

# Body image concern in relation to peer and media influence in adolescents

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The present investigation aimed to study Body image concern in relation to Peer and Media influence in adolescents. The sample comprised 160 adolescents (Females=80, Males=80) in the age range of 15-19 years. They were randomly selected from various private schools and colleges of Patiala city and belonged to middle class families. The subjects were administered Revised Body Shape Questionnaire (Mazzeo, 1999), Peer Influence Scale (Mukai, 1996) and Socio-cultural Attitude Towards Appearance Questionnaire (originally developed by Heinberg et al., 1995) to assess body image concern, peer influence and media influence respectively. Correlational Analysis of the data showed that body image concern was positively related with peer and media influence. Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis revealed significant contribution of peer influence & media influence in explaining the variance in body image concern.

Keywords: body image concern, peer influence, media influence

Body image is actually one's psychological picture of physical self as it involves not only physical appearance but also how one feels and reacts emotionally as well as how we think others perceive us. Body image concern refers to body image dissatisfaction, which is defined as an unfavourable comparison to an idealised body shape. It can be seen in terms of negative and distorted sense of one's appearance, an unsatisfied feeling or an overestimation of one's body.

Thus, it is a condition where people are preoccupied with the appearance. As Pruzinsky and Cash (2002) note, there are numerous terms used to describe body image concern, and they are often used interchangeably (e.g. body image disturbance, body size dissatisfaction, body concern and body esteem etc.).

Increased levels of body image concern or a preoccupation with the body can result in a state known as body image disturbance which is comprised of three main aspects:

- Body size distortion (an inability to form a realistic estimate of personal body size)
- Body dissatisfaction (an unsatisfactory feeling about one's body or body parts)
- Body image disorder (a condition in which individual behaviour has become disturbed)

Research evidence over the years demonstrates that a great discrepancy between the current and the ideal body image is a major cause of body image dissatisfaction (Shih & Kubo, 2002; Pokrajac-Bulian & Zivic-Becirevic, 2005). Also, that body image concern is prevalent across lifespan affecting children as young as five years old. Kostanski, Fisher, and Gullone (2004) reported that some children who are overweight and those who have high dietary restraints may be more vulnerable to body image dissatisfaction than others.

During adolescence (Lerner et al., 1973 & Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999) due to dramatic physical changes an individual's body and physical attributes are especially significant and physical appearance is dominant concern for females. Increased capacity for introspection may also cause adolescents to be especially vulnerable to extreme and negative preoccupation with their own and others' views of their bodies. Body image dissatisfaction and weight concern are heightened among college students of both gender,

especially amongst young women as 'normative discontent'.

Previous findings indicate higher prevalence of body image concern in women than in men as women are more likely to overestimate their body size, which results in greater body image discrepancy (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003). However, several recent studies indicated that an increasing number of college men reported trying to gain weight and muscle in order to achieve ideal male physique (Wong et al., 1999; Lowery et al., 2005).

Body image concern is thought to be influenced by a large number of factors. Taylor et al. (1998) have devised a categorisation of these factors into four key areas: biological, psychological, interpersonal, environmental and cultural factors.

## *Biological factors*

These include any individual characteristics which are fixed such as age, gender and ethnic group.

- *Age:* Body image concern has been found to be prevalent across all age groups yet, research has shown that during adolescence it appears to be more pronounced. Adams et al. (2000) reported that negative feelings towards one's self are developed in early childhood and become very important on entering adolescence. Cash et al. (1986) found that when comparing people across all age categories, those who were in their teens and twenty's were most concerned about their appearance.
- *Gender:* It is a prominent factor and has a great impact on how individuals perceive their current body shape and determine their ideal body image. This discrepancy between the males and females regarding body image starts at an early age (Duncan et al., 2004). Women have more negative body image attitudes than do men. They are most likely to perceive themselves as being overweight hence want a leaner body shape. On the other hand, self-perception of being underweight also had an effect on appearance evaluation, particularly for men and adolescent boys (Furnham & Calnan, 1998). Studies reveal that they want to be bigger/ heavier/ muscular and try to gain weight (Thompson & Smolak, 2001).
- *Ethnicity:* A number of studies have shown that there are definite cultural and ethnic differences in body image preferences. Barnett et al. (2001) in their study on college students found that although Asian women had a lower body weight, they chose a smaller ideal figure whereas, Asian men reported an ideal figure larger than

their current figure. White women also report being overweight as unattractive due to more awareness and internalization of the thin body ideal while Black women viewed being overweight as attractive (Abrams & Stormer, 2002).

