

Reclaiming Bodies, Reclaiming Voices: A Feminist Participatory Study on Adolescent Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Power in Bangladesh

Amitav Kumar Kundu

Manusher Jonno Foundation

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500708>

Received: 13 May 2026; Accepted: 18 May 2026; Published: 11 June 2026

ABSTRACT

This study, *Reclaiming Bodies, Reclaiming Voices: A Feminist Participatory Study on Adolescent Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Power in Bangladesh*, explores how beauty standards, social expectations, and power dynamics shape adolescents' self-esteem and everyday experiences. Using a mixed-method feminist participatory approach, the research combined quantitative surveys with qualitative tools such as storytelling, body mapping, power analysis, and Rivers of Life exercises to capture both measurable trends and lived realities. Adolescents aged 11–16 and parents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds participated in the study, including marginalized groups such as adolescents with disabilities and youth from low-income households.

This study examines how beauty standards, gender norms, and social pressures shape adolescent self-esteem in North Bengal, Bangladesh. Employing a mixed-method feminist participatory design, the research combined a quantitative survey of 100 participants (40 girls, 40 boys, and 20 parents) with qualitative workshops, including focus group discussions, storytelling, body mapping, power analysis, and Rivers of Life exercises. Quantitative findings reveal widespread body dissatisfaction, with fair skin and slimness identified as dominant ideals. Girls reported higher levels of appearance-related distress (18.7%) compared to boys (15.6%), while peer comparison emerged as a major driver of insecurity (34.8% of girls and 28.9% of boys). Qualitative narratives highlighted intersectional challenges linked to colorism, disability, and poverty, alongside resilience and critical awareness among adolescents. The study demonstrates that body image concerns extend beyond emotional distress, affecting academic concentration and social participation. By integrating feminist theory with behavioral science, this research contributes to global scholarship on adolescent psychology and feminist participatory methodologies. It underscores the need for gender-transformative, media-literate interventions that promote self-acceptance and challenge harmful beauty norms in South Asian contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence represents a critical developmental stage in which young people form their identities, self-concepts, and social belonging. During this period, self-esteem is particularly vulnerable to external pressures, including family expectations, peer interactions, and media influences. Global research consistently demonstrates that body image concerns are strongly linked to adolescent self-esteem, with implications for mental health, academic engagement, and social participation. However, much of this scholarship has focused on Western contexts, leaving South Asian experiences underexplored.

In Bangladesh, adolescents navigate a complex environment shaped by entrenched beauty norms, colorism, gender expectations, and the expanding influence of digital media. Fair skin and slimness are widely valorized, while darker skin tones, larger body sizes, disability, and poverty often become sources of exclusion and stigma. These pressures are reinforced through everyday interactions with peers, relatives, teachers, and online platforms, creating a climate in which appearance is closely tied to worth and acceptance.

Despite growing recognition of these challenges, there remains limited empirical research that integrates feminist perspectives with mixed-method approaches to capture both measurable trends and lived realities in South Asia.

This study addresses that gap by examining how beauty standards, social expectations, and power dynamics shape adolescent self-esteem in North Bengal, Bangladesh. Guided by a feminist behavioral conceptual framework, the research explores the intersection of structural norms and individual experiences, highlighting both constraints and opportunities for resilience.

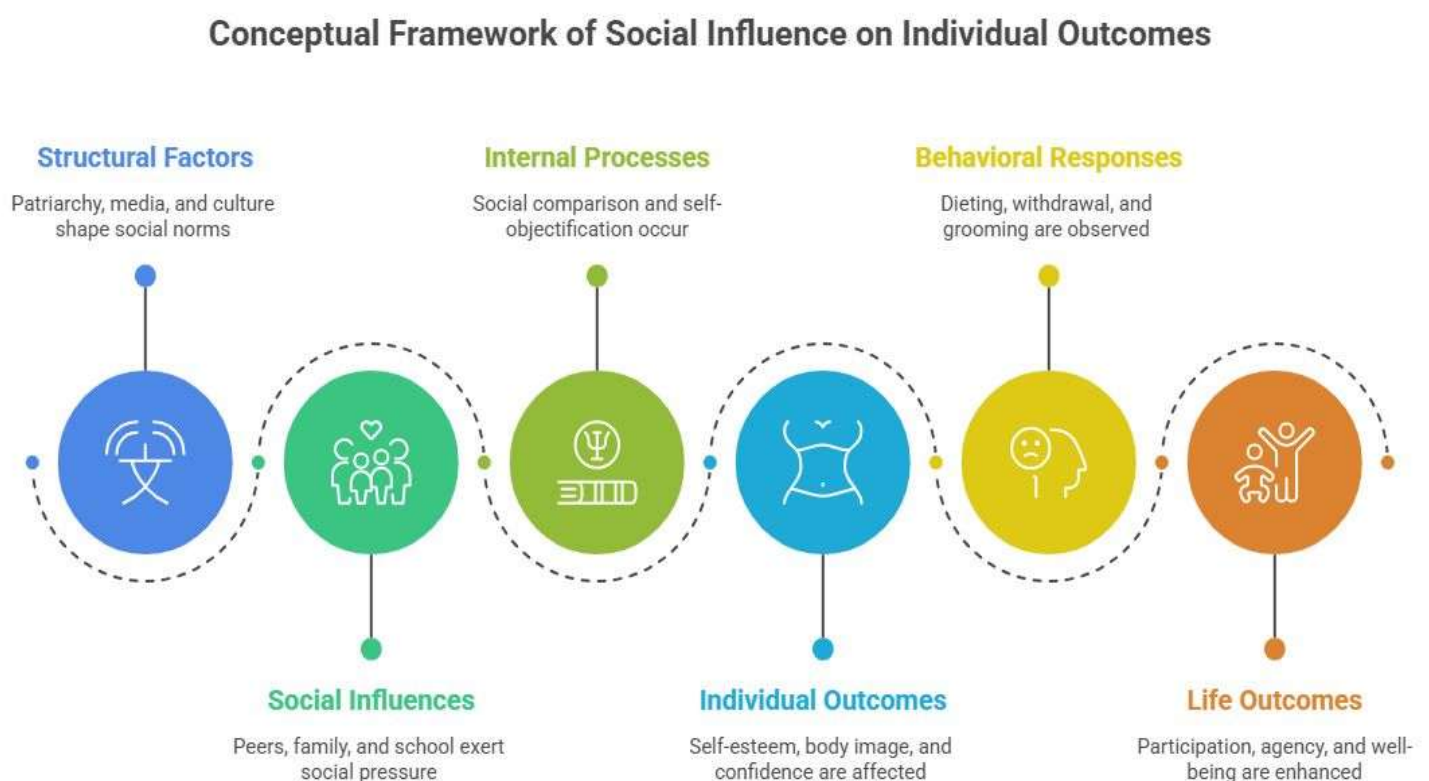
- The study is guided by the following research questions:
- How do adolescents perceive beauty and body image in their everyday lives?
- What sources of pressure most strongly influence adolescent self-esteem?
- How do gender, class, and disability intersect to shape these experiences?
- What forms of resilience and agency emerge in response to these pressures?

