

Open Access Article

AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY ON THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON FEMALE BODY IMAGE AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Dr. N. Tamilselvi

Assistant Professor, Dr. MGR Educational and Research Institute, Chennai,
tamilselvi.av@drmgrdu.ac.in

B. Saranya

Assistant Professor, Hindustan college of Arts & Science, Rajiv Gandhi Salai, Padur, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, saranyasuresh.kkdi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” as the saying goes. The purpose of this paper is to understand and criticize the role of social media in the development and/or encouragement of eating disorders and body image dissatisfaction among college girls. Most of the data gathered in this study was collected from colleges and offices of the city of Chennai, from previous studies on related issues and from media itself. This study was conducted using experimental research methods, mostly through surveys through questionnaire likely to be affected by changing standards of beauty or likely to have significant numbers of interactions related to these changing standards. The findings of this study are that cultural standards of beauty in India are narrowing and conforming to more international standards, and that these changes are causing new physical and psychological problems to be introduced into Indian society.

Keywords: Social Media; Dissatisfaction; Eating Disorders; Psychological Factors; Skin Complexion.

抽象的

俗话说“美在旁观者的眼中”。本文的目的是了解和批评社交媒体在大学女生饮食失调和身体形象不满的发展和/或鼓励中的作用。本研究中收集的大部分数据来自钦奈市的大学和办公室、之前对相关问题的研究以及媒体本身。这项研究是使用实验研究方法进行的，主要是通过问卷调查进行的，这些问卷调查可能会受到不断变化的美容标准的影响，或者可能与这些不断变化的标准有大量的相互作用。这项研究的结果是，印度的美容文化标准正在缩小并符合更多的国际标准，这些变化正在给印度社会带来新的生理和心理问题。

关键词：社交媒体；不满意；饮食失调；心理因素；皮肤肤色。

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to understand and criticize the role of social media in the development and/or encouragement of eating

disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction among young women. College girls are exceptionally vulnerable to the impact that social media can have on their body image

Received: October 18, 2021 / Revised: November 09, 2021 / Accepted: December 27, 2021 / Published: January 18, 2022

About the authors : Dr. N. Tamilselvi

Corresponding author- Email: tamilselvi.av@drmgrdu.ac.in

as they develop an outlook on their bodies and accept the developmental changes that occurred during puberty. This paper provides evidence that there is a relationship between the recent surge in disordered eating and high consumption of social media. Further, this analysis assesses the ways in which the thin ideal as portrayed in advertisements encourages women to look a certain, unrealistic way. The research also considers various social psychological theories to explain how women in society form their perceptions with a combination of what they see in the media as well as what they see in their friends and family. Most of the data gathered in this study was collected from colleges and offices of the city of Chennai, from previous studies on related issues, and from the media itself.

This study was conducted using experimental research methods, mostly through surveys through questionnaire likely to be affected by changing standards of beauty or likely to have significant numbers of interactions related to these changing standards. The findings of this study are that cultural standards of beauty in India are narrowing and conforming to more international standards and that these changes are causing new physical and psychological problems to be introduced into Indian society.

1.1 HYPOTHESES

The research formulates the following hypothesis:

- Visual media creates impact on disordered eating and body/skin complexion dissatisfaction among college girls.
- Visual media creates body/skin dissatisfaction more on heavy viewers than light viewers.

1.3 OBJECTIVES

1. To study the influence of visual media on college students
2. To study the preferences given by the college students about their body shape, skin complexion and height.
3. To study the body dissatisfaction factors among college students.
4. To study the differences of body dissatisfaction among heavy viewers and light viewers
5. To understand whether or not young people make specific changes in behavior subsequent to media exposure and, if so, to what extent.
6. To compare the influence of the media with that of friends and the family on these (selected) behaviors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The media-related factors of body image perceptions were selected on the basis of Visual media. The non-media related factors of body image perceptions were selected on the basis of literature review study, drawn mainly from psychology, social psychology and health research. This contained the non-media related factors that contribute to body image perceptions. These include self-esteem, role of peer. The consequences of body image factors were low self-esteem, anxiety and aspiration.