### *Psychological factors*

Relate to mental health of individuals which can affect how they perceive their own body image. These include self-esteem, depression and anxiety.

Self-esteem as a stable trait that includes general feelings of self-worth. A number of studies (Mendelson et al., 1995; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003) have found associations between self-esteem and physical self-worth i.e. the feeling of pride, happiness and satisfaction with the body. Whereas, dissatisfaction with the body was associated with increased feelings of inadequacy and decreased self-esteem for both females and males (Parks & Read, 1997; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002).

Body image dissatisfaction has also been related with negative affect. An attempt to lose weight in girls and a desire to gain muscle in boys was associated with low mood regardless of their actual weight (Kaur et al., 2003; Mc Cabe et al., 2005). Few researchers (Davis et al., 1991; Agliata & Tanteff-Dunn, 2004) have established a link between body image dissatisfaction and anxiety. They opined that exposure to male body ideal was associated with self-reported anxiety in men. Additionally, neuroticism was found to be a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction.

### *Interpersonal factors*

These relate to interactions with other people, the key ones being friends and family.

Familial concerns and pressures also contribute to increased body dissatisfaction and body image concerns in both males and females. Evidence suggests that being teased by the family members is directly associated with negative feelings about current body image and a desire to be thin among female adolescents (Befort et al., 2001). For male adolescents, feedback from their father and male friends had greater impact on their body image concern. Peer influence has an impact on the body image concern especially on dieting behaviours (Lieberman et al., 2001; Eisenberg et al., 2005). It may be either through the 'direct mechanism' where the influence is clearly expressed and can be explained through social reinforcement (comments or actions of others that serve to support and perpetuate the thin ideal body image for women, such as teasing and encouragement to diet) or 'indirect mechanism' which can be seen in terms of peer modelling or social norms when individuals try to imitate others behaviour such as dieting, idealising popular figure and body image preoccupation as acceptable in their social settings (Eisenberg et al., 2005).

### *Environmental and Cultural factors*

Factors relating to external influences affecting body image include media and socio-economic status.

The media is able to influence body image concern through various sources such as television, films, music videos, newspapers, magazines and more recently internet sites. Such an exposure can increase the awareness and internalization of the ideal body image which results in high levels of body image concern (Forbes et al., 2004). The media plays an important role in transmitting a standard of thinness to women across all ages. George and Johnson (2001) reported that the media not only influences body image concern but also use of unhealthy weight control methods.

Social class may also have an effect on how individuals perceive themselves and the importance they place on attaining the ideal body image. Previous researches (Adams et al., 2000) indicate that girls from higher social classes were more likely to choose a thinner body ideal and have tried to lose weight compared with girls from lower social classes. It was found that adolescents from more affluent backgrounds reported greater discrepancy between the perceived current and ideal figures than those from middle and low SES groups (Wang et al., 2005).

Thus, physical appearance has a great impact on people's lives and especially on adolescents, as their body image is particularly "elastic" during this time (Grogan, 1999). It plays a strong influence on their popularity, peer acceptance and self-evaluation (Jones, 2001). Though body image concern is prevalent across lifespan but it is more crucial part of adolescent's life affecting many aspects such as interpersonal relationships, physical activities and self-concept. It puts the adolescents at risk of developing various problems such as poor self-esteem or self-concept (Sondhaus et al., 2001), social anxiety (Trapnell et al., 1997), depression, eating disorders as well as various unhealthy weight control behaviours such as chronic dieting, excessive exercise patterns etc.

The main focus of the present investigation is to study the relationship of peer and media influence with body image concern. Also, to find out if peer and media influence are significant predictors of body image concern.

### *Hypotheses of the study*

- Both peer and media influence would be positively related with body image concern.
- Peer and media influence would be significant predictors of body image concern when taken conjointly than their separate contribution.

