



# Peer Influence and Psychological Aspects of Eating: A Review of Association Between Peer Influence, Eating Behavior, Body Image among Young Adults

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## ABSTRACT

The constant changes in adolescents' life are transnormal marked by peer influence and body related images. The main aim of the study was to examine the relationship between peer influence, eating behavior, and body image among young adults. The study followed quantitative research design including random sampling technique for the data collection from 99 participants, aged 18-25 years, selected from the undergraduate course at Amity University, Lucknow. To assess peer influence, the Peer Pressure Questionnaire developed by Singh and Saini (2010, revised 2016) was used, to assess eating behavior, Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26) by developed by Garner & Olmsted (1982), and to assess body image concern Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-34) developed by Cooper, Taylor, & Fairburn (1987) was used. While previous research has shown a strong positive correlation between peer influence, body dissatisfaction, and distorted eating behavior, the findings of this study present a different perspective. A significant correlation was observed between peer influence and eating behaviors, indicating that social interactions play a key role in shaping dietary habits. However, contrary to past studies, peer influence had only a weak association with body dissatisfaction, and no significant relationship was found between body image concerns and eating behaviors.

**KEYWORDS:** Peer influence, eating behavior, Body image, Eating Attitude, Body dissatisfaction

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as the period from puberty (10-12 years) to physiological maturity (around 19 years), is a complex and transformative phase of human development. It's a period marked by significant biological changes, rapid cognitive development, and intense social exploration. This stage is a crucial bridge between childhood and adulthood, where individuals not only undergo physical maturation but also grapple with forming their identity, values, and place in the world. It's a time of both vulnerability and immense potential, characterized by heightened sensitivity to social cues, a growing desire for autonomy, and an increasing reliance on peer relationships. Classic developmental theorists like Hall, Erikson, Piaget, and Freud have provided foundational insights into the challenges and opportunities inherent in adolescence, emphasizing the struggles with identity formation, the development of abstract thought, and the resolution of earlier psychological conflicts. Among the many influences that shape adolescents, peer groups emerge as particularly salient, serving as vital contexts for social learning, identity exploration, and the acquisition of essential life skills. In the Indian context, where a rich tapestry of cultural traditions, familial expectations, and rapid modernization converge, peer influence likely takes on unique dimensions, potentially playing a pivotal role in how young people navigate the complexities of a changing society while striving to establish their individual identities.

### Peer influence

Peer influence, the process by which individuals affect each other's thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors within a social group, is especially salient during adolescence. It involves aligning oneself with peer norms and behaviors, often to achieve social acceptance. This influence operates through mechanisms like social learning, social comparison, and reinforcement. Adolescents increasingly look to peers for behavioral cues as parental oversight declines. Peer influence can manifest differently across cultures, with collectivist societies emphasizing group harmony while individualistic cultures often support personal identity alongside conformity.

### Eating behavior

Eating behavior, encompassing the psychological and physiological processes governing food choices and consumption, is also significantly shaped during adolescence. Disordered eating behaviors, influenced by factors like peer group norms, can develop during this period. Eating is not solely driven by energy needs but is also a social and pleasurable experience. Peer pressure, often related to body image and dieting, can contribute to unhealthy eating

patterns and increase the risk of eating disorders. Cultural and social trends further shape eating behaviors, with cross-cultural studies revealing variations in peer influence on eating patterns globally.

### Body image

Body image, the internal picture one has of their own body, is another critical aspect of adolescent development. It encompasses perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about physical appearance, significantly influencing self-esteem and well-being. Peer influence can contribute to body dissatisfaction through mechanisms like social modeling, teasing, and weight-focused discussions. Broader sociocultural factors, including media representations and social media, also play a role in shaping body image perceptions. Cultural context, family environment, and individual psychological traits further mediate the relationship between peer influence and body image concerns.

### RATIONALE

Body image issues and unhealthy eating habits are increasingly common among young adults, largely due to social pressures and idealized beauty standards, yet existing research disproportionately focuses on Western populations, creating a gap in understanding these dynamics in non-Western contexts where cultural variations in beauty ideals, dietary practices, and peer relationships are significant.

