

Self-Esteem and Self-Objectification in Indian Female Adolescents: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

This review examines the established correlation between self-objectification and diminished self-esteem, with a specific focus on its manifestation among young women within the unique socio-cultural context of India. Acknowledging that existing research is predominantly situated within Western frameworks, this paper addresses the necessity of understanding how traditional norms, indigenous media influences such as Bollywood, and socioeconomic factors may differentially shape self-perception and self-esteem in this population. Self-objectification theory posits that societal emphasis on female appearance leads to the internalization of an external perspective, negatively impacting self-worth and potentially contributing to adverse psychological outcomes like body shame and anxiety. Consequently, this review underscores the critical need for culturally sensitive research to elucidate the complex interplay between self-objectification, self-esteem, and mental well-being in young Indian women, thereby informing the development of culturally appropriate and effective interventions.

Keywords: *self-worth, self-esteem, self-objectification, indigenous, adolescents, body shame*

Objectification theory, introduced by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), explains how cultural sexual objectification shapes women's experiences. According to this theory, women are taught to see themselves from an outsider's perspective, a process called self objectification. This means they start viewing their bodies as objects to be judged based on appearance rather than valuing themselves for their full identity and abilities. Society reinforces this mindset by constantly promoting beauty as the most important part of a woman's worth. Media and social influences further strengthen this idea by flooding women with idealized images and messages that encourage them to continuously monitor and evaluate their looks.

Self objectification occurs when individuals internalize this external perspective, prioritizing their physical appearance over other crucial aspects of their identity, such as their intellect, skills, or character. This leads to a diminished sense of self-worth based on inherent qualities or accomplishments, and an increased reliance on external validation derived from

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adherence to societal beauty standards. The consequences of self-objectification are far-reaching and profoundly detrimental to women's psychological and emotional well-being. The constant self-monitoring of one's appearance leads to feelings of shame and inadequacy when the body fails to meet often unrealistic and unattainable beauty ideals. This relentless pressure to conform to these ideals can contribute to a range of unhealthy eating habits, including restrictive dieting, binge eating, and other disordered eating patterns. Research indicates that even preadolescent girls as young as seven are exhibiting signs of such behaviors, highlighting the insidious nature of this phenomenon.

Furthermore, self-objectification is strongly linked to increased anxiety, depression, and lowered self esteem. The constant focus on appearance can detract from other essential aspects of life, hindering personal and professional development and contributing to a negative self-image. It can also foster unhealthy comparisons with others, leading to feelings of competitiveness, inadequacy, and strained relationships. The preoccupation with appearance can limit women's ability to fully engage in activities and pursuits unrelated to their physical appearance, further restricting their potential and hindering their overall well-being.

The text highlights a cyclical process where societal objectification leads to self-objectification, which in turn perpetuates the objectification of women. Media plays a significant role in reinforcing this cycle by consistently portraying idealized images of women, often focusing on their physical attributes rather than their character or accomplishments. This constant exposure to unrealistic beauty standards normalizes objectification and encourages women to internalize these standards and strive to emulate them. Social interactions also contribute to this cycle, with appearance-focused communication further emphasizing the importance of physical attractiveness.

The text distinguishes between objectification and sexual objectification, with the latter referring specifically to treating an individual as a mere object of sexual desire, often disregarding their other qualities and humanity. This is frequently observed in media portrayals of women, where their bodies are presented as objects of consumption rather than as whole individuals. This dehumanization can lead to dismemberment, where women are reduced to specific body parts rather than seen as complete beings. The text argues that sexual objectification is a significant societal issue that contributes to women's self-objectification and its associated negative consequences.

Objectified Body Consciousness (OBC) is a related idea that includes three key aspects: self-surveillance (constantly checking and monitoring one's body), body shame (feeling inadequate when one's body doesn't match societal beauty standards), and control beliefs (the belief that appearance can be fully controlled through effort). These factors are closely linked and play a significant role in shaping how individuals experience self-objectification. Self-objectification can be understood as both a state and a trait. A state of self-objectification refers to a temporary internalization of the objectifying gaze in a specific situation, while a trait of self-objectification reflects a more stable and enduring tendency to view oneself as an object. While self-objectification can be influenced by situational factors, it can also become a habitual way of thinking and perceiving oneself.