## Method

### *Participants*

The Participants of the present study comprised 160 adolescents (Females=80, Males=80) in the age range of 15 to 19 years. They were randomly selected from various private schools and colleges of Patiala city belonging to middle class families.

### *Instruments*

*Body image concern (Mazzeo, 1999)*: It is a 8-item revised Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ) used to examine body image concern. Scores range from 8 to 48, a higher score indicating a higher level of body image concern.

*Peer Influence Scale (Mukai, 1996)*: The 9 item Peer Influence Scale assessed the role of close friends (same-sex) as role models and expectancy socialisers in the domain of weight concern and dieting behaviour. Respondents rated the frequency of their interchange with one another or couple of close friends regarding eating habits. The PFS uses a 5-point Likert scale and the total score ranged from 9 to 45. The high number represents the higher influence and pressure from friends regarding eating domain.

*Socio-cultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (originally developed by Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995)*: was used to measure influence of media. In the present study two versions of SATAQ were used i.e. for males and females. The original questionnaire consists of 14 items and measures 2 aspects i.e. awareness and internalization. However, there was one added factor in the adapted version of SATAQ (Luevorasrikul, 2007) for

males i.e. muscularity. This adapted version of SATAQ consisted of 13 items rated on 5-point Likert type scale. Based on the respondents' answers, a total score was summed and given a possible ranging from 13 to 65, higher score indicated a greater influence from the media.

## Results and Discussion

Analysis of the data using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (Table-1) revealed that peer and media influence were positively related with body image concern for both female and male adolescents.

*Table 1: Showing correlation of BIC with PI & MI for Female and Male adolescents.*

Body Image Concern	Females	Males
Peer Influence	.47**	.40**
Media Influence	.66**	.29**

\*\*p < 0.01

The previous literature revealed that females are more prone to peer influence and pressure about weight and dieting, are teased for being overweight and popularity associated with being thin. Levine and Smolak (1992) and Paxton (1996) found that not only feedback from best friend was an important factor and predictor for body change strategies among girls but also dialogue between friends regarding weight and body image has a significant impact on girls' body image concern. VanderWal and Thelen (2000) also opined that peer teasing and belief in the importance of thinness to peers was significant predictor of body image dissatisfaction.

Peer modelling and social comparison also influences body image concern (Stormer & Thompson, 1996; Eisenberg et al., 2005), as it was found that having friends who were dieting to lose weight was associated with a greater use of unhealthy weight control behaviours for both average and moderately overweight girls. Overall, women are more likely to have their bodies criticized and talk about dieting with members of their peer groups which is referred to as "fat talk".

The positive correlations between media influence (.66\*\*) and body image concern reveal that female adolescents are also highly influenced by media which send messages about ideal body shape for young people through various means such as television, advertisements, magazines etc. One of the well documented reasons of media influence amongst females is the preponderance of slim, tall, and long-legged women depicted in the media. In the contemporary society there is a pervasive belief that women need to fit this "ideal" to be successful. Ideas about having an attractive body shape, the drive to be slender and dieting were related to television viewing for many females. The extent of discrepancy women perceive between their own attractiveness and body image and images representative of ideal feminine attractiveness presented in the T.V. predicts how concerned they are with their weight and shape (Posavac et al., 2001). Adolescent girls who were exposed to fashion magazines and read those magazines for information about the thin body shape and weight change were more likely to report high levels of body image concern, feel dissatisfied their bodies, afraid of fatness, obsessed with weight and preoccupied with being thin than those who did not pay attention to such magazines (Levine et al., 1994; Turner et al., 1997). Some of these investigators further opined that women with certain vulnerability characteristics (e.g. low self-esteem, identity confusion, higher comparison tendency etc.) may be

more susceptible to the impact of thin-ideal media and thus, show more body image concern.

In case of males too, similar trends can be seen i.e., peer influence (.40\*\*) and media influence (.29\*\*) were positively correlated with body image concern. The previous literature on peer influence and body image concern revealed that boys too perceive pressure mostly from peers in form of peer teasing, which was also associated with depressive symptoms (Wertheim et al., 1997). Though males indulge in less social comparison as compared to females and are less likely to have their bodies criticized, but appearance pressure and teasing may be salient influences on a range of body image concerns within diverse adolescent and young adult samples. It was further opined that internalization mediated the relationship between appearance conversations and criticism from friends and body dissatisfaction (Jackson & Chen, 2008). Peer influence among boys also included negative appearance-related feedback, popularity among friends based on appearance, & peer modelling of body image and weight concerns (Thompson et al., 2005).

