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IMPLICATIONS OF NOTIONS OF BEAUTY AND BODY IMAGE ON INDIAN CORPORATE EXECUTIVES AND ENGINEERS

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ABSTRACT

Both men and women are keenly aware of their body image and physical appearance. Within the labour market, individuals bring forth not only their skills and qualifications but also their physical attributes. Existing literature on labour market discrimination reveals that deviations from ideal beauty standards and body image norms have led to both covert and overt advantages or disadvantages for individuals of both genders. The objective of this research paper is to examine the concept of beauty, delve into the complexities surrounding body image, and analyse how these factors impact the employability and career progression of entry-level corporate executives and engineers in the low-wage Indian labour market. To address this specific context and obtain valuable insights, we conducted in-depth interviews with 28 working professionals, forming a unique sample for this study. Through extensive thematic analysis, our findings shed light on the prevalence of appearance-based discrimination in the Indian labour market and present the strategies employed by individuals to tackle this challenge.

KEYWORDS

beauty, body image, lookism, beautiful is good, beauty is beastly, discrimination, beauty premium, Indian labour market

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INTRODUCTION

Obsession with beauty is rampant and widespread across multiple cultures. In the words of the opening ceremony director of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, it was considered in "national interest" to bring in a super cute, pretty nine-year-old girl for lip-syncing to the original voice of another child who had a better voice but was perceived to be less attractive because she had crooked baby teeth and a chubby face (Madan, 2016). This act of blatant discrimination received condemnation from all over the world, but it is just one of the countless examples that portray Asia's obsession with the notion of beauty. Belief in 'lookism' is the construction of an ideal body image or appearance, which suggests that those who do not reach the norm are discriminated against. Additionally, in the United States, the media has projected such unrealistic standards of beauty that it has contributed to multiple incidents of eating disorders and low perceptions of body image as well as self-esteem among teenage girls (De Casanova, 2004; Lovejoy, 2001).

Beauty and the face are extremely powerful symbols of the self. Ugliness and physical deformities, particularly facial deformities, are discriminated against. Stories of "Snow White", "Cinderella", "Sleeping Beauty", and "Ugly Duckling" emphasize the importance of being beautiful for gaining acceptance in society.

Obviously, beauty and appearance have played an important role in employment, conveying a set of messages about a firm. Additionally, studies have established the prevalence of wage inequality in the labour market based on various tangible/ intangible characteristics of individuals (Biddle and Hamermesh, 1998; Frieze, Olson, and Russell, 1991). The job of a person is dependent not only on his / her intellectual capacity but also on many other factors that come into play to determine employability (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1993; Mobius and Rosenblat, 2006). One of them is body image¹ which serves as a major aspect of self-worth and mental health across one's lifespan. Coupled with body image, beauty brings palpable rewards in the labour market, with more attractive people having a higher probability of getting hired (Gilmore, Beehr, and Love, 1986).

Nevertheless, there has been a lack of sufficient research conducted on the concepts of beauty and body image within the Indian context. Moreover, the findings derived from studies focusing on high-income Western nations cannot be directly extrapolated to a low-middle-income country such as India (Lewis-Smith et al., 2023). This is due to the unique cultural context that gives rise to distinctive concerns regarding beauty and body image. Additionally,

¹ Body Image can be defined as 'a person's perceptions, thoughts and feelings about his or her body' (Grogan, 1999, p. 1).

even when catering to the Indian specifics, the extant literature has largely ignored the repercussions of beauty ideals and body image on the career progression of individuals currently employed in the Indian labour market.

This study delves into the concept of "Being Beautiful" and its significance within the Indian labour market by addressing the following research questions: 1) What do Indian corporate executives and engineers feel about beauty and body image? 2) Do these notions have a role to play in the Indian workplace in the form of benefits or discrimination? 3) What kind of strategies have been useful for the workforce to manoeuvre through these challenges? Consequently, the current work makes notable contributions to the limited existing literature on beauty and body image in the following key aspects: Firstly, it explores these notions within a cultural context that has received insufficient research attention. Secondly, it takes a qualitative approach to investigate the presence of not only discrimination but also the potential advantages associated with physical attractiveness in the Indian labour market. Finally, this research broadens the comprehension of beauty standards and body image, shifting the focus from personality development during adolescence to encompassing the impact on employability and career advancement for entry-level professionals within India's dynamic and unpredictable labour market.