By situating adolescent voices at the center of analysis, this research contributes to international scholarship on body image and self-esteem while advancing feminist participatory methodologies in South Asian contexts.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study is guided by an integrated Feminist Behavioral Conceptual Framework. This framework combines feminist theory, which examines power relations, gender norms, and systemic inequalities, with behavioral science and social psychology, which explore how individuals think, feel, and act within their environments. Feminist theory challenges patriarchal structures, cultural traditions, and media narratives that shape narrow beauty standards, especially for girls and marginalized adolescents. Behavioral science and social psychology contribute models of social learning, internalization, and self-regulation, showing how external pressures are absorbed, negotiated, and sometimes resisted by young people. This approach enables a comprehensive analysis from broad social forces to individual psychological processes, illustrating how societal expectations influence family, peers, schools, and adolescents' internal experiences and behaviors. By sitting adolescent experiences within this intersectional context, the framework identifies both the constraints of dominant norms and opportunities for agency and change. It informs both research analysis and the development of interventions to empower young people to reclaim their bodies, voices, and futures.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



This study is guided by an integrated Feminist Behavioral Conceptual Framework that combines feminist participatory principles with behavioral science and social psychology. Feminist theory provides the foundation by interrogating power relations, gender norms, and systemic inequalities that shape adolescents' experiences of body image and self-esteem. It emphasizes reflexivity, positionality, and the co-creation of knowledge, ensuring that adolescents are not treated as passive subjects but as active agents in the research process.

Behavioral science contributes models of social learning, internalization, and self-regulation, explaining how external pressures from peers, family, and media are absorbed and negotiated by adolescents. Social psychology adds insights into comparison processes, identity formation, and resilience, clarifying how adolescents evaluate themselves against societal ideals and how these evaluations influence emotional well-being and behavior.

By integrating these perspectives, the framework traces a pathway from **structural norms** (patriarchy, colorism, media representations) → **social influences** (family, peers, schools) → **psychological processes** (comparison, internalization, self-monitoring) → **behavioral outcomes** (appearance modification, withdrawal, reduced academic focus). Feminist participatory principles ensure that these pathways are not only analyzed but also challenged through reflexive practice, collaborative interpretation, and action-oriented recommendations.

This integration allows the framework to capture both the constraints of dominant norms and the possibilities for agency and resilience. It positions adolescents as co-researchers whose voices shape the analysis, while behavioral science provides the empirical rigor needed to demonstrate how social pressures translate into psychological and behavioral outcomes. Together, these approaches generate a holistic understanding of adolescent self-esteem and body image in Bangladesh and inform interventions that are both evidence-based and socially transformative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on body image and self-esteem has been extensive across psychology, sociology, and gender studies. Global scholarship consistently demonstrates that exposure to idealized media images fosters body dissatisfaction among adolescents (Tiggemann, 2011). Festinger's **Social Comparison Theory** (1954) explains how individuals evaluate themselves against peers and societal icons, often leading to negative self-perception. Fredrickson and Roberts' **Objectification Theory** (1997) further highlight how pervasive societal focus on appearance encourages self-monitoring, anxiety, and shame, with consequences for cognitive performance and participation in public life.

In South Asia, emerging research underscores the intersection of **colorism, gender norms, and socio-economic status** in shaping adolescent self-esteem. Studies in Bangladesh and India reveal that fair skin is valorized, while darker skin tones and larger body sizes are stigmatized, contributing to exclusion and discrimination (Nahar et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2019). Adolescents in rural communities face layered challenges, including strict gender expectations, limited mobility, and heightened risks of early marriage, all of which influence body image and agency.

