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Appearance Teasing and Identity Formation Amongst Young Adults: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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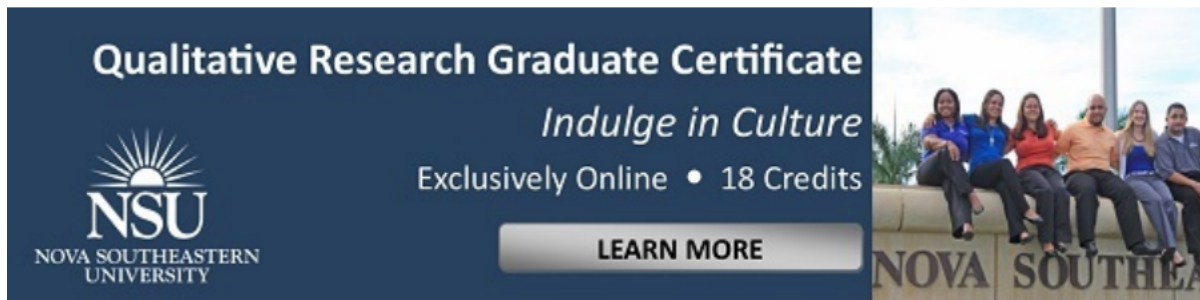


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Abstract

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Keywords

appearance teasing, identity, self, coping, interpretative phenomenological analysis, qualitative

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Appearance Teasing and Identity Formation Amongst Young Adults: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Appearance teasing (AT) is such a widespread phenomenon that to discount its meaning, impact, and severity on the lives of those who are teased would be a mistake. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Indian youths who have been appearance-teased by their close friends and family, how they perceive it has impacted their senses of self and identity and to understand their coping strategies that help them manage the negative effects of AT. Data was collected via semi structured interviews with six young adults and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Analysis of the transcripts reveals five master themes encompassing forms of exhibition of AT, causes, impact, protective factors, and coping strategies that represented the experiences for this population. Each individual voice captured in this study offers valuable insights into how teasing someone based on their appearance can have tremendous impacts on their psyche and behavior. Findings also point to the unique role played by Indian culture in these experiences of Indian youths. Based on the results, we conclude that there is a substantial need for awareness about AT in India and the impact of its normalization on Indian youth.

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Introduction

Research shows that our sense of self evolves out of social interaction. As we traverse through different social contexts and environments, our identity also transforms. Identity formation has been described as one of the developmental tasks by Erikson (1950) that adolescents and young adults must overcome to live fruitful lives. A person's sense of self comprises anything that a person might identify as "me" (James, 1890). Higher levels of self-concept clarity are linked to better health, including lower levels of stress, depression, improved emotional stability, and better romantic relationships (e.g., Campbell et al., 2003; Lewandowski et al., 2010). If people do not have a clear understanding of who they are and whether they like who they are, this can lead to problems like identity crises and role confusion. Without a distinct sense of self, people may turn to outside sources to give coherence to their identity. One such external source is societal appearance standards (i.e., slim women, muscular men; Vartanian, 2009). These standards have become deeply ingrained in people's minds, especially through exposure to images of idealized bodies in the media. In such a society, people who deviate from these so-called "normal standards" are appearance-teased and body shamed. The baleful practice of AT is ubiquitously observed across international borders and in diverse cultures, spanning countries such as China, Korea, Germany, Czech Republic,

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Australia, USA, and so on (e.g., Schmidt & Martin, 2019; Yoh, 2018). The basis for social and sexual judgement of people is their physical appearance, which includes both their body and how they shape, dress, and accessorize it (Kuipers, 2015).

Most researchers define body shaming and appearance teasing in limited terms. Appearance teasing (AT) has been defined as “negative social feedback on one's physical characteristics” (Cash, 1995). Body shaming, weight shaming or Appearance-based harassment can be described as the act of mocking or humiliating someone based on their physical appearance (Duncan et al., 2018). Moreover, body shaming has been described in research as a mostly unrepeated act whereas appearance teasing has been termed repeated (Schlüter et al., 2021). However, appearance teasing running rampant in our country is not limited to the type meant to mock or criticize the appearance of a person, making subtle or not-so-subtle innuendos meant to chip away at a person's self-esteem. Another kind of teasing that has been scarcely researched or studied is the kind that is not only unintended to harm the other person but often used as a form of endearment to show the intimate relationship dynamics such as among family and friends. Giving funny nicknames to children, siblings or friends, especially related to their appearance, is generally considered a sign of a close relationship. Although these names are literally related to appearance teasing, they are not meant to harm the other person. Sometimes these appearance-based names do not even have an intention behind them at all! Such as calling a *chaiwala* younger than you “chotu” even though he is not small but just because the name stuck to him since childhood. Can these really be considered negative social feedback on physical characteristics of a person? Overall, this shows that AT is not just a negative term as it has been portrayed so far. Teasing can be the product of good or bad intentions, just as it can have both positive and harmful effects. On the plus side, positive teasing is used to flirt, diffuse tension, and foster bonds between individuals (Keltner et al., 2001). For some people, making fun of others is a habit and a means to communicate (Stritof, 2022); it is a type of interpersonal interaction that some people find amusing and humorous while others find cruel and a way to harm someone else's feelings (Kowalski, 2000). This intrinsic dichotomy – a mix of aggressive and playful elements – can have varying effects on the relationship between teaser and recipient (Eckert et al., 2020). Given the possible emotional and behavioral consequences of teasing, particularly those which are negative, it is crucial to comprehend the lived experiences of AT in youth, which in turn can aid understanding and increase awareness, support, and development of early intervention programs.

In this study, we aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of how appearance teasing affects young adults. We delve into their perceived meanings, lived experiences, and the consequences of such interactions. Furthermore, we explore the various coping mechanisms employed by participants to navigate these challenging experiences. To establish a robust groundwork for our exploration, we did a comprehensive literature review. This encompassed an analysis of the phenomenon of appearance teasing, its meaning, sources, and manifestations across various contexts. Notably, gender differences in the experience of appearance teasing were examined, shedding light on potential variations in how males and females perceive and respond to such encounters. Furthermore, our exploration extended to the realms of self and identity. This involved diving into the multiplicity of identities that individuals inhabit and the potential reciprocal relationship between the self and society. In particular, we examined the process of identity formation in the crucial developmental stage of youth, acknowledging the intricate interplay of individual identity and societal influences. All of these dimensions are comprehensively expounded upon in subsequent sections.

Appearance Teasing

The subjects of teasing frequently talk about their weight in their experiences. However, physical characteristics such as the nose, body height, chest size, hair, or extremities can also be the subject of appearance teasing. According to studies on the prevalence, kinds, and outcomes of appearance-related teasing encounters (Almenara & Ježek, 2015; Cash, 1995), almost 75 percent of college students experienced such experiences. Since physical appearance is a major determinant of social acceptance and approbation during adolescence, appearance-related teasing is significant during that period (Kowalski, 2000). People need social support in order to achieve their objectives of gaining social acceptance and to integrate more fully into society. Adolescents' social support networks are typically limited to their parents, peers, and teachers. The social support of these people helps adolescents feel valued and persevere in the face of difficulty (Koh, 2006). Adolescents advance and grow as a result of their family's social support. As they start to create more close relationships with important people, adolescents develop a sense of intimacy, enjoyment, psychological stability, and sociality (Chung et al., 2005).

