

## Body Image Issues Faced by Adolescents in India

Shefali Sharma<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Body image is a self-attitude towards one's body, such as, with respect to its size, shape and aesthetics. Increasing importance is given to physical appearance in modern societies as is evident from media depictions and boom in the grooming industry. These patterns can be observed all over the country due to increasing impact of globalization and modernization in India. The influence of such changing demands can act as a strong factor in determining self beliefs of adolescents. A negative body image at an early age can over shadow the self-concept and self-esteem beliefs of an individual. In the present study, using a self report questionnaire, a total of 115 participants between the ages of 14 to 16 years were asked questions about their body image and related self beliefs. As indicated in previous researches, preoccupation with body image was observed in adolescents with many adolescents reporting negative attitudes towards self. In addition, it was seen that body image disturbances were consistent across gender. Thus, it is important for schools to recognize that they need to provide guidance to students on issues like body image and self beliefs as they can have a significant impact on mental health of adolescents. The paper concludes by suggesting some measures for schools to promote positive body image building in students as well as help enhance their understanding of self and surroundings.

**Keywords:** *Body Image, Adolescence, Self Beliefs, Body Image Disturbances, Indian Adolescents, School Mental Health Programme.*

Research in body image is growing parallel to the increase in importance of physical appearance in the society. Markets forcing boom in cosmetics and grooming products in current industrialized society along with the have not only accentuated interest in physical attractiveness, but has also constricted social standards of who is "better". With increasing emphasis on physical attractiveness, there are also higher instances of preoccupation and dissatisfaction with one's physique. The present research attempts to locate the impact of these changes on body image of adolescents in the context of increasing consumerism and globalization in the Indian society (Thapan, 1995). Various body-image related risk factors and issues faced by adolescents are discussed.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, SPM College, University of Delhi & Ph.D Scholar, CIE, University of Delhi. North Campus, New Delhi, India

[\\*Responding Author](#)

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Body image is a multi-dimensional construct. It is defined as a self-attitude towards one's body, be it with size, shape or aesthetics (Cash and Prunzinsky, 2004). Some of the aspects that the broader term body image attempts to cover are: weight satisfaction, size perception accuracy, body satisfaction, appearance satisfaction, appearance evaluation, appearance orientation, body esteem, body concern, body image disturbance, and body image disorder etc. to name a few.

Another important aspect is that body image is not the same as physical attractiveness. Our perceptions about our body are not always same as others see us, or an independent realistic schema. Body image is influenced by several agencies in society. There are a variety of factors such as media, culture, gender, family and peers that influence the development of body image. Regardless of people's actual physical characteristics, their own perceptions, beliefs, and feelings about their appearance determine how they believe others view them and their body image (Jackson, 2004). Thus, a positive body image facilitates social confidence and comfort, whereas a negative body image leads to social inhibition and anxiety.

Studying body-image, hence, becomes important due to the status it holds for individuals in the modern times. It holds the potential to dramatically influence self beliefs of individuals and, thus, their quality of life (Goldfein, 1994). From childhood onwards it affects emotions, thoughts and behaviors in everyday life. Its affect is most crucial on relationships, public as well as most intimate (Frost, 2004). Appreciating its importance, hence, helps us understand self experiences and their effect on different people, especially those whose body image undermines their quality of life.

Although every segment of population can be prone to body image issues, some groups have been seen to be more vulnerable than others. Adolescents of both genders have been identified as one of the vulnerable groups (Valutis et. al., 2009). Due to the physical changes experienced during puberty, adolescents develop heightened consciousness towards their body. Cognitive development enhances their inclination towards self and surroundings. In industrialized cultures, body image, including perception of overall physical appearance, is probably the most important component of adolescent's self-esteem (Davison, 2005). Even for modern populations in general, the influence of body image has been well documented for its impact on self-esteem and social functioning. However, existing research on body image is largely based on American and European experiences and conceptualizations of adolescence. Body image researches on males are few in number, and fewer on Indian adolescents.

The current research, hence, is aimed to understand the set of influences which impact body image development in Indian adolescents, both males and females, and the self beliefs that result from it.

### METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to understand body image issues in adolescents and their relationship with self-beliefs, in the current research, self report questionnaire was used. A qualitative analysis was done for the data collected in order to explore the issue.

#### *Sample*

The questionnaire was administered on a total of 115 adolescents in the age group of 14 to 16 years. These adolescents were students belonging to two types of co-ed schools, private and government. The different types of schools were selected to understand differences in the population across socio-economic variables and co-ed school were used in order to analyze differences across gender.

Sub-groups in the study	Number of participants
Government school girls	32
Government school boys	28
Private school girls	32
Private school boys	23

#### *Tool*

A nine item questionnaire was developed based on theoretical understanding of the concept and a pilot study done on a small sample of adolescents. The questionnaire contained self report items along with some projective questions to counter socially desirable answers from the participants. The questionnaire inquired into the following aspects related to body-image: prevalent body image ideals, attitudes towards different body types, preoccupation with body, weight and other physical characteristics, major body image concerns in adolescents and the existence of its relationship with respect to self beliefs.