Digital media has intensified these pressures. Adolescents are frequently exposed to edited and filtered images that set unrealistic standards, contributing to heightened dissatisfaction and emotional distress (Perloff, 2014). Yet, research also shows that **media literacy and critical awareness** can mitigate these effects, though such skills remain underdeveloped in many South Asian contexts.

Feminist scholarship emphasizes the importance of **intersectionality** (Crenshaw, 1989) in understanding overlapping identities such as gender, class, rurality, and disability. These intersections create unique experiences of marginalization and privilege, requiring nuanced methodological approaches. Participatory feminist methodologies have been increasingly recognized for their ability to center adolescent voices, challenge power dynamics, and generate action-oriented knowledge (Cornwall, 2016). However, few studies in South Asia have integrated feminist participatory methods with mixed-method designs to capture both statistical trends and lived realities.

This study builds on these theoretical and empirical foundations by combining quantitative analysis with participatory tools. It contributes to the literature by situating adolescent experiences within a **feminist behavioral conceptual framework**, highlighting how structural norms, social influences, and psychological processes converge to shape self-esteem. In doing so, it addresses a critical gap in South Asian scholarship and advances international debates on adolescent body image and feminist participatory research.

Research Objectives

- To explore perceptions of beauty and body image among adolescents
- To understand the sources of pressure influencing self-esteem
- To examine gendered and intersectional experiences
- To analyze the behavioral and emotional impacts of body image concerns
- To generate participatory narratives for action-oriented programming

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method feminist participatory design, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative participatory tools. The quantitative component provided measurable trends in adolescent self-esteem and body image, while the qualitative component captured lived experiences through storytelling, body mapping, power analysis, and Rivers of Life exercises. This design ensured both breadth and depth of understanding, consistent with feminist principles of agency, inclusion, and reflexivity.

Participants and Demographics

A total of **100 participants** were included in the survey:

- **Adolescent girls (n = 40)**, aged 11–16, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Adolescent boys (n = 40)**, aged 11–16, similarly diverse in background.
- **Parents (n = 20)**, representing both mothers and fathers, to provide complementary perspectives.

The sample included adolescents from low-income households and those with disabilities to ensure intersectional representation.

Recruitment and Inclusion Criteria

Participants were recruited through schools, community centers, and local NGOs in North Bengal. Inclusion criteria required adolescents to be aged 11–16 and enrolled in school or community programs. Parents were included if they had children within this age range. Exclusion criteria included adolescents outside the age range or those unwilling to provide assent/consent.

Instruments

- **Quantitative survey:** Adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and established body image measures. Reliability was tested using **Cronbach's alpha** to ensure internal consistency.

Qualitative tools:

- **Storytelling:** Adolescents narrated personal experiences of pride, shame, and exclusion.
- **Body Mapping:** Participants illustrated perceptions of their bodies, highlighting areas of pride or insecurity.
- **Power Analysis:** Adolescents mapped individuals and institutions influencing their self-esteem.

- Rivers of Life: Participants visualized their self-esteem journey over time.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained before conducting the study. Written parental consent and adolescent assent were secured. Confidentiality protocols were strictly followed, and safe spaces were created to minimize emotional risk.

Mixed-Method Integration

Quantitative and qualitative findings were **triangulated** to enhance validity. Survey data identified prevalence and trends, while qualitative narratives explained underlying mechanisms and contextual meanings. Integration occurred at both the analysis stage (comparing themes with statistical results) and the interpretation stage (linking numerical patterns with lived experiences).

Sampling Overview

The sampling distribution is presented below with denominators and percentages for clarity:

Type	Tool	Total Sample (n)	Distribution
Quantitative	Survey	100	Girls: 40, Boys: 40, Parents: 20
Qualitative	Focus Group Discussions (Body Mapping, Power Analysis, Rivers of Life)	4 groups	Girls: 2 groups, Boys: 2 groups
Qualitative	Storytelling	10	Girls: 5, Boys: 5

FINDINGS

Table 1 summarizes the prevalence of appearance-related pressures among adolescents and parents in North Bengal. The data highlight differences in reported distress, peer comparison, appearance modification, academic concentration, and media literacy across groups. Percentages are calculated from denominators (girls n=40, boys n=40, parents n=20) to ensure transparency. This comparative presentation illustrates both gendered patterns and parental observations, offering a clear overview of how body image concerns manifest across different segments of the sample.

Table 1. Prevalence of Appearance-Related Pressures

Indicator	Girls (n=40)	Boys (n=40)	Parents (n=20)
Reported distress	18.7%	15.6%	—
Peer comparison	34.8%	28.9%	—
Appearance modification	60.0%	40.0%	—
Reduced academic concentration	21.8%	32.4%	55% (observed)
Awareness of image editing	0.7%	2.0%	—

Fair Skin Emerged as the Dominant Beauty Standard

Numbers alone only tell part of the story. Behind these stats are real adolescent girls and boys who bear the burden of colorism daily. For many, the idea that beauty means having fair skin isn't just a message from TV or magazines; it comes from those closest to them: parents, relatives, neighbors, and teachers. Imagine a girl looking in the mirror and, before she even leaves her house, already feeling she doesn't measure up because of her skin tone. For her, and for many others like her, this message is echoed at family gatherings, in classrooms, and on social media. It becomes a quiet voice in their minds, shaping their confidence and even their dreams for the future.