2.1 The Rise of Unsatisfied Women

We are living in a world that idealizes the sickly thin and shames the overweight. Throughout history, to be underweight was typically frowned upon. It was a sign of poverty and lack of resources. In fact, obesity was actually considered 'prestigious and admired'. To be fat was seen as an accomplishment – as a way to judge success. Today, as Indians become

wealthier and shifts to a culture of overindulgence and abundance, rates of obesity are rising, but it is no longer a sign of success. Instead, in our society, which focuses on physical appearance, fatness is looked down upon, while thinness is idolized. As a result, our society is now facing two problems: an epidemic of obesity as well as an increased rate of women who are unhappy with their bodies.

One experiment performed in 2011 by Nina Haferkamp and Nicole C. Kramer revealed that people who look at attractive users (on Facebook) have less positive emotions afterwards and are also more dissatisfied with their own body image than people who look at unattractive users. Another 2011 study performed at the University of Haifa in 2011 by Professors Yael Latzer, Ruth Katz and Zohar Spivak of the Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences had similar results. It looked at the correlation between the amount of time adolescent girls spent looking at Facebook and negative body image and (dis)satisfaction. In this particular study, researchers looked at females from the age of 12 to 19 and asked them to self-report their social media use and approaches to dieting, as well as a general sense of how they feel about their bodies. In the end, it was established that:

The more time girls spend on Facebook, the more they suffered conditions of bulimia, anorexia, physical dissatisfaction, negative physical self-image, and negative approach to eating and more of an urge to be on a weight-loss diet. (University of Haifa).

It is important to note that Latzer, Katz, and Zohar did not assert that there was causation

between Facebook use and body dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, the high correlation between the two suggests that girls who spend a lot of time on social media may be using it as a way to feed their negative body image or just to find dieting and weight loss tips. Although this study focused on a slightly younger demography of females, the results are telling of the dangerous side effects of high social media use. One psychologist, Dr. Harry Brandt, at The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt says that Facebook is making it easier for people to spend more time and energy criticizing their own bodies and wishing they looked like someone else (PRNewswire). That ‘someone else’ used to only be depicted in the constant advertisements that appear throughout society, but can now interfere into everyday life through several platforms and devices. The main SNS used among college girls today are Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Pinterest, and Tumblr, according to various sources. These sites allow college girls the opportunity to both create their own textual and graphic content as well as look at and critique the content created by peers and celebrities whom they admire. With 74% of all women using SNS, there must be certain lifestyle and behavioral consequences that stem from the constant ability to monitor one’s online profile. Once we understand the extreme prevalence that SNS, specifically photo-heavy social networking, plays in the lives of college girls, it will be easier to assess its potential impact on social comparisons and body image. In observing the relationship between young female body image with their use of social network sites (SNS), it is important to understand the purpose they serve, how pervasive they are, and what ideals they reinforce. As social media blurs the line between the physical and the virtual, the question is

whether social media intensifies the impact of peer group pressures that have always existed in physical peer pressure or if it introduces an entirely new problem.

There are three related schemas that further serve as building blocks to the overall application and implications of social comparison theory and social physique anxiety. They are: objectification theory, uses and gratification theory and cultivation theory. Together, these theories help us to understand the relationships between female social media use and body dissatisfaction and ultimately negative body image and a resulting obsession for the perfect body. The theories below help explain how negative self-image and resulting extreme weight loss behaviors can be the outcome of social pressures and external comparisons, rather than, simply, the result of a psychological disorder. Taken together, these theories suggest that a person, especially one with low self-esteem, will base his or her body image heavily on social comparisons.

The objectification theory helps explain the root of the problem in social comparisons. It hypothesizes that women are deeply affected by how they see women portrayed in the media. The theory explains that women in media are often depicted as objects to be looked at, and discusses the implications that objectification has on average women society. It suggests that society has conditioned young women to look at other women in a certain way. Objectification theory refers mostly to what women see in the media, with less focus on peers, yet is a solid base on which to observe how college girls have grown accustomed to be overly critical about their bodies and their peers.

Developed by Barbara L. Frederickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts in 1997, objectification theory also attempts to understand women's decisions and their relation to potential threats to their mental health, such as disordered eating and eating disorders. Specifically, objectification theory states that:

“Objectification functions to socialize girls and women to treat themselves as objects to be evaluated based on appearance. Girls learn, both indirectly and vicariously that other people's evaluations of their physical appearance can determine how they are treated and, ultimately, affect their social and economic life outcomes.” (Roberts & Gettman 17-18).