Others have a tremendous impact on adolescents as they build their self-concepts and go through bodily changes during puberty (Harter, 2001). Adverse social experiences during childhood and adolescence, particularly appearance teasing, have recently been identified as important predictors of body image issues, appearance anxiety, and Body Dysmorphic Disorder symptoms during adolescence (Mastro et al., 2016). Adolescence is a time of greater self-awareness, self-consciousness, preoccupation with image, and concern with social approval, in addition to creating and reestablishing identity (Kaiser, 1997). Peers have an increasing effect throughout this transitional period, and adolescents become more aware of themselves in relation to others. Teasing is a way adolescents exert influence on one another. Understanding appearance-related teasing during adolescence is critical because teasing can have long-term, even irreversible consequences.

For the purpose of this study, we conceptualize appearance teasing as teasing or making jokes about the appearance (body or dress) of another person which may have positive, negative, or no intentions and whose impact depends on the context, intent of the speaker, and perception of the receiver.

Sources of Appearance Teasing

Unlike other types of bullying which are frequently carried out by peers or siblings, appearance-related teasing among overweight kids is also carried out by parents (37%) and other adults (27%), in addition to peers (92%) and friends (70%; Puhl et al., 2012). Few researchers have focused explicitly on teasing by family members. Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues (2002) discovered that 28.7% of adolescent girls had been mocked about their weight by a family member. Girls who are mocked by family members are more likely to engage in harmful weight control behaviors and binge eating. They also have higher levels of body dissatisfaction, investment in thinness, weight management behavior, and eating disturbance than girls who have not been ridiculed. According to one study, maternal comments have a bigger influence on daughters' attitudes and behaviors than paternal comments. During adolescence, appearance-focused interactions with friends and peers may be more important and powerful socializing factors than interactions with parents (e.g., Paxton et al., 2006).

Gender Differences

Gender, as an intricate and multifaceted concept, encompasses a broader spectrum of identities, roles, and expressions beyond the traditional male-female dichotomy. It delves into the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions that shape an individual's sense of self. There is conflicting information regarding the gendered prevalence of appearance teasing. For instance, some research indicates that girls experience more teasing than boys do (Farrow & Fox, 2011). Other researchers find that boys experience more verbal bullying and appearance pressure than girls (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018) or that there are no gender differences at all (Phares et al., 2004). These inconsistent findings may be due to the large heterogeneity of the analyzed groups in terms of age, cultural background, and different conceptualizations of teasing (e.g., Liang et al., 2011). Body image expectations are especially intense for girls; thus, it is not unexpected that adolescent females are more likely than boys to be the target of appearance-related mocking by both peers and parents (Almenara & Ježek, 2015). It's noteworthy that prevalence rates of weight-based teasing among adolescent females are almost twice as high as those among boys (33% vs. 18%; Goldfield et al., 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2017).

Self and Identity

“Self” is generally used to refer to one's sense of “who I am and what I am” (Hammell, 2006). In other words, refers to “an organized configuration of perceptions of who one is” (de Valverde et al., 2017). Everyone has a self, yet no two selves are the same. Some aspects of ourselves are similar, some totally different from others. We are constantly changing as we age and interact with society: we become different from the people we were yesterday or many years ago, yet we remain the same and do not question every day who we are today. Self has often been described as a sense of consistency in our personality or behavior. It is the sense that joins the person from yesterday to who the person is today and often to who they'll become in future. All of this demonstrates that the self is a varied and intermittently continuous set of mental self-representations. The self is also dynamic in that it could alter as a result of clarifications, updates, and reevaluations (Diehl et al., 2011). Thus, the self is capable of interpreting and reinterpreting their surroundings and finally transforming themselves into something that can be identified as the identity (Cinoğlu & Arıkan, 2012).

Each of the social statuses that the self holds are associated with an identity. Humans navigate various roles, responsibilities, and duties throughout their lives. A person who is someone's child can also be someone else's brother, student, husband, father, teacher, grandfather, and so much more. As a result, humans develop multiple identities in order to reflect these diverse roles and different situations evoke different aspects of self at different times. Identity is not rigid but rather flexible and can vary according to the environment and context one is interacting in.

People's motivations, perceptions of themselves and others, and behavior are all influenced by the self and identity concepts (Brewer, 1991; Oyserman et al., 2007).

Types of Identities

There are three forms of identities: "personal," "role," and "social" (or "group") identities. They form the "bases of identity" when combined (Burke & Stets, 2009). For individuals, these three identity kinds work together to define the self as a distinct entity. Personal identity is what distinguishes one person from others; it is an individual's conscious awareness of his or her own existence (Burke & Stets, 2009). Social identity, on the other hand,

refers to how people identify with a social group (Lee et al., 2016). We have as many social identities as there are social groups of which we consider ourselves to be a part, as many personal identities as there are interpersonal connections in which we participate, and as many clusters of unique features as we think we possess. Role identities are people's perceptions of who they are as members of a particular social role (McCall & Simmons, 1978). One's relative status positions in the social system are related to their role identities. The roles of student, employee, and parent are common instances of role identities. According to research in social identity and self-categorization theories, people conceive of themselves in terms of personal or social identities depending on the situation (Hogg, 2006; Oyserman, 2015).

Reciprocal Relationship Between Self and Society

According to Stets and Burke (2003), there is a reciprocal link between self and society, in which the self acts as both a subject who acts on society and an object who is acted upon by society. We are active players in the formation of our own identities. Mead (1934) discussed the symbolic interaction tradition, which holds that the self emerges from social interaction using symbols. He felt that culture influences individuals through how they think about themselves, and that self-conception emerges and is constantly transformed through interpersonal interaction. Mead's (1934) "taking the role of the other" and Cooley's (1902/2016) "looking-glass self" theories emphasize the role of others in our self-perception. We use others as yardsticks and compare ourselves to them, making them a significant source of inspiration for ourselves.

Identity Formation in Youth

During childhood, a child's world is centered around their parents, making friends, and discovering shared interests with them. But as infants become older, they also start paying attention to their own unique qualities that set them apart from others. The actual identity development begins in adolescence, as it requires cognitive abilities that are only fully available at that age. A person starts searching for an answer to the question "who am I?" during this stage. Stability in identity becomes crucial as uncertainty in roles can lead to undesirable outcomes, such as delinquent behavior or even psychotic episodes (Erikson, 1950). Identity formation is a key developmental task for youth which has implications for their internalizing (e.g., anxiety and depression) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, delinquency, and substance use; Crocetti et al., 2013). In order to function effectively, people must complete this developmental job of creating a solid identity framework in youth that provides them a sense of continuity and prevents role confusion.