This study is motivated by the growing concern about the psychological and behavioral effects of social pressures on young adults, acknowledging that peer groups play a crucial role in shaping body image, influencing dietary choices, and reinforcing societal appearance norms, and it aims to bridge the identified gap by examining how peer influence impacts eating behaviors and body image within a non-Western cultural framework. Through a thorough analysis of these relationships among young adults, the study seeks to reveal the extent and consequences of peer pressure in this context, ultimately using the findings to inform the development of targeted interventions designed to foster positive body image, promote healthy eating behaviors, and encourage self-acceptance among young adults, thereby improving their psychological well-being.

### METHODS:

#### OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. Examine the association between peer influence and eating behavior in young adults.
2. Investigate the connection between peer influence and body image perception in young adults.
3. Assess the link between body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating patterns.
4. Additionally, it aims to evaluate how peer pressure shapes attitudes towards eating and body image.

#### Sample

The study involved 99 students enrolled in undergraduate programs at Amity University, Lucknow

#### Measures

**Peer Pressure Questionnaire (PPQ)** developed by Singh & Saini (2010, revised 2016). This scale quantifies the level of peer influence experienced by individuals across various life domains. It comprises a series of statements that participants rate on a 5-point Likert scale. Responses range from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). A higher overall score on the PPQ indicates a greater susceptibility to peer influence.

**Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26)** developed by Garner & Olmsted (1982). This self-report questionnaire is designed to assess disordered eating behaviors and identify individuals at risk. It includes 26 items that participants rate. Each item is scored as follows: "Always" (3), "Usually" (2), "Often" (1), and "Sometimes," "Rarely," or "Never" (0). The scores for all 26 items are summed up to obtain a total score. A total score above 20 is indicative of potential concerns regarding disordered eating patterns, suggesting a need for further evaluation.

**Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-34)** developed by Cooper, Taylor, & Fairburn (1987). This tool evaluates the degree of body dissatisfaction and concerns related to body shape and weight. It utilizes a 6-point Likert scale for responses, ranging from 1 (Never) to 6 (Always). Higher scores on the BSQ-34 indicate greater body dissatisfaction and concern about body shape. The final score obtained from the BSQ-34 is categorized to classify the level of body dissatisfaction: no dissatisfaction (<80), mild dissatisfaction (80-110), moderate dissatisfaction (111-140), and severe dissatisfaction (>140).

### RESULTS

**Table 1:** shows the Gender difference between the scores of Peer influence of under Graduates.

Category	N	Mean	SD	SIG.
Male	14	62.43	19.77	0.198
Female	85	64.61	26.56	

P<0.05 level

Peer influence did not significantly differ between males (M=62.43, SD=19.77) and females (M=64.61, SD=26.56), p=0.198. Gender is not a significant predictor of peer influence in this sample

**Table 2:** shows the Gender difference between the scores of Eating behavior of under Graduates.

Category	N	Mean	SD	SIG.
Male	14	112.79	19.15	0.567
Female	85	118.79	21.34	

P<0.05 level

Eating behavior did not significantly differ between males (M=112.79, SD=19.15) and females (M=118.79, SD=21.34), p=0.567. Gender is not a significant predictor of eating behavior in this sample

**Table 3:** shows the Gender difference between the scores of Body image of under Graduates.

Category	N	Mean	SD	SIGN.
Male	14	79.07	35.90	0.803
Female	85	80.53	36.86	

P<0.05 level

Body image concern did not significantly differ between males (M=79.07, SD=35.90) and females (M=80.53, SD=36.86), p=0.803. Gender is not a significant predictor of body image concern in this sample

**Table 4:** shows the Age difference between the scores of Peer influence of under Graduates.

Category	N	Mean	SD	SIG.
18-21	80	65.36	26.04	0.300
22-25	19	59.84	23.97	

P< 0.05 level

Peer influence did not significantly differ between 18–21-year-olds (M=65.36, SD=26.04) and 22–25-year-olds (M=59.84, SD=23.97), p=0.300. Age is not a significant predictor of peer influence in this sample.

**Table 5:** shows the Age difference between the scores of Eating behavior of under Graduates.

Category	N	Mean	SD	SIG.
18-21	80	118.25	21.91	0.259
22-25	19	116.63	17.48	

P<0.05 level

Eating behavior did not significantly differ between 18–21-year-olds (M=118.25, SD=21.91) and 22–25-year-olds (M=116.63, SD=17.48), p=0.259. Age is not a significant predictor of eating behavior in this sample.