Objectification of women in mass media has a substantial impact on women who force their subconscious mind to evaluate women in ways that they otherwise would not. Beginning at a young age, women are taught that by society their bodies are the most important part of their identity – that they are judged based solely on what they look like or the clothes that they wear. Using a combination of cultivation theory and the Uses and Gratification theory, social media is a perfect example of what can happen when a certain type of woman are seen as ideal body images by media. Women with low self-esteem are most vulnerable to choosing what media to which they will expose themselves and that choice will also contribute to the construction of a possibly distorted understanding of reality. For instance, a woman with high body dissatisfaction will choose to follow other women, whom she thinks embody a certain ideal, on Instagram. In response, she will feed her negative body image and strive to look the same way.

Cultivation theory, Objectification theory and the Uses and Gratification theory all serve as building blocks to emphasize the main points of social comparison theory and social physique anxiety: that social comparisons play a critical role in the formation of self-worth, body image and self-esteem. This includes both the comparisons that we make with movie stars and models, as well as the ideals that we see propagated through our peers. People tend to base a lot of their decisions and judgments on what they see in people who surround them as well as what others have justified as socially acceptable.

In combining all four theories, it can be concluded that many women's feelings toward their own bodies are highly influenced by what occurs around them, whether in the physical or virtual world. Through mass mediated images, women have long been encouraged to adopt and maintain a certain ideal physique and focus on their bodies as the most important aspect of their persona. They have been conditioned to accept the objectification of women in mass media; and therefore, certain women who do not look like, or who do not think they look like what they see in the media, tend to suffer from a feeling of discontent. That discontent and dissatisfaction with their body, according to objectification theory, can lead to self-surveillance, self-objectification and anxiety. Then, according to the uses and gratification theory, this anxiety is channeled through their choice of media. It is the women with negative body image who will choose to consume a certain type of medium to participate in upward comparisons and reinforce their negative thoughts. Next, cultivation theory argues that a high consumption of that chosen medium will then cause the woman to create a distorted social reality. Eventually, she will

believe that she must embody what she sees in that medium. All together, these theories suggest that women with already negative body image tend to be vulnerable to the internalization of the ideal body type that they see in media, therefore causing them to seek out more thin ideal photos to make upward comparisons, and eventually make diet and exercise decisions to further their progress toward replicating it.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an exploratory research design for the study. Survey method was employed to find the effects of visual media on female body image of college girls. A quantitative approach provided the focus for exploring the relationships between the TV commercials related determinants and non-media related determinants on the body image perceptions and its consequences. Survey research could indicate associations between TV commercials and body image perceptions of college aged women. This survey was conducted by the administration of questionnaire to a sample of respondents who were college girls, selected from various colleges in Chennai and Pondicherry.

3.1 Statistics tests, techniques, Data analysis

The data from the 200 respondents were coded and entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Adequate care was taken to verify with the original questionnaire randomly for errors and corrections.

3.2 Television Exposure

Television exposure was defined as the amount of time spent by the respondent viewing television. Higher scores indicated higher television exposure.

S.No	ITEMS	PERCENTAGE
		%
1	Less than 2 hours	48
2	2-4 hours	30
3	More than 4 hours	22

3.3 Beliefs and Favorites

Beliefs and Favorites were defined as the belief created by media and favorite characters shown or portrayed in Visual media.

S.No	ITEMS	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE
1	Believes that the information or message which was given by media is real and true.	15	68	17
2	Influenced by the information shown by media.	29	47	25
3	Want to lead a life of the characters which was shown by media.	17	26	58
4	Want to change appearance according to the favorite characters which was shown by media	17	17	66
5	Knows from the media that looking thin and height and having fair skin complexion is beautiful.	29	22	50

3.4 Influence of Visual media

Influence of visual media was defined as the influence that the audience experienced with regard to body image perceptions. It is the degree to which audience compare their body to image perceptions. It is the degree to which audience compare their body to women portrayed in visual media. This concept was measured, using 10 items constructed and included by the researcher. This concept included three factors, namely Physical factors, Habits, and Psychological factors.

The Linker-type scale contained ordinal level measurement with 5-point responses, ranging from totally agrees to totally disagree, with higher scores indicating higher visual media influence.

