

Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Suicidal Ideation among Young Adults

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This research explores the associations between body image along self-esteem on suicidal thoughts in young Indian adults while covering an essential gap in non-Western research territory. The study uses standardized psychological instruments like the Rosenberg self-esteem scale, body self-image questionnaire and suicide behavior questionnaire revised, to evaluate 255 individuals aged 18-25 who showed significant relationships between negative body image perception and low self-esteem, leading to higher suicidal thoughts. Findings of the paper show that Self-esteem has established itself as the stronger determining factor than body image when it comes to predicting this relationship. These psychological constructs actively interact within India's sociocultural setting to produce suicidal thinking behaviors. The research findings establish essential knowledge about developing mental health programs

Keywords: Body image, Self-esteem, suicidal ideation, young adults

Emerging adulthood, spanning ages 18-25, is a distinct developmental period characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and optimism about future possibilities (Arnett, 2000). This phase is marked by frequent changes in love, work, and worldviews (Facio et al., 2007). While these features are more prevalent among 18-25-year-olds, they may not be as unique to this age group as initially theorized (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). Emerging adults often experience a sense of freedom and excitement but also anxiety and depression (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). The theory of emerging adulthood has been applied to explain high rates of substance use in this age group, linking it to the developmental characteristics of this period (Arnett, 2005). Cultural context plays a crucial role, as emerging adulthood is primarily observed in societies that allow for prolonged independent role exploration during late teens and twenties (Arnett, 2000).

The concept of body image has evolved since Schilder's 1935 definition as a mental representation of one's body (Giuseppe Vallar, 2024). It now includes both perceptual and attitudinal components, shaped by factors such as social anxiety, psychological distress, and interpersonal relationships (Zhou Han, 2018). Recent research has expanded from focusing solely on negative body image to recognizing positive body image as a distinct construct, aligning with trends in positive psychology (Meshkova, 2021). Body image is now seen as a complex, multifaceted concept that may remain stable over time and act as a trait marker (Ábrahám et al., 2017). Emerging studies continue to explore this area using new assessment tools across diverse social groups (Meshkova, 2021).

Research highlights a strong link between body image, self-esteem, and mental health in young adults. Low self-esteem is a known risk factor for suicide attempts in this age group (Soto-Sanz et al., 2019). Social media

and societal standards heavily shape body image, often leading to diminished self-esteem and psychological distress, especially among females (Merino et al., 2024; Chukwuere & Chukwuere, 2023). Understanding this connection is essential for promoting youth mental well-being (Pradhnani & Kaushik, 2024). These findings emphasise the need for fostering positive body image, encouraging healthy media habits, and implementing targeted interventions for vulnerable youth.

Recent Indian studies show that poor body image among medical students is linked to lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and depression (Victor et al., 2024; Neeraj et al., 2024; Diengdoh & Ali, 2022). Dissatisfaction, observed in both underweight and overweight students, also correlated with lower academic performance (Neeraj et al., 2024). Reported rates of depression, anxiety, and stress were 32%, 40.1%, and 43.8%, respectively (Taneja et al., 2018). Factors such as family history of mental illness and strained relationships further contributed to these issues. These findings underscore the need for targeted mental health interventions for medical students.

Research shows that self-esteem in adolescents and young adults is shaped by multiple factors, including age, gender, and parental background (von Soest et al., 2016). While closely tied to appearance in early stages, its link to social domains strengthens over time. Self-perceived attractiveness more strongly predicts self-esteem in females, influenced by romantic confidence (Bale & Archer, 2013). Gender conformity affects self-esteem depending on whether the motivation is autonomous or externally pressured (Good & Sanchez, 2010). Despite academic challenges, students often maintain stable self-esteem in family and social contexts (Akoul et al., 2020). These findings reflect the complex and evolving nature of self-esteem across developmental stages.

Significance

This study is timely as mental health issues among youth continue to rise amidst rapid societal and digital transformations. Young adults aged 18–25, while exploring their identities, face increased vulnerability to psychological challenges. The growing concern over suicide among Indian youth highlights the urgent need to understand the interplay between body image dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and suicidal ideation.

Social media and Western beauty standards have amplified body image concerns, making it critical to examine their impact in non-Western contexts. By analysing these factors within the Indian sociocultural framework, this study addresses a key research gap. It offers insights that can inform interventions aimed at reducing suicide risk, guiding mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers in developing targeted prevention strategies. Beyond practical applications, the study also contributes to theoretical advancements in understanding the mental health dynamics of modern Indian youth.

