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WOMEN AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE FEMININE BODY: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

Dr. Kahini Palit
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Adamas University, Kolkata 700126, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

Society upholds a woman's physical beauty as of paramount importance. Body image propagated by media create an unreal unachievable standard of beauty for women, who internalize the media's messages and develop a constant dissatisfaction with their bodies and negative body image about themselves.

KEYWORDS- *Body Image, Beauty Ideal, Body Consciousness*

Gender socialization, taking place at an early age ensures that boys and girls are exposed to very different ways of bringing up, starting from toys and fantasies. Fairy tales, either in the form of Disney Princess films, merchandise, games, or books, make sure women know that looking good is a very important part of their lives. Little girls learn to love Barbie dolls and Disney princesses, who possess beautiful blue eyes, perfect hourglass figure, and slender legs. And the girl unconsciously starts craving for that beauty, and feels dissatisfied with her 'imperfect figure', which is rarely like the examples of beauty she is exposed to.

According to Backman and Adams (1991) women are, from a young age taught to prize relationships with men, whom presumably they attract with their beauty. Thus the idea that a woman's personal happiness or unhappiness is brought about by her beauty or lack of it is inculcated in women at a very early age. Robinson and Ward (1995) argue that in most cultures personal beauty is arguably the most important quality a woman can possess. Femininity is imposed on the girls via value constructs such as the 'beauty ideal', beauty being a noteworthy aspect of most of children's literature. The women, in most of these stories are quite beautiful, the good ones obviously, while the bad evil ones lack the 'features' of the beautiful girls and are deemed ugly. The objectification of the body and an imposed body consciousness is thus imbued at a very early age. This objectification of the feminine body is internalized and continues throughout the lifetime of a woman, who, at various stages of their life are encouraged by the beauty industry to feel insufficient without the additional beauty treatments, even cosmetic surgeries to 'perfect' their 'imperfections'.

The beauty industry is a big billion-dollar industry in the world. And arguably, the industry's most coveted customers are women. Several researchers have found that women worldwide spend considerable time and money to manage how they look. The cultural mandate is that physical attractiveness is an asset for women, perhaps the most important one, and that women should go to lengths to rectify the way they look originally. These cultural messages abound with elaborate techniques of look enhancement, from make-ups, use of expensive cosmetics, to undergoing cosmetic surgeries. These messages together impose the idea that how women are perceived, evaluated and treated are invariably related to how they look.

MEDIA MESSAGES ABOUT THE BEAUTY IDEAL

The media plays the most important role in creating body images in women—how one perceives her own body, with subtle messages of consciousness of the deficiencies. Media images associate beauty with happiness and fulfilment. The media conveys these messages through a plethora of programs -films, advertisements, soap operas etc. This ever present reminder leads to distorted body image in women and leads to unhealthy behaviours like excessive preoccupation with appearance or extreme dieting to shed weight, because it is an unbearable shame to be fat. Van Vonderen and Kinnally (2010) found that being overweight is seen in our society as a weakness, a sign of laziness, a condition that can be prevented. The stigmatization associated with being overweight negatively affects the people (Miller and Downey,1999). Media comparisons have been found to strongly contribute to lower self-esteem (Van Vonderen & Kinnally, 2010). The beauty industry has also been found to have a negative effect on a woman's self esteem, body image and perception of beauty (Britton, 2012). According to Stice and Shaw (1994) a socio-cultural female ideal is communicated to women, with mass media being 'one of the strongest transmitters of this pressure'.

HOW BEAUTY IS CONCEPTUALIZED IN INDIA

India has consistently nurtured white skinned English features as the standard of female beauty. Needless to say, such a construct of ideal feminine beauty is the result of a postcolonial mentality. Thus, among Indian women, love for fair skin and a thin body is almost universal. Fairness creams have for long flooded the Indian market, with new ones pouring in every year. The media uses airbrushed pictures of models to make them look slimmer,

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and fairer. Body image dissatisfaction regarding skin complexion is steadily on the rise in India, because most people are varying shades of brown, as is natural for a tropical country. Similarly, the 'thin-ideal' propagated by the media by specifically selecting models who are unhealthily underweight, create a sense of deficiency in the women who watch, who feel eager to change their body into 'the desirable beauty' shown in the advertisements and movies. Heinberg (1996) states that besides setting a nearly impossible standard to achieve in the thin-ideal, the media also sends the message that the body is as changeable as you want it to be.

Body dissatisfaction can be brought about by the pressure to be thin from one's close social environment. Repeated messages that one does not live up to the standard would be expected to cause dissatisfaction with appearance (Streigel-Moore, Silberstein & Rodin 1986;Thompson et al, 1999). Although internalization of societal norms about body image occurs from various sources, messages from one's immediate subculture may be especially pertinent and meaningful (Presnell, Bearman & Madeley 2007).

The sociocultural theory contends that mass media influences an individual's perception of what the ideal body is, and bodies that do not match this ideal are therefore thought to be unattractive (Morrison et al 2003). As a result, internalization of society's standards of ideal body may contribute to body image dissatisfaction (Matz, Foster, Faith & Wadden 2002). Bell and Dittmar (2011) define negative body image as 'the psychologically salient discrepancy between a person's perceived body and their ideal body, which manifests itself as the experience of negative thoughts and esteem about one's body and appearance. Researchers have observed the rise of eating disorders in young women resulting from negative body image and body dissatisfaction (Ridolfi et al, 2011).

Women are targets of ideal body portrayals of media, most of which are 'impossible for many people to realistically and healthily achieve (Pritchard & Cramblit, 2014). Ferguson et al (2014) argue that 'increased incidence of eating disorders across the early and mid 20th century seem to coincide with trends in the media towards emphasizing thinness in women. As Bartky argues, 'these images remind us constantly that we fail to measure up. Whose nose is the right shape after all; whose hips are not too wide, or too narrow? The female body is revealed as a task, an object in need of transformation'. Media images of the ideal body produce, as Bartly notes, 'a sense of estrangement and a sense of deficiency'. And thus increasingly we find a number of YouTube channels discussing beauty secrets of women, along with thousands of beauty related queries regularly sent to women's fashion magazines.

Bartky (1990) argues that women are self-policing. Women think of themselves as always potentially being observed and judged. So, she argues, they constantly watch themselves for any deviation from acceptable standards of appearance. This causes women to exist somewhat at a distance from themselves, always watching, judging and criticizing. Every waking moment of everyday, women must make sure that their appearance conforms to acceptable standards.

In her 1991 book, 'The Beauty Myth', Naomi Wolf contends in respect of the images of female beauty that weighs upon women-

'more women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before, but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers'.

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