Factor analysis was performed to explore these factors.

S.No	ITEMS	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE
1	I believe that the information or message which was given by media is real and true.	15	68	15
2	I will get influenced by the information shown by media.	29	47	25
3	I want to lead a life of the characters which was shown by media.	17	26	58
4	I want to change my appearance according to my favorite characters which was shown by media.	17	17	66
5	I knew from the media that looking thin and height and having fair skin complexion is beautiful.	29	21	50

3.5 Factor 1: PHYSICAL FACTORS

Here Physical factors are defined as worthwhile feeling of the self-experienced by the individual. Ten items are used to find out individual's physical self-esteem.

S.No	ITEMS	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	Satisfied with eyes and eyebrows.	55	36	8	2	0
2	Satisfied with nose.	38	28	19	15	1
3	Satisfied with body's unwanted hair growth in hands and legs.	21	23	24	19	14
4	Satisfied with skin complexion	28	38	22	11	3
5	Likes only fair skin complexion.	8	17	26	23	28
6	Satisfied with height	39	22	13	18	9
7	Satisfied with body shape and size	28	33	17	17	7
8	Like to be slim.	35	34	21	8	4
9	Wants collar bones to show.	10	12	25	33	20
10	Wants a flat stomach or tummy.	37	35	14	8	7

3.6 Factor 2: HABITS

Here Habits are defined as the regular works of the individual. Nine items are used to find out individual's Habits.

S.No	ITEMS	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	I skip my breakfast regularly.	11	16	19	22	34
2	I reduced my food intake, fearing of excess weight.	11	16	19	22	34
3	I use to go to gym, to maintain my body shape	5	8	6	34	48
4	I will do dieting rather than walking.	9	10	16	34	33
5	I am using fairness creams regularly.	15	16	11	20	40
6	I use to go to beauty parlors regularly.	3	7	13	32	46
7	I use to avoid going in sunlight, fearing of getting sun turned skin.	17	19	18	25	21
8	I am using sun screen lotions regularly.	9	12	11	29	40
9	I use to wear high heels slippers.	7	10	11	26	48

3.7 Factor 3: PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

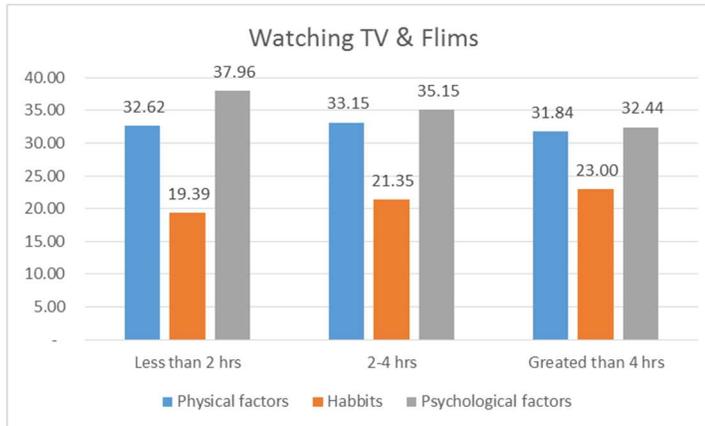
Psychological factor was defined as the anxiety of the individual with regard to their own body when they realize their body does not match the ideal body image.

S.No	ITEMS	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	I feel stressed when I am looking poor/ugly/dull/ba	11	20	22	24	24