Rationale

The human brain cannot resist noticing three things: food, attractive people, and danger (Chatterjee, 2015). In today's world, physical appearance receives excessive attention, with attractiveness being a distinguishing factor that draws people towards friendships and other forms of association. Consequently, people have become more conscious of their body image, often feeling inadequate and dissatisfied with their own bodies, as they pursue the idealized bodies portrayed in the media. Internalizing societal beauty standards can influence one's self-concept, as these values become personal benchmarks for self-evaluation and the assessment of others (Jones et al., 2004). Moreover, as per the Tripartite Influence Model (van den Berg et al., 2002), peers, parents, and the media serve as conduits for the spread of information about ideal body norms and contribute in the emergence of eating and body image issues. Numerous

studies have investigated body shaming and appearance teasing, revealing links to increased body surveillance, depression, poor body image, Appearance-Based Rejection Anxiety, and dysmorphic concerns, as well as diminished emotional expressivity and optimism, among other issues (e.g., Brewis & Bruening, 2018; Saxena et al., 2020; Sun, 2018). Adolescents and young individuals are especially vulnerable to body dissatisfaction due to the physical, social, and psychological changes they experience (Clay et al., 2005). Emphasizing appearance teasing and body shaming as negative behaviors aimed at humiliation, most studies overlook the complexity of this phenomenon, which can imply different things to different people in various settings depending upon the speaker's intent and listener's perception. The current body of research on appearance teasing (AT) predominantly consists of quantitative studies conducted in foreign contexts (e.g., Almenara & Ježek, 2015; Feragen & Stock, 2016). However, there is a notable dearth of qualitative research specifically focusing on appearance teasing and its role in identity formation. Understanding the subjective experiences of Indian youths who have been appearance teased and comprehending the dynamics of how teasing is perpetrated within Indian society, particularly in families, remains largely unexplored. Qualitative studies can provide valuable insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals, offering a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and familial factors that influence appearance teasing in India. By delving into these subjective accounts, we want to shed light on the impact of appearance teasing on Indian youths and how it may shape their self-concepts, identity formation, and coping strategies.

Recent research from India reveals that negative body talk (fat talk) in peer discussions significantly contributes to body dissatisfaction and the pursuit of unrealistic body ideals, especially among women. Despite the growing research on the psychosocial effects of COVID-19, the pandemic's influence on body image and resulting distress remains stigmatized and rarely discussed. Academics contend that the COVID-19 outbreak poses specific risks to body image because it has interfered with daily routines, restricted outdoor activities, increased exposure to anxiety-inducing media, and raised fears about infection (Juneja & Ahuja, 2020). In addition, it seems that jokes and memes about weight gain, fewer exercise routines due to gym and park closures, discussions with peers about food, concerns about appearance in online meetings, and selfies posted on Instagram and other SNSs have all contributed to an increase in body image issues. Since the lockdown, the public has been overwhelmed with messages promoting self-improvement, including a never-ending supply of diet and fitness programs that frequently show off "perfect" bodies. Although the goal of this fitness inspiration is to persuade viewers to lead healthier lives by encouraging exercise and wholesome nutrition, it may have the exact opposite unexpected effects. We believe that in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the impact of appearance teasing on individuals' self-concept has gained even greater significance. Conducting qualitative research on appearance teasing in the Indian context would help in gaining a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon and its impact on the subjective experiences of Indian youth. Such research can contribute to the development of more targeted and culturally sensitive approaches to address appearance teasing and its consequences, ultimately fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment for youth in India.

Research Questions

The specific research questions that guide our study are the following:

1. What are the study participants' perceptions of their lived experiences related to appearance teasing?
2. How have these experiences shaped/impacted their sense of self and identity?

3. What are the coping strategies they use to deal with the negative impact of Appearance Teasing?

Researchers Positions

The constructivist approach to research is used to undertake the current study. According to Hein (2007), constructivism is the notion that each learner constructs meaning on their own and in relation to others as they acquire new knowledge. According to this theory, people build their own new understandings or knowledge by fusing what they already know and believe with concepts, experiences, and activities with which they come into contact. The present position in the research also draws from the concept of social comparison theory put forth by Festinger (1954) and “looking-glass self” put forth by Charles Horton Cooley (1902/2016). According to the social comparison theory, persons have a natural predisposition to appropriately judge themselves by comparing them to others. People learn about their abilities through examining their environment and comparing themselves to those with whom they believe themselves to be comparable. However, if they lack precise criteria, they develop a conclusion by watching the opinions and abilities of others while conducting this comparison. The “looking glass self” theory describes how one’s social self or social identity is influenced by how one appears to others. People’s beliefs and feelings about themselves – their self-concept or self-image – emerge as a result of their perception and internalization of how others see and assess them (Chandler & Munday, 2011).

As researchers, we harbor a strong interest in social psychology and desire to understand more about the experiences of Indian youths who have been subjected to intentional or unintentional appearance teasing, and how such encounters impact their self-concept. The first author has had many experiences of appearance teasing in childhood with people making passive remarks about her appearance. Similarly, the second author also faced appearance teasing in various forms and from various sources. The third author, too, has observed and experienced appearance teasing which caused his friends to be socially withdrawn and impacted their lifestyle and personality. As we delved into these experiences, we realized that the way we were affected by and coped with appearance teasing was different from each other. These differences in our experiences and those of other people we knew intrigued us to explore the possible alternative ways in which appearance teasing has affected people in their development of self and how one deals with appearance teasing. This initiated a quest to understand the in-depth experiences of appearance teasing of Indian youth.

Method

Research Design

In our current study, we employed a qualitative methodology and utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of Indian youth who have experienced appearance-related teasing. This approach was used to better comprehend the phenomenon of appearance teasing as experienced by a certain person and the interpretation they give to it.

IPA is idiographic and has origins in phenomenology because it is committed to a deep investigation of a phenomenon as it is experienced and given meaning in the lived experience of a specific individual rather than attempting to construct an objective account of the phenomenon itself (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, IPA uses “double hermeneutics,” which means that it tries to understand how participants are trying to understand their surroundings (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53).

Sample

During our research we unwaveringly adhered to the core tenets enunciated in the Declaration of Helsinki, serving as the bedrock of ethical research involving human subjects. The participants were recruited leveraging pre-existing personal connections. Following IPA guidelines, we identified and chose a purposive homogeneous sample of six participants (four females and two males) who reported experiences of being appearance teased and were willing to share those experiences. Other inclusion criteria for choosing the participants included the age range being 18 to 25 years old. We excluded those participants who either reported experiencing no appearance teasing or didn't fit the age range. The mean age of the participants was 19.33 years. Prior to their participation in the study, all participants were provided with a written informed consent form. The consent form explained the study's objectives, the nature of their involvement, and any potential risks and benefits. Participants were given sufficient time to review the document, and all their queries were answered. It was emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Moreover, throughout the data collection process, participants' physical and psychological well-being were closely monitored, and any signs of distress or discomfort were addressed promptly. To safeguard participants' privacy and confidentiality, all data collected during the study were anonymized and stored securely. Personal identifiers were removed from the dataset to ensure that participants' identities remained confidential.

Table 1

Participant demographic details

Pseudonym	Age (in years)	Gender	Religion	EQ	No of FM	TAI
S.Y	20	Female	Hindu	Undergraduate student	4	9 Lakhs
Charu	19	Female	Hindu	Undergraduate student	7	12 lakhs
Anupam	20	Male	Hindu	Undergraduate student	4	8 lakhs
Reishimdar	19	Female	Christian	Undergraduate student	5	10 Lakhs
KGK	19	Female	Hindu	Undergraduate student	4	6 lakhs
SK	19	Male	Hindu	Undergraduate student	4	4 lakhs

Note. EQ= Educational Qualification; FM= Family members; TAI= Total Annual Income

Procedure

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed by the researchers after review of literature and lengthy deliberation. Firstly, the participant(s) were contacted and briefed about the objective of the study and research ethics. Consent was taken for their participation and to record the interview. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in one-to-one setting in a place where the participant(s) felt comfortable, and participants were allowed to answer in the language with which they felt more comfortable between Hindi or English. Interviews were approximately 30 to 50 minutes in length and commenced with broad questions such as, "Can you tell me what do you understand by the term teasing?" followed by more focused questions

depending on young people's responses such as, "how did you feel when this happened?" After the interview, the participant(s) were debriefed and reassured that all the details of the study and their personal information would be kept confidential and would be used solely for the research purpose. Each researcher conducted the interview with two participants. Later, the interviews were transcribed individually and for analysis an iterative process of identifying patterns and linking themes was followed after reading transcripts thrice. Excerpts from interview transcripts were meticulously translated from Hindi to English to ensure clarity and precision in presenting the study results. The process of translation was conducted with utmost care to maintain the integrity of the original responses while making them accessible to the wider academic audience.

