

## Sociocultural Influences on Appearance Avoidance Behaviours among Urban Indian Adults

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*Urban Indian adults face pressure on a day-to-day basis to meet "muscular" or "thin" body type norms across social media, family expectations, and peer groups. This leads to a significant impact on how they view themselves and their behaviour in social settings. The current study analyses the relationship between body image and appearance-avoidance behaviour. It also explores the influence of socio-cultural factors (family, media, and peers) on avoidance behaviours among urban Indian adults. A sample of 290 participants (N = 292; males = 135, females = 157) aged 18–50 years were included in the study through random sampling and were assessed using standardised measures. Statistical analysis, including Pearson's correlation, linear regression, one-way ANOVA, and individual sample t-test, was used.*

*The correlation results revealed a significant positive relationship between body image and appearance avoidance behaviours ( $r = 0.88$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Multiple linear regression analysis revealed thin-ideal internalisation as a sole predictor of body image concerns as compared to muscular ideal internalisation. The t-test showed no significant gender differences in body image concerns. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in body image concern across age groups, with the youngest group reporting the highest average scores. This study helps mental health professionals, such as social psychologists, school psychologists, clinical psychologists, health psychologists and sports psychologists, recognise and understand risk factors and psychological needs of their clients, leading to more effective interventions.*

**Keywords:** Appearance avoidance, socio-cultural influences, internalization, media influence, body image concerns

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## INTRODUCTION

Body image does not refer only to the aesthetic physical appearance of an individual but is a multidimensional and subjective concept including the individual's perceptions, thoughts and feelings regarding their own body (Neagu, 2015). However, these perceptions are not formed randomly and arise from various socio-cultural standards set by families, peers and media. Body image is a psychological concept including the individual's perceptions and feelings about their own body as well as their feelings towards other individuals' bodies (Thompson et al., 1999). Paul Schilder defined body image as the "picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves".

These feelings and perceptions can either be negative or positive. Positive perceptions lead to positive rational acceptance, including self-care behaviours and mental activities fostering rational self-talk and acceptance of one's own body (Cash et al., 2012). On the other hand, negative perceptions might lead to appearance fixing or avoidance behaviours such as making changes to one's external appearance in order to get camouflaged or hide perceived physical flaws, constantly weighing oneself, avoiding social gatherings, restraining eating behaviours and changing clothing behaviours (Mukta N et al. 2023). Both appearance fixing and avoidance pose as maladaptive coping strategies by individuals who face dissatisfaction regarding their own body or have low self-esteem (Cash et al., 2005).

Body satisfaction can be defined as the degree of discontent one experiences regarding one's own body. When an individual experiences low levels of body satisfaction, they indulge in appearance avoidance behaviours, as mentioned. The Tripartite Influence Model proposed by Thompson (1999) categorised variables that influence body image dissatisfaction into three: cultural influences, parental influences and peer influences. The theory posed parents as significant predictors of body dissatisfaction through direct and indirect ways. Direct influence includes behaviours such as teasing, criticising about weight or encouraging to diet (Badola et al., 2025). Indirect parental influence includes modeling for instance, the parent's preoccupation with weight or dietary habits (Badola et al., 2025).

Peer influence arises from appearance-based teasing or bullying. In certain environments, such as competitive sports, the impact of these pressures is amplified. Lastly, due to the importance and time given to media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat or even movies, the influence of media has become an unavoidable source of appearance pressure. More use of visual platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram was correlated with

higher levels of body dissatisfaction due to app features such as filtered photos, Photoshop, editing, etc. (G Sushmitha et al., 2025). Several studies have shown the impact and significant role of such socio-cultural influences on the manifestation of appearance avoidance behaviours in Indian adults.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Mirrors are not merely objects of reflection; they quietly echo society's expectations, cultural norms, and deeply ingrained ideals of beauty. For many individuals, especially women, these reflections become sites of conflict, where personal identity clashes with social standards. Across recent Indian scholarship, body image concerns emerge not as isolated insecurities but as deeply social, cultural, and psychological experiences that are shaped by media, gender expectations, and shifting ideals of attractiveness. While early discourse in India focused heavily on women's bodies, more recent work brings attention to men, revealing that body dissatisfaction is a shared, though differently expressed, phenomenon. Male body dissatisfaction is centred around the idea of muscularity and low body fat, which often leads to extreme exercising, severe substance use, eating-related issues, and muscle dysmorphia (Olivardia et al, 2005) discovered that male college students perceived the ideal body to be approximately 25 pounds (equivalent to 11.34 kg) more muscular than their current muscle mass. Their investigation also delved into the potential connections between lower levels of perceived muscularity and fatness with feelings of depression and dissatisfaction with one's body.

The outcomes revealed that solely perceptions of inadequate muscularity were linked to these adverse attitudes and emotional states. In contrast, perceptions of fatness or weight did not emerge as significant predictors of such negative impacts, suggesting a potentially heightened importance of muscularity for certain male individuals. Similarly, women's body dissatisfaction is widely spread across issues driven by societal, media and peer pressures to meet the idealised beauty standards. Literature shows that two-thirds of school-going girls are dissatisfied with their body image and perceived themselves as overweight despite having a normal BMI (Body Mass Index). Also, the cultural norms in India contributed to the body image concerns; society prefers fair skin and a slender physique, which are considered attractive for females and are often reinforced through marital roles, social narratives and family expectations (Dheeraj Prakash et al, 2025).

Many studies have explored the impact of body image concerns among young individuals and adolescents, but there is limited intensive research done among adults across the lifespan of 18 to 50 years, and how socio-cultural influences lead to appearance avoidance behaviours. Additionally, most studies tend to focus on gender separately or focus mainly on women. Though there have been gender inclusive studies, there is a limited gender inclusive study focusing on urban Indian backgrounds.

Moreover, family, peers and media are widely considered as significant predictors of body-related pressures, but there has been no significant research focusing on the comparison of their impact. Additionally, in India, family and peers play a significant role in shaping an individual's body image, but existing literature has focused on media influence without involving the pressure faced from other socio-cultural influences. There have been multiple studies conducted on women from rural areas, but limited research on women from urban areas, especially on a gender-inclusive sample belonging to all socio-economic statuses.

## **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

### ***Research Questions:***

1. Is there a relationship between body image and appearance avoidance behaviours?
2. What is the impact of socio-cultural influences on body image among urban Indian adults?
3. Are there any gender differences in body image concerns?
4. Do appearance avoidance behaviours vary across different age groups among urban Indian adults?

### ***Research Objectives:***

- To examine the relationship between body image and appearance avoidance behaviours
- To assess the impact of socio-cultural influences on body image among urban Indian adults
- To examine gender differences in body image concerns
- To examine whether avoidance behaviour differs among age groups

***Research Hypotheses:***

- There will be a positive relationship between body image and appearance avoidance behaviour.
- There will be a significant impact of socio-cultural influences on body image.
- There will be greater body image concerns among women than men.
- There will be significantly higher avoidance behaviour in younger adults compared to older adults.

***Research Design:***

This study follows a quantitative research design. It relies on numerical data to examine the relationship between body image and Avoidance Behaviours. Here, the primary aim of the study is to examine the influence of sociocultural body image ideals (thinness and muscularity) on avoidance behaviours defined as actions designed to avoid situations that provoke scrutiny of one's physical appearance, such as avoidance of mirrors, photographs, social gatherings and form-fitting clothing among urban Indian adults, and to understand how family, peer, and media pressures contribute to these behaviours.

***Sample/ Sampling Method:***

The research involved urban Indian adults between 18 to 50 years old from various genders, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This age group was selected to understand appearance avoidance behaviours across different stages of adulthood due to body-image standards. A snowball sampling method was used for selecting participants. The questionnaire was shared online, and participants asked to forward it to others who meet the criteria. This method was used as it allows a wider reach and easier data collection.

***Variables:***

- Independent Variable - Sociocultural Influences and Body Image
- Dependent Variable - Appearance avoidance behaviours: such as avoiding social situations, hiding one's body, or experiencing discomfort in public settings

***Tools of Data Collection:***

Data will be collected using structured questionnaires. The Socio-cultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4) was used to understand and calculate the influence of Sociocultural Influences related to appearance and satisfaction. The Body Image Concern Inventory (BICI) will be used to evaluate the tendency of appearance avoidance behaviours.

***Procedure:***

The questionnaire will be administered online using Google Forms to ensure easy access and wider reach. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study before filling out the questionnaire. Participation will be voluntary and confidentiality will be maintained. Responses collected through Google Forms will be transferred to Excel for statistical analysis

***Data Analysis:***

The collected data will be entered into SPSS for analysis. Pearson's correlation coefficient, T-TEST and ANOVA will be utilised to assess the strength and direction of the connection between Sociocultural Influences, body image standards and appearance avoidance behaviours. This analysis will assist in figuring out if a stronger internalisation of body image ideals is significantly linked to a higher tendency towards appearance avoidance behaviours.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research study was conducted to elucidate the impact of socio-cultural influences such as family, peers and media on body image and appearance avoidance behaviours.

Participant data were gathered from a sample of 292 individuals (137 males and 154 females) within the age range between 18 to 50 years. The data consisted of scores from two scales - Socio-cultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4) and Body Image Concern Inventory (BICI).

After scoring the data, we performed inferential statistical analysis through IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0.2.0. The findings have been presented according to the four hypotheses proposed in this study.