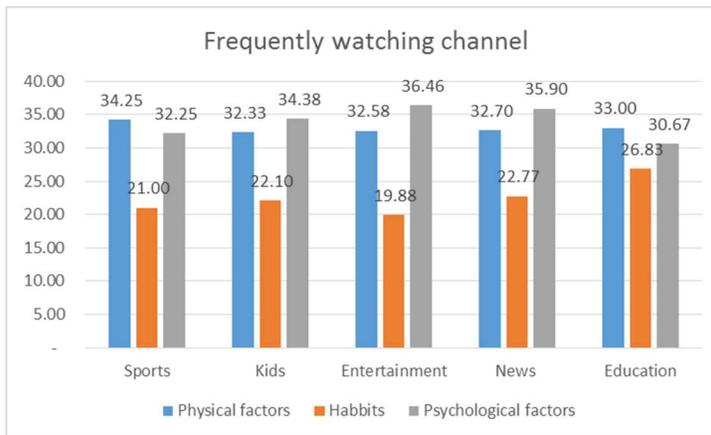
	d among my friends' group.					
2	I look beautiful when I am hungry.	6	5	17	38	35
3	If I didn't get noticed, I will feel bad, and I will get anger sometimes.	5	18	26	27	26
4	I want to be loved because of my uniqueness like eyes, eyebrows, nose and lips	13	15	23	29	21
5	I want to be praised about my skin complexion and body height and weight.	7	14	19	32	29
6	I believe that being thin is important than being healthy.	7	12	7	30	46
7	I believe that my status in the society depends on my external appearance rather than my knowledge	6	12	17	24	41
8	I am much worried about having dusky skin complexion.	8	8	25	34	26
9	I am much worried about my body height and weight.	14	15	19	27	26
10	I feel ashamed when my friends teasing my external appearance.	10	16	19	27	29

3.8 COMPARISONS OF THREE FACTORS

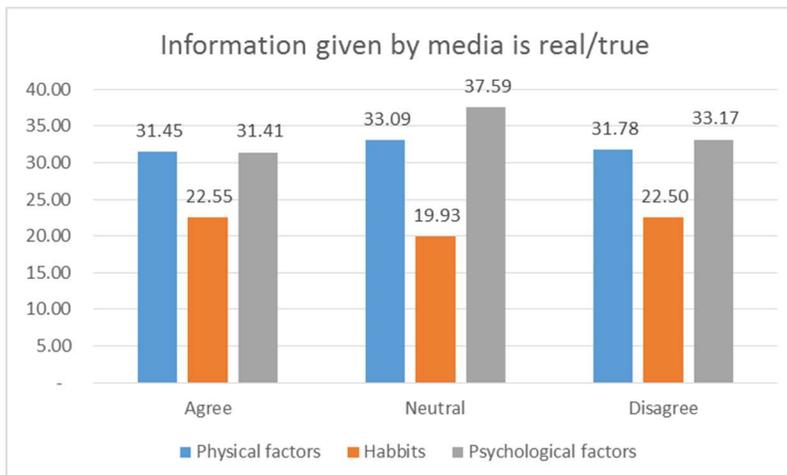
Comparison of the watching TV and films data with the points obtained by the respondents in all the three factors



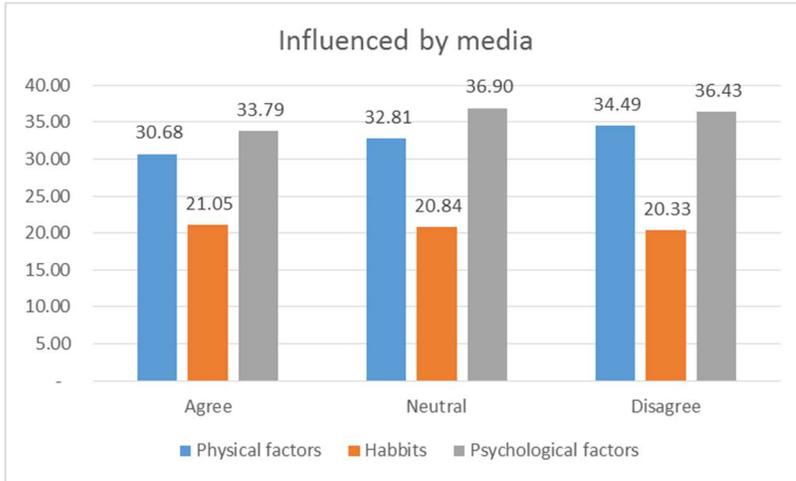
Comparison of the frequently watching channel data with the points obtained by the respondents in all the three factors



