

**Does Appearance Related Anxiousness Hint
towards Body Dysmorphic Disorder? A Gender-
Based Enquiry about Appearance Concern**

Rituparna Ghosh

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Abstract

The idea of perfection is a myth or is vague. People nowadays are always striving for perfection, be it their looks, body image, clothing etc. But are there any exact criteria that makes us perfect? The rampant usage of social media has almost compelled us to believe in the abstract idea of perfection and the existence of a virtual world. The widespread usage of filters in clicked images have made our lives literally virtual. We are almost separated from the real-life situations. Appearance related anxiousness can be a symptom of Body Dysmorphic Disorders, which is known to be a very common disorder. People who are anxious about their appearance are not satisfied with their appearance and are engrossed with finding flaws in the same which is actually non-existent or is minimal. Generally, it is a common observation that women are more concerned about their appearance than men. Women are meant to be beautiful from the societal perspectives. Thus, it can be assumed that appearance related consciousness will be more among women than men. Anxiety related to appearance can affect individuals irrespective of all age groups. Concern about appearance starts at adolescence. Thus, in this paper an attempt has been made to study how much there is anxiousness about appearance among various age groups and gender belonging to varied spaces and whether these tendencies can indicate the presence of Body Dysmorphic Disorder or not.

Keywords: *Appearance anxiety, virtual world, perfection, gender divide, non-existent flaws.*

1. Introduction

Appearance related concerns mostly dissatisfaction and lack of confidence can hint towards anxiety regarding the same. We can observe individuals are unsatisfied with their either skin, hair, weight etc. or all around their physical appearance. Due to this dissatisfaction, it is observed that people are always trying to modify themselves not actually but virtually. The use of filtered photos on social media platforms can be cited as an example of such efforts. Appearance related anxiousness can indicate the presence of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), which is said to be a very common disorder but it is not recognized and so the disorder remains untreated (Phillips et al. 1995:1216). It has adverse effects

on different spheres of life (Malik et al. 2021:3). Social media usage and body image dissatisfaction are positively related i.e. longer the social media usage the more is the dissatisfaction with one's body (Hashim et al. 2022: 12).

BDD though comes under the purview of psychology, behavioural patterns of humans are a subject of discussion of geography and this creates a linkage between the two disciplines. Behavioural approach in geography which focusses on the study of human behaviour establishes the connection between Geography and Psychology. Behavioural geography which is said to be a “psychological turn in human geography” (Hussain 2002:404) has a multidisciplinary approach and includes “ideas, paradigms and theories produced by psychologists, philosophers, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists and planners” (Hussain 2002:407). Behavioural geography which recognizes “man as a responder to stimuli. It seeks to identify how different individuals respond to particular stimuli” (Adhikari 2004:271). Geographical Psychology is an emerging discipline where emphasis is placed upon personality traits (Shuttleworth et al. 2020:3).

1.2 Objectives

The present study has been conducted to achieve the following:

- 1) To find out appearance related concern among males and females.
- 2) To find out appearance related concern among different age groups.
- 3) To find out the relation between social media usage and body dissatisfaction.

1.3 Previous Work

Phillips Katharine A et al. (1995) in their report on “Case Study: Body Dysmorphic Disorder in Adolescents” have elaborated how BDD in spite of being a common psychiatric disorder is not recognized and not known among clinicians (Phillips et al. 1995:1216). They have mentioned that the disorder mostly starts during adolescence.

Bjornsson Andri S et al. (2010) in their article on “Body dysmorphic disorder” have talked about the disorder in detail, its definition, classification, the symptoms, the age group most prone to the disorder and the various treatments. The study concluded with the fact that how the disorder remains unrecognised, how its acknowledgement and treatment is urgently necessary and also stressed upon its prevention (Bjornsson et al. 2010:10).

Malik Farheen et al. (2021) in their article on “Body Dysmorphic Disorder: A Comprehensive Review” have talked about the disorder in detail, the symptoms, the criteria for identifying the disorder, the effects it has on life with special emphasis on the life of students and the ways of managing the same (Malik et al. 2021:2-6).

