

**Issues Related to Body Image in Young Adult Women****Shekinah Shammah Pakki\*<sup>1</sup>, Anuradha Sathiyaseelan<sup>2</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Body image is what an individual perceives of his or her body and the mental schemas that one forms with respect to their body and may or may not bear resemblance to reality. The four elements to a body image are how you see your body, how you feel about your body, how think about your body and what you do as a result of all of the above. It may be positive or negative. Body image in young adult women means how women between the ages of 18-25 years perceive their body and what factors influence the body image of women in that age. Body image has implications on mental health such as self-esteem, anxiety, depression and self-confidence and eating disorders. Physical illnesses such as cancer, obesity, rheumatoid arthritis also play a role in body image. Literature done in other countries suggests that a majority of women have body image issues. Therefore this concept has to be studied in the Indian context too.

**Keywords:** Negative Body Image, Positive Body Image, Young Adult Women, Mental Health, Physical Illness, Psychological Effects.

**INTRODUCTION**

With the constant pressure and burden to look thin, taut and flawless, there is so much going on for young adult women. They have to constantly keep track of their weight, their calorie intake, their skin, their style lest they make the blunder of looking out of place or “last season”.

This is not made any easier by the magazines, print and visual media and social media that constantly go about flaunting flawless, blemish free, the perfect zero size, in trend models that is generally accepted as the norm or the look that people have to achieve. With the widespread reach of media it seems nearly impossible to turn a blind eye to the body ideal the media has to offer. It is almost as if thinness is the norm and those who do not conform to the norm face a whole lot of criticism and ridicule [1]. The oxford dictionary defines body shaming as any act or practice of putting down another person by passing disrespectful or critical remarks regarding the shape of their body or size in a mocking manner.

When one passes by a magazine stand one can't help but notice the various magazines like Vogue and Lucky almost shoving into their face the ideal body. They hire experts and have columns giving the general population tried and tested sure shots on how to lose those extra pounds in days, how to get rid of love handles instantly and how to hide blemishes and get fairer skin, celebrity diets etc. when they actually know nothing about the reader, much less about how they look. The highly whitewashed and air brushed models adorning the covers of the magazine look just like any of us when they do not have a thick layer of make up or

wear flashy clothing. But the magazines are often criticized for their questionable photographing, usage of lights to manipulate the appearance and even more highly questionable editing. The magazine is just one among the many other sources of media trying to push through the body ideal [2].

Television and movies are nowhere falling behind when it comes to body shaming. The plot shown on television and in movies employs at least one character for “comic relief” is portrayed to be fat and ugly. Even in the movies since old overweight characters are used for this purpose. The 27 year old movie Dil uses Miss Mimi, who is stereotypically shown as eating food the entire time, for this purpose. It is the same even in the recent past with Sweetu from Kal Ho Na Ho. When it comes to Television the comedy show The Kapil Sharma show constantly makes fun of the character Palak for her weight and image. It is a pathetic excuse for comedy [3].

Things like these are enough to scar an individual. The damage is mainly done to their concept of body image. Body image is what an individual perceives of his or her body and the mental schemas that one forms with respect to their body. Body image may or may not bear resemblance to reality. There are

four elements to a body image. These include, how you see your body, how you feel about your body, how think about your body and what you do as a result of all of the above. Body image can be both positive and negative depending on the four elements mentioned above. A positive body image is one wherein an individual is comfortable with his or her body. They do not necessarily have to think of it as perfect but instead they accept it as it is and take care of it. A negative body image on the other hand is one wherein an individual cannot accept his or her body no matter how perfect or imperfect it is [4].

Body image according to author Amelia Richards in her book is the issue that brings together the women involved in feminism's third wave. From the research done on body image among young adult women it is evident that when women look into the mirror at the least 80 percent of them are unhappy with what they see. They often times see a much distorted image of themselves in the mirror which is far from reality. Although it is a given fact that anorexics generally perceive themselves to be fatter than they actually are, it should also be taken into account that this happens not just with those diagnosed with an eating disorder such as anorexia but with women who are not diagnosed too. A few studies even found out that about 80 percent of the women sample gave an over estimation of their weights. An alarming number of women, who aren't abnormal or diagnosed with a clinical psychological disorder, stare at their own reflection in the mirror and see a fat, ugly women looking back at them [5].