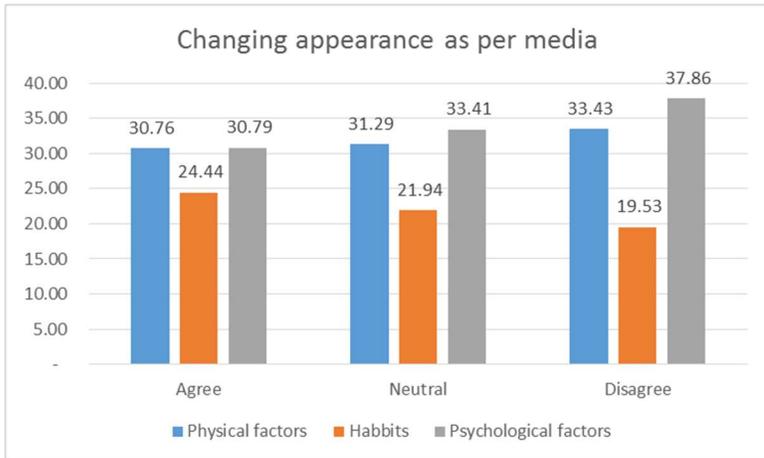
Comparison of the information given by media is real/true data with the points obtained by the respondents in all the three factors



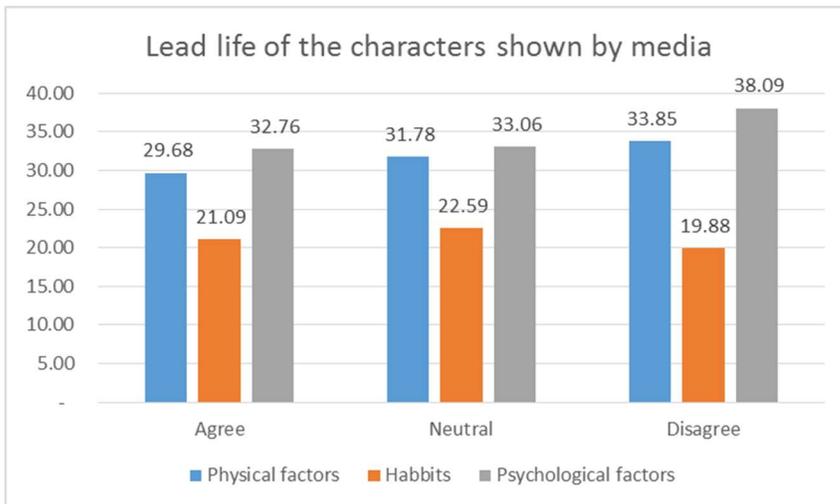
Comparison of the influenced by media is real/true data with the points obtained by the respondents in all the three factors



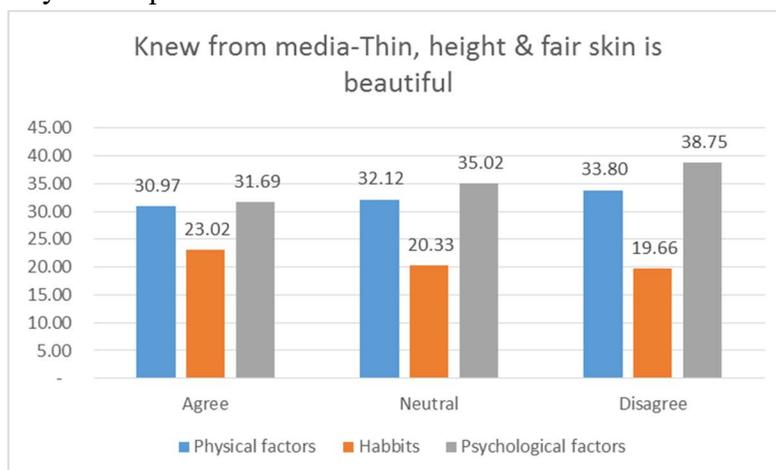
Comparison of the changing appearance as per media data with the points obtained by the respondents in all the three factors



Comparison of the lead life characters shown by media data with the points obtained by the respondents in all the three factors



Comparison of the 'knew from media that thin, height and fair skin is beautiful' data with the points obtained by the respondents in all the three factors



Data Entry & Clearing

The respondents of this study were 200 college girls. None of the participants had previously participated in any studies, involving body image or attractiveness. They were drawn from four colleges across Chennai and Pondicherry. The data from the 200 respondents were coded and entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Outlier Analysis

The outlier analysis was performed to remove cases that were found to be outliers in the data. The sample size of this study was 214. Fourteen of the questionnaires were incomplete and were removed which brought down the sample size to 200. The data analysis was carried with the 200 responses.

4. RESULTS

From the study the following findings were arrived. The current study set out to replicate past research indicating the impact of visual media in eating disorders and body dissatisfaction among college girls.