Alruwayshid M. S. et al (2021) in their article on “The influence of social media on body dissatisfaction among college students” have found out that there is an effect of socio-economic status of individuals on their body dissatisfaction i.e. higher the socio-economic status higher the body dissatisfaction and vice-versa (Alruwayshid et al. 2021:1745). The study was conducted on both male and female university students of Saudi Arabia (Alruwayshid et al. 2021:1742).

Hashim Noraini et al. (2022) in their article on “Dissatisfaction about Body Image During Social Networking among University Students” have established the fact that longer exposure to social media enhances dissatisfaction about body image and exposure to social media is one of the causes of dissatisfaction about body image (Hashim et al. 2022:12). The study found that gender; body mass index and body dissatisfaction are significantly related to each other (Hashim et al. 2022:16).

Czernecka Agnieszka et al. (2023) in their paper on “Body Dysmorphic Disorder Questionnaire-Dermatology Version (BDD-DV): formation and validation of the Polish language version” have discussed about BDD, its onset at adolescence and its adverse effect on life. They have mentioned that defects are related mainly to skin and hair (Czernecka et al. 2023:421). The study is based on survey on Polish speaking population to identify the disorder. The questionnaire used for the survey is Body Dysmorphic Disorder Questionnaire-Dermatology Version (Czernecka et al. 2023:421). The study involves rigorous statistical calculation and analysis.

The present study is an attempt towards identifying appearance related concerns among different age groups and gender in varied space which may indicate the presence of BDD. Such a holistic and comprehensive approach is lacking in the previous studies on BDD. Mostly studies on BDD have been done by psychologists and medical professionals but the present one has been done from a geographer’s perspective. Thus, herein lies the distinctiveness of this study.

2. Materials and Methods

The perception study is based on primary data collected through sample survey. The perception study has been conducted using a questionnaire based mostly on ‘Body Dysmorphic Disorder Questionnaire’ or BDDQ which “is a brief, widely used self-report measure” (Dyl et al. 2006:371) and other questions related to appearance concerns based on ‘Appearance Anxiety Inventory’ (Veale et al. 2014:605) or “AAI can be used as a tool for treatment planning and outcome measurement” (Veale et al. 2014:615) as an effective tool for identifying the disorder. The survey conducted on 82 individuals includes 65 females and 17 males. The participants of the survey are from different age groups ranging from 18 to 44 years. Previous works have been reviewed for a clear understanding of the concept and for finding the research gaps.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Social and Economic Characteristics of the Population Under Study

The social and economic characteristics of the participants involved in this present study have been taken into consideration. The different parameters about the above characteristics are gender, age, marital status, residential location-urban or rural, educational qualification and occupation.

3.1.1 Gender, Age and Educational Qualification

Appearance related consciousness and gender are related to each other. Generally, it is seen that females are comparatively more conscious about their appearance than the males. The participants in the survey consisted of 79.33 per cent females and 20.67 per cent males.

It is assumed that concern about appearance is dependent on age. There seems to be an inverse relationship between age and appearance related consciousness. The survey has been conducted on individuals of age below 20 years, 20 to 30 years, 30 to 40 years and of 40 years and above. The minimum age of the participants in the survey was 18 years and the maximum age was 44 years. The survey results show that 28.05 per cent of the participants are below 20 years of age, 47.56 per cent are between 20 and 30 years, 19.51 per cent are between 30 and 40 years and 4.88 per cent are 40 years and above.

Education makes an individual aware and as well as conscious, thus educational qualification was asked for. Even when any problem remains undiagnosed, only when questions related to that problem are administered to them, it might make the individuals aware of the same. The responses obtained on educational qualification was classified as higher secondary, graduation, post-graduation, technical and above post-graduation. It can be seen from the survey that 36.59 per cent of the respondents are educated up to the 12th standard, 24.39 per cent are graduates, 21.95 per cent are post graduates, 12.20 per cent have B.Tech degree and 4.88 per cent have M.Phil and Doctorate degrees.

3.1.2 Marital Status

Marital status and anxiousness about appearance may be related to each other. The survey results show that 81.67 per cent of the respondents are not married and 18.33 per cent are married.