The next section of the paper deep dives into a literature review to give a background for the study and present the research gaps. Subsequently, the methodology is explained along with the sample and the profile of the participants. After that, the findings are discussed before giving out research implications in the form of a conclusion. Lastly, the limitations of the work and agenda for future research are highlighted.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY

Body Image

The concept of body image encompasses various dimensions, including behavioural, attitudinal, and perceptual aspects (Brown, Cash, and Mikulka, 1990). It is a complex construct that has been interchangeably referred to as "body concept," "body percept," "body ego," or "body boundary" (Van der Velde, 1985), adding credence to why it becomes difficult to describe this form and identify the body image.

Initially rooted in neuroscience, the notion of body image emerged with the postural model, highlighting the unconscious ease of movement through space (Head and Holmes, 1911). Over time, it was explored from organic and psychogenic perspectives, conceptualized as the mental representation one holds of their own body (Schilder, 1935). A tri-dimensional view of body image was proposed, encompassing physiological, sociological, and libidinous

structures. The physiological dimension focuses on the material body, particularly the experience of physical pain. The sociological dimension considers the cultural influence on socially accepted norms and their impact on the individual's perceived reality of their body. The libidinous structure, derived from psychoanalytic theories, incorporates conscious and unconscious levels of experience. Further research emphasized the significance of body image through the concept of ego feeling, which refers to the perception of the self by the ego (Federn, 1952). It is not an image, rather it indicates the existence of one. The psychoanalytic perspective acknowledges the organic foundation underlying psychological functioning.

In contemporary discussions, body image has been described as loose mental representations of the body (Slade, 1994), encompassing multifaceted social encounters with embodiment. This includes body self-perception and related behaviours, emotions, opinions, feelings, and actions. Body image also encompasses one's attitudinal disposition toward their physical self, incorporating evaluative, perceptual, and behavioural components (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002). The perception of body image has been formed in two contexts, i.e., either the individual has a positive or negative body image. Positive body image encompasses multiple facets, including body appreciation, body acceptance and love, adaptive appearance investment, a broad conceptualization of beauty, inner positivity, and more. It is a holistic and stable construct that can be adjusted, providing protection and being intertwined with unconditional body acceptance from others. Moreover, individuals' diverse social identities contribute to shaping their own positive body image (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2015). On the other hand, negative body image is about how individuals perceive the distorted view of their body as opposed to what they really are. In the process, they feel nervous, self-conscious, and embarrassed by their own bodies (Rosen, 1995), leading to low body esteem or body dissatisfaction (Gattario and Frisén, 2019). Body dissatisfaction is a person's negative thoughts about his or her own body. Appearance satisfaction has a strong correlation in the age group of 40s to 80s and shows parallel patterns of change in adolescence. Women are more concerned with weight issues in comparison to men who show a strong inclination towards preoccupation with their shape issues (Andersen and DiDomenico, 1992). Body image is not only socially constructed but also has multiple sources of origin in which one can explain when and how the female/male body evolves naturally over time. Currently, body image for women is in a phase where the female ideal body is slimmer than before and is socially controlled where women have to learn to be judged, express themselves in a certain manner, and monitor their bodies from the vantage point of their surroundings during their

lives. Social and cultural aspects enunciated through the media, influence individuals to have an "ideal" type of feminine body that is difficult to achieve.

The extant literature has highlighted the notion of body image and related disturbances much more among women as compared to men (Quittkat et al., 2019). Previous studies have shown that the levels of body dissatisfaction over adolescence decrease among boys and increase among girls (Rosenblum and Lewis, 1999). But, owing to media portrayal since the mid-1980s, the cultural viewpoint and societal attitude towards the male body image have undergone a shift from the aesthetical sense to the functional aspect (Pope et al., 1999). Nowadays, in the era of Instagram, the trending ideal masculine body image is accepted as a V-shaped figure with an emphasis on large shoulders, biceps, and chest (Chatzopoulou, Filieri, and Dogruyol, 2020). Thus, apart from women, men have also begun to be impacted by body image preoccupations. Muscle dysmorphia is a condition wherein men think they are underweight, underdeveloped, and thin (Pope et al., 1999). It can have detrimental effects on self-esteem and mood. This can also lead to anxiety disorders, thereby resulting in the use of anabolic steroids, unhealthy body change strategies to gain muscle or burn fat, and excessive gymming (Olivardia, Pope, and Hudson, 2000; Pope et al., 2005).