- Majority of the college girls spend time in watching television less than two hours

daily.

- They frequently watch entertainment channels.
- Majority of the respondents were neutral in their response about the information given by media is real and true.
- Majority of the respondents were neutral in their response about influenced by media.
- Majority of the respondents disagreed in their response about leading life of the characters shown by media.
- Majority of the respondents disagreed in their response about changing appearance as per media.
- Majority of the respondents disagreed in their response that they knew from media that looking thin, tall and having fair skin complexion is beautiful.
- Disparity within physical factors, habits & psychological factors in terms of watching television remains neutral however, effect remains significant in Physical factors & habits whereas it was lower in psychological factors.

- Self-esteem seems to be high irrespective of how much they watch TV, which channel they watch & get information and get influenced. Score being > 25 in all the factors.
- However, self-esteem seems to be lower when they watch more Entertainment channels compared to News & Education channels. Hence the researcher found there is some impact on self-esteem among those who watch entertainment channels but not to a greater extent.
- Respondent's Psychological & Physical factors get influenced and believe information provided by media is real. However, there is no or little influence on their habits.
- Influence from media is high on Psychological factors, moderate in Physical factors & low on habits.
- Respondent does wish to change their Physical & Psychological appearance but not their regular habits as per media.
- It is not that much evident that thin, tall and fair skin is beautiful as shown in the media

5. CONCLUSION

In combining objectification theory, cultivation theory, and the uses and gratification theory, the researcher concludes that visual media does have negative impact on women who are already susceptible to body image concerns. This is a dangerous concern because of the high number of women who are predisposed to body dissatisfaction, coupled with the extremely high and increasing rates of social media use among college women. However, data points collected from the respondents clearly show there is some amount of impact on the Physical & Psychological factors and very little impact on

the habitual activities. This could be an actual fact or the respondents could be little bit hesitant in showing up their real responses. Media influence on society is very evident, however, they are not open to accept the real fact. This paper does not blame visual media for the recent increase in body image concerns. It has only examined the relationship and made logical conclusions based on psychological theories and cultural studies and the researcher's observations. Today, visual media has become the second nature for most college students, and it is easy to forget that it comes with all the same dangers as in-person and peer pressure. This paper has tried to expose the ways in which visual media is exacerbating the problem of female body dissatisfaction and eating disorders among college girls. An increase in media awareness has to be the first step toward encouraging a healthy relationship between a woman, her body, and her media network.

REFERENCE

1. Akhila Vasan, Films and TV: Viewing patterns and influence on behaviors of college students Fellow, Health and Population Innovation Fellowship Programme
2. Albanesius, Chloe. "Facebook Acquires Instagram For \$1 Billion." PC Magazine (2012): Academic Search Premier. Web. 15 Nov. 2013.
1. Bordo, Susan. Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body. Berkeley: University of California, 1993.
2. Calogero, Rachel M., Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, and J. Kevin. Thompson. Self-objectification In Women: Causes, Consequences, and Counteractions.

-
- Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011.
3. Derenne, Jennifer L. and Eugene V. Beresin. "Body Image, Media, and Eating Disorders." *Academic Psychiatry*, 2006. 257-261.
 4. Duggan, Maeve and Joanna Brenner. "The Demographics of Users of Social Media Users 2012." Pew Research Center. 14 February 2013.
 5. Gaesser, Glenn A. *Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Your Weight and Your Health*. Gurze Books: California, 2002
"Global Faces and Networked Places." Nielsen 2009.
 6. Holstrom, Amanda. "The effects of the Media on Body Image: A meta-Analysis." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 48.2, 196-218, 2004.
 7. Rebecca Gelles, Fair and Lovely: Standards of Beauty, Globalization, and the Modern Indian Woman, SIT Graduate Institute - Study Abroad, gellesr@carleton.edu
 8. Levine, Michael P. and Linda Smolka.Vandereycken,Walter (Ed); "The prevention of eating disorders. Studies in eating disorders: An international series." New York, NY, US: New York University Press, 23-56, 1998.
 9. Mulvey, Kate, and Melissa Richards. *Decades of Beauty: The Changing Image of Women, 1890's to 1990's*. London: Hamlyn, 1998. Print.
 10. Grogan, Sarah. *Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women, and Children*.