Theoretical Framework

This study examines the relationship between self-esteem, body image, and suicidal ideation among young adults through significant psychological theories. The Sociocultural Theory of Body Image (Thompson et al., 1999) posits that ideals of beauty are shaped by cultural and societal norms, which promotes unrealistic standards through media, family, and peers, resulting in body dissatisfaction. Social media exacerbates this issue with upward comparisons and filtered images, damaging self-worth and mental health. In particular, the clash between Indian culture and contemporary Western beauty ideals intensifies body image concerns, leading to mental health challenges and suicidal thoughts.

Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) explains emotional distress stemming from the gap between an individual's actual and ideal self. Young adults often feel their appearance falls short of societal standards, leading to negative feelings and low self-esteem. Prolonged self-discrepancy can foster hopelessness, a known risk factor for suicidal ideation, which may be addressed through self-perception interventions.

The Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005) suggests that suicidal thoughts arise from feelings of burdensomeness and disconnection, combined with an ability to harm oneself. Failing to meet societal appearance norms can create a sense of being a burden, leading to increased risk of suicidal thoughts, highlighting the importance of self-worth and belongingness in suicide prevention.

Recent studies in India reveal a strong link between body image, self-esteem, anxiety, and depression among medical students. Students with poor body image reported lower self-esteem and higher anxiety and depression levels (Victor et al., 2024; Neeraj et al., 2024; Diengdoh & Ali, 2022). Dissatisfaction was found in both underweight and overweight students and was also associated with lower academic performance (Neeraj et al., 2024). Depression, anxiety, and stress rates were reported at 32%, 40.1%, and 43.8%, respectively (Taneja et al., 2018). Contributing factors included family history of mental illness, poor body image, and strained family relationships. These findings highlight the urgent need for targeted mental health interventions and awareness programs for medical students.

Several studies highlight a strong link between body image and self-esteem in adolescents. Rai Anamika et al. (2020) and Sujitha G. et al. (2024) found a positive correlation between the two, with females reporting greater body image concerns and

lower self-esteem than males. Duchesne et al. (2017) showed that self-esteem mediates the effect of body dissatisfaction on psychological distress, indicating that poor body image can lead to lower self-esteem, increasing anxiety and depression. These findings underscore the interconnectedness of body image and self-esteem and the need to address both to support adolescent mental health.

Recent studies highlight the protective role of self-compassion in adolescent mental health, particularly regarding body dissatisfaction and suicidal ideation. Higher self-judgment predicts suicidal thoughts, while self-compassion moderates this link (Fan et al., 2022). In Chinese adolescents, self-compassion and family cohesion help prevent the shift from ideation to suicide attempts (Sun et al., 2020). Self-compassion is positively associated with body satisfaction and negatively linked to psychological distress, eating disorders, and body dysmorphia (Pullmer et al., 2019; Allen et al., 2020). These findings suggest that fostering self-compassion is essential for improving body image and reducing suicide risk and disordered eating among adolescents.

Obesity has been modestly linked to mental health issues in adolescents, particularly among females. Meta-analyses show higher risks of depression and anxiety among obese adolescents, along with increased body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem (Anisa et al., 2022; Moradi et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2008). These findings highlight the role of body weight perception in shaping psychological well-being across diverse populations.

Research indicates a significant relationship between self-harm behavior (SHB), body image, and self-esteem in adolescents. Oktan (2017) found a negative correlation between self-esteem and SHB, and a positive correlation between body

image dissatisfaction and SHB. Muehlenkamp & Brausch (2012) demonstrated that body image mediates the relationship between negative affect and non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). Kuznetsova et al. (2023) reported lower body satisfaction in adolescents with suicidal and non-suicidal self-harm compared to controls. Lundh et al. (2007) observed high rates of deliberate self-harm associated with low self-esteem and low mindfulness in Swedish adolescents. Gender differences were noted, with girls reporting more cutting behaviors than boys (Lundh et al., 2007). These findings suggest that body image and self-esteem are crucial factors in understanding and addressing SHB in adolescents, highlighting the need for interventions targeting body-related pathology and emotion regulation (Muehlenkamp & Brausch, 2012; Oktan, 2017).

Research consistently shows that body image perception strongly influences self-esteem and mental health in female adolescents and young adults. Subjective perception of being overweight—more than actual BMI—is linked to lower self-esteem and higher depressive symptoms (Latha et al., 2006; Kim & Kim, 2001). Many young women report body dissatisfaction despite having a normal BMI and often engage in unhealthy weight control practices (Pop, 2016; Harring et al., 2010). A significant negative correlation exists between self-esteem and body dissatisfaction, and a positive correlation between BMI and body dissatisfaction (Pop, 2016). These findings emphasize the importance of promoting positive body image and educating young women about healthy weight perceptions and lifestyle habits.

