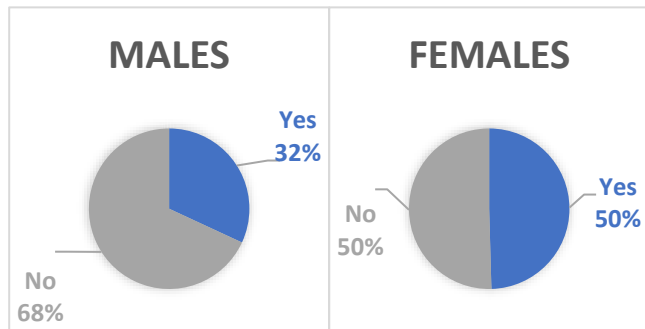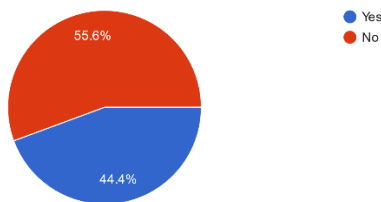Do the unrealistic beauty standards on digital media affect your view of yourself (physically)?
160 responses

- Yes
- No

31.3%

68.8%

MALES

No
62%

Yes
38%

FEMALES

No
19%

Yes
81%

Q12: Do you wear/ avoid certain types of clothes to camouflage your disliked features?

Do you wear/ avoid certain types of clothes to camouflage your disliked features?
160 responses

- Yes
- No

37.5%

62.5%

MALES

No
64%

Yes
36%

FEMALES

No
27%

Yes
73%

Q15: Have you been on any diet because of lack of body confidence?

Have you been on any diet because of lack of body confidence?
160 responses

- Yes
- No

55.6%

44.4%

MALES

No
68%

Yes
32%

FEMALES

No
50%

Yes
50%

Q17: Do you avoid having photos/ videos taken because of your disliked features?

Do you avoid having photos/ videos taken because of your disliked features?
160 responses

- Yes
- No

43.1%

56.9%

MALES

No
57%

Yes
43%

FEMALES

No
37%

Yes
63%

### Q21: Do you use makeup to hide your disliked facial features?

Do you use makeup to hide your disliked facial features?
160 responses

- Yes
- No

82.5%
17.5%

MALES
Yes 6%
No 94%
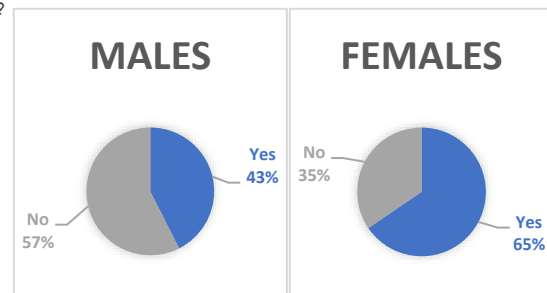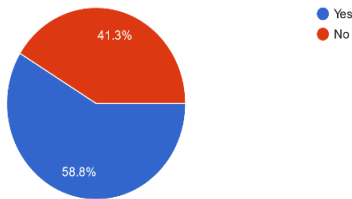
FEMALES
Yes 22%
No 78%
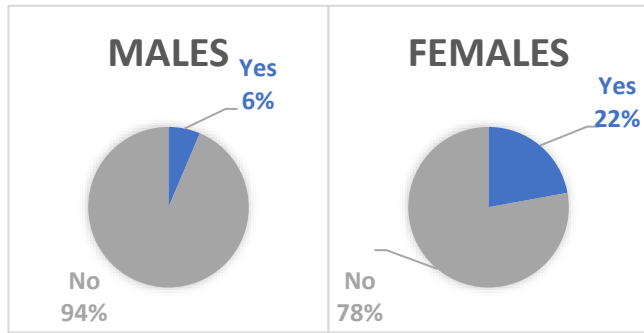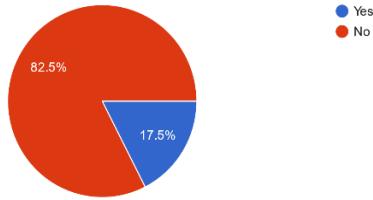
Q22: Would you like acceptance from friends/ family of your appearance, to make you more confident?