However, the existing concepts of body image have primarily been developed within the Western context, and the authors could not identify any research that specifically considers the cross-cultural differences prevalent in a country like India, including aspects of skin colour (Peltzer, Pengpid, and James, 2016), body hair (Phadke, 2017), the usage of harmful skin-lightening products (Shroff, Diedrichs, and Craddock, 2018), the after-effects of colonial rule in the form of the existence of social disparities based on skin tone as a measure of cultural value in the determination of caste, class, occupational status, marital prospects and so on (Lewis-Smith et al., 2023). Even when focusing on India, most of the research on body image has primarily concentrated on adolescents to decipher the influence of body image concerns on personality development (Deshmukh and Kulkarni, 2017; Ganesan, Ravishankar, and Ramalingam, 2018; Johnson et al., 2015; Singh, Parsekar, and Bhumika, 2016). This study fills these research gaps by expanding the investigation of body image within the Indian context, transitioning from a focus on personality development to exploring its implications for career progression.

Beauty Premium in the Labour Market

In the labour market, organisations look to tap into beauty premium for enhanced productivity in a classic case of statistical discrimination as compared to the more popular view of taste-based discrimination. Pieces of evidence from the extant literature support the

fact that physical attractiveness can manifest itself in the form of enhanced social capital, human capital, intelligence, and personality (Kanazawa and Still, 2017; Nault, Pitesa, and Thau, 2020). Also, it has been established that feeling physically attractive confers a feeling of self-confidence and power (Mobius and Rosenblat, 2006). Consequently, physically attractive candidates are rated higher on employment-related dimensions such as competence, decision-making, motivation, performance potential, personality for the job, and so on (Dipboye, Arvey, and Terpstra, 1977; Gilmore, Beehr, and Love, 1986). Thus, hiring attractive employees seems to bode well for organisations too. This is true for both genders, unless the job is considered inappropriate for that particular sex (Cash, Gillen, and Burns, 1977). As a result, both men and women have to devote time and energy in order to live up to their ideal image of an attractive appearance (Mahajan, 2007).

This relentless pursuit of the beauty premium in the labour market has been highlighted by research on the “beautiful is good” stereotype over the last decades (Dion, Berscheid, and Walster, 1972; Hosoda, Stone-Romero, and Coars, 2003), whereby it is believed that physically beautiful people have more good attributes, socially desirable personalities, and fulfilling life outcomes than less beautiful people. On the other end of the spectrum, women have to deal with the “beauty is beastly” effect where attractive women, while applying for male-type or managerial jobs, are considered to be less hireable as compared to men of any level of attractiveness because of perceived enhanced femininity and lack of agency (Heilman and Stopeck, 1985; Paustian-Underdahl and Walker, 2016).

Although the impact of the beauty premium on employability is evident, the authors are unaware of any previous research examining the effects of both the “beautiful is good” and “beauty is beastly” stereotypes on career advancement. The present work aims to address this gap by investigating the positive and negative consequences of the beauty premium on career progression within a sample of entry-level Indian corporate executives and engineers.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study is exploratory in nature, making it possible to express many aspects of research and to use the voices of participants that are not otherwise discussed. This research uses a qualitative research paradigm for understanding the relationship between body image, beauty premium, and labour market outcomes in India. Thematic analysis was chosen as the method to analyse the collected data due to its flexibility and theoretical freedom, enabling the generation of rich, comprehensive, and detailed descriptions.

Participants

A total of 28 participants, comprising entry-level corporate executives and engineers aged between 24 and 31, with a minimum industry experience of 2 years, were carefully chosen from two urban agglomerations: Mumbai and Hyderabad. Among the participants, 9 were male and 19 were female. They exhibited diverse backgrounds and hailed from various cities across India, although they had resided in Mumbai and Hyderabad for a minimum of 1 year. The participants belonged to the middle-class and upper-class economic strata, which served as a proxy for their personal beliefs. The details of the participants have been presented in Table 1.