#### *Analysis*

Content analysis was done for objective and descriptive type of questions. Statements from the questions were clubbed together to draw out conclusions by thematic analysis. Questions which were used for triangulation are analyzed through cross-reference.

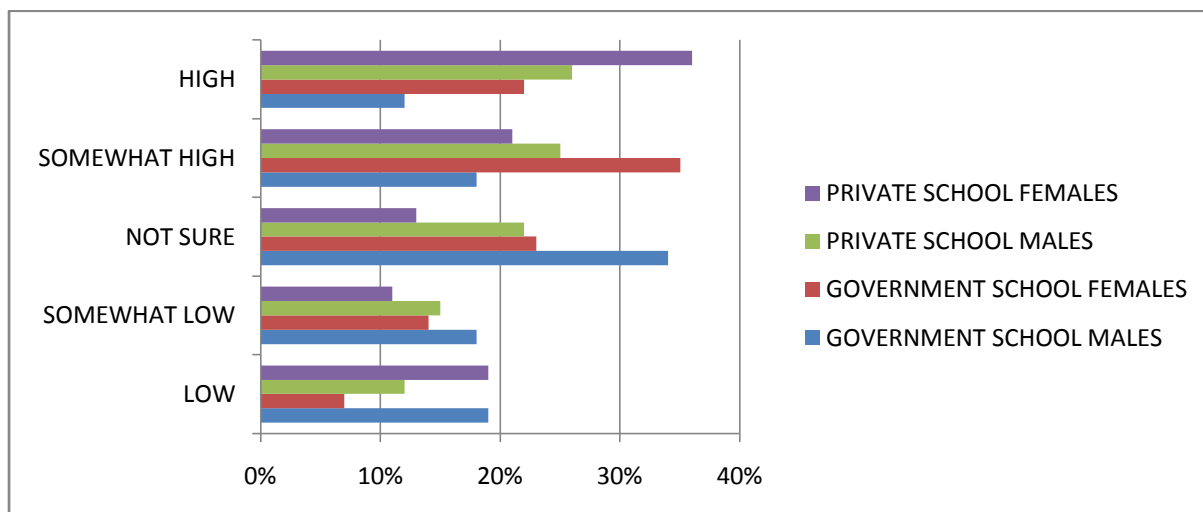
### RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### *Prevalence of body image disturbances*

Body image disturbances were prevalent in many participating adolescents. Adolescent group is a potent population portion vulnerable to body image disturbances (Valutis, et. al., 2009; Davison, 2005). Growth and other developmental changes build consciousness towards ones appearance and these trends are evident in concerns reported by both males and females. Contrary to popular belief, and in consonance with research on adolescence, it was observed that males were also affected by body-image disturbances, especially in lower socio-economic groups. Body image disturbances are very potent in hampering development adolescents and adolescents across gender report feelings of shame, embarrassment, loneliness, and low self esteem when confronted with a negative body image.

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*Comparative analysis of body-image disturbances, across gender and socio-economic class.*



**1.1 Bar graph showing preoccupation levels of adolescents across gender & socio-economic class.**

Previous research on body image has focused more on body image issues of females in comparison to males (Cash and Prunzinsky, 2004). There is, however, a very small difference between the dissatisfaction levels of the two groups. Male adolescents are dissatisfied with their bodies almost as much as girls are.

As for the comparative trends for the two types of schools, government school students showed higher dissatisfaction levels in comparison to private school students. Research has shown that larger discrepancy between desired body image and actual physique leads to higher dissatisfaction levels (Cash and Prunzinsky, 2004). If both groups are being exposed to similar “upper class” Indian or Westernized images on media, then the higher dissatisfaction levels for lower socio-economic groups can be accounted for by greater discrepancy levels they face leading to higher dissatisfaction levels.