Body Image has many correlating factors. In the study done by Darlow and Lobel done on 274 undergraduate women it was found that women who are overweight and internalise the thin ideal are more susceptible to lesser body image satisfaction [6]. Similarly a study done by Swami *et al.*, has shown that 89.0 percent of ladies appeared to have weight-based body disappointment and BMI had a negative relation to body satisfaction leading to poor body image [7].

Another correlating factor to body image as studied by Sahay and Piran is skin color. What was found in the study is that women who were from the South Asia-Canada origin wanted their skin to be lighter and this desire was positively related to how much they differ from the cultural ideal which is white or fair skinned. Therefore what was seen is that fair skinned women had highest body satisfaction as opposed to medium skinned women who had lowest body satisfaction [8].

Other than the physical features related to the body there are certain external factors that literature proves to be correlating to body image in young adult women. In a review paper done by Groesz, Levine and

Murnen in 2002, 25 studies on thin ideal media images and its influence on body image were reviewed and the findings suggest that body image was considerably more negative when tested after being exposed to thin images in media than when exposed to average sizes or plus sizes models in media [9].

A study targeting the TV viewing behavior and its impact on body image was done in 2007. According to the findings TV viewing increases in women the discrepancy between the real and the ideal self which is the basis for a negative body image which was also seen in the results of the study that TV viewing increases body dissatisfaction in women and that how what is commonly believed about body image influences behavior related to it such as buying behavior or dieting behavior [10]. However in a study done by Ferguson *et al.*, it was seen that there is no influence of exposure to television on body dissatisfaction [11]. In the same way there are many other studies for and against the influence of TV on body image and dissatisfaction. However the influence cannot be negated out as a major chunk of research suggests that Television viewing or exposure has a considerable influence on body image in the sense that TV viewing affects comparison of body between the images shown in TV and the viewers.

In a study conducted by Kim and Chock it was seen that although mere exposure to facebook didn't influence body image, the behavior of online grooming such as seeing and commenting on facebook friends' profiles were positively correlated to wanting to be thinner [12]. Maddox found that the young adult women leaning towards generating negative consequences and social comparison that is upward is connected with dissatisfaction and thin ideal internalization. Although women in the study counter argued and challenged the media ideals it wasn't enough and had no significant effect on body dissatisfaction and related variables [13].

Parental and peer influence also plays a major role in body image. Christopher and Chukkali found that teasing did have an influence on body image and that peers and family were the major groups that were involved in teasing [14]. Johnson, Edwards and Gidycz found that family, peers, significant others such as boyfriends, pressures of media weight-related issues and criticisms had an impact on dissatisfaction with body and subsequent disorderly eating such as dieting and bulimic behaviors [15].

A negative or a poor body image has its implications in young adult women. A negative body image can be a precipitating factor for a woman who has a genetic predisposition to developing an eating disorder. But this is only for a small amount of the population. More often than not a negative body image is often resulting in reduced self-esteem, self-

confidence and an extreme preoccupation with dieting behavior. Furthermore a negative body image can also contribute to or result in depression or depressive symptoms, body related anxiety, complications in interpersonal relationships such as intimate relationships, occupational life and in extreme cases can lead to abuse of substances and varying health related problems.

Hamilton in her study conducted on young adult college women found that there are certain aspects of body image that correlate with depression as measured by Beck's depression Inventory. It was seen that as appearance and body satisfaction decrease, depression increases thereby forming a negative correlation. It was also seen that as overweight preoccupation increases there is an increase in levels of depression. This may also lead to a circular causality as increased depression may lead to increased weight which may in turn lead to increased preoccupation with weight [16]. However early literature suggests that Obesity, which is a correlating factor of body image, does not predict depression. Friedman and Brownell argue that the early studies' findings are a result of how they were conducted and fresh studies should be conducted [17]. A study collected data from a survey on health and nutrition in the nation and found that obesity is associated with depression in women and not so much in men [18].