[Table 1]

Data Collection

Data were collected using in-depth interviews. The three research questions were asked in the form of open-ended questions: 1) How would you define the concepts of 'beauty' and 'body image'? 2) Have you personally experienced the influence of beauty or body image in your workplace? 3) If so, what strategies have you employed to amplify the positive effects and minimize the negative effects?

The interviews lasted for about 30 minutes on average. Prior to conducting the interview, informed consent was obtained by making the study's intent and goals transparent to the participants. The researchers are aware that findings can be jeopardized by deliberate analysis and the tendency against social desirability. Hence to mitigate these assumptions, the interviews were centered on prior conduct. Data collection was performed till the point of theoretical saturation.

Data Analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was performed using 6 steps (Braun and Clarke, 2006): understanding the data set, creating initial codes, searching for themes, assessing the themes, naming the themes, and producing the final analysis. On the basis of open coding and the subsequent introduction of categories, additional questions were asked on a need basis to validate the findings.

FINDINGS

We aim to investigate the participants' perspectives on beauty, their interpretation of body image, and the potential influence of adhering to societal standards of beauty on their job prospects and employability. Let us delve into the diverse themes explored within these areas of inquiry.

1. Notions About Beauty

In today's work environment, where appearance-related knowledge is readily applied, employees have unconsciously begun seeking physical attractiveness as a means to advance their careers. The prevalence of weight-loss centers and cosmetic surgery clinics is indicative of the significance placed on appearance in contemporary society, as reported by a substantial number of participants. In this section, we delve into the participants' perspectives on the notion of beauty. This exploration encompasses their understanding of the components that constitute beauty, the qualities associated with an attractive person, and the physical characteristics they attribute to beauty. Beauty is seen as encompassing various aspects, including personal presentation, communication style, and physically appealing attributes such as facial features, smile, eyes, skin tone, slender physique, tall height, and certain physical traits associated with the Aryan lineage. Beauty, for the participants, is an element they can personally relate to. For instance:

Participant #20 believes *“Beauty is defined by the outfits that you wear. I mean right outfit for the right occasion is what matters.”*

Participant #7 says *“ Oh so, beauty! for me is something like having a beautiful smile, for me beautiful is mainly for girls, and handsome is for men. About men I feel they should be clean-shaven; I personally don't like stubbles so boys who are clean-shaven would be more approachable to talk for me.”*

Participant #8 opines, *“I generally find people physically attractive if they carry themselves well. I usually feel that people with good communication skills are more physically attractive. Again, communication skills do not mean that the person should be good at speaking English, but whenever you communicate, the tone should be kind or convincing.”*

Participant #9 adds, *“I like people with a dusky complexion, big eyes, and sharp features; sharp means those widely talked about Aryan features. I feel fair people look plastic, especially those models and actresses. Dusky skin is great, maybe somewhere I love that skin because I am dusky, so it is good to be comfortable in your skin!”*

Beauty can also serve as a quality or attribute that individuals perceive they lack and desire to possess, which could explain why someone who possesses that particular feature/characteristic may be appealing to the opposite sex. For example:

Participant #3 says *“I find people with fair skin really beautiful because having a darker complexion I have always envied them. I am sorry for being a little filmy here but definitely, when fair girls with spotless skin go out, they just shine in the bright*

sun. I feel that skin colour does matter. I have always seen that girls who have a white tone are more likely to have a male fan following.”

Participant #15 says, “I have always felt, that we as human beings always compare and find others pretty, because somewhere we envy what the other person has and we don’t. When a particular thing that we don’t find in us is present in some other person then we find it beautiful. Even if I am pretty and I am short, I envy tall girls, so I guess this is all our inner self which has low self-esteem.”

The participants' understanding of beauty encompassed not only their own perception of the aspects, features, and characteristics that they deem beautiful about themselves but also their perspective on what they find attractive in the opposite sex. For instance:

Participant #7 says “If you talk about being physically attractive then I feel that girls who are tall or should I say with a thin build and tall height are attractive to me. I am not being judgmental but your face gives us a first impression. So, people or girls with these features definitely attract me.”

The notion of beauty has also been critically evaluated in terms of how it is being packaged and sold and there is an entire business industry earning millions from it. Here is an illustration:

Participant #9 says, “I feel the notion about the entire concept of being physically attractive is media driven. The understanding of being beautiful or not is culturally defined. I mean that the idea of being beautiful varies from culture to culture and then after picking those cultural values we perceive ourselves and also judge others on that basis.”

The notion of beauty not only comprises what the participants perceived and accepted by others to be beautiful but also their conception of body image which is discussed in the next theme.

2. Idea of Body Image

The majority of participants expressed a consensus that body image is a subjective concept, and its meaning, characteristics, and significance vary from person to person, resulting in unique individual distinctions. Concerns about body image tended to arise predominantly after individuals' college years. Notably, participants who had a strong support system, including family and friends, exhibited greater confidence and were better equipped to handle comments in a positive manner. These findings are similar to the current literature on body image and family support (Hensley-Choate, 2005; Snapp, Hensley-Choate, and Ryu, 2012). It was observed that many participants who reported being satisfied with themselves actively

engaged in practices such as yoga, gym workouts, or other fitness mechanisms. The study revealed that men displayed similar levels of body consciousness as their female counterparts, and those dissatisfied with their bodies often resorted to cosmetic surgery or minor laser treatments in pursuit of perceived perfection. For example:

Participant #28 says, *“Growing up had been really difficult for me. I was always criticized for my lips because they were not apparently proportional to my face. So, I decided to get it changed for my personal satisfaction. I am happy and content with myself.”*

The idea of body image swayed from one’s perception to the perception of others about oneself.

As Participant #7 aptly puts it, *“Body image for me pertains to what one’s view is of one’s own particular body as well as the people or the peer group’s view of one’s body. So, it’s not only what people think about yourself but also what you think about yourself.”*

The conceptualization of body image is an ideal type to categorize or assess people. For instance:

Participant #5 says, *“Body Image is how I perceive myself and my appearance vis-a-vis other people of my age group and it has become one of the parameters of how you assess people and categorize or label them.”*

The perception of body image, both in terms of self-acceptance and conformity to societal standards, significantly impacts an individual's confidence level and extends its influence on various other aspects of life (Mobius and Rosenblat, 2006). To illustrate this point:

Participant #22 says, *“I am not happy with my body. I am short and my confidence level is really low because of that. Moreover, due to this, I am unable to communicate my thoughts properly even though I can write really well. There was a time when I used to be so upset and hyper-anxious that I started taking medical treatment and maybe somewhere by god’s grace and with the support of my mother I am much better now.”*

Participant #2 adds, *“After I started working, I could see that beautiful people get some extra benefits maybe extra attention, and as a result, they have much more confidence than I have.”*

At times, peers, colleagues, and even loved ones can knowingly or unknowingly prompt individuals to scrutinize their body shape, suggesting that it needs correction if it does not align with their idealized image. The fitness industry and advertisements centred around

achieving an ideal weight based on Body Mass Index (BMI) further perpetuate these notions, creating a heightened awareness of weight among consumers. This highlights the impact of such products on individuals' weight consciousness. For example:

Participant #20 says, *“I'm overweight so I definitely don't like it. I feel that it's fine if you are overweight but as long as you are fit, or if you can camouflage it, it's fine. If my flab is just hanging out, I don't like that, so I consciously wear clothes that make me look nice. Of course, it's still obvious that I am overweight, but they make me feel look nice and camouflage my flab. My friends also continuously keep taunting me regarding my weight which I really don't like and feel upset about it. But yeah, these days I have become a little conscious and with time taking some steps to avoid eating junk or outside food.”*

The concept of body image is also heavily influenced by the media, which promotes a specific body type as appealing and attractive, often exemplified by movie actors or sports personalities. This portrayal leads consumers to believe that achieving this idealized body is socially acceptable and desirable (Levine, Smolak, and Hayden, 1994; Paxton et al., 1991):

Participant #27 says, *“I am an ardent follower of Virat Kohli. I want to be like him and get myself tattooed also the way he has done. I never used to believe in men's face wash and all but since he is the brand ambassador of the men's facewash, I started using it. Somewhere, now my tan has reduced and my skin has become smoother. I am more satisfied now with my skin. I was disturbed with the pimples which I used to get earlier.”*

As is the case of participant #14 who says, *“I would have been happier if I would have looked like George Clooney, Bradley Cooper or Brad Pitt [Hollywood actors] but that has more to do with my specifications. I'm 80% happy with my body, 20% not happy.”*

According to existing literature, when individuals who do not align with the prescribed ideal body image are exposed to such images, it creates a thriving industry that profits by offering solutions to rectify perceived flaws and persuading individuals that they can achieve a perfect version of themselves (Mahajan, 2007). For instance:

Participant #17 narrates, *“I had a lot of facial hair, so I got a laser surgery done for that because that made me too conscious. Now I am the happiest. But there is a very funny incident associated with this. The parlour where I got this done is named “Ideal Image”; this made me wonder that yes, the ideal notions of body image are defined and I was really surprised that how can being fair or having spotless skin be the*

flagbearer of an ideal body image when half of India's population is not fair, but maybe that is how the world works and maybe that is why I got a laser operation done."

