

Portrayal of Body Image through Media and Its Implications

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Abstract: *As the world is witnessing dynamic changes today, the way one sees oneself and also others is changing accordingly. Body image is taking up considerable spaces in our minds as our productivity is somewhat related to how we perceive ourselves. As the media tries to sell us exactly how we should be whether it is our colour, shape or size, there is an added pressure on people to fit in to a certain construct of beauty. This paper purports to understand the dynamics of body image—how individuals are affected by it, the role of media, and whether and how it is changing in today's day and time.*

1. Introduction

When we talk about our perception of our own selves, it is not merely the 'skin deep' beauty that we think about but also and more importantly the outward self that comes into play. Body image, as defined by Judy Lightstone, "involves our perception, imagination, emotions, and physical sensations of and about our bodies. It's not static-but ever changing; sensitive to changes in mood, environment, and physical experience. It is not based on fact. It is psychological in nature, and much more influenced by self-esteem than by actual physical attractiveness as judged by others. It is not inborn, but learned. This learning occurs in the family and among peers, but these only reinforce what is learned and expected culturally."

According to the Dove Campaign For Beauty, only 2 percent of women worldwide consider themselves beautiful, and 81 percent of women in the U.S. believe the media sets an unrealistic standard of beauty most women couldn't ever achieve.

Our image of the self is largely influenced by our surroundings. Research shows that television can change one's body image by leading them to think about their weight, body, attractiveness, etc. Apart from that, the country that we live in, our upbringing, our peer groups and the level of education are few factors among many others that determine that reflect our body image.

One of the main factors that shape our idea of body image is the level of openness that we have been exposed to. The higher the level of free thinking, the lesser we judge others for their looks. In which case, if someone is overweight, we understand their condition instead of bullying them. Similarly, if an individual's genetics are such that they are skinny, we don't thrust burgers down their throats thinking they 'need' to eat.

Journalist Kate Pierce found in a study of *Seventeen* that all a girl learns from a fashion magazine is "how she looks is more important than what she thinks, that her main goal in life is to find a man who will take care of her.. and that her place will be home with the kids and the cooking and the housework."

Today, as technology is developing and social media platforms like Instagram are becoming a rage among young people, the need to look good is always pressing. The number of likes and comments on one's pictures are becoming new parameters of judging one's worth. At the same time, things like online bullying are becoming more common because a certain person looks a certain way.

More than that, studies have shown that teenagers and youngsters themselves become overly critical of themselves as they grow on the idea that looking a certain way and having a certain body type is the only way to fit in and be accepted by the society. On certain occasions, people have gone to hideously obnoxious extent to look like a certain other celebrity.

Question is, who decides what is perfect and what is not? If we see thin, and perfectly chiselled people everywhere- whether it is advertisements, or music videos or the buttery pages of fashion magazines— is it necessarily the way to exist? I mean, what if someone is happy with being overweight as long as it doesn't cause them a problem on the health front?

As media tries to sell us perfect body shape and beach hair, is it really so important that one would try to starve themselves to attain the goal weight that some magazine sets them for summer? More

so, does the media sell thin bodies because the people like to see it or do people want thin bodies because the media sells it?

The idea is, no body shape is ideal and nobody can be looking perfect. Instead of the media portraying what should be and it can be achieved, it should rather encourage people to be comfortable in their own skin. Since this competition to look the best is increasing, body shaming is becoming a common trend. People are made to feel guilty by their kins that they look bad or ugly, or maybe they are 'too fat' or too skinny.

Body image decides to a great extent the way one performs in their education or jobs or overall confidence for that matter. The more we start to accept ourselves and each other the way they are, the easier it gets for a person to achieve their goals. I mean, looks matter—one should look presentable but not at the cost of their self-esteem.

This study tries to delve into the implications of body image—past studies, and the present scenario. Even though the media portrays thin men and women, are people actually getting affected by it or have they decided to move beyond? Also, is it time for us to move beyond the construct of beauty and accept people for the way they are? The research makes an attempt to understand.

2. Literature Review

This section studies three past research papers done on body image. Each one of these talk about body image but in a different manner.

Why Don't I Look Like Her? The Impact of Social Media on Female Body Image

Kendyl M. Klein

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The paper talks about how media in general is affecting the way a woman looks at herself and the development of eating disorders among young women. The author talks about the 'Thinspiration' phenomenon wherein young, emaciated girls post pictures of themselves, suggesting that thin body is the ideal type and as the name suggests, is inspirational.

The paper lays special emphasis on eating disorders like *Anorexia Nervosa* and *Anorexia Bulimia*. Apart from these two distinctly recognised forms of eating disorders, EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified