# Effect of Exposure to Attractive Models on Social Appearance Anxiety among University Students

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study aimed at examining the effect of exposure to media portrayed images of attractive models on social appearance anxiety among young adults. We also aimed at understanding the differences in social appearance anxiety, objectified body consciousness and romantic inclination in terms of romantic relationship status. One hundred university students (50 men and 50 women) were randomly assigned to experimental (exposed to attractive images of models) and control group matched for age and gender. Participants were also administered valid measures on romantic inclination, social appearance anxiety and objectified body consciousness. Results indicated that those who had been exposed attractive model showed higher level of appearance anxiety compared to the control group. Further statistical analysis showed that men have higher levels of romantic inclination and body objectification than women do. Analysis with regard to the relationship status revealed that those who had a recent break up in relationship showed higher levels of body consciousness and romantic inclination than the currently dating group and single group.

**Keywords**: Social appearance anxiety, romantic inclination, body objectification

All of us wish to have a good physique, as we feel good subjectively and socially when we have one. However, for a minority of us this wish becomes the sole purpose of life and this keep them preoccupied with fear of looking ugly and out of shape. Such excessive worry about physical appearance is termed as Social appearance anxiety and may be defined as "tension and anxiety experienced by people when they are assessed by others in terms of their physical appearance" (Hart, Leary, Rejeski 1989). With excessive social appearance anxiety, social interactions and social functioning are retarded and the individual shows signs of social anxiety disorder and negative body image (Claes et al., 2012).

Among the factors that influence social appearance anxiety, mass media is an influential source of images and messages about the idealized body image that are considered as the standard. Media-portrayed images, especially the ones that portray in advertising products of cosmetics, dieting and weight-altering products, promote the idea that body shape and size are flexible, and that achieving the thin ideal is relatively easy (Brownell, 1991).

The media images appear realistic, though they are heavily edited and refined before being broadcasted (Richins, 1991; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Past research studies have demonstrated how the media can lead to a negative perception of a person's body image (Ashikali & Dittmar, 2012; Ata, Thompson & Small, 2013; Hausenblas *et al.*, 2013). Both the advertisng and entertaining media constantly portray an ideal and beautiful body for women and strong and muscular body for men. When people see these images and then compare their own bodies, which are often times different from what is portrayed as ideal in the media, they feel dissatisfied with their original bodies and crave for the one portrayed by those body models. Studies have linked this dissatisfaction to low self-esteem,

eating disorder, depression (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Garbe, ward & Hyde, 2008; Hausenblas *et al.*, 2013).

While attesting the salience of body image and appearance anxieties in general life functioning, Cash, Theriault and Annis (2004) emphasized the importance of body image in interpersonal functioning and romantic relationship. Studies have found that physical attractiveness was a favourable attribute in partner selection with both men and women (Li, 2007). In a study examining the associations between young woman's romantic relationships and their body image Markey and Markey (2006) found that high dissatisfaction in women regarding their bodies lead to the belief that their partners were unhappy than the actual scenario. Further analysis showed that those in the relationship for a longer period of time believed that their partners had a desire for them to look thinner.

While numerous studies on social appearance anxiety and body image have been reported, research on these variables in Indian cultural context is very sparse. Though Indian society is known for its traditional norms in showing in one's body in public and restrictions there upon, these traditional, norms are fast waning with the advent of exposure to globalized mass media and massive westernization process. In this context, understanding the social appearance needs and body image among Indian youth and its link with romantic relationship assumes importance. In this background, we were interested to examine how the exposure to media portrayed images would influence social appearance anxiety of young university students in India. To understand the body consciousness and appearance anxiety in the context of romantic relationship, we intended to examine how these variables differ in the context of different romantic relationship status viz. 1. Single, 2 currently in a romantic relationship, 3.expreinced a recent break-up in relationship. We expected that exposure to attractive models would augment appearance anxiety and the levels of the study variable will differ by relationship status.

## METHODS

### Participants

The participants for the study were drawn from a large central University in southern India.

We intended to include fifty participants in the experimental group (25 male and 25 female) with an equivalent control group matched for age range (18-24) and gender.

Invitation to participate in the study was made through flyers in the hostels and social networking channels of the authors. Participants who expressed willingness to participate were invited in small groups (maximum of five members). Before the beginning of the experiment, using a lottery, participants were randomly assigned to either experimental group or control group. Once the expected sample was reached (25 men and 25 women), further recruitment was stopped.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Stimuli for the experiment

Originally, the authors selected 70 images of physically attractive models (35 males & 35 females), celebrities and sportspersons from internet and online magazines. None of the images had obscene posture or porn content. A group of 6 volunteers who were not part of the experiment rated each images for its attractiveness on a scale of very much attractive (7) to not at all attractive (1). Images with highest ratings (40 images: 20 male & 20 female) were selected for the experiment. All the images were standardized for pixel size and resolution (1200×1800, 300 dpi) through Photoshop. Images for the control group were 40 non-living objects (furniture, automobiles etc) sourced from the online advertisements. In both the groups, images were presented in a laptop computer (HP pavilion: g6) as a slideshow with each image appearing for five seconds.

### Objectified Body Consciousness Scale

The objectified body consciousness scale developed by McKinley and Hyde (1996) is a self-report measure of body consciousness. It has 24 items which measures body surveillance, body shame and appearance control beliefs. The OBCS has got an excellent internal consistency of (Cronbach's $\alpha$ ) of.75. It is scored on a 7 point likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Items 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22 and 24 are reversed score. The total score is calculated by finding the sum of 24 items and the score ranges from 24

to 168, with a high score indicating high body consciousness.

## Romantic inclination scale (Ganth and Kadhiravan, 2013)

The scale consists of 38 items exploring into attitude, beliefs and desire towards romantic pursuits of youth. It also involves items related to marriage ideation, match making and fantasy thoughts about the partner. Internal consistency of the scale measured by Cronbach alpha was 0.85 and test retest reliability established after a gap of four weeks was found to be 0.82. The scale showed moderate correlation with Attitude Towards Love Scale (Knox & Sporakowski, 1968)

Social appearance anxiety scale

The social appearance anxiety scale developed by Hart, Leary and Rejeski (2008) is a 16 item assessment of anxiety about being negatively evaluated by others because of one's overall appearance. Items are rated on an agreement scale from not at all (1) to extremely (5). It has got a high test- retest reliability, good internal consistency, good factorial validity and incremental validity. Internal consistency for this scale is .97 for women and .96 for men. The total score ranges from 16 to 80. High score indicates high appearance anxiety.

Along with the above measures, a questionnaire consisting 10 items assessing the attitude towards advertisement was also administered to disguise the participants form the main objectives of the study. Items in the questionnaire include 'You buy products because your favorite actor/actress appears in the advertisement', "You like products modelled by sportspersons'. A demographic data sheet was used to get details age, gender, education level and current romantic relationship status of the participants.

Procedure

The research investigation was presented to the participants as a study of how advertisement influences what one is likely to purchase. The experiment was conducted in small groups (not more than five members). The participants were seated comfortably in a spacious room without any disturbance. The participants were divided into experimental and control group based on the lottery they got. The experiment was conducted in two

sessions. In the initial session basic demographic details were collected from both groups and the romantic inclination scale was given. After the completion of the romantic inclination scale the experimental stimuli was presented to the participants (experimental group) as an experiment investigating the influence of advertisement on what one is likely to purchase. After the presentation of the stimulus the social appearance anxiety scale and objectified body consciousness scale were given. A dummy questionnaire was also introduced in order to help participants remain blind to the exact purpose of the research. The control group was presented with the respective stimuli (non-living objects) as a study of effectiveness of advertisement of the products, after which the OBCS and appearance anxiety questionnaire were administered. Finally, participants were debriefed about the real objectives of the study.

## RESULTS

**Table 1:** Gender difference on study variables

| Variable | Gender | Mean | SD | t value |
|----------|--------|------|-----|---------|
| Body consciousness | Male | 90.24 | 11.26 | 2.15* |
| | Female | 85.04 | 12.90 | |
| Social Appearance Anxiety | Male | 29.56 | 8.83 | .893 |
| | Female | 31.18 | 9.30 | |
| Romantic Inclination | Male | 141.86 | 18.05 | 3.23** |
| | Female | 130.78 | 16.18 | |

*** p<0.01,*p<0.05*

Gender differences in terms of the study variables are presented in table 1. The results show that the gender differences exist in body objectification and romantic inclination of subjects. Male participants showed higher level of body consciousness and romantic inclination as compared to females. However, the social appearance anxiety scores did not vary significantly for men and women.

**Table 2:** Mean Difference for Social Appearance Anxiety

| Group | Mean | SD | t value |
|-------|------|-----|---------|
| Experimental | 38.24 | 5.75 | |
| Control | 22.50 | 2.55 | 17.68* |

*\*p<.001*

Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation and t value of experimental and control group for social

appearance anxiety. The significant t values indicate that the social appearance anxiety was higher for the experimental group than the control group. This suggests that the exposure to attractive models have an influence on the social appearance anxiety of the participants and thus provided evidence for our hypothesis that exposure to attractive models would augment the social appearance anxiety of the participants.

**Table 3:** Differences in Study Variables by Relationship Status

| Variable | Relationship status | F (df) | Scheffe's post-hoc result (Subset alpha=0.05) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Body Consciousness | 1. Single(N=56) | | |
| | 2. Currently relationship (N=37) | 2.587* (2,97) | 1vs 2; 2vs3*; 1vs3 |
| | 3. Break-up(N=7) | | |
| Social Appearance Anxiety | 1. Single(N=56) | | |
| | 2. Currently relationship (N=37) | 1.285 (2,97) | — |
| | 3. Break-up(N=7) | | |
| Romantic Inclination | 1. Single (N=56) | | |
| | 2. Currently relationship (N=37) | 5.343** (2,97) | 1vs2; 2vs3; 1vs3* |
| | 3. Break-up (N=7) | | |

*p<.05, **p, .001

The results of one-way analysis of variance on the variables by relationship status are presented in table 3 along with the post-hoc results of significant F statistic.

Significant F statistic suggests that body consciousness and romantic inclination differ by relationship status of the participants, while social appearance anxiety did not show any difference based on one's relationship status. Post hoc analysis of body consciousness revealed that those who had a break up in a romantic relationship showed significantly higher level of body consciousness compared to those who were in a current romantic relationship. However, in terms of romantic inclination, the break up group showed significant more inclination than the single group.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the gender difference analysis demonstrates that men showed more body consciousness than the female counterparts did. This goes against the common belief that women are more obsessed about their physical appearance than men. However, Corson and Andersen (2002) had argued that the body image worries of men are more diverse and complex than women as the male ideal body involves complex combination of body shape, weight and muscularity. This multidimensional body dissatisfaction among men are growing over the last 30 years (Cash, 2002). Similar studies on body dissatisfaction among men had shown that muscular ideals for men are becoming more and more out of reach for the average men (Pope *et al.*, 2000) which leads to worsening of body image dissatisfaction. Also, percentage of men who were dissatisfied with their body was on an increasing trend (Cash, 2002, p. 270).

The significantly higher mean score of men on romantic inclination shows that men were more inclined towards romantic relationship than their female counterpart were. This shows that men showed more initiation in developing a premarital romantic relationship and showed positive attitude towards the same. In India, it is culturally acceptable for men to be overt in matters pertaining to partner selection and romantic relationship. Our tradition views 'boys look for a girlfriend' in a more receptive way than 'Girls look for a boyfriend'. This result goes in hand with previous researches in India (IIPS, 2010; Abraham & Kumar, 1998; Ganth & Kadhiravan, 2017) which showed that men showed more interest in developing romantic relationship when compared to women.

An examination of the results of the experiment evidences the increase in social appearance anxiety in the participants after exposed to attractive models. This suggests that the participants might internalize the ideal body image portrayed by those models and subsequently underrate one's own physique, triggering anxiety. This result goes in hand with previous studies (Lavine, Sweeney & Wagner, 1999; Monro & Huon, 2004). Communication theories have argued that repeated exposure to media content leads viewers to begin to accept media portrayals as representations of reality and thereby accept those norms (Gerbner, Gross, & Morgan, 2002; Brown,

2002). They emphasize that continuous depiction and portrayal of such ideal images makes men, and women see this as attractive, ideal and normative. Because such representations are often skewed and beyond reach for non-professionals, adopting these standards lead to decreased satisfaction with one's own body (Levine & Harrison, 2004). With the advent of globalized entertainment media and ever-increasing size and influence of the mass media depicting standards of beauty and fitness, the influence of those portrayals of ideal body, shape and fitness have become the social standards of physical appearance. This result in more and more individuals, especially young adults, suffer negative effects of being constantly exposed to images of "ideal" bodies in the media.

A perusal of table 3 shows differences on the variables of body consciousness, appearance anxiety and romantic inclination in terms of romantic relationship status. Significant differences were found in body consciousness and romantic inclination levels among the three groups (Single. currently in a romantic relationship and break-up). The post hoc analysis and the mean scores indicated that break up group showed significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction (97.57) and romantic inclination (148.86). This result indicates that those who had a break up were more conscious of their body and physical appearance than those in a current relationship (86.35) and single individuals (87.25). This result shows a break up in relationship means more bodily consciousness and attention.

Similarly, those who had a break up in a romantic relationship showed more romantic inclination (148.86) than those in a current relationship (141.05) and single individuals (131.63). This indicates that break-up group is more obsessive about romantic interests and ideas than the other groups are. It is interesting to note that no significant difference were showed on social appearance anxiety in terms of relationship status. This indicated that appearance anxiety is independent of relationship status and common irrespective of one's current relationship status.

The limitations of the study need to be noted. The present study utilized data collected from an institutionalized sample of educated youth and hence results could not be generalized to other sections of Indian youth. Future studies could be conducted on a community sample drawing participants from diverse background.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the study showed that mere exposure to attractive models could significantly increase the social appearance anxiety among young adults. This suggests that young men and women constantly compare their appearance and measure themselves against an idealized and often unattainable standard of beauty and body image. This comparison leads to feelings of dissatisfaction and anxiety about their own bodies. Such comparisons and resultant anxieties are due to excessive self-objectification in an image-driven culture. While media, as evidenced by the present study and other previous literature, exerts a major influence on self-objectification, the role of romantic relationships and the pressure to look good in attracting and retaining partner plays a vital interpersonal influence. Acceptance of the self and reality and realization of the importance of healthy body against idealized body shapes would help reduce the anxieties of youth. The findings of the present study could be incorporated in designing social and life skills training programs and interventions for youth development.

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