However, in some cases, the idea of body image changed with one's understanding of the representation of body image and self-discovery. Participant #15 highlights the transformative impact of feminist discourse on her perception of body image, leading to a shift in her understanding and self-acceptance:

"There was a time when I was not very happy with my body because I felt I was overweight and didn't look good and that I am dark. In classes 11 and 12, the guy I used to like didn't pay much attention to me and I blamed my body and my looks for it. But then during college, the more I started reading feminist literature; the more confident I became and started loving my body. Definitely, now that I am more confident, I take measures to reduce my weight and relieve stress. I believe that you should be comfortable in your own skin and that is what matters."

Thus, we have observed the influence of peers, colleagues, media, and societal norms in shaping the construction of body image, leading individuals to strive for conformity and rectify perceived flaws. However, there are those who question and reject this prescribed narrative, embarking on a journey of self-discovery to define their own concept of body image. This theme suggests that the perceived ideal body type and beauty standards impact an individual's performance in the workplace, including confidence levels, communication skills, presentation, and even career progression. In the following theme, we will delve deeper into these aspects.

3. The Effects of Beauty Premium and Body Image on Job Prospects and Employability

As mentioned earlier, existing literature on job lookism indicates that individuals can experience advantages or discrimination based on their physical appearance. In this theme, we aim to investigate the presence of lookism in the Indian labour market and examine the participants' experiences in their workplace. It is noteworthy that despite Participant #17's previous comment regarding the majority of the Indian population not having a fair complexion, there appears to be a lingering colonial influence favouring a lighter skin tone. Participants observed that the preference for fair skin among their colleagues or superiors does not correlate with one's competence to perform assigned tasks. In fact, participants have encountered discrimination based on their non-conformity to the ideal beauty standards. For example:

Participant #4 says, *“Definitely discrimination does happen in the job market also. I remember in my previous job, my manager used to suggest me to use certain products which will help to tone my skin, since I have a darker complexion. I used to be really surprised because I had never been told like this directly, especially since I always felt I have been hired for my knowledge or the skills that I have. As an engineer, I never felt this was important. But then I realized that it was a different game altogether when I started working. My manager and one of my colleagues used to sit and discuss about various beauty products and maybe my colleague was more beautiful than me so she used to get better assignments than I got.”*

Discrimination based on skin tone was not limited to participants with darker complexions; even those with fair skin had encountered prejudiced treatment. Some recruiters held the belief that individuals with fair complexions would struggle to adapt to certain job profiles.

Participant #12 vividly recounts such an incident:

“I guess yes I had come across this situation once during my campus placements. Since I am a little fair and on the recruitment day, I was wearing western formals and had applied some light makeup. Another thing was that my communication skills are good so was answering all their questions in fluent English. The funny thing that happened was when after the interview the recruiter literally told me that ‘Madam I don’t think that you will be able to adjust in a factory as it is difficult for a modern person to work in a factory setting.’ I was really surprised to hear this. I answered all their questions – like remembered all the labour laws, and performed excellently in the case studies that they had given, but this was something that really moved me. Just because I am fair, was wearing a western outfit, and had a confident personality, made the recruiter think that I would not be able to survive the factory environment. These are some of the things I guess are really discriminating, and yes finally in the results I was not selected for the factory location and one of my friends who is just the opposite of me got through it.”