3.1.3 Occupation

Occupation can also be a cause of making oneself appearance conscious. The responses obtained on nature of occupation through the survey was classified into student, service, business and unemployed. The survey reveals that 57.32 per cent are students, 34.15 are engaged in service, 6.10 are engaged in business and 2.44 per cent are unemployed.

3.1.4 Residential Location

Place of residence can be a determinant of one's concern about and presenting oneself. Since access to certain facilities such as salon, beauty parlors etc. are location dependent so the place of residence of the participants has been considered. Though nowadays these facilities are available irrespective of the location. About 56.11 per cent of the survey participants were from urban areas and 43.89 per cent of the same were from rural areas.

The survey was conducted on individuals across diverse spaces- various states of India, various districts of West Bengal and even outside the country. About 39.02 per cent of the participants are from the district of Paschim Bardhaman, 18.29 per cent are from the district of Bankura, 14.63 per cent are from Kolkata, 9.76 per cent are from the district of South 24 Parganas, 4.88 per cent are from the district of North 24 Parganas, 3.66 per cent are from countries of Japan, United Kingdom, 2.44 per cent are from the state of Karnataka, 1.22 per cent are from the states of Jharkhand, Kerala and Himachal Pradesh and districts of Birbhum, Hugli and Nadia respectively .

3.2 Appearance Related Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction

Different parameters/ criteria have been taken into consideration in order to find out satisfaction and dissatisfaction related to one's appearance. The responses for most of the questions have been categorized into "Yes" and "No". But for some questions categories "Sometimes" and "May be" have been included. Results about appearance related satisfaction or dissatisfaction have been represented in Figure 1 and discussion about the same have been done in the following paragraphs

3.2.1 Worry about One's Look

The participants in the survey were asked whether they were worried about their appearance or not. The survey results show that 4.88 per cent of the respondents (Figure 1) are always worried about how they look, 30.56 per cent of them are sometimes worried about the same. Most (64.56 per cent) of the respondents are not worried about their looks.

3.2.2 Anxiety about Not Being Thin Enough and Getting Fat

The participants were asked whether they were anxious about their figure being not so slim or they were worried of getting fat. The survey results show that 30.45 per cent of the respondents (Figure 1) were anxious that they were not slim enough and were also afraid of getting fat, while 69.55 per cent of the same were not anxious about the same.

3.2.3 Upset with Life because of One's Look

The participants were asked to state whether they were upset with life because of their appearance. The survey reveals that 13.44 per cent of the respondents (Figure 1) feel that they are not happy in

their lives because of their appearance while 86.56 per cent of the same are not unhappy in their lives due to their looks.

3.2.4 Problems with Look Affecting Relationships, Social Activities

The respondents were asked to convey whether their problems with appearance affected their relationships with friends, partner and involvement in social activities. About 9.78 per cent of the participants (Figure 1) in the survey feel that their perceived problems about their appearance affect their relationships and involvement in social activities, while 90.22 percent of the participants do not feel the same.

3.2.5 Problems with Appearance Interfering with Work and Other Activities

The participants were enquired whether their problems with appearance interfered with their work or other activities. The survey revealed that 7.33 per cent of the respondents (Figure 1) said that problems with their appearance interfered with their work and 92.67 per cent of the respondents said that there was no such problem.

3.2.6 Avoidance Due To Looks and Things Avoided

The participants were asked whether they avoided anything because of their looks. The survey results show that 8.46 per cent of the respondents (Figure 1) said that they avoided certain things due to their appearance. Among them most (6 per cent) of the respondents avoided fitting cloth because of their looks and 1.23 per cent avoided make-up and hair products due to their looks. About 91.54 per cent said that they had no such problem and their response was negative.

3.2.7 Satisfaction with Skin Colour

The respondents were asked to state their satisfaction with their skin colour. It has been commonly observed that fair complexion is always preferred over dark complexion. Figure 1 shows that 8.54 per cent of the respondents are not satisfied with their skin tone while 91.46 per cent are satisfied with the same.