What makes colorism especially painful is how it is passed down through generations. Parents who grew up with the same messages now often unknowingly repeat them to their children. Little compliments, warnings about staying out of the sun, or suggestions to use fairness creams become part of everyday life, reinforcing the idea that only certain kinds of beauty are valued. Over time, these small moments add up, teaching adolescents to judge themselves and others through a narrow lens. The internalization of these standards affects how they see themselves, how they relate to their peers, and whether they feel they belong. It's not just about appearance; colorism shapes self-esteem, friendships, and the sense of possibility that young people carry with them as they grow. These findings remind us that the fight against colorism isn't just about changing opinions, but about changing the daily realities that shape young lives.

Dark Skin was the Most Commonly Perceived “Unattractive” Trait

Behind the numbers lies the story of countless adolescents who feel the sting of exclusion every day, not because of anything they have done, but because of the color of their skin. For a girl walking into school with hope for the day, a single offhand remark about her being “too dark” can linger long after the final bell rings. For a boy, hearing jokes or whispers about his skin can make him shrink away from activities he once enjoyed. These are not isolated moments they are woven into the fabric of daily life, shaping the way adolescents see themselves, their worth, and their place among peers.

What makes this reality even more painful is that these attitudes are not limited to the schoolyard or playground. When parents are often unaware, they echo the same biases, and the message becomes part of the home as well. Little comments, advice to stay out of the sun, or praise for lighter complexions work their way into family conversations, reinforcing the idea that dark skin is a problem to be fixed rather than a natural and beautiful part of one's identity. The result is a cycle where self-doubt and insecurity are passed down, generation to generation, leaving adolescents with the burden of shame and exclusion that is not their making. These stories reveal that for many young people, colorism is not just a social challenge; it's a daily test of self-worth, belonging, and resilience. Tackling this issue means more than awareness; it requires breaking the cycle of silence and teaching both youth and adults to celebrate all shades of identity.

Girls Experienced Greater Appearance-Related Psychological Pressure

The quantitative findings, in line with in-depth qualitative narratives, reveal that girls are subject to especially intense body-image pressures compared to boys. Nearly one in five girls 18.7% reported feelings of inferiority, depression, or distress related to their appearance, compared to 15.6% of boys. This difference, while seemingly modest numerically, is magnified by the wider social context: girls not only reported higher rates of psychological distress, but also greater engagement in appearance comparison and behavior change. These findings reflect a landscape in which girls face heightened scrutiny from family, peers, and the media, leading to persistent self-evaluation and efforts to conform to narrow beauty ideals. The gendered nature of these pressures means that girls' self-worth is often more closely tied to their appearance, exposing them to greater risk of emotional distress, reduced confidence, and social withdrawal. The data underscore the urgent need for gender-sensitive interventions that address these deep-rooted societal expectations and equip girls with tools for resilience and self-acceptance.

Peer Comparison is a Major Driver of Self-Esteem Challenges

The findings affirm that peer comparison and pressure are central to adolescents' struggles with self-esteem. Over a third of girls 34.8% and nearly a third of boys 28.9% regularly compare their appearance to others, showing how ingrained and normalized comparison culture is. Friends and peers are the primary source of appearance-related insecurity, surpassing family or media influences. These figures reveal how adolescents are embedded in environments where appearance influences social acceptance and belonging, creating a cycle of evaluation and self-doubt based on often unattainable standards. This undermines confidence and fosters competition and exclusion, worsening self-esteem issues. Addressing peer comparison is crucial for adolescent well-being. Widespread appearance-based teasing, humiliation, and social exclusion are also evident. Over a quarter of girls 28.0% and boys 27.0%, experience rebuke or abuse related to looks, mainly occurring in community spaces and schools, indicating that both public and educational settings perpetuate appearance-based

discrimination. Such stigma can have lasting impacts, including lowered self-esteem, reduced social participation, and reinforcement of harmful norms. Combating appearance-based stigma requires a community approach involving schools, leaders, and institutions to create safer, inclusive environments. Discrimination is often intersectional, targeting youth with dark skin 16.2%, overweight 13.3%, or with disabilities 10.5%, often overlapping and increasing risks of social isolation and distress. Interventions must recognize this complexity to effectively support marginalized youth.

These numbers do not exist in a vacuum. When adolescents face appearance-based abuse, it most often happens in the places where they should feel safest: their neighborhoods and schools. More than 83% of incidents occur in community spaces where children gather to play, socialize, or simply go about their daily lives. Nearly half of all cases occur at school, a place meant for learning and growth, but which too often becomes a site of judgment and exclusion. These environments, which are supposed to nurture young people, end up reproducing harmful norms and making adolescents feel exposed and vulnerable.

Colorism, Body Size, and Disability are Major Reasons for Exclusion

The reasons for this abuse are not random. The data make it clear that certain traits like having dark skin (up to 16.2%), an overweight body (up to 13.3%), or a disability (up to 10.5%) put adolescents at even greater risk. For these young people, the experience of teasing and exclusion is not just about one aspect of who they are, but the intersection of many. Being targeted for multiple, overlapping reasons compounds their sense of isolation and can make everyday life feel like an obstacle course of judgment. These patterns reveal that discrimination is layered and complex, and that solutions must be equally nuanced, addressing not just individual self-esteem, but the social systems that allow such exclusion to persist.