**Table 6:** shows the Age difference between the scores of Body image of under Graduates.

Category	N	Mean	SD	SIG.
18-21	80	80.00	36.57	0.732
22-25	19	81.68	37.39	

P<0.05 level

Body image did not significantly differ between 18–21-year-olds (M=80.00, SD=36.57) and 22–25-year-olds (M=81.68, SD=37.39), p=0.732. Age is not a significant predictor of body image in this sample."

**Table 7:** shows the correlation between the values of peer influence and eating behavior of the Undergraduate.

**Correlation Table:**

**Table 7**

	Peer pressure	Eating Behavior
Peer pressure	1	0.990
Eating Behavior	0.990	1

N= 99

P&lt; 0.05 level

Peer pressure and Eating behavior exhibited a strong positive correlation ( $r=0.990$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Increased peer pressure is significantly associated with changes in eating behavior within this sample.

**Table 8:** shows the correlation between the values of peer influence and body image of the Undergraduate.

**Correlation Table:****Table 8**

	Peer pressure	Body Image
Peer pressure	1	0.007
Body Image	0.007	1

N=99

P&lt; 0.05 level

Peer pressure and body image showed a negligible positive correlation ( $r=0.007$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). No significant association exists between peer pressure and body image in this sample.

**Table 9:** shows the correlation between the values of eating behavior and body image concern of the Undergraduate.

**Correlation Table:****Table 9**

Variable	Body Image	Eating Behavior
Body Image	1	0.007
Eating Behavior	0.007	1

N=99

P&lt; 0.05 level

Body image and eating behavior showed a negligible positive correlation ( $r=0.007$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). No significant association exists between body image and eating behavior in this sample.

## INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to investigate the complex interplay between peer influence, eating behavior, and body image among young adults, focusing on a non-Western context. The results revealed a strong positive correlation between peer influence and eating behavior, suggesting that social interactions significantly shape dietary habits. This aligns with the Social Learning Theory, indicating that individuals may adopt peer group's dietary habits through observation and modeling. Research supports this, highlighting social modeling's role in dietary choices and emphasizing that eating behaviors are deeply embedded within social interactions, influenced by social acceptance and peer approval. Young adults, particularly in university settings, may develop eating behaviors reflecting social norms and peer expectations.

However, the study also found a weak correlation between peer influence and body image concerns, suggesting that peer pressure does not significantly associate with body dissatisfaction among young adults. This contrasts with other studies, demonstrating that peer influence's impact on body image varies across populations and contexts. Sociocultural factors like media exposure, beauty standards, and self-perception may play a more significant role in shaping body image than direct peer influence. Theories like the Social Comparison Theory and the Social Identity Theory support this, suggesting that body image is influenced by comparisons with societal ideals and sociocultural groups, potentially overshadowing direct peer influence.

Furthermore, this study showed a non-significant correlation between body image concerns and eating behavior, suggesting that dissatisfaction with body image is not directly associated with unhealthy eating habits. This indicates that while body dissatisfaction is a contributing factor, other elements like social influences, self-esteem, and psychological resilience also significantly shape eating behaviors. The study also examined differences in peer influence, eating behavior, and body image concerns across age and gender groups, finding no significant differences. This suggests these factors are relatively consistent across demographics, potentially due to shared social environments and evolving societal norms. Overall, the findings highlight the complex interplay of factors shaping eating behaviors and body image perceptions, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding that acknowledges both social and individual elements.

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## CONCLUSION

This study explored the interplay between peer influence, eating behavior, and body image among young adults, with a focus on addressing gaps in non-Western research. The results highlighted a significant correlation between peer influence and eating behaviors, suggesting that social interactions play a crucial role in shaping dietary habits. This aligns with Social Learning Theory, indicating that individuals may adopt the dietary habits of their peer groups through observation and modeling. However, contrary to some previous research, peer influence showed only a weak correlation with body image concerns, suggesting that factors like societal beauty standards and self-perception may be more influential in this regard. Furthermore, no significant correlation was found between body image concerns and eating behavior, implying that other psychological and social variables may mediate this relationship.

In conclusion, the study provides evidence that peer influence significantly shapes eating behaviors among young adults, while body image concerns are influenced by a broader array of sociocultural factors. These findings emphasize the need for multifaceted interventions that address both social and cultural dimensions to promote healthy eating habits and positive body image. It underscores the importance of fostering critical thinking skills, challenging unrealistic beauty standards, and cultivating supportive peer environments. By understanding the complex interplay between these factors, we can develop more effective strategies to foster psychological well-being, self-acceptance, and healthier lifestyles among young populations.

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