Recent research underscores the complex relationship between body image, social media, and psychological well-being across cultures. Social media use for body-

related content often reduces body satisfaction globally, though self-status seeking may improve it in specific contexts like Korea (Lee et al., 2014). Cultural norms shape body ideals differently in Western and non-Western societies, with females generally more affected, though male concerns are rising (Abdoli et al., 2024). Diverse methods—including self-reports, experimental, and computational tools—are needed to assess these impacts (Jarman et al., 2022). Physical, cultural, and gender factors further complicate body image perceptions, influencing mental health and self-esteem (Merino et al., 2024). These findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive interventions and comprehensive research methodologies to address body image concerns effectively.

Objectives

To examine the predictive role of body image and self-esteem on suicidal ideation among young adults.

To understand how body image dissatisfaction and levels of self-esteem contribute to the development of suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

To explore whether self-esteem acts as a mediator in the relationship between body image and suicidal ideation.

Hypothesis

A combined model of body image and self-esteem significantly predicts suicidal ideation among young adults.

Method

Sample

The sample for the present study consists of 255 participants belonging to the age group of 18- 25. The subjects were drawn using purposive sampling through online platforms and University network platforms.

Tools

Suicide Behaviors Questionnaire-Revised (SBQ-R): The SBQ-R is a 4-item tool that assesses various dimensions of suicidality, including lifetime history of ideation or attempts, frequency of suicidal thoughts in the past year, severity of past attempts, and future risk. Scores range from 3 to 18, with higher scores indicating greater risk. It is widely used in clinical and research contexts due to its brevity and effectiveness in identifying at-risk individuals, boasting high validity and reliability.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES): The RSES features 10 items examining global self-worth through a 4-point Likert scale. Items 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9 are reverse-scored, with higher total scores reflecting higher self-esteem. The scale demonstrates good reliability, including an internal consistency of 0.77 and test-retest correlations of 0.88.

Body Self-Image Questionnaire (BSIQ-SF): The BSIQ-SF is a 27-item self-report instrument measuring global body image perception using a 5-point Likert scale. It covers aspects like appearance and fitness, with total scores utilized for analysis. The instrument is highly reliable and valid, fostering sincere responses through anonymity. Results reflect overall self-perception of physical appearance among participants.

Results

Table 1 Descriptive table

Scales	mean	median	mode	standard deviation	normality (shapiro)
Rosenberg Self esteem	22.94	23	23	5.289	0.014
body image	75.25	76	83	14.470	0.146
suicidal ideation	6.29	5	3	3.6	0

Table 2 Correlation table

Scales	R	significance
rosenberg self esteem(spearman)	0.209	0.01
body image(pearson)	0.483	0.00

Table 3 Regression table

Scales	R square	Percentage of deviances
Rosenberg self esteem	0.248	24.8%
body image	0.04	4%

The descriptive statistics reveal that self-esteem, as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, had a mean of 22.94, a median of 23, and a mode of 23, with a standard deviation of 5.289. The close values of the mean, median, and mode suggest a relatively symmetrical distribution, although some variation exists in participants' self-esteem levels. For body image, the mean score was 75.25, with a median of 76 and a mode of 83. The standard deviation of 14.470 indicates a wider spread of responses, and the higher mode compared to the mean suggests a slight positive skew, meaning more participants had higher body image scores. Suicidal ideation had a mean of 6.29, a median of 5, and a mode of 3, with a standard deviation of 3.600. The lower mean and mode indicate that most participants reported low levels of suicidal ideation, though some variation exists.

Normality tests indicated that self-esteem scores ($p = 0.014$) and suicidal ideation scores ($p = 0.000$) were not normally distributed, and thus the distribution was skewed. This indicates that the self-esteem and level of suicidal ideation of the participants were diverse and thus, there were outlying values that influenced the distribution. Conversely, body image scores ($p = 0.146$) displayed normal distribution (responses were more evenly distributed and could be used in parametric statistical tests).

Correlation analysis revealed a significant relationship between body image and suicidal ideation. Pearson's test showed a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.483$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that individuals with a more negative body image tend to have higher suicidal ideation levels. This suggests that body image perception plays a meaningful role in suicidal thoughts. Additionally, Spearman's test found a weak but significant positive correlation between self-esteem and suicidal ideation ($r = 0.209$, $p = 0.01$), suggesting that lower self-esteem is associated with increased suicidal ideation, though to a lesser extent than body image.