Discrimination in recruitment or on the job extends beyond skin complexion and encompasses the traditional expectations of appearance during interviews and daily office attendance. As emphasized by Hamermesh and Biddle (1993) and Mobius and Rosenblat (2006), there is no inherent link between one's knowledge and their appearance in performing tasks. However, individuals face discrimination for failing to conform to the implicit standards established by recruiters and senior officials. For instance:

Participant #22 says,” *The thing which I found discriminating was when I was bluntly told by the recruiter to shave and come and to remove my stubble. I am like I have brains and this is what is going to give you profits and not my clean-shaven face. But this is what is expected from men. I just did not get the logic behind him asking me to do that. This really shook me up and my confidence level. I somehow finished the interview. I guess I could have performed better.*”

The topic of discrimination based on communication skills, including proficiency and accent in English language usage during conversations with colleagues and employers, was also highlighted. While English serves as the official language in India, not everyone is equally fluent in it due to various factors such as mother tongue, medium of education, and educational institutions attended. This has led to discontent and sparked debates about the importance of English-medium education for career growth, as portrayed in Bollywood movies like *Hindi Medium* and *Angrezi Medium*. Participant #6 shares a personal narrative highlighting the discrimination he faced due to his English communication skills, which had a direct impact on his career advancement. He expresses:

“I'm from Bihar and I've had a traditional way of talking. Although I have a decent knowledge of my subject, I've always been a laughing stock because my speaking English wasn't perfect. It hurt me most when we were all assigned a team assignment and I did most of the work and even completed the assignment well before time. But when we addressed the project with my mentor, I was not allowed to introduce myself to senior management because my communication skills were not good. I didn't even get the awards, and the presenter got positive reviews in the evaluation. Also, I was always stuck with the same team and the same role. This was a major eye opener for me, and I quit the organisation, and now I'm satisfied with my new career.”

In addition to these factors, the perception of an ideal body type not only influences one's self-perception but also has consequences for one's career. As observed in the previous section, participant #15 experienced body weight consciousness, as her body did not align with the accepted ideal body image. Likewise, participant #28 also faced scrutiny for being overweight, which she believed resulted in workplace discrimination and hindered her career progression.

It is intriguing to observe that individuals are often compelled, either directly or indirectly, to conform to societal ideals of beauty. This coercion can manifest as discrimination, job rejections, job stagnation, and obstacles to promotion. However, once a person aligns with the ideal body image, they appear to reap various benefits in their career, such as enhanced

growth opportunities, increased confidence levels, altered perceptions of colleagues, invitations to social events, official trips, a boost in their overall personality, and an overall sense of well-being. For instance:

Participant #28 says, *“I honestly believe that your looks and charisma matter, and that they are of tremendous help in the work. I was really nervous about my weight, and yes, I was overweight. I used to work very hard, but some of my colleagues believed that obese people were lazy, which is completely untrue. I decided to see a dietician because it was really starting to affect my career. Probably, I wasn't promoted. But I never understood that until I actually tried to reduce my weight and lost about 9 kilograms. The mindset of my co-workers really shifted – I was invited to an informal gathering, and my manager promised to take me on a number of official trips. There was a marked difference in people's attitudes. So, I realized that the way you are or your personality has a lot of impact on your career because I was actually promoted to the headquarters of our office, too.”*

Thus, it is evident that lookism prevails within the Indian labour market, influencing the treatment individuals receive based on their adherence to the ideal standards of beauty and body type. Participants reported experiencing discrimination based on their skin tone, appearance and presentation during recruitment processes, communication skills, and English-speaking abilities. Furthermore, the participants encountered the effects of both the "beautiful is good" and "beauty is beastly" stereotypes, which impacted their career progression.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper is not to address negative body image concerns or challenge existing beauty ideals in relation to the labour market. Instead, it aims to provide insights into the perceptions of ideal body image among a specific group of individuals and its impact on labour market outcomes. The paper explores how individuals perceive "beauty," their attitudes towards their own physical appearance, and how these factors influence their employability and career trajectories. The study revealed that discrimination was not limited to a specific gender, as both male and female employees reported experiencing discrimination based on body image. This aspect has often been overlooked in previous research on body image. The study observed the operation of the "carrot and stick" principle, where individuals who did not conform to the ideal standards of beauty and body image faced discrimination, while those who did conform experienced various benefits such as increased confidence, enhanced personality, acceptance by colleagues, invitations to social and professional events,

promotions, and more. The research also highlighted that both physical appearance and intellectual capacity contribute to an individual's professional success. Many participants held at least an undergraduate or postgraduate degree and were actively employed. For some participants, this study served as their first self-examination, allowing them to develop a more intimate understanding of their bodies.