Analysis

We analyzed the data using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Our research delved into the lived experiences of six Indian youth who have been subjected to appearance teasing from the public or their own family and close friends. Our objective was to have a deeper understanding of the young people's personal encounters and ramifications of appearance teasing on their self-concept. To achieve this objective, we diligently transcribed the interviews and immersed ourselves in the transcripts, repeatedly reading them while simultaneously listening to the audio recordings to gain familiarity with the data. Subsequently, we made comprehensive notes capturing any noteworthy observations on the left margins of the document. These encompassed descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments aimed at discerning the participant's unique perspectives, understandings, and thought processes on various issues. An illustration of this process is presented in Table 2.

For guidance we followed the steps outlined in Smith and colleagues' (2009) book, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*, and Noon's (2018) article, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: An Appropriate Methodology for Educational Research."

Table 2

Note making

Transcript	Notes
<p>I: Okay now moving on... how has your experiences of appearance teasing been?</p> <p>S: My experience of AT has been a mixture of lot of things... as I've said... when friends say certain things to me... at times I tell them see I am not okay about it. Let's not do this. At times they kind of understand, at times they do not understand. And they'd continue to do so and we are helpless of course. What can we do about it after that. So... that is how it has been and yes... at times I tend to take it (teasing) lightly because pointing out certain things again and again to a certain person is hard, or maybe I'd feel that situation is not right or</p>	<p>Considers herself helpless in the face of friends' appearance teasing her despite her telling them not to- could this be linked to her prioritizing friendship over discomfort and not wanting to deteriorate the relationship?</p> <p>Seems to consider friendships fragile and something that can be damaged by her speaking up about her discomfort- might be related to past experiences of friendships?</p> <p>Get too uncomfortable to speak anything.</p>

<p>anything. Or it might happen that I get too uncomfortable to speak anything. It's easier talking to our friends and communicating about the discomfort of appearance teasing but when it comes to relatives and elder people. There lies the real problem. Because then there comes the notion of respecting our elders. And we cannot... because it's difficult to tell them that this is not right and even if we do, they would reply by saying "we are just concerned for your health." but they need to consider that there is a difference between being concerned and body shaming others. In this situation it becomes more difficult to communicate with them than friends.</p>	<p>AT by relatives and the elder people... "there is the real problem."</p> <p>Indian culture of respecting family and elders makes it difficult to speak up against the discomfort caused by AT by relatives and elders.</p> <p>Seemed exasperated when speaking about how concern for health should be expressed differently so as it is different from body shaming- might be due to many such experiences of AT disguised in the form of concern from relatives?</p>
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In the next phase, we developed emerging themes. During this stage, we carefully scrutinized our exploratory notes to discern the emerging patterns and themes inherent in the data. We tried to maintain the complexity and essence of the data while trying to simultaneously reduce the volume of detail. Table 3 showcases this manifestation of emerging patterns and themes.

Table 3

Developing emerging themes

Notes	Themes
<p>the participant was more conscious about self, but has improved a lot with right people being in their life.</p>	<p>Social support as a protective factor</p>
<p>Says people have set standards and those who do not come under one are vulnerable to being teased</p>	<p>Beauty standards as cause of AT</p>
<p>Seemed sad and sounded helpless when saying how she felt her identity has been restricted due to her appearance and being AT.</p>	<p>Impact of AT on identity</p>
<p>Believes that the intention behind AT by family is concern for health but that health concern is expressed in the form of teasing and taunts about appearance.</p>	<p>Health concerns by family portrayed as AT.</p>

In the final stage we tried to search for connections between emerging themes and the order in which the themes fit together. The emerging themes were grouped together based on conceptual level similarity and the final theme table was compiled. Our main aim of this step was to provide a structure which effectively highlighted the most interesting and important aspects of the participants' account (Smith et al., 2009). Various subthemes emerged under each main theme.

Table 4*Theme table*

Themes	
1.	<p>Forms of exhibition of Appearance Teasing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • part of their everyday experiences • With words or actions-verbal and non-verbal forms (avoidance) • portrayed as health concern-interaction • discrimination • Jokes as subtle forms of appearance teasing • Hurtful whether intended or not
2.	<p>Physical Appearance and Stigma</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discrimination • Stereotype • Internalization of Negative Feelings • Social Exclusion
3.	<p>Causes of Appearance Teasing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignorance within society • Unrealistic beauty standards • Social comparison • Health concerns • Stereotypes • Gender- girls of marriageable age • Role of Indian culture in prevention of expressing discomfort caused by AT
3.	<p>Impact Of Appearance Teasing</p> <p>On Emotions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varies according to source and context • depends on perception about intention of speaker • Feelings- uncomfortable, anger, exasperated, alienation, fear of social rejection <p>On self and Identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past self and current self • Past unwanted self • Better self-concept • Social identity • changed thought processes <p>Change in Behavior</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts to adapt- appearance and personality • Became more empathetic • Changed thought process has affected behavior
4.	<p>Protective factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive social relationships • Positive social media content

5. Coping mechanisms
- Active coping strategies
 - Standing up for self
 - justification
 - Self-affirmation and self-love
 - “tit for tat” and sarcasm
 - Passive coping strategies
 - taking it more lightly or ignoring
 - Bearing the discomfort caused due to fear of social rejection
 - avoidance
 - Searching for affirmation from others

Results

Data analysis led to development of five master themes pertaining to forms of exhibition of appearance teasing, its causes, its impact, the role of protective factors, and coping strategies used. Homogeneity was visible across the five major themes with all participants contributing to them. Furthermore, our examination of the data unveiled a plethora of insightful sub-themes within each master theme as exemplified in Table 4.

Forms of Exhibition of Appearance Teasing

This theme encompasses the different forms in which appearance teasing. In the context of Indian society, appearance teasing manifests in diverse forms and expressions. Encompassing a wide array of behaviors, this pervasive phenomenon is deeply ingrained in everyday life, taking the form of jokes, derogatory remarks, avoidance, and discriminatory actions. The target features of teasing varied from height, weight, color complexion, facial features, and so on. How one dresses was also found to be a cause of AT.

KGK: So if you are thin, you will have a certain type of appearance thing. If you are fat, you'll have a certain type of appearance teasing. If you have bigger, let's say breasts, you'll have certain type of appearance teasing and blah blah blah and. Similarly, I feel that appearance teasing has a lot to do with ones social economic status. The kind of clothes I wear, KGK: Things that have happened in grade seven or eight, I'm still carrying them with me because somewhere or the other I haven't been able to forget them.

Charu: sometimes I used to feel like till 6th 7th class only people don't used to come next to me and sit next to me because of my [dark] complexion. I used to think that a lot.

Anupam: So there was an event They were providing food as well but *galiwale bache* (street kids) were not allowed, but then they stopped me from entering despite me not being a *galiwala* (street kid)...that experience stayed with me for a long time throughout my childhood making me sad.

Participants vividly recounted deeply impactful experiences that remained etched in their memories, even though those events had transpired quite far in the past. They reported

feeling hurt from it. This was especially relevant when the participants felt discriminated against by others due to their appearance; like how Charu felt her classmates avoided her due to her skin color and how Anupam associated him being denied entry into an event with him looking like a street (homeless) kid.