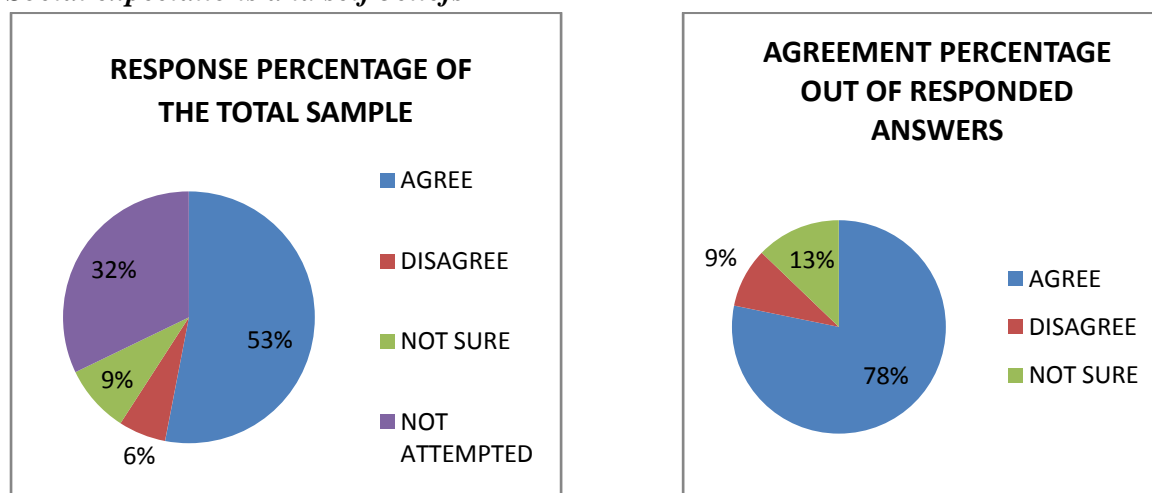
### ***Socio-cultural influences on body-image***

Compliments and comments by people surrounding individuals are important sources of deciding whether individuals would develop a favorable body image or not (Jackson, 2004). Significant others such as parents and peers were seen to be most influential in having an impact on body image development in adolescents. Peers in comparison to parents were seen to be more actively engaged in conversations that trigger body consciousness in adolescents. Acceptance and approval by friends seemed more crucial in deciding the importance given to physical attractiveness. Apart from parents and peers, teachers and other adult such as neighbors and kin group were also important perpetrators of consciousness about ones appearance.

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Apart from significant others, social institutions were found to be another major source of influence which shaped body image beliefs of adolescents. Differentiation and highly competitive environment of schools compelled students to compare and constantly evaluate themselves and others. Tasks such as interviews which provided students delineated or incomprehensible reasons of achievement or failure lead them to attribute achievement to extraneous factors such as physical appearance. The most important source of transmission of societal expectations and outcomes regarding physical attractiveness seemed to be experiences of discrimination on various media sources, such as, television, internet, social networks and cinema.

### *Social expectations and self beliefs*



**1.2. Pie-Chart showing adolescent perceptions towards link between personality and success.**

Theories under the socio-cultural perspective predict that people behave more favorably towards attractive others (Jackson, 2004). Thus, prevalence of favorable behavior towards physically attractive others in adolescent groups were examined. Results showed that adolescents were indeed biased towards physically attractive people and strongly negative attitudes towards unattractive were shown, especially towards obese people. This stereotype was prevalent equally across socio-economic groups and gender. Thus, two of the hypotheses offered by social expectancy theory regarding effects of physical attractiveness were corroborated in these findings. Firstly, there is consensual agreement within cultures about who is attractive and who is not and secondly, people behave differently towards attractive and unattractive others (Cash and Prunzinsky, 2004).

In agreement with the above findings, it was observed that adolescents attribute different characteristics to people depending only on the basis of physical appearance. Attributes such as “smart”, “successful” and “intelligent” were associated with physically attractive males and “smart” and “friendly” with physically attractive females. Obese males and females both were characterized as “lazy”, “stubborn” and “complacent”. These biases were even stronger in responses from opposite sex members. Majority of the adolescents subscribed to socio-cultural norms which proclaim physically attractive people to be “better”.

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The “anti-fat” attitudes were also quite high among adolescents. The “ anti-fat” attitudes make students believe that obesity is not only a cosmetic flaw but as a character defect as well (Davison, 2005) , hence, when asked to report body shapes which represent characteristics such as “unsuccessful” and “clumsy”, students chose overweight images in all groups. According to the socio-cultural perspective, this implies that physically attractive individuals, in turn, develop a more positive self concept in comparison to unattractive individuals.

### CONCLUSION

In light of the above discussion, it is important to note that schools as well as other social institutions play an important role in shaping self beliefs of young members of the society. It is important for schools to recognize that students need constant guidance from adults, as issues like body image disturbances can have a significant impact on their mental health. Schools need to make interventions through mental health programs to specifically address body image issues, promote positive body image building in students, and enhance their understanding of self and surroundings.

Students should be made aware of the impact past body experiences can have on their development of body image, including the inculcation of body image attitudes via familial, cultural, and social experiences. They can be taught to cope with negative feelings about self that pervade day-to-day thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Identifying what dysfunctional appearance assumptions beliefs or schemes adolescents hold about their bodies is also important.

Media literacy is a very important part of such programs. Social construction of beauty, its narrow definition within Western culture, and the effects of socialization on the development of body image need to be discussed. Media strategies such as computer technology and others tricks to constructs images of body that sell fantasies and products also need to be analyzed.

Considering the above findings that the number of students dissatisfied with it are high, some interventions need to be included in school mental health programs which specifically address body image issues.

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