

SOCIAL PHYSIQUE ANXIETY IN ADOLESCENTS: A COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION OF INFLUENCES, COPING STRATEGIES AND HEALTH BEHAVIOURS

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to advance traditional quantitative research by examining the complexity of social physique anxiety (SPA; Hart et. al, 1989) in adolescent females. A total of 44 female high school students between the ages of 14-18 years of age participated in individual semi-structured interviews. These interviews were guided by stress and coping theoretical frameworks and health behaviour perspectives (Lazarus, 1999; Leary, 1992; Rodgers, 2002). Subsequently, 27 interviews (67.5%) were selected for analysis as these participants directly discussed personal concerns regarding body image and SPA. Resultant themes regarding the antecedents, prevalence, and consequences of SPA were drawn from 1053 pages of transcribed interviews and included: impact of media, changing one's appearance, dietary restraint, others' input/influence (particularly friends and family), and physical activity. Some participants also discussed smoking as a strategy to manage SPA. The ease of which any given strategy could be identified and employed was discussed (i.e. wearing baggy clothing when experiencing negative physical self-perceptions would be easier to adopt than engaging in an ongoing exercise regime). Consequences of adopting such strategies could further perpetuate cycles of low self-worth and more frequent engagement of unhealthy behaviours (such as disordered eating, substance use, maladaptive exercise patterns). A concern with these behavioural cycles is adolescent females' overemphasis of the physical self while neglecting the development of other integral facets of the self. By identifying and understanding how social physique anxiety affects adolescents' choice and engagement in health behaviours, it is possible to tailor both mental and physical health-focused intervention strategies.