Charu: for you it might be a joke but for others, it might be considered as teasing and hurt them.

KGK: And if I do get offended, people say that, oh, why are you getting offended? I was just kidding.

Participants also drew attention to the subtler yet impactful aspect of appearance-related jokes. They regarded such jests as offensive and hurtful, irrespective of whether they were intended as harmless banter.

S.Y: They (family) are concerned, they say that other people talk behind your back, but we say it on your face.

S.Y: They'd (relatives) say "we are just concerned for your health." but they need to consider that there is a difference between being concerned and body shaming others.

We also found that the participants believed the intention behind appearance teasing from their immediate family and close friends was genuine concern for their well-being, cleverly disguised in the form of teasing. However, intriguingly, they also shared instances of others, excluding close family and friends, using health concerns as a pretext for teasing them. This revelation sheds light on the intricate interplay of intentions and perceptions in appearance teasing dynamics, urging us to foster open communication and understanding to navigate these complex social interactions respectfully and empathetically.

KGK: That is also sort of appearance teasing wherein they're just trying to, you know, please me as to how I look... people said that you look like Deepika Padukone (celebrity) if she was a bride so that was something, they were trying to tease me, of course, and I took it very positively.

During the interview, KGK shared an intriguing observation about occasions when appearance teasing had a positive impact on her. Surprisingly, she felt happy and uplifted by such teasing, particularly when others playfully compared her appearance to that of a famous and attractive celebrity. In these instances, appearance teasing took on a more lighthearted and complimentary tone, contributing to a sense of joy and validation. This finding adds depth to the complex nature of appearance teasing, demonstrating that its effects can vary widely based on the context and intent.

Physical Appearance and Stigma

This theme covers the stigma revolving around physical appearances which eventually leads to the exhibition of stigmatized behaviors manifested through discrimination, stereotype social exclusion and negative feelings towards people who deviate from societal ideals of attractiveness. This stigmatization often results in the internalization of these negative

perceptions by the stigmatized group, leading to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and psychological distress.

Anupam: Mummy used to get discriminated back in her hometown because she is dark skinned... I don't actually know how many times, but mom told me that my family talks behind my back to her like, "He's dark skinned like you." I often got unfair treatments all because I'm dark skinned.

Charu: I used to feel like till 6th 7th class people didn't come and sit next to me because of my complexion. Some people even made it clear with their words. There were always rumours so I got to know.

Anupam opened up about his mother's experiences of facing discrimination based on her complexion. He also recollected his own past encounters of being discriminated against by family members due to his dark complexion. Similarly, Charu shared her feelings of being socially excluded, with people avoiding interactions with her because of the stigma surrounding dark complexion.

Anupam: Like people often tell girls, "You're way too thin, you should eat more often or you won't be able to get married" but even boys are told something like that. Like if there is no hair on their head then they're told "You won't get to date someone" which isn't right.

KGK: because I'm thin, people end up judging that because she's thin, she's not so strong. So my strength is also determined from my body size and shape.

Anupam and KGK shared insightful instances about prevailing stereotypes based on physical appearances. Anupam recounted how girls often face criticism regarding their body figures, with overweight girls deemed unsuitable for matchmaking. Similarly, boys experiencing baldness encounter discouragement from pursuing relationships. KGK highlighted how people tend to judge her physical capabilities solely based on her physique, perpetuating the classic stereotype of associating thin individuals with weakness.

Charu: the negative comments about my dark complexion from my relatives made me feel very stressed and frustrated. I was in 5th 6th standard and I was like I want to die. I don't want to live with these people, I don't want to talk to anyone about it because it was like these people were repeatedly saying the same things over and over.

KGK: I have often heard people commenting on the way I walk or how it looks when I walk. So comments like these, I don't want to hear them, but I end up hearing them and they came up as a joke but that they made me feel uncomfortable in my own skin.

During our research, we noticed that the participants exhibited a striking internalization of negative attitudes stemming from the stigma surrounding their physical appearances. This internalization had a profound impact on their self-perception, leading them to feel stressed, frustrated, and uncomfortable with their own selves. Charu, for instance, shared how repeated appearance teasing from relatives, despite her pleas to stop, caused her to develop a deep self-

hatred over time, triggering self-harming tendencies. Similarly, KGK became excessively self-conscious about her body due to the many comments she received from others about her gait.

Causes of Appearance Teasing

All the participants shared their perspectives on the diverse yet interconnected factors contributing to appearance teasing (AT). These factors included societal ignorance, perpetuation of unrealistic beauty standards, the prevalence of social comparison, health concerns, perpetuation of stereotypes, and gender biases, particularly affecting girls of marriageable age. Additionally, the role of Indian culture emerged as a significant aspect, often inhibiting individuals from expressing their discomfort caused by AT.

Charu: And we don't think that much before saying. This is the first biggest problem (emphasis here) of our society of speaking before thinking.

KGK: OK, so even if people end up teasing the other person, they don't think that they have done any harm. They just think that it's OK to do it and it's normal.

Participants held the belief that humans possess an innate tendency to engage in making fun of others, particularly those they know well. Both Charu and KGK passionately conveyed their frustration with the prevailing ignorance within society regarding the ignorance within society about not knowing the impact teasing can have on others.

Anupam: Everyone has their own standards of appearance and people who are different from these standards are teased...My mom's skin complexion is dark as well, so she used to get discriminated in her hometown for her dark complexion.

Anupam: For example, my sister often gets appearance teased. Like, "You have to get married someday so you should start becoming slim". I feel that girls get more appearance teased as compared to boys.

Participants identified unrealistic beauty standards prevalent in society as a significant factor contributing to appearance teasing. Ideals of fairness as being a sign of beauty, for instance, resulted in discrimination against Anupam and his mother. Anupam further shared his sister's experiences of frequent appearance teasing, with societal pressure to lose weight to gain a slim figure in anticipation of marriage.

SY: It's easier talking to our friends and communicating about the discomfort of appearance teasing but when it comes to relatives and elder people... There lies the real problem. Because then there comes the notion of respecting our elders. And we cannot... because it's difficult to tell them that this is not right and even if we do, they would reply by saying "we are just concerned for your health."

Participants emphasized that they found appearance teasing by their relatives particularly uncomfortable, primarily because they felt unable to speak up against it. SY shared that she endured discomfort due to the fear of being perceived as disrespectful if she voiced her objections. This suggests that cultural dynamics surrounding familial relationships might

play a pivotal role in inhibiting individuals from addressing appearance teasing, fostering a culture of silence and enduring discomfort.

SY: All of my cousins are younger than me. But they've all got taller. And now whenever I am among them then it'd definitely come in conversations that "you look like the youngest despite being the eldest." This happens a lot.

During our research, SY shared a deeply personal experience where her slower physical development compared to her peers led to social comparison, resulting in appearance teasing. This challenging situation further amplified when her family's concern for her well-being also manifested as appearance teasing. The convergence of these factors created a distressing cycle, affecting SY emotionally and socially.

Impact of Appearance Teasing

This theme captures the impact that appearance teasing has had on participants' feelings/emotions, their self and identity and their behavior.

KGK: I don't attach a totally negative connotation to appearance teasing, but it actually depends on who is it coming from

SK: Like it just depends how does that person tell it to you and conveys that message to you... with my family member when they said, hey, you are a fat, you are looking fat. So it was me like, OK, I'm fat, I should lose some weight for sure. But you know, somebody calling me on the street, somebody saying on the street, I would say it's a bit different.