While the text primarily focuses on the negative consequences of self-objectification, it also briefly acknowledges that some scholars have explored potential empowering aspects, particularly for individuals who may not conform to conventional beauty standards. This

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perspective suggests that self-objectification can sometimes be a means of reclaiming agency and feeling desirable in a society that often marginalizes certain body types. However, the text emphasizes that self-objectification, in general, is driven by comparisons to dominant cultural beauty standards and often leads to harmful outcomes.

In tandem with objectification, self-esteem plays a critical role in an individual's overall well-being. A robust sense of self-esteem is fundamental to a positive self-concept, profoundly influencing an individual's self-perception and interactions with the world. It's a multifaceted construct, encompassing beliefs, coping skills, social competence, cultural awareness, and psychological and physiological attributes, all contributing to overall self-satisfaction. In essence, self-esteem is a broad measure of self-evaluation, reflecting feelings of self-worth and emotional well-being. It represents a subjective judgment of one's inherent value and a belief in one's capabilities and positive qualities.

Individuals with high self-esteem tend to enjoy stronger social connections, perform better academically, achieve greater success in their careers, experience positive peer relationships, and demonstrate more effective coping mechanisms. Conversely, low self-esteem is frequently associated with detrimental outcomes, including suicidal thoughts, substance abuse, depression, and antisocial behaviors. Children struggling with low self-esteem may find it challenging to build and maintain healthy social relationships, potentially leading to social rejection. Ultimately, self-esteem, whether elevated or diminished, plays a pivotal role in motivation, mental well-being, and overall quality of life.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concepts of self-objectification and self-esteem are deeply interconnected, particularly for women navigating societies where physical appearance is excessively valued. Self-objectification as defined by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) objectification theory, involves internalizing an observer's perspective, leading to a focus on appearance over internal qualities. This internalization directly impacts self-esteem, creating a cycle where external validation becomes paramount. (Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. (1997). Objectification theory: A framework for understanding women's experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 173-206.)

One of the most significant consequences of self-objectification is its corrosive effect on self-esteem. When individuals constantly monitor their appearance, comparing themselves to unrealistic ideals and anticipating the judgment of others, they become hyper-focused on perceived flaws and shortcomings (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). This constant self-surveillance can lead to feelings of body shame, inadequacy, and anxiety. The internalization of societal beauty standards creates a relentless pressure to conform, making it nearly impossible to achieve a stable and positive sense of self-worth. Self-esteem becomes contingent on meeting these external criteria, leaving individuals vulnerable to fluctuations based on perceived attractiveness rather than inherent value.

Media plays a significant role in perpetuating both self-objectification and its negative impact on self-esteem. The constant bombardment of idealized, often digitally altered images creates unattainable beauty standards. This exposure leads women to internalize these unrealistic ideals, constantly comparing themselves and fueling self-objectification. This consistent comparison, in turn, diminishes self-esteem as women perceive themselves as falling short of these unrealistic expectations. (Ward, L. M. (2016). The impact of

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television exposure on emerging adults' views and beliefs about sexual relationships: A decade of research. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 60(1), 1-17.)

The negative consequences of self-objectification and its link to low self-esteem extend beyond mere dissatisfaction with appearance. It significantly impacts overall psychological well-being, contributing to mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. The constant focus on appearance can detract from other vital aspects of life, hindering personal growth and affecting interpersonal relationships. (Moradi, B., & Huang, Y. P. (2008). A meta-analytic review of objectification theory and its link to eating disorders. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 32(2), 108-123.)