Adolescents Frequently Modify Their Appearance to Meet Social Expectations

A significant proportion of adolescents actively engage in appearance-altering behaviors to comply with social expectations. The data show that 34.8% of girls and 28.9% of boys have changed their behaviors in pursuit of improved appearance, with even higher rates when considering specific practices: nearly 60% of girls reported using beauty or brightening products, and over a third used makeup; among boys, roughly 40% used beauty products and a similar share altered their hairstyles. These trends reflect the strong internalization of beauty norms among both genders, driven by relentless societal and peer pressure. Such practices may provide temporary boosts in confidence, but often reinforce the notion that self-worth is contingent upon meeting external standards. The prevalence of these behaviors also suggests an expanding commercial market targeting adolescent insecurities. Ultimately, these patterns highlight the urgent need for interventions that promote self-acceptance and challenge the normalization of appearance-based self-modification.

Body Image Concerns are Affecting Education and Daily Participation

Body image anxieties are taking a tangible toll on adolescents' academic and daily lives. Nearly half of girls (45.3%) reported spending extra money on appearance-related products, and more than a third (38.7%) devoted additional time to grooming both clear indications of the financial and temporal costs of appearance pressure. Alarmingly, 21.8% of girls and 32.4% of boys reported reduced concentration on their studies as a result of body image concerns. Parents echoed these observations, with over half noting that their children's academic focus had suffered. These findings highlight that body image issues are not limited to emotional distress; they have concrete impacts on educational engagement, productivity, and daily functioning. The diversion of time, money, and attention toward appearance management can set back academic achievement and broader personal development, underscoring the need for holistic interventions that address both psychological and practical consequences of appearance-related pressures.

Media Literacy Regarding Edited Images is Very Low

The data reveals a critical gap in adolescents' ability to recognize and resist unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated by digital media. Only 0.7% of girls and 2.0% of boys demonstrated strong awareness of image editing or manipulation on social media, while a significant proportion 42.8% of girls and 34.8% of boys had no

knowledge of such practices. This lack of media literacy leaves young people highly susceptible to the influence of filtered, airbrushed, or otherwise altered images, fostering unrealistic expectations and deepening body dissatisfaction. The vulnerability is compounded by the ubiquity of digital content, making it difficult for adolescents to distinguish between genuine and edited appearances. These findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive media literacy education that equips adolescents with critical thinking skills to evaluate and challenge the media messages they encounter.

Parents Simultaneously Reinforce and Resist Beauty Norms

The findings highlight a complex and often contradictory role for parents in shaping adolescents' attitudes towards appearance. Nearly half of parents (46.2% of mothers and 48.7% of fathers) observed changes in their children's behavior related to appearance. While about 70% of parents claimed not to support excessive focus on looks, many continued to personally endorse fairness-based beauty standards and other narrow ideals. This reveals a paradox: parents may discourage overt preoccupation with appearance in their children, yet still model and transmit the very norms that fuel insecurity and low self-esteem. The intergenerational transmission of beauty ideals complicates efforts to build resilience, as children receive mixed messages within the family environment. These dynamics underscore the need for family-based interventions that address both conscious and unconscious reinforcement of harmful beauty norms, helping parents to become more effective allies in promoting self-acceptance and confidence.

DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

The data suggest that more than half of adolescent's experience dissatisfaction with their appearance, signaling that insecurity about body image is not an exception, but rather a common and normalized experience among young people. This widespread dissatisfaction points to a broader cultural climate in which feelings of inadequacy are embedded in everyday life. The high prevalence of comparison behavior, where adolescents continuously evaluate their own appearance against peers, celebrities, and idealized images, creates an environment of ongoing self-scrutiny. In this context, comparison is not a sporadic occurrence, but a persistent part of adolescent socialization, reinforcing unattainable standards and making self-doubt a routine aspect of development.

Triangulation revealed strong alignment between quantitative prevalence and qualitative narratives. For example, the high percentage of girls reporting distress was echoed in storytelling accounts of shame and exclusion. Similarly, low media literacy rates were consistent with adolescents' inability to distinguish edited images during participatory exercises.

Findings confirm Social Comparison Theory and Objectification Theory in the Bangladeshi context. Colorism and gender norms intensify pressures, while poverty and disability compound exclusion. Despite awareness of media manipulation, adolescents still internalize unrealistic standards, showing a gap between knowledge and emotional resilience. This study's participatory approach reveals nuanced lived experiences often absent in survey-only research. Policy implications include school-based media literacy, family awareness programs, and inclusive community interventions.

Behavioral change data reveal that a notable proportion of adolescents actively attempt to modify their bodies or appearance in response to these pressures. This includes behaviors such as restrictive dieting, excessive grooming, experimenting with beauty products, or even withdrawing from social interactions. These actions underscore that body image concerns are not confined to internal thoughts or feelings, but manifest in concrete efforts to alter one's body to align with perceived ideals. Importantly, many respondents reported negative consequences associated with these attempts, such as diminished self-confidence, increased emotional distress, and reduced participation in school, extracurricular activities, or social events, demonstrating the far-reaching impact of body image struggles on overall well-being and engagement. The high level of awareness regarding edited images and digital manipulation, such as filters, airbrushing, or photo enhancement, demonstrates that many adolescents understand, on an intellectual level, that the beauty standards portrayed in media and online are often artificial and unattainable. However, despite this awareness, continued dissatisfaction with their own appearance persists. This highlights a critical gap between knowledge and internalization: while young people

may consciously recognize that images are unrealistic, they still emotionally respond to these standards, internalizing feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness. This emotional response suggests that media literacy alone is insufficient to protect adolescents from the psychological harms of unrealistic beauty ideals, underscoring the need for deeper, emotionally focused interventions.