As suggested earlier, body image also has its implications on interpersonal relationships. Cash *et al.*, found that aspects of body image such as increase in discomfort with regards to their body, apprehensions regarding approval and being accepted into social interactions were associated with fear of intimacy in women. It was also seen that body image dissatisfaction was associated with social evaluation anxiety. The study also showed that increasing body image dissatisfaction was linked to a generally less secure attachment style, and more anxiety with regards to romantic attachment [19]. Further research on being self-conscious about body image during physical intimacy suggests that a total of one-third women experience the phenomenon of self-consciousness with regards to body image during physical intimacy acts with their partner. It was also seen that the participants who reported higher levels of self consciousness of body image were less likely to be sexually assertive and tended to avoid sexual activity with a partner which can prove to be detrimental to the romantic relationship [20].

Halliwell and Dittmar found that exposure to thin models in media resulted in higher anxiety that is related to body as opposed to when presented with average size models or plus size models. This is attributed to internalization of the thin ideal presented and portrayed in the media [21]. It is also seen that body

image satisfaction affects quality of life [22]. Muennig *et al.*, also found that the way obesity affects our physical health is in a way related to how we perceive our body to be. More specifically the desire to lose weight impacts the physical health [23].

Body image is also affected in women with physical illness. Some of the common illnesses that affect body image are cancer, obesity and rheumatoid arthritis. In a study conducted in women with cancer after the surgery of mastectomy it was seen that women's body image significantly became negative and many even reported to feel that they are missing a part of themselves. They also engaged in behaviors such as hiding their bodies behind loose clothing etc [24]. It was also seen in another study that post mastectomy the marital adjustment is low when compared to the control group owing to appearance related issues [25]. Another paper talks about body image issues prominent with individuals who have breast cancer and have undergone mastectomy [26]. Similar results were found in patients with rheumatoid arthritis. When the body image of patients with rheumatoid arthritis was compared to a control group it was found that the patients had lower body image than those who didn't have rheumatoid arthritis [27]. In a review study it was seen that obese people are more likely to have a lower body image. This was even more prominent in women [28]. In another study it was found that patients with psoriasis had a much lower body image than the control group. A negative correlation was found between psoriasis and body image [29]. Body image is also affected in cardiac patients. When a study sought to find out the effect it was found that patients who received a heart transplant had much lesser body image satisfaction in patients with heart transplant than in control group. There was also a greater association between body image and depression in the heart transplant group [30]. HIV and body image are also related. In a study conducted on HIV infected women with and without lipodystrophy, low body image was seen in women who are HIV infected with lipodystrophy as compared to women who are not HIV infected or who are HIV infected without lipodystrophy [31]. Hence there are evidences that say that body image issues are common among chronic physical illnesses. Body image issue will also increase the psychological and emotional issues among chronic physically ill individuals. This has been mentioned in the above studies.

Literature has enough proof that body image should be taken seriously as a psychological concept with the implications it has on mental health and overall functioning. However it must be noted that most of the research is done abroad and may or may not have implications in India. Hence it is important for research to be focused on understanding body image among Indian young adult women as the cultural factors may play an important role in the development of body

image. Also majority of the available literature on body image is done on either adolescents or student populations who are pursuing psychology as this is a convenient population to approach and most of the research is quantitative in nature. A study done in Chennai on a sample of 912 girls who are above the age of 12 found out that 30 percent of the women are under the pressure of advertisements displaying a body ideal and this puts a lot of pressure on the female viewers to look like the ideal body shape [32]. A study in Karnataka showed that body image satisfaction was associated with influence of family and peers. This has implications such as unhealthy eating patterns on females [33]. In another sample from across India it was found that teasing mediates the influence Body Mass Index has on body image dissatisfaction and has been seen to influence the drive for thinness [34]. Further research must focus on the aspects of body image qualitatively as it applies to Indian young adult women. This may also help in the development of body image assessment and screening tools pertinent and relevant to the cultural context of India.

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