3.2.8 Applying Filters and Editing the Photo

The respondents were asked whether they use filters while clicking their own photos. The usage of filters may hint towards dissatisfaction with their appearance. Filters completely transform the appearance of an individual. The survey reveals that filters are always used by 10.97 per cent of the respondents, 57.32 per cent of the respondents sometimes apply filter and 31.71 per cent of the respondents do not use filters (Figure 1). About 68.29 per cent of the respondents are inclined towards application of filter for clicking their own photos.

The reason for using filter was also enquired about. The survey reveals that only 1.92 per cent of the respondents use filter as they are dissatisfied with their appearance and 98.08 per cent use filter to

improve the whole photo, though responses in this regard was found to be an ideal one rather than the true one.

The participants were asked to mention whether they felt the necessity of editing their clicked photo or not. It is commonly observed that photo editing with special reference to selfie and also those portraits clicked by others occurs due to dissatisfaction with oneself. The survey reveals that 4.88 per cent of the respondents always edit photo, 60.98 per cent edit their photos sometime and 34.14 per cent of the respondents do not edit photos (Figure 1). About 65.86 per cent of the respondents have a tendency towards editing their photos.

The reason for editing photo was also looked into. The survey reveals that 2.04 per cent of the respondents were not confident about their appearance, 6.12 per cent wanted to remove the flaws in their appearance, and 91.84 per cent of the respondents wanted to improve the photo in totality.

3.2.9 Appearance Related Anxiousness

Generally wearing make-up can be a way of enhancing one's appearance as well as concealing one's real appearance. The female participants in the survey were enquired about whether they put on a lot of make-up on usual days. The survey reveals that none of the female participants wear huge make-up on normal days.

The female participants were asked to mention whether they have the confidence to leave for outside without putting on make-up on normal days. The survey results in Figure 1 show that 90.76 per cent of the female participants are confident to go outside without wearing make up on normal days while 9.24 per cent of them are not confident to leave for outside without putting on make-up on usual days.

Dressing well can indicate one's wish to look good for oneself or making oneself representable to others. The male participants in the survey were asked to state whether they feel the necessity to get well-decked up on normal days. Figure 1 shows that 29.41 per cent of the male participants feel it necessary to get well-dressed even on normal days while 70.59 per cent of them do not feel the same.

The male participants were asked to mention whether they were confident to leave for outside without being well-decked up on normal days. The survey results in Figure 1 show that 88.24 per cent of the male participants have the confidence to go outside without being well-decked up on normal days while 11.76 per cent of them are not confident about the same.

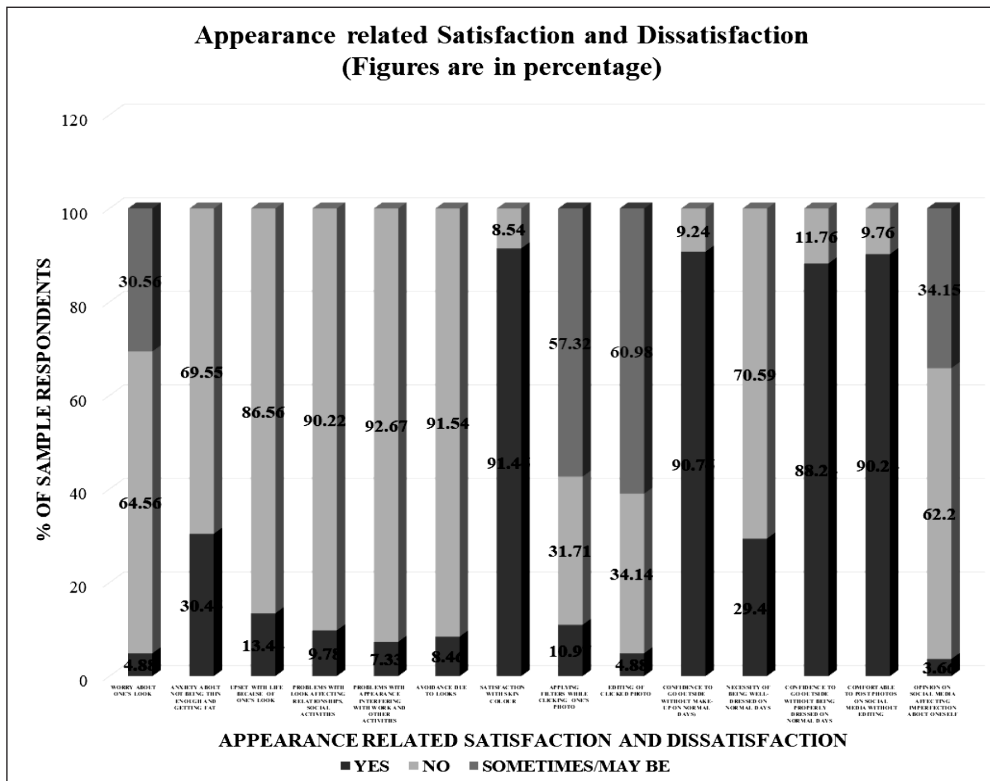
It has been assumed that discomfort associated with posting unedited photos on social media can be an indication of anxiousness about one's appearance. The participants in the survey were asked to state whether they are comfortable to post their photos on social media without editing the same. Figure 1 shows that 90.24 per cent of the participants are comfortable to post unedited photos on social media while 9.76 per cent of the participants are not comfortable about the same.