Anupam: Whenever my mom used to point out something about me, I would pay close attention to it because I value my mom's opinion/ judgement more than anyone else's.

According to KGK and SK, the impact of appearance teasing hinges on who the teaser is and how the teasing is conveyed by the speaker. Another factor in play here is how the teasing is being perceived by the listener. For SK appearance teasing from individuals outside the circle of close family and friends was particularly hurtful. For Anupam, the dynamics were reversed: he placed higher significance on his mother's opinion, valuing her viewpoint more than others', and as a result, appearance teasing from his mother carried a greater impact on him. This individual variation in the perception of the source's opinion and teasing underscores the intricate nature of appearance teasing's effects on individuals.

SK: I would say. Yeah, I don't mind it, you know, people calling me fat because I am fat, man. I can change it. But, you know, with my face, like, I have a I have a very short nose, and people used to call me like, I look like a pig, right? So that was something really hurtful... No, man, I cannot change my nose...

Another thought-stimulating discovery came to light through SK's account where he shared his distinct perspective on the impact of appearance teasing. He noted that he considered teasing about things that could be changed in terms of appearance as having less effect on him, compared to teasing about features that were more fixed and difficult to alter, like facial characteristics.

Anupam: I mostly get offended or frustrated with that [AT] and if I get a chance, I react but I usually don't react but I try as much as I can to ignore them as I feel like it's a waste of energy.

KGK: but then I still often feel that people are talking about me. When they're talking behind me they might not care about me at all, but this feeling that people are always talking about you and they're always joking about even if they're laughing, it's always you that has always stayed with me.

KGK: I used to think that people are just looking at me to find another joke to laugh upon ..I try to stick with some certain people and my extreme immediate circle, I haven't been able to change it. I don't think I'll ever be able to change it.

Charu: I remember being so fed up of listening to the same thing over and over again that I lost control. It got so overwhelming that i had thoughts like “Who am I?!” and “Why do i even exist!” I was in 5th 6th standard and I was like I want to die. I don't want to live with these people (relatives).

Overall, participants unanimously found appearance teasing hurtful, irrespective of intent. Negative emotions like discomfort, anger, exasperation, alienation, and fear of rejection accompanied such experiences. KGK shared a unique perception – she felt observed and talked about by others when they laughed while looking at her. This heightened vigilance hints at the impact of teasing on her sensitivity and paranoia. She admitted being selective in her social circle to protect herself. Charu's account revealed even more alarming consequences. She disclosed harboring pent-up frustration, exasperation, and volatile feelings due to incessant teasing. Shockingly, she confessed to past struggles with self-harm and suicidal thoughts, the result of suppressed emotions and anger.

Anupam: I developed a sense of insecurity during my childhood. I used to think that there is something lacking in me or maybe I look ugly.

Reishimdar: Being teased by people during childhood lowered my self-confidence because of which I used to avoid going out to play.

Charu: I didn't like myself or my body back then. I didn't like my dark complexion (skin color). Due to this i hated myself till my 10th standard. Like I wasn't very confident in myself to be honest. I was completely different person. Like I was that little girl in the class whom no one even knew existed!

Over time, participants' senses of self and identity have been significantly influenced by relentless appearance teasing. They distinguished between their past selves and their present selves, illustrating the impact of teasing on their growth. In the past, they felt unwanted, lacked confidence, and were dissatisfied with their bodies. Anupam shared his insecurity and the feeling of something missing in himself due to appearance teasing. It caused Reishimdar to withdraw from outdoor activities. Charu related her challenges in forming friendships and low self-confidence to her struggles with self-acceptance stemming from appearance teasing. She even admitted to hating herself due to the persistent teasing.

Anupam: I couldn't form an identity for myself which affected my decision making and because of which, I couldn't act the way I thought. I wouldn't speak much and keep quiet in a lot of places because of my under confidence.

S.Y: ...sometimes it feels like is my identity restricted to this (my appearance)?

Charu: I never felt I was important...like people were taking decisions without asking for my opinion. No one used to ask me what I want.

Anupam found it hard to express himself openly and struggled with making decisions due to his lack of confidence in his appearance. SY acknowledged that her sense of who she was felt limited to how she looked because of such experiences. Charu also admitted that she used to feel unimportant in social situations when people teased her about her appearance.

SY: I believe that if this didn't happen with me then I wouldn't have introspected about the same. About self-acceptance, self-love. Had my body been perfect according to other people it wouldn't have affected me in many ways, I wouldn't have thought about it, I suppose much... But because this has happened, it has changed my thought processes, developed them. And that has somehow made me a better person. I feel like i have become more mature.

KGK: They have affected me positively I would say, because they have made me much more. So I am a very sensitive individual to others.

S.Y: Whenever I've taken stand for myself, I feel proud of those instances.

Charu: I feel really good, like I know what I've come through...if I think myself as that person and now I think myself as the person I am sitting right here, there is a lot of difference and I feel really good and proud about myself ki I came all the way there and then I am here. So it's good.

Despite struggling with an undesirable past self, the participants have come a long way and now perceive themselves as transformed individuals following their encounters with appearance teasing. SY particularly sees her repeated experiences with appearance teasing as having a positive impact, enhancing her awareness and empathy. She asserts that her thought processes have evolved, and she's grown more mature through these experiences. This sentiment was shared by KGK as well. This transformation in their self-perception has sparked feelings of joy, pride, and empathy. SK now feels more assured in social interactions, having successfully navigated the adverse effects of appearance teasing. These narratives highlight the resilience and personal growth that can emerge from facing challenges like appearance teasing.

All of this reveals that appearance teasing had diverse impacts on the participants' sense of self and identity. It led to the formation of a "past self" marked by feelings of being unwanted, contrasting with their "current self" where they've developed a more positive self-concept. Furthermore, it influenced their social identity and brought about shifts in their thought patterns. These experiences underscore the intricate ways appearance teasing can shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and their roles in society.

Charu: Angry... my behavior got angry. I used to get irritated very easily.

Reishimdar: ...so there was a time when I intentionally started eating more food to put on some weight so that I don't look too thin, to reduce being appearance teased by people.

SK: ... I tried to change my body how it like with my fat, how it looks. I started doing more research on how should I lose weight. And I went to gym. I did my exercise control, my eating habit, diets and stuff like that, which helped me a lot in losing my weight.

Charu: Like if someone teased my for my appearance the I'd try to be more of a good person in myself and my personlaity and maybe I'll become a better person with that.

SY: I've come to accept my body but I'd want to work on my body.

The participants also noted shifts in their behavior stemming from their encounters with appearance teasing. Charu linked her previous bursts of anger and emotional volatility to the persistent appearance teasing she faced. Additionally, they shared their endeavors to adapt, whether that meant altering their physical presentation or adjusting their personalities, all in response to appearance teasing.

These insights underscore the profound influence of appearance teasing on individuals' conduct, encompassing emotional responses and conscious adaptations aimed at addressing the impact of such teasing.

Protective Factors

This theme explores the pivotal role of positive social connections and constructive social media content as shields against the detrimental effects of appearance teasing (AT).

Reishimdar: everyone was accepting of who I was and that made me feel secure about myself in my social circle and helped me develop confidence whenever heading out somewhere.

KGK: They have just encouraged me to accept myself, so that has impacted me.
SK: my family was very supportive of me when when I was fat, right?.. my family, my girlfriend and everybody that I know, my friends circle. Help me a lot in that positive way.