Regression analysis using the stepwise method further demonstrated that self-esteem had an R^2 value of 0.248, meaning it accounted for 24.8% of the variance in suicidal ideation. In contrast, body image had an R^2 value of 0.04, explaining only 4% of the variance. These results indicate that while both self-esteem and body image significantly impact suicidal ideation, self-esteem has a more substantial influence. This suggests that interventions aimed at improving self-esteem may have a more significant effect in reducing suicidal thoughts compared to focusing solely on body image.

Discussion

The present research analyzed how body image and self-esteem influenced suicidal thoughts within young Indian adults between 18–25 years old. The research established essential relationships between these variables which shed light on psychological processes leading to suicidal thoughts among this demographic.

The research results confirmed the hypothesis about suicidal ideation predictions from self-esteem and body image by demonstrating a moderate ($r = 0.483$) positive relationship between negative body image and suicidal thinking. The findings verify earlier studies which show that body

dissatisfaction leads to psychological distress which includes depression and anxiety that function as risk factors for suicidal thoughts (Victor et al., 2024; Zhou Han, 2018). Social media and societal beauty standards worsen these feelings since they affect impressionable young adults who heavily depend on exterior validation at this major developmental phase (Merino et al., 2024).

The relationship between self-esteem and suicidal thoughts was still statistically substantial ($r = 0.209$) yet weaker while explaining 24.8% of suicidal ideation variance in regression analysis. Negative body image starts the process of distress but low self-esteem emerges as the primary factor that makes individuals more susceptible to prolonged suicidal thoughts. Scholarly research on self-esteem as a protective mechanism against mental health problems where decreased self-esteem produces hopelessness and reduced coping resources receives support from these findings (Orth & Robins, 2022; Soto-Sanz et al., 2019).

The study findings match existing research on non-Western populations that shows how changes in culture combined with digital media impacts body image beliefs (Chukwuere & Chukwuere 2023). This study disproves Western findings about gender divides because it reveals that Indian male and female young adults face similar threats when their body dissatisfaction combines with low self-esteem. These psychological factors play an essential role in suicide risks because they maintain their importance across all cultures.

This research demonstrates how body image and self-esteem perform fundamental roles in the development of suicidal thoughts among young adults so it requires balanced mental health approaches that tackle appearance issues together with fundamental self-acceptance. This research enhances suicide prevention literature while

proving the necessity to create specific solutions for modernizing young

Conclusion

The significance of this study is the exposure of the meaningful correlation amid body image, self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts among young Indian adults. Although body image dissatisfaction and low self-esteem are both relevant to the occurrence of suicidal thoughts, self-esteem proved to be the better predictor. The results indicate the extent of sociocultural pressures, especially via media and peer pressure, on the perceived view of the self and mental health in this important developmental stage of emerging adulthood. Using proven psychological instruments and statistical processing, the study establishes that people with low self-esteem and negative body image prove to be more susceptible to suicidal thoughts. These revelations form part of the expanded knowledge on the psychological realities affecting youthful mental health in non-Western settings, the need to intervene early and empowering tactics that foster self-esteem and positive perceptions of their body images.

In spite of its insights, this study is limited. The purposive sampling has drawbacks in generalizing the findings to other cultures, age groups or socioeconomic strata. Self-report instruments can imply a response bias, where a suicide ideation is underreported or exaggerated self-esteem. These tools are standardised; however, they might fail to reflect the complexity of the constructs. The cross-sectional limitation has causal limitation, displaying correlation, but not direction or order. Other factors such as gender identity, media exposure and previous mental conditions are also not included in the study though they can affect the outcomes. Future studies ought to comprise large variations of samples, longitudinal studies, and other psychosocial factors.

The next interventions should focus on self-worth. There should be CBT-based self-esteem programs in schools and colleges, as well as social media campaigns that promote self-acceptance. The policies governing mental health should incorporate body image education and control the media so that they portray a variety of normal bodies. It is important to identify the people at risk early on in schools and places of work. Chatbots supported by AI will be able to assist in a timely manner. The study ought to implement gender-sensitive design to examine variations in these factors, according to the person. The involvement of social media in the development of self-esteem must also be addressed, having more rigid filters and content that alters how someone looks. Longitudinal research is needed to help disentangle causes and guide useful interventions.

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