Intersectional Case Narratives

Case 1: Skin Tone and Social Exclusion (Gender + Colorism)

“I always did well in school, but my skin was the first thing people noticed,” shared a 14-year-old girl. “Sometimes, I felt invisible in group activities because others would pick someone fairer, even if I knew the answer. The teasing hurt more than any bad grade.” Her story shows that, for many girls, the color of their skin can shape where they belong and how they feel about themselves, regardless of their talents or achievements.

Case 2: Poverty and Restricted Self-Expression (Class + Gender)

One participant from a low-income family described watching her classmates show off new clothes and beauty products while she wore the same outfit week after week. “I wanted to join them, but I felt out of place,” she said. “It’s not just about money, it’s about feeling like you matter.” Her words highlight how poverty isn’t only about what you have, but about whether you feel seen and accepted.

Case 3: Disability and Visibility (Ability + Gender)

An adolescent girl living with a physical disability shared, “No one ever asked if I wanted to join the conversation about beauty. It’s like I don’t even exist in those moments.” Her experience wasn’t about being compared or teased, but about being left out entirely, showing that for some, the hardest part is not being seen at all.

Case 4: Masculinity Pressure among Boys

Pressure isn’t only a girl’s story. One boy admitted, “I feel like I must act tough and look strong all the time, even when I just want to relax. If you’re not tall or muscular, people notice.” Boys may talk less about it, but the struggle to fit an ideal is real for them too.

These narratives demonstrate that body image is experienced differently depending on intersecting identities, reinforcing the need for nuanced interventions.

DISCUSSION ON FEMINIST LENS

Quantitative Insights

The quantitative findings reveal a persistent and troubling trend of body dissatisfaction among adolescents in Bangladesh. More than half of the surveyed youth expressed discontent with their physical appearance, suggesting that feeling insecure about one’s body has become a normalized aspect of adolescent experience. Notably, this lack of confidence is not evenly experienced across all groups: girls consistently reported higher levels of dissatisfaction than boys, highlighting the gendered nature of beauty standards and the disproportionate scrutiny and expectations placed on female adolescents. This gender gap aligns with broader societal patterns, where girls face greater pressure to conform to narrow ideals of attractiveness.

Most respondents reported frequently engaging in comparison, evaluating their appearance against peers, celebrities, or social media influencers. This habitual comparison is a significant driver of self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, as adolescents are exposed to a constant stream of curated, idealized images. The influence of social media is especially pronounced: while most adolescents are aware of photo editing tools and digital manipulation, many still internalize these unattainable standards as authentic. This demonstrates a critical gap between cognitive awareness and emotional impact, as relentless exposure to enhanced images fuels insecurities despite intellectual understanding.

The survey further revealed that many adolescents respond to body dissatisfaction with concrete behavioral changes. These include modifying eating habits (such as dieting or skipping meals), increasing time spent on grooming and appearance-related activities, experimenting with beauty products, or avoiding situations where their bodies may be scrutinized such as sports, swimming, or social gatherings. These attempts to conform to perceived beauty norms often come at a cost: a significant proportion of youth reported that such changes negatively affected their daily lives, including diminished participation in school, withdrawal from social activities, and increased stress or emotional fatigue.

Experiences of teasing, bullying, or negative comments about appearance were also widely reported, especially within school environments. Such incidents were not isolated, but rather part of a broader culture of appearance-based judgment among peers. The data shows strong associations between these negative social interactions and lower levels of self-esteem, as well as increased emotional distress, anxiety, and even avoidance of school or group activities. These findings highlight the profound influence of peer dynamics on adolescents' self-worth and mental well-being.

Perceptions of Beauty

Survey responses indicated that most adolescents define beauty in terms of narrow physical attributes, such as fair skin, slim body shape, and specific facial features like sharp noses or large eyes. These ideals are not organically formed but rather reflect the pervasive influence of societal and media-driven norms that prioritize certain looks while marginalizing others. The lack of diversity in these definitions underscores the power of dominant narratives to shape what is deemed desirable or acceptable, often at the expense of self-acceptance and inclusion.

Sources of Pressure (Power Analysis)

High levels of self-comparison

Adolescents' tendency to compare themselves to others is a central theme across both quantitative and qualitative findings. This comparison is magnified by the omnipresence of social media, where peers, celebrities, and influencers frequently share curated, often edited images. Adolescents internalize these idealized representations as benchmarks for their own appearance, leading them to scrutinize their bodies for perceived flaws. This cycle of comparison extends beyond physical features to include clothing, lifestyle, and even social status, further intensifying feelings of inadequacy. The constant measuring against unattainable standards not only undermines self-worth but also fosters an environment of competition rather than community among peers. As a result, self-comparison becomes a primary contributor to diminished self-esteem and pervasive body dissatisfaction.