Charu: All the positive change that has happened in me. All of this is credited to my few true friends who have always been there for me.

Participants emphasized the role of supportive social network in helping them navigate their negative experiences with appearance teasing (AT) and in shaping their newfound identities. This underscores the importance of positive relationships, understanding friends, and family members who provided encouragement and empathy. Such support served as a catalyst for participants to transcend the negative impacts of AT and embark on a journey of personal growth and self-discovery.

Anupam: Like, for me, I'm connected to the world with social media so I can understand but I won't say that I'm not totally insecure but I'm still somewhat less insecure than my mom.

Anupam's statement highlighted the positive and protective influence of affirmative social media content centered around self-love. This illustrates how constructive online

resources can serve as a buffer against appearance teasing's negative effects. Such content enhances self-esteem and resilience, mitigating the harm caused by appearance-related challenges.

Coping Mechanisms

Within this theme, we delve into the diverse strategies participants employed to navigate the adverse repercussions of appearance teasing. These strategies are delineated into active and passive coping approaches. Active coping involves participants' proactive measures to address the negative impacts of appearance teasing, reflecting their determination to manage the challenges. On the other hand, passive coping strategies encompass more indirect responses to the effects of appearance teasing, often involving avoidance or ignoring emotions.

KGK: Most importantly, I speak up. If I'm not comfortable being, I speak up.

SY: ... And then I realised okay fine... if they can do this (stand up for themselves) then maybe this (appearance teasing) is wrong and that's why they are speaking up for it. so there was a lot of introspection involved which changed me in many ways...

KGK and SY mentioned that they coped with negative instances of AT by speaking up about their discomfort. SY in particular found inspiration in observing others standing up against appearance teasing, motivating her to proactively and openly address her own experiences of being teased (vicarious learning).

Charu: ... I was like "So what if I have dark complexion. Many people have dark complexion.". When I accepted this and said so then other people couldn't retaliate with other remarks and stopped (appearance) teasing me.

Charu shared that she began to understand and accept her skin color better, which helped her feel more comfortable with herself. She thought that by accepting herself, people might be less likely to tease her.

Charu: ... If I ever felt that someone is teasing me or making fun of me, then I did "tit for tat" because rod is the logic of fools. Rude people don't understand soft language. If they still continue teasing despite repeatedly asking them not to, then do it (appearance teasing) once with them or their children and they'll stop.

Reishimdar: During childhood, everyone agreed that I was very thin and I couldn't say anything but now I am able to counter argue and if someone of my age starts to tease me, then I would also start teasing them as well.

Charu hinted at a feeling of wanting to get back at those who teased her while discussing her "tit for tat" approach. Her frustration was evident due to facing appearance teasing repeatedly, leading her to think that if others, or their children in the case of relatives, experienced the same teasing, they might stop. Reishimdar also admitted to employing a similar strategy.

SY: ... Maybe this happens because the other person is our friend and we don't want that friendship to deteriorate by speaking against appearance teasing again and again. So we take it more lightly as we cannot afford to lose that friendship.

Anupam: ... I didn't have any other option than coping with it. With whom would I have sat otherwise so I had to cope with it.

Charu: I used to run away from there crying (in the past).

SY: I avoid some of my relatives.

SY shared how she endured the discomfort caused by appearance teasing, often downplaying it to maintain her friendships. She worried that repeatedly expressing her discomfort might strain her relationships. Similarly, Anupam revealed a fear of social rejection, recounting how he stayed silent despite feeling hurt by appearance teasing. Avoidance of social interactions, particularly with relatives, was also a recurring theme in the participants' stories.

KGK: It also improved with small little compliments from people.

KGK. I often look at myself in the mirror and I feel like, oh, I look good.

The participants in this study also reveal a quest for validation and approval from both others and themselves. For instance, KGK shared how receiving compliments and being compared to actresses boosted her self-esteem and aided her coping. She also admitted to seeking reassurance from her reflection in the mirror to feel better. Similarly, SK echoed a similar sentiment, stating that positive validation from others regarding his appearance had a positive impact on his emotional well-being.

Participants employed an array of coping strategies to manage the effects of appearance teasing. Some actively addressed instances by voicing their discomfort, seeking validation, and embracing their uniqueness. Others adapted their appearance or personality, while a few contemplated retaliations as a response. Seeking acceptance from peers and self-affirmation played a significant role, with participants valuing compliments and positive feedback. Additionally, some employed avoidance tactics, sidestepping social interactions to minimize potential teasing. These diverse approaches showcased the participants' resilience and determination to navigate appearance teasing's challenges, highlighting their multifaceted efforts to foster emotional well-being and self-acceptance.

Discussion

In this study we take a unique, in-depth and idiographic approach delving into the experiences six Indian youth who have been appearance teased. Our study encompassed a threefold objective. Firstly, we aimed to uncover the participants' perceptions concerning their lived experiences in relation to appearance teasing. Secondly, we sought to understand how these encounters influenced and shaped their sense of self and identity. Lastly, our investigation delved into the coping strategies they employed to navigate the adverse effects of appearance teasing. Findings revealed that while each participant's had distinct lived experiences, a common thread of homogeneity emerged in the forms of AT they experienced, the underlying reasons for the teasing, its impact, the protective factors which helped in mitigating the negative

effects and the coping strategies employed. This provides unique insights into the lived experiences of appearance teasing of Indian youths.

The participants considered appearance teasing to be a common phenomenon which almost occurred quite frequently in daily life. They considered the term to hold a slightly negative connotation but were aware that AT can also be positive in certain situations. They also believed body shaming to be a specific type of AT. This narrative is a little bit at odds with earlier research, which generally uses the term AT to describe a negative phenomenon that frequently takes the form of verbal harassment and provocations, ranging from name-calling (e.g., "mottu," or "pencil,") to aggressive remarks. Teasing needs to be distinguished in this situation from victimization and bullying behaviors that are more aggressive and physical, such as sexual harassment, serious threats, or physical violence (e.g., Keltner et al., 2001; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

Participants in the current study spoke of different forms in which AT is exhibited in the Indian Society. They mentioned that there can be different target features of AT like height, weight, dress, facial features, hair etc. This finding is consistent with the findings of Cash (1995) regarding the target of teasing, in which experiences frequently connect to the individual's body weight but can also relate to facial features (e.g., the nose), body height, chest, hair, or extremities. Some features targeted by appearance teasing were considered more sensitive than others like facial features or breast size. Furthermore, participants held that teasing was not only restricted to verbal forms (taunts, jokes etc.) but non-verbal behavior (like pointing at someone and laughing, avoiding them) as well. Another important finding was how health concern by family members was often portrayed as AT but ironically, at the same time, participants perceived AT by people other than immediate family and close friends as teasing disguised as health concern. According to research, both negative weight talk from family members and taunting of children about their weight (e.g., criticizing one's own or others' weight, advising someone to avoid doing something or dress a certain way due to their weight) are linked to unhealthy eating patterns and worsened physical and psychosocial health in the short- and long-term (Keery et al., 2005; Puhl et al., 2017). The participants believed jokes to be a subtle form of AT and often used as a front to tease others just like health concerns. The participants considered jokes or even ribbing about appearance hurtful whether intended or not. Discrimination was also found to be a form in which AT is exhibited in our society. Corbett (2007) also points out that in an appearance-based society, "...many employers care very much about the physical appearance of their employees, and some make employment decisions based, at least in part, on the physical appearance of employees and applicants."