The reason for such discomfort was also looked into. About 55.56 per cent of the participants mentioning discomfort said that they wanted to present the best version on oneself on social media while 44.44 of them said that dissatisfaction with appearance was the reason for their discomfort in posting unedited photos on social media.

3.2.10 Effect of Social Media on Perception of Body Dissatisfaction

The participants in the survey were asked to state whether social media affected their idea of imperfection about themselves. The survey brings forth the fact that 3.66 per cent of the participants think that social media has an effect on their idea of imperfection, 34.15 per cent of them are not sure of the same and 62.20 per cent of them think that social media has not impacted their idea of imperfection (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Source: Sample Survey, January 2024.

3.2.11 Time in Hours Spent in a Day Thinking About Ones Looks

The respondents were asked to state about the number of hours they spend in a day on thinking about how they look. The survey results show that majority (96.34 per cent) of the respondents said that they spend less than one hour in a day thinking about their own appearance. About 2.44 per and 1.22 cent of the respondents mentioned that they spend one to 3 hours and more than 3 hours in a day respectively thinking about that their own appearance.

3.2.12 Time Spent on Dislikes and Likes in Appearance

The participants were asked to mention whether they spend more time thinking about dislikes in their appearance than what they like in their appearance. The survey reveals that 6.10 per cent of the participants spend more time on thinking about what they dislike in their appearance rather what they like in their appearance, while 93.90 per cent of them said that they spend more time on thinking about what they like in their appearance rather than what they dislike in their appearance.

3.2.13 Significance of Appearance in Assessing Self-Worth

The participants were asked to mention the importance of their appearance in determining their self-worth which can be indication of one's anxiousness about their appearance. The study shows that 13.41 per cent of the participants said that their appearance has prime importance while assessing self-worth and 86.59 per cent of them do not think so.

3.2.14 Time and Monetary Investments in Improving Appearance

If one is too much concerned about their appearance then one may devote lot of time and money for making their appearance perfect. The survey participants were asked to state whether they spend lot of time, effort and money for making their appearance perfect or not. The study reveals that 2.44 per cent of the participants have confirmed that they spend lot of money, time and effort for making their appearance perfect while 97.56 per cent are not involved in that.

3.2.15 Contentment with Appearance Controlling Happiness or Sadness

The participants were asked whether their contentment with appearance dictates their state of happiness or not. The survey results reveal that for 21.95 per cent of the participants the answer was "yes" i.e. their satisfaction with appearance control their mood and determines their happiness or sadness and for 78.05 per cent of them it was "no" rejecting the existence of such a situation.

3.2.16 Appearance Related Reassurance

The participants were asked to state whether they sought reassurance from others about how they look or not. About 82.93 per cent of the participant does not seek reassurance from others about their appearance which means that they are confident about their looks and 17.07 per cent of them do look for assurance from others.

3.2.17 Life Events Occurring Due to Appearance

The participants were asked to inform whether they feel that their appearance was or can be responsible for occurrence of certain events in life in the past as well as in the future. About 9.76 per cent of the participants feel that certain events in life had occurred and will occur because of their appearance while 90.24 per cent of them do not feel the same.