Emotional distress

The emotional consequences of body image struggles are both immediate and enduring. Adolescents in the study frequently reported experiencing anxiety and shame when faced with criticism or even subtle comments about their appearance, whether from friends, family, or strangers. These feelings are compounded by the anticipation of negative judgment, making adolescents hyper-vigilant about how they present themselves. For some, emotional distress manifests as persistent sadness or embarrassment, which can escalate to clinical depression or anxiety disorders if left unaddressed. The emotional toll is further exacerbated by the sense of isolation that comes from believing their struggles are unique or shameful, when these challenges are widely shared among their peers.

Withdrawal from social and academic engagement

As body image concerns intensify, many adolescents begin to withdraw from settings where they feel exposed to judgment. This can mean avoiding social gatherings, sports, or extracurricular clubs, as well as reducing classroom engagement. For some, the anticipation of teasing or unwanted attention prompts them to skip school entirely. Over time, this withdrawal can lead to social isolation, reduced academic performance, and limited opportunities for personal growth. The avoidance of potentially supportive environments deprives adolescents

of experiences that could bolster their confidence and resilience, creating a cycle where isolation further entrenches negative self-image.

Attempts to confirm

In response to societal and peer pressures, adolescents often seek to alter their appearance to conform to prevailing beauty norms. These behaviors range from seemingly benign activities such as changing hairstyles or experimenting with makeup, to more concerning practices like restrictive dieting, excessive exercise, or the use of skin-lightening products. While these efforts may yield momentary boosts in confidence, they frequently lead to unhealthy habits and reinforce the belief that self-worth is contingent upon meeting external standards. Many adolescents report that attempts to conform ultimately result in disappointment, frustration, and a deepening sense of inadequacy. In some cases, these patterns can escalate into clinically significant issues such as eating disorders or chronic anxiety.

Synthesis and Implications

Collectively, these patterns demonstrate that body image concerns are not surface-level or isolated issues. Rather, they are deeply embedded in adolescents' emotional well-being, social participation, and everyday life choices. The interplay between comparison, emotional distress, withdrawal, and attempts to conform creates a reinforcing cycle that can be difficult to break without intentional intervention. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies that cultivate self-acceptance, challenge harmful norms, and foster supportive peer and family environments.

Storytelling Narratives

Through participatory storytelling, adolescents and parents brought to life the realities behind quantitative trends. For instance, one participant recounted being excluded from peer groups because of her darker skin tone, a powerful example of how colorism operates alongside gendered beauty norms to shape social belonging and self-esteem. Another adolescent described the anxiety and self-consciousness she felt when posting photos on social media, due to the fear of negative comparison and judgment. These narratives move beyond statistics, illustrating the deep emotional toll and nuanced experiences that underline the data, and pointing to the need for empathy-driven, contextually grounded interventions.

Body Mapping Insights

The body-mapping activities provided powerful visual evidence of participants' internalized insecurities. Many girls highlighted specific areas such as skin tone, body size, or facial features that they felt dissatisfied with or wished to change, typically reflecting the influence of socially constructed ideals. Boys also participated, though often less vocally, and tended to focus on traits associated with masculinity, such as height, muscularity, and perceived strength. These visual representations not only made insecurities visible but also facilitated open conversations about the diverse and sometimes hidden pressures adolescents face regarding their bodies.

Rivers of Life Analysis

The Rivers of Life exercise enabled participants to visually chart the evolution of their self-esteem from early childhood through adolescence. Many described early years as a time of innocence and relative confidence, with declines becoming evident as they entered adolescence, a period marked by heightened peer scrutiny, media exposure, and growing awareness of societal beauty standards. However, the narratives also highlighted moments of resilience and positive change, often attributed to supportive relationships with family, friends, or mentors, as well as participation in workshops or awareness-building activities that promoted self-acceptance. This longitudinal perspective underscores the dynamic and malleable nature of self-esteem, and the potential for targeted interventions to make a meaningful difference at critical developmental stages.

Gender and Intersectional Analysis

The data reveals pronounced gender disparities in experiences of body image and self-esteem. Girls consistently report facing more intense scrutiny and pressure to adhere to strict appearance norms, which can curtail their mobility, social participation, and opportunities for self-expression. Intersectional analysis further demonstrates that these challenges are magnified for adolescents who are also marginalized by class, disability, or other factors. For example, youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be excluded from peer groups due to an inability to access fashionable clothing or beauty products, while adolescents with disabilities often face invisibility or exclusion from beauty-related conversations altogether. These compounded challenges highlight the need for nuanced, equity-focused interventions.

Behavioral and Emotional Impacts

A synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals several key, interrelated patterns that define adolescent experiences of body image and self-esteem:

- **High levels of self-comparison:** Adolescents consistently report comparing themselves to peers, celebrities, and social media figures. This habitual comparison, fueled by constant exposure to idealized images and social expectations, intensifies feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with their own appearance. Such comparison is a central driver of low self-esteem.
- **Emotional distress:** Feedback and comments about appearance whether from peers, family members, or even strangers are strongly associated with emotional distress. Adolescents describe experiencing anxiety, shame, sadness, or embarrassment in response to criticism, teasing, or judgment about their looks. This emotional burden can be persistent and negatively affects overall mental health.
- **Withdrawal from social and academic engagement:** The emotional toll of negative body image often leads to withdrawal from social situations, extracurricular activities, and even academic participation. Many adolescents avoid environments where they feel judged or scrutinized, leading to isolation, missed opportunities, and hindered personal development.
- **Attempts to conform:** In response to societal and peer pressures, adolescents often engage in behavioral changes to align with perceived beauty standards. These efforts may include dieting, excessive grooming, altering their style, or using beauty products often at the expense of physical and psychological well-being. Many report that such attempts bring only temporary relief and, more often, reinforce cycles of self-doubt or even lead to harmful outcomes such as disordered eating or chronic stress.