The second theme sheds light on the stigma associated with physical appearance of people who are different from idealized bodies. The experiences of stigma were evident in participants accounts: participants were discriminated against and unfavorable stereotypes were held towards them based on their physical appearance. Repeated experiences with negative appearance teasing led to internalization of negative attitudes such as self-hatred, suicidal ideation, being overly conscious of body image, etc. Some participants were even felt socially excluded as a stigmatized group. Individuals with undervalued physical qualities or characteristics are frequently stigmatized as a result of their "spoiled identity," making them prone to social rejection and even overt forms of discrimination (Puhl & Gloor, 2012). A favorable societal bias is created toward people who are seen as physically attractive according to Western socio-cultural ideals, whereas significant prejudice is created against people who are deemed unattractive or as deviating from the prevailing expectations for physical appearance. Certain aspects of physical appearance have become so devalued that widespread cultural stereotypes have developed and persisted (Puhl & Gloor, 2012).

The third theme, causes, highlighted the factors behind AT. Most participants reported a host of causes of AT like ignorance within society about the impact of AT, unrealistic beauty

standards in society and media, social comparison, health concern of family members, and stereotypes. Beauty ideals are profoundly ingrained in our goals, behaviors, habits, and self-conceptions (MacCallum & Widdows, 2016). People with physical characteristics that society devalues frequently experience stigma and social rejection (Puhl & Gloor, 2012). Indian culture of respecting elders and not arguing with them was cited as a major factor restricting the participant's expression about discomfort caused by AT. The participants revealed that they feared being seen as disrespectful if they asked their relatives to not appearance tease them and thus bore, they discomfort. One participant reported feeling helpless in such situations. Another participant also mentioned the role of gender in AT: he believed that girls (especially those of marriageable age) are appearance teased more than boys. Similar results have been found by Almenara and Ježek's (2015) study where girls were more likely to report appearance teasing than boys.

In the fourth theme the participants further discussed the impact that AT had on their emotions. They emphasized negative feelings associated with AT like discomfort, anger, exasperation, alienation, fear of social rejection, insecurity, etc. One participant even confessed to having self-harming tendencies and suicidal thoughts in childhood due to being AT for her dark complexion. Numerous research that examined the impact of appearance teasing have demonstrated its detrimental consequences on several mental health outcomes. Self-esteem issues, elevated depression (Feragen & Stock, 2016), and even suicide ideation and attempts (Ford et al., 2017) are included in this list. Additionally, those who tease may choose to focus their taunts on particular bodily parts or physical characteristics that the target cannot control, which can have a greater psychological impact on the target (Kowalski, 2000); for example, one participant revealed feeling worse when teased about his nose than his weight because he considered weight to be something he could control but not the nose. The participants also reported the impact that AT was perceived to exert on their lives especially their sense of self and identity. They distinguished between a past (unwanted) self and present (better) self. They held that at first, AT made them feel dissatisfied with their bodies, underconfident, and inferior, but over time these experiences have changed their thought processes and made them more sensitive and empathetic. They believe themselves to have evolved into a better version of themselves, one which is more confident and has a better self-concept. The participants divulged sticking to a few intimate friends and family and avoiding others, especially relatives, due to their past experiences of AT. They also reported feeling uncomfortable, inferior, and unimportant in social situations. This is consistent with studies showing that teasing experiences in teenagers are linked to social withdrawal, anxiety about being judged negatively, and loneliness (Storch et al., 2004). McCabe et al. (2010) found links between childhood teasing and anxiety problems in adults, particularly social anxiety. The participants also noted a marked change in their behavior due to experiences of AT. Earlier, it made them more volatile, irritated, and angry, but now after new developed thought processes, they hold that they have become more rational and less defensive.

Social support predominated the fifth theme about the protective factors against negative impacts of AT. The participants discussed how support from their family, partner and close friends helped them manage the adverse effect of AT. They also mentioned how positive social media posts such as those about self-love helped them. According to Baldwin and Hoffmann (2001), social support improves wellbeing and appears to act as a buffer against the negative consequences of stress; teasing was regarded as one such stressful event in their study.

The final theme highlights the salience of different coping strategies used by participants. The participants emphasized the strategies that helped them overcome challenges caused by AT in their lives. They spoke about the ways active strategies like standing up for self, justification, practicing self-love, "tit for tat," and sarcasm helped them to maintain their positive exercise habits. Participants in the current study spoke of working on and changing

the way they appeared or their personality in order to adapt, such as following a strict regime, etc. The passive coping strategies included searching for self-affirmation from others, bearing the discomfort caused, or taking the teasing lightly to lessen its impact on the self. Adaptive (e.g., positive rational acceptance, diversion, and mindfulness) to maladaptive (e.g., appearance fixation, avoidance, and rumination) body image coping techniques exist (Cash et al., 2005; Wade et al., 2009); however, the distinction between adaptive and maladaptive coping is rarely easy. The use of avoidance and appearance fixing tactics is deemed maladaptive since such strategies are associated to disordered eating patterns, reduced self-esteem, and lower quality of life (Cash et al., 2005; Mancuso, 2016). Positive rational acceptance, on the other hand, is regarded as adaptive since it results from higher levels of self-esteem and is linked to lower levels of self-evaluative salience of physical appearance as well as higher levels of social support (Grower et al., 2020). While exercise is the most frequently mentioned in studies, additional coping mechanisms include good eating, improving one's appearance, connecting to friends or family, religion/spirituality, spending time alone, and so on (MacKenzie, 2012).

What greatly intrigued us during our research was the nuanced nature of intention behind appearance teasing. A complex interplay of motives was uncovered. On one hand, a sense of inferiority can be conveyed through the act of teasing, yet on the other, it can also be utilized as a means of expressing familial concern about the well-being of the individual. This intricate dynamic resonated with us on a personal level as researchers. We recognized instances, drawing from our own experiences, where family members inadvertently used words associated with appearance teasing out of genuine concern for the health of their loved ones. In these scenarios, the impact on the listener often diverged from the speaker's initial intention, underscoring the intricate ways in which language can be interpreted. What further left us in awe was the resilience displayed by the participants in response to the barrage of appearance teasing they endured. Despite undergoing such an ordeal, they emerged as individuals who embraced self-improvement. Engaging in exercise regimens, bolstering self-confidence, and pursuing self-improvement endeavors collectively contributed to their personal growth. This transformative journey parallels our own experiences as researchers, where we too encountered instances of appearance teasing. In response, we channeled our efforts towards skill enhancement, identified areas for growth, and accepted ourselves while striving to cultivate self-improvement. This shared narrative underscores the universal potential for positive change in the face of challenges, exemplifying the remarkable ability of individuals to harness adversity for personal development.

Amid rising awareness of appearance teasing's role in perpetuating prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination, the engagement of social psychologists remains crucial. This study's findings about how individuals interpret and confront appearance teasing, as well as the unique impact of Indian culture, offer valuable insights. These findings hold promise for crafting interventions that encompass culturally suitable coping strategies. By addressing these dynamics, this research contributes to empowering individuals to effectively navigate appearance teasing's complexities while respecting cultural sensitivities. There lie certain limitations about the current study which we researchers acknowledge. The respondents were exclusively heterosexual, middle-class, undergraduate college going students. The current study is also subject to the researcher trying to make sense of participants' sense of their experiences (double hermeneutic). Furthermore, each participant had different articulation skills and differed in their length and breadth of expression about their experiences of appearance teasing. Future research could employ mixed methods for deeper insights, while longitudinal studies might unveil appearance teasing's evolving impact on self and identity over time.

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