3.2.18 Problems in Self-Acceptance Due to Appearance

The participants were asked to state whether their appearance create problems in accepting oneself and in enjoying their life. About 85.37 per cent of the participants do not have such problems while 14.63 per cent of them do think that their appearance creates problems in accepting themselves and in enjoying their lives.

3.3 Appearance Related Securities and Insecurities

Certain questions to address the securities and insecurities related to one's appearance were administered to the survey participants. The responses have been categorized as "Not at all", "a little", "often", "a lot" and "all the time". The results about the same are shown in Figure 2 and the discussions about the same have been done in the following paragraphs.

3.3.1 Comparison of Appearance with Others

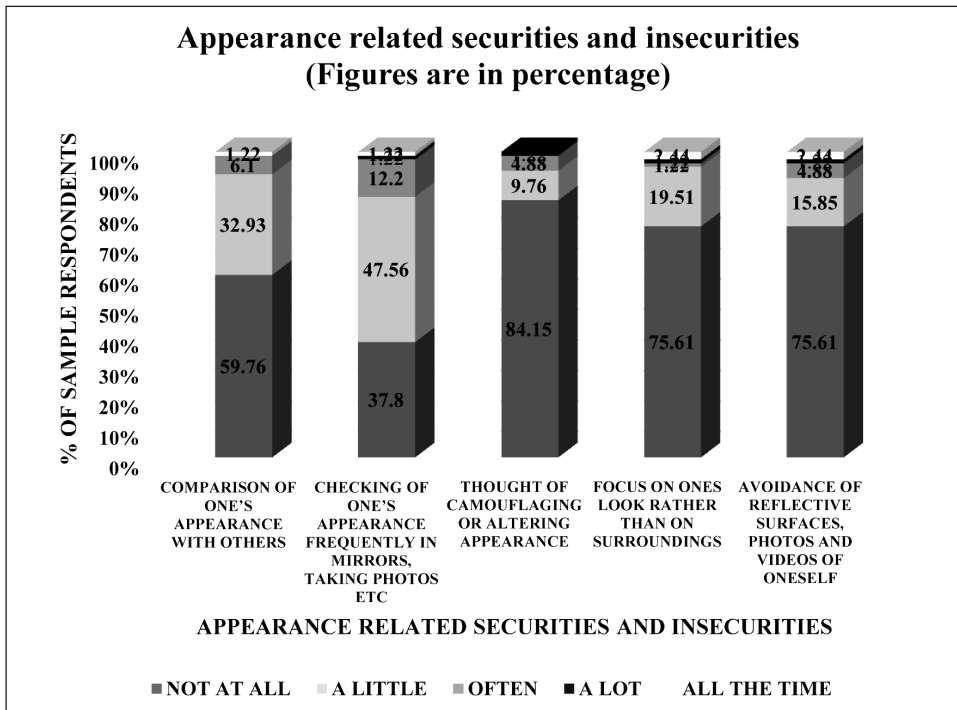
The participants were asked to mention whether they involve in comparison of one's appearance with others or not. The survey results in Figure 2 show that 59.76 per cent of the participants do not compare their own appearance with others while 1.22 per cent of them are always involved in comparison of their own appearance with others.

3.3.2 Frequency of Checking Appearance

The participants were asked to state whether they are frequently involved in checking themselves in mirrors, clicking photos of oneself or not. The results obtained through the survey show that 37.80 per cent of the participants are never involved in observing themselves in mirrors and clicked photos while 1.22 per cent of them are always involved in frequent observation of themselves in mirrors and clicked photos (Figure 2).

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Figure 2



Source: Sample Survey, January 2024.

3.3.3 Need to Camouflage Appearance

The participants were asked to say whether they think of changing or hiding their appearance or not. The survey results shown in Figure 2 reveal that 84.15 per cent of the participants do not think of altering or hiding the way they look while 15.85 per cent of them think of changing or concealing their real appearance.