#### 4.1 Pearson Correlation: Correlation Analysis:

**Table 4.1: Correlation Matrix between Negative Evaluation and Appearance Avoidance Behaviour (N=292)**

|    | NE | AA      |
|----|----|---------|
| NE | -  | .889*** |
| AA | -  | -       |

Note- \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , NE = Negative evaluation, AA = Appearance Avoidance, N = 292

As presented in Table 4.1, Negative evaluation and avoidance behaviour: Pearson's correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between the scores of negative evaluation of one's body image and appearance avoidance behaviour. The analysis revealed that the relation between body image and appearance avoidance posits that there is a significant positive relationship ( $r = .889$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the more an individual's concerns are related to negative evaluation, the higher they tend to experience appearance-related anxiety. The high significance score indicates that the results do not occur due to chance. There is a slight positive correlation between body image and appearance avoidance behaviours.

#### 4.2 Regression Analysis: Impact of Socio-cultural Influences on Body Image

**Table 4.2: Multiple Regression Analysis: Predicting Body Image from Socio-cultural Influences (N= 292)**

| Predictor         | $\beta$ |    |   |    |    |
|-------------------|---------|----|---|----|----|
| (Constant)        | 4       | 30 |   | 51 | 5  |
| Thin/low body fat | 3       | 5  | 5 | 99 | 01 |
| Muscular body     | 9       | 2  | 5 | 09 | 2  |
| Family Pressure   | 4       | 9  | 2 | 98 | 7  |
| Peers Pressure    | 7       | 3  | 3 | 21 | 3  |
| Media Pressure    | 3       | 7  | 5 | 97 | 01 |

Note: N = 292; B = unstandardized coefficient, SE = Standard Error;  $\beta$  - standardized coefficient;  $F(5, 286) = 41.824$ ,  $p < .001$

As presented in Table 2, the impact of socio-cultural factors on body image: A multiple linear regression was utilised to determine whether different socio-cultural factors, including family, peers, media, and internalisation of muscular/thin body ideals (SATAQ 4; Thompson et al. 2015), could predict the impact of body image scores of individuals (BICI; Thomas F. Cash 2002). The regression model was statistically significant ( $F(5286) = 41.824, p < .001$ ). It indicates that sociocultural factors affect body image concerns in adults. Among the variables, media influence was seen to have the strongest impact on adults ( $\beta = .346, p < .001$ ), the next strong influence was of internalisation of thin body ideals with a score of ( $\beta = .196, p < .001$ ), and then followed by family influence with a score of ( $\beta = .142, p = < .017$ ). Internalisation of muscular body type ( $\beta = .085, p = > .132$ ) and peer influence ( $\beta = .068, p = > .263$ ) does not have a significant impact on urban Indian adults. Thus, it can be concluded that the greater an individual has internalisation of thin body ideals, the higher the chance of the person experiencing body image dissatisfaction.

#### 4.3 T-test for Group Comparisons: Gender and Body Image Concerns

**Table 4.3: T-test Results for Body Image Concerns by Gender (N=292)**

| Variable                   | Group  | <i>n</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Std. Deviation</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|----------------------------|--------|----------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------|----------|----------|
| <b>Body image concerns</b> | Male   | 137      | 37.61       | 18.09                 | 289       | 0.25     | .796     |
|                            | Female | 154      | 37.09       | 15.85                 |           |          |          |

*Note.* N = 292; M = 37.67 ; SD = 18.09 ; df = 289 ; t = 0.25; p = .796

Table 4.3 comparison of gender and body image concerns: There is an Independent sample t-test was conducted to see the gender difference in body image concerns. The mean and standard deviation scores for gender difference in body image concerns are slightly higher in males (M=37.61, SD=18.09) in comparison to females (M=37.09, SD=15.85). The difference between the 2 genders is very small, which shows very little difference in body image concerns between the genders. The t-value (t=0.259) with p-value (p=.796) proves that there is no significant difference between the two genders. We can conclude that gender does not influence body image concerns, and both genders experience similar levels of body

image concerns. Therefore, gender does not play a major role in experiencing body-related dissatisfaction, and it is a universal issue.

#### 4.4 Inferential Analysis: One-Way ANOVA

**Table 4.4: Comparison of Avoidance Behaviours across Age Groups (N=292)**

| Age group    | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|--------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 18-24 (1)    | 112      | 44.16    | 19.23     |
| 25-34(2)     | 79       | 33.12    | 13.89     |
| 35-50(3)     | 101      | 32.89    | 13.64     |
| <b>Total</b> | 292      | 37.27    | 16.92     |

*Note.* N = 292; *M* = 37.27; *SD* = 16.92,  $F(2,289) = 16.64$ ,  $p = <.001$ .