Would you like acceptance from friends/ family of your appearance, to make you more confident?
160 responses

- Yes
- No

22.5%
77.5%

MALES
No 38%
Yes 62%

FEMALES
No 16%
Yes 84%
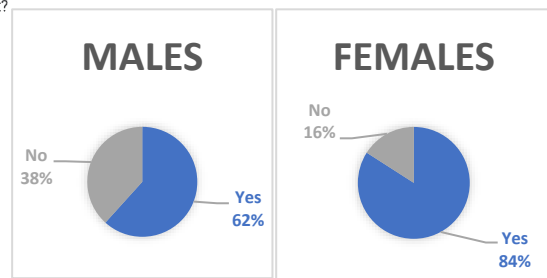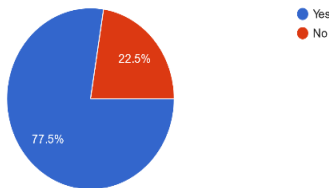
Q23: Do you want a platform to share your experiences with others who have similar concerns?

Do you want a platform to share your experiences with others who have similar concerns?
160 responses

- Yes
- No

41.3%
58.8%

MALES
Yes 43%
No 57%

FEMALES
No 35%
Yes 65%

Q26: Is there sufficient representation of all body shapes/ sizes/ complexions etc. in media (movies/ TV shows/ social media) today?
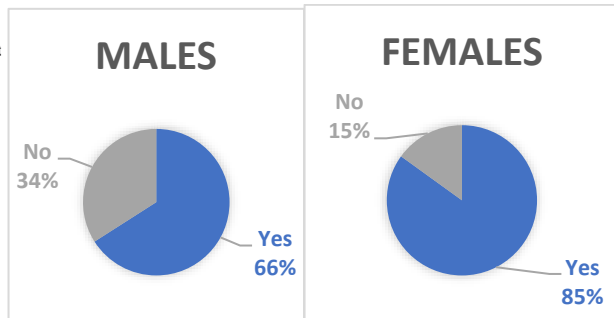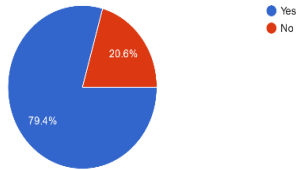
Is there sufficient representation of all body shapes/ sizes/ complexions etc in media (movies/ TV shows/ social media) today?
160 responses
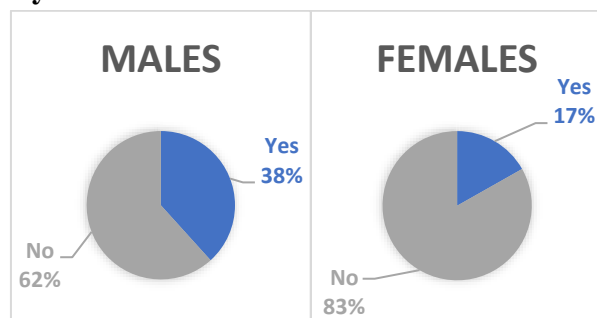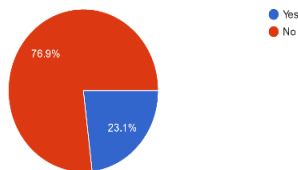
- Yes
- No

76.9%
23.1%

MALES
Yes 38%
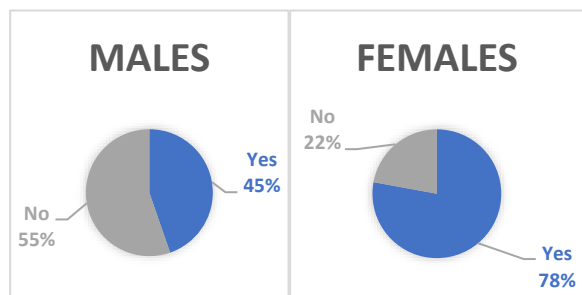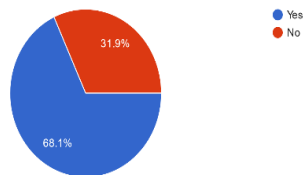No 62%

FEMALES
Yes 17%
No 83%

Q27: Do you think representation of all body types and skin tones in the media will make you confident about yourself?

Do you think representation of all body types & skin tones in the media will make you confident about yourself?
160 responses

- Yes
- No

79.4%
20.6%

MALES
No 34%
Yes 66%

FEMALES
No 15%
Yes 85%

Q28: Will awareness creation/ public acknowledgement by celebrities/ influencers help you overcome body negativity?

Will awareness creation/ public acknowledgement by celebrities/ influencers help you overcome body negativity?
160 responses

- Yes
- No

68.1%
31.9%

MALES
No 55%
Yes 45%

FEMALES
No 22%
Yes 78%

Q29: Will awareness campaigns/ workshops at school/ college help reduce body negativity?

Will awareness campaigns/ workshops at school/ college help reduce body negativity?
160 responses

- Yes
- No

76.3%
23.8%

MALES
No 38%
Yes 62%

FEMALES
No 18%
Yes 82%