3.3.4 Preoccupation with Appearance

The participants were asked to state whether they are focused on their appearance rather than on what is happening around or not. The survey results shown in Figure 2 reveal that 75.61 per cent of the participants do not pay attention on their appearance while 24.39 per cent of them are involved in paying attention on their appearance and do not bother about their surroundings.

3.3.5 Uneasiness with Appearance

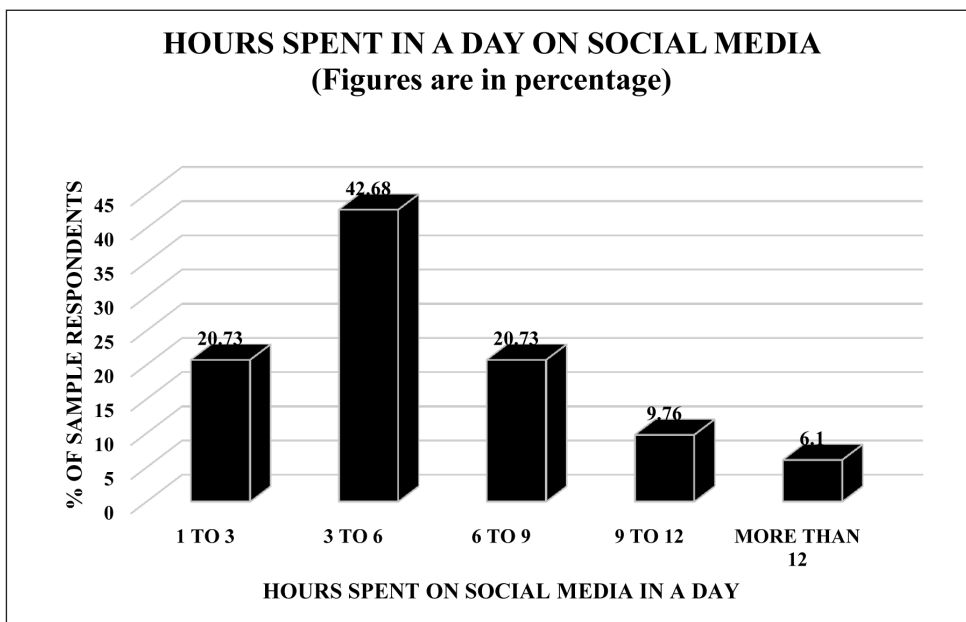
The participants were asked to say whether they avoid mirrors, previously clicked photos and videos

of oneself or not. The survey results in Figure 2 show that 75.61 per cent of the participant do not avoid mirrors, already clicked photos and videos of themselves but 24.39 per cent of them do avoid such things.

3.3.6 Time Spent Daily on Social Media

The participants were asked to state the time they spend on social media (Facebook, Instagram etc) in a day. The survey results show that 36.59 per cent of the participants spend 6 hours and more on social media while 63.41 per cent of them spend less than 6 hours on the same in a day (Figure 3).

Figure 3



Source: Sample Survey, January 2024.

3.3.7 Age of Onset of Realising Imperfection

The participants were asked to mention the age at which they started realizing imperfections in themselves. The survey results reveal that 60.98 per cent of the participants did not recognize imperfections in their appearance, 26.83 per cent of them recognized such imperfections at adolescence, 9.76 per cent of them recognized them at the age of 20 years and above and only 2.44 per cent of them recognized such imperfections below 10 years.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study is based entirely on primary data. It brings before us that bodily dissatisfaction is less among older age groups compared to the younger age groups under study. The responses to some of the specific questions on appearance concern have been found to be an ideal one rather than the true one. Another interesting fact that has come up is the reluctance on the part of male participants in participating in the survey. Though previous studies showed that usage of social media effects satisfaction and dissatisfaction about oneself but this study could not find such effect. Acceptance of oneself in totality without being anxious or insecure is what needs to be done. But since appearance related anxiousness can mean the presence of BDD, it needs to be seriously addressed as discussion about the same may arouse realization of an individual who may not be aware of the same. The study attempted with a multidisciplinary approach aims to stress on people's perception on anxiety related to appearance which possibly can hint towards presence of a very serious psychological disorder from a geographer's point of view. Self-realization of the problem and finding a solution for its amelioration is what needs to be targeted for a healthy living.

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