Before delving into the crucial interpretation of body image in this article, it is important to establish the participants' understanding of the term. Consensus was reached among almost all participants that body image refers to how individuals perceive themselves and how they believe others perceive them. A notable observation was that the majority of participants expressed dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their bodies, commonly referred to as "problem areas." Interestingly, both male and female participants commonly expressed discontent with their abdominal region. Participants who were dissatisfied with their weight often felt upset due to societal stereotypes associating obesity with laziness, despite this perception being untrue. An intriguing finding was the influence of a strong financial background on achieving higher levels of body positivity. It was unanimously agreed upon that the definition of body image is contextual and varies among individuals. Some individuals exhibited self-consciousness regarding excess fat or flab, while others embraced and accepted themselves regardless of societal norms. Notably, a male participant stated contentment with being "skinny," deviating from conventional notions of appearance and embracing his own unique physique. Female participants displayed a greater level of specificity when identifying preferred or disliked physical characteristics of their bodies. They expressed a strong sense of happiness and satisfaction with their defining feminine features. On the other hand, male participants who expressed dissatisfaction with their physical appearance commonly disliked excess weight, particularly belly fat, a lack of head hair, and shorter stature.

Both male and female participants openly shared their experiences and factors that influenced their positive or negative feelings towards their bodies. An interesting point raised during the interviews was that society tends to mock not only overweight or "fat" individuals but also those who are underweight or "skinny." Parents were identified as influential figures in fostering positive body images among the majority of participants. Many participants noted that the onset of puberty marked a pivotal moment when they became aware of their bodies as tangible physical entities. Male participants specifically mentioned notable changes such as voice deepening and the growth of facial hair.

The participants' perception of beauty and body image, formed during their adolescent years, often persisted into adulthood until they were exposed to critical self-understanding through sources like feminist literature or personal self-discovery. Participants shed light on the presence of lookism within the Indian labour market, where individuals face discrimination or benefit based on their adherence or deviation from the ideal standards of beauty and body image established by recruiters or employers. It is worth noting that unlike laws protecting Indian citizens from discrimination based on caste, race, religion, sex, and place of birth, there are no specific laws safeguarding individuals from discrimination based on appearance or looks, as seen in countries like the United Kingdom and Australia. Implementing laws in this regard could promote equal opportunities in employment and have a ripple effect on the daily lives of individuals.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is important to acknowledge that the analysis conducted in this study is based on self-reported data provided by the participants, and hence is prone to subjectivity. The reliance on participants' willingness to openly share their experiences on a sensitive issue further adds to the potential limitations of the study. Future research endeavours could benefit from expanding the participant pool to include individuals from multiple cities across India, rather than solely focusing on Mumbai and Hyderabad. By incorporating a more diverse sample, it would be possible to compare and contrast the findings obtained in this study, offering a broader understanding of the perceptions and experiences related to body image across different cultural contexts within the country. Furthermore, incorporating participants from different cities could also shed light on the influence of urban versus rural environments on body image perceptions. Urban areas tend to have greater exposure to media, advertising, and cosmopolitan ideals of beauty, which may impact the participants' self-perception and body image standards. On the other hand, participants from rural areas may have different cultural norms and values that shape their ideas of beauty and body image. This expansion could provide valuable insights into the variations, similarities, and unique factors that influence body image ideals and their impact on individuals' lives in various regions of India.

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TABLE

Table 1 - Basic Profile of the Participants

Participant No.	Gender	Age	Occupation Area
1	Female	25	Engineering
2	Female	27	Executive
3	Female	27	Executive
4	Female	31	Engineering
5	Female	26	Engineering
6	Male	27	Engineering
7	Male	25	Engineering
8	Female	26	Engineering
9	Male	26	Engineering
10	Female	27	Engineering
11	Female	25	Engineering
12	Female	29	Executive
13	Female	28	Executive
14	Male	30	Executive
15	Female	26	Engineering
16	Female	27	Executive
17	Female	26	Engineering
18	Female	29	Executive
19	Female	27	Engineering
20	Female	28	Executive
21	Female	28	Engineering
22	Male	25	Engineering
23	Male	24	Engineering
24	Female	28	Executive
25	Male	26	Engineering
26	Male	30	Executive
27	Male	31	Executive

28	Female	28	Executive
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