Together, these patterns demonstrate that body image concerns are not merely superficial or isolated issues, but are deeply linked to adolescents' emotional health, social participation, and overall quality of life.

CONCLUSION

- The study demonstrates that body dissatisfaction and appearance-related pressures are widespread among adolescents in North Bengal, with fair skin and slimness emerging as dominant ideals.
- Girls reported higher levels of distress than boys, and marginalized groups such as adolescents with disabilities and those from low-income households faced compounded exclusion.
- Peer comparison, family expectations, and social media were identified as the most significant drivers of insecurity, leading to behavioral modification and reduced academic concentration.
- Despite these challenges, adolescents exhibited resilience and critical awareness, highlighting opportunities for gender-transformative interventions.

This research makes a clear scholarly contribution by integrating feminist participatory principles with mixed-method analysis, offering new insights into adolescent body image and self-esteem in South Asian contexts. It advances international scholarship by situating adolescent voices at the center of analysis and demonstrating how participatory approaches can enrich empirical rigor. Practical applications include the development of school-based media literacy curricula, family awareness programs, and community interventions that challenge harmful beauty norms and promote inclusive environments. These findings also inform policy design aimed at strengthening adolescent well-being and resilience. Looking forward, future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative designs across South Asia to examine how body image and self-esteem evolve over time and across cultural contexts. By combining rigorous empirical reporting with participatory feminist methodologies, this study contributes to building more equitable and supportive environments for adolescents worldwide.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Programmatic Actions

- **Introducing participatory self-esteem education in schools**

Schools should integrate participatory self-esteem and life-skills sessions that encourage adolescents to discuss identity, confidence, diversity, and emotional well-being in safe and inclusive spaces.

- **Promote critical media literacy**

Media literacy programs should help adolescents critically understand edited images, unrealistic beauty standards, online comparison culture, and the influence of social media on self-esteem.

- **Establish peer support mechanisms**

Peer support groups and adolescent clubs can create safe environments where young people share experiences, build confidence, and support one another against bullying and exclusion.

Gender-Transformative Approaches

- **Challenge harmful beauty norms**

Community campaigns and school initiatives should challenge colorism, body shaming, and narrow beauty ideals while promoting diverse and inclusive representations of beauty and identity.

- **Engage boys and men in discussions on gender equality**

Programs should involve boys, fathers, and male community members in conversations on gender equality, respectful behavior, and positive masculinity to reduce harmful stereotypes and discrimination.

Parental Engagement

- **Build awareness on supportive communication**

Parents should be sensitized to how criticism, teasing, and comparisons affect adolescents' confidence and emotional well-being, and encouraged to adopt more supportive, positive communication practices.

- **Address intergenerational transmission of norms**

Awareness initiatives should help families reflect on how harmful beauty standards and gender expectations are passed across generations and encourage more inclusive attitudes.

Policy Implications

- **Integrate mental health and self-esteem into education systems**

Education policies should incorporate mental health, psychosocial support, and self-esteem-building components within school curricula and adolescent development programs.

- **Strengthening adolescent support services**

Government and development actors should expand adolescent-friendly counseling, protection, and support services, especially for marginalized and vulnerable young people.

REFERENCES

1. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
2. Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>
3. Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. (1997). Objectification theory. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 173–206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>
4. Nahar, Q., et al. (2020). Gender norms and adolescent development in South Asia. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 35(3), 345–370.
5. Perloff, R. M. (2014). Social media effects on young women's body image concerns. *Sex Roles*, 71(11–12), 363–377. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0384-6>
6. Tiggemann, M. (2011). Sociocultural perspectives on human appearance. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62, 353–376.
7. UNICEF. (2019). Adolescent well-being in South Asia. UNICEF.
8. Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
9. Brown, B. B., & Larson, J. (2009). Peer relationships in adolescence. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (pp. 74–103). Wiley.
10. Cash, T. F., & Smolak, L. (2011). *Body image: A handbook of science, practice, and prevention* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
11. Gill, R. (2008). Empowerment/sexism: Figuring female sexual agency in contemporary advertising. *Feminism & Psychology*, 18(1), 35–60.
12. Grogan, S. (2016). *Body image: Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women and children* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
13. Harter, S. (2012). *The construction of the self: Developmental and sociocultural foundations* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
14. UNESCO. (2021). *The impact of digital media on children and adolescents*. UNESCO Publishing.
15. WHO. (2020). Adolescent mental health. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>
16. Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. HarperCollins.
17. APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. American Psychological Association.
18. Fardouly, J., & Vartanian, L. R. (2016). Social media and body image concerns: Current research and future directions. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 9, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.09.005>
19. Levine, M. P., & Murnen, S. K. (2009). “Everybody knows that mass media are/are not [pick one] a cause of eating disorders”: A critical review of evidence for a causal link between media, negative body image, and disordered eating in females. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 28(1), 9–42.