Recent research has delved into the multifaceted nature of self-objectification, exploring its correlates and consequences across diverse populations. Gattino et al. (2023), in a large-scale cross-cultural study, revealed significant relationships between heightened self-objectification and diminished body image and low self-esteem. This study underscores the powerful influence of sociocultural factors, highlighting that the problem is not limited to one specific nation. (Gattino, S., Baiocco, R., Chirumbolo, A., Comparcini, L., D'Alessandro, G., Di Napoli, I., ... & Laghi, F. (2023). Predictors and consequences of self-objectification: A large-scale cross-cultural study. *Sex Roles*, 1-16.)

The link between self-objectification and self-esteem often creates a harmful cycle. Individuals with low self-esteem may be more prone to self-objectification (Murnen & Smolak, 2009). When people feel uncertain about their worth, they might rely on their appearance for validation, making them more likely to adopt objectifying beliefs and engage in constant self-monitoring. This process reinforces feelings of inadequacy and body shame, further diminishing self-esteem. As a result, they become caught in a continuous loop of seeking external approval, making it difficult to cultivate true self-acceptance.

It's tough being a woman in a world that often treats your body like an object to be looked at and judged. Think about it – from a young age, girls are bombarded with images of "perfect" beauty in the media, and they might even experience unwanted sexual attention in their daily lives. It's like there's this constant pressure to measure up. Sometimes, as a way to deal with this, women might start to police their own appearance, constantly checking how they look. But this can backfire, leading to really negative feelings about their bodies, anxiety, and even issues with things like their periods, their sense of their own body, and their mental well-being. It can even mess with things like their sex life and eating habits. And for young people especially, constantly seeing these unrealistic beauty standards can really mess with their heads. It's like they're taught that their worth is tied to how they look. When they can't achieve this impossible ideal, it can lead to serious problems with how they feel about themselves and their relationship with food. Some experts even say that just being a woman in a society that focuses so much on physical appearance can create unique psychological struggles, like feeling anxious about how you look, being ashamed of your body, and having trouble with eating. It's like women are taught to see themselves from the outside, through other people's eyes, instead of focusing on how they feel on the inside. (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

Addressing the complex relationship between self-objectification and self-esteem requires a holistic approach that considers individual, social, and cultural factors. While individual strategies are essential, societal change is also necessary to create a culture that values women for their whole selves, not just their physical appearance. Challenging objectifying

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messages, promoting media literacy, and fostering a more inclusive and accepting environment are crucial steps towards creating a world where women can thrive, free from the constraints of self-objectification and the erosion of self-esteem. By understanding the intricate connection between these two concepts, we can work towards empowering women to embrace their true selves and unlock their full potential.

CONCLUSION

Existing studies on how young women feel about themselves and how much they focus on their appearance are mostly based on Western cultures. This creates a big gap when we try to understand Indian teenage girls. India has its own unique social rules where how a woman looks and how modest she is are often seen as very important. We need to know how these traditional ideas affect how Indian girls see themselves and how much they think about their looks. Also, in India, family and community have a big influence on how teenagers see themselves, which isn't always the case in Western countries. We also need to consider that Indian girls are exposed to beauty standards not just from global media, but also from Bollywood and local movies. We don't fully understand how these different beauty ideals impact their self-esteem and how much they focus on their appearance. On top of this, India has big differences in wealth, and whether a girl lives in a city or a village can change what kind of media and social ideas she's exposed to. We need more research to see how these economic and location differences play a role. With more and more internet access, especially in cities, we also need to figure out how social media is specifically affecting how Indian teenage girls feel about themselves and their bodies, considering local trends and pressures. In addition, Bollywood and regional cinema are powerful forces in shaping what's seen as beautiful in India, and we need to understand how these movies influence young female viewers. Because of all these cultural differences, programs designed to help girls feel better about themselves and focus less on their looks, which are often developed in Western countries, might not work well in India. We need to create and test programs that fit with Indian culture. Finally, we need to better understand how focusing too much on appearance and not feeling good about oneself might be linked to mental health issues like anxiety and depression in Indian teenage girls. More research in all these areas is really important to help us create programs and policies that truly support the well-being of young women in India.

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Conflict of Interest

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