Media also influences males considerably regarding their body shape, weight, physical appearance, as well as body image concern. Previous researchers (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Spitzer et al., 1999; Ricciardelli et al., 2000) also found that one-third of the men who read various sports or fashion magazines, or watched T.V. shows depicting thin characters were more likely to endorse such ideals for themselves. The impact of viewing idealised male media images on body image concern have shown that the ideal male body exposed in the media and endorsed by men is a muscular toned body shape and high internalization of such ideal was strongly related with low self-esteem and greater body dissatisfaction or concern among adolescent boys (Humphreys & Paxton, 2004).

The Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis (Table-2 & 3) revealed that peer and media influence have significantly contributed in explaining the variance in body image concern for both female and male adolescents.

*Table 2: Showing stepwise multiple regression analysis of significant predictors (Media & Peer Influence) for Body Image Concern (Female adolescents) (N=80).*

	R	R-square	F
Media Influence	.66	.43	59.06**
Media Influence, Peer Influence	.72	.52	42.14**

\*\*p < 0.01

For female adolescents (Table-2), media influence was the major contributor in causing variation in body image concern (BIC) and accounted for 43% of total variation. This indicates that media is one of the important factors affecting body image concern for females in the present society. It has also been reported by various researchers (Turner et al., 1997; Hausenblas et al., 2002; Mc Cabe & Ricciardelli, 2003) that popular media (T.V., movies, magazines etc.) send messages about the ideal body shape for young people which leads to body dissatisfaction especially in females as a result of being pressurized to attain those ideals. These messages about the ideal female body (i.e. slim & tall) are transmitted not only through mass media but also by family and peers which also affects body image (Stice et al., 1994).

Further, results reveal that in case of females, peer influence accounted for 9% of the variance over and above media influence. As Wiseman et al. (2005) opines, adolescence is a time of uncertainty

and during this period adolescents are seeking out their identity, therefore, most of them want to be perceived as a part of whatever they perceive "the norm" to be. This perception is often heavily shaped by their peers and the media. It has been found (Botta, 2000; Jones et al., 2004) that the effects of media were stronger or even negative where media messages were discussed in peer groups and peers were advocates, who estimated the importance of such media messages. Further, discussions with friends about the latest pop stars for example, serve to reinforce the value and importance of media presented messages of the thin ideal. Many of the girls in their sample stated that variables like teasing, other girls' verbalized concerns, wanting to be a part of a group or please friends and friends' dieting behaviours led them to engage in dieting themselves. Thus, girls who frequently compared their bodies with others reported higher levels of distress and body image concern. In a recent study by Krayer et al. (2008) it was found that peers play an important part in making sense of media messages and provide comparison targets themselves.

Table 3: Showing stepwise multiple regression analysis of significant predictors for BIC (Male adolescents) (N=80).

	R	R-square	F
Peer Influence	.40	.16	15.22**
Peer Influence, Media Influence	.45	.21	10.06**

\*\* p < 0.01

For male adolescents (Table-3), 16% of the variation in BIC was accounted for by peer influence alone. Possibly, males perceive pressure in the form of teasing from their peers and family members which have been consistently associated with low self-esteem, high depressive symptoms and various emotional health problems (Wertheim et al., 1997; Shisslak & Crago, 2001). Further, as opined by Mukai (1996) peers adolescents create an appearance culture that is governed by norms and expectations which are modelled and reinforced within peer society.

Results further revealed that media influence in male adolescents accounted for only 5% of the total variance in body image concern over and above peer influence. Strausburger & Wilson (2002) suggest that media is not homogeneous in its impact on children and adolescents; it depends on how these powerful messages have been delivered and valued by peers, close friends and parents. Humphreys and Paxton (2004) reported that boys who were exposed to the muscular body ideal, high internalization of such ideal was strongly related to greater body dissatisfaction and depression. An attempt to attain muscular body shape was also associated with low self-esteem and high body image concern as reported by Croll (2006).

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