As indicated in Table 4.4, comparison of avoidance behaviour across age groups: One-way ANOVA was used to evaluate various age groups experiencing more body image concerns, leading to appearance avoidance behaviour. The findings revealed that appearance avoidance behaviours had significant differences across age groups, which indicates that age has an effect on these behaviours. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was examined through the Games-Howell test, and it revealed that age group 1 ( $M=44.16$ ,  $SD=19.23$ ) has significantly higher scores than age group 2 ( $M=33.12$ ,  $SD=13.89$ ) and age group 3 ( $M=32.89$ ,  $SD=13.64$ ), meaning the younger population experiences more avoidance behaviours due to body image concerns. Although there was no significant difference found between age groups 2 and 3.

## DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to examine the role of sociocultural factors in body image concerns and to explore gender and age differences in body image concerns. Put simply, the results tell a very clear and important story: body image concerns are a product of the social world people are immersed in - particularly media. First, the correlations revealed that all the sociocultural influences considered - internalization of thinness and muscular ideals, and perceived pressure from family, peers and media - were positively related to body image concerns. Put simply, the more people were affected by these appearance-related messages,

the more likely they were to be dissatisfied with their body image. Of these factors, media was the strongest predictor, supporting the work of sociocultural theorists that media are a key source of defining and promoting unrealistic ideals of beauty (Thompson J. Kevin et al., 1999; Tiggemann Marika, 2011). This finding is particularly relevant today as a result of the nature of the media. People are no longer simply consuming media content but interacting with highly manipulated images on social media. This can result in the acceptance of these "ideal" images, which can lead to body image comparisons and dissatisfaction. This may explain the finding of increased media influence being related to more body dissatisfaction in the current study. The regression analysis went further by gauging which factors actually predict body image concerns, taking all factors into account. This analysis showed media is the strongest predictor, even when considering other factors, followed by internalization of thin/low body fat ideals and family. Surprisingly, peer influence and muscular internalization were not significant. This does not mean that they are not important, just that their impact may be captured by more pervasive influences such as the media. That is, media may not only influence an individual's perceptions but also those communicated through peers and family. This is consistent with findings that media messages often "spill over" into social interactions (Harrison Kristen, 2000). The second key finding from the results is the importance of internalization. Both thinness and muscular ideals were positively associated with body image concerns, but thinness internalization had a stronger relationship. This may reflect the ongoing dominance of the lean body type as the ideal body type. However, the significant correlations with muscular ideals suggest that people are also increasingly exposed to conflicting ideals (to be thin and muscular, simultaneously) which may compound their feelings of dissatisfaction. The analysis of body image avoidance behaviors adds another layer to this understanding. The high inter-relationship between the various components of avoidance suggests that body image dissatisfaction is not isolated but manifests in a number of ways. People who are unhappy with their bodies may avoid mirrors, social events, or certain clothing, forming a pattern of avoidance. This finding adds to cognitive-behavioral views that such avoidance helps to maintain body dissatisfaction over time (Cash, 2012). Another stand-out result of the study was a lack of gender differences in body image concerns. In the past, body dissatisfaction has been considered to be higher for women. Yet, the present findings show that men and women are equally concerned, and this may reflect a cultural change. Greater exposure of men to idealized body images - such as

lean and muscular bodies - may have played a role in this shift (Frederick David A. et al., 2007). This underscores the need to move beyond gender stereotyping and see body image as a societal issue. In contrast, age differences were clearly evident. There were greater concerns with body image among younger participants. This aligns with the theories of development, which highlight that adolescence and young adulthood are stages of life that involve identity development and increased social comparison (Erik Erikson, 1968). The younger age groups are also more engaged with social media, where they are exposed to more appearance-relevant comparisons. These circumstances may render them especially susceptible to body dissatisfaction. Overall, the study underscores the prominent role of media in body image concerns, which is also related to self-imposed standards and family factors. However, the absence of gender differences and the heightened concerns among younger individuals suggest the need for more gender-inclusive and age-sensitive interventions to address body image concerns.

## CONCLUSION

These findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of the impact socio-cultural influences such as family, peers and media can have on body image concerns and how this might lead to the manifestation of appearance avoidance behaviours. Research into socio-cultural influences on body image produced multiple findings that confirm the influence of media, peers and family on body image. The analysis indicated that the more an individual indulges in negative evaluation of their own body, the higher they tend to experience appearance-related anxiety, thus leading to appearance avoidance behaviours. The expected gender difference for body image concerns turned out to be less significant than anticipated. Thus, gender does not play a significant role in experiencing body-related concerns and demonstrates it as a universal phenomenon. Additionally, results revealed that individuals belonging to the age group of 18 to 24 years had a higher tendency to practice avoidance behaviours than the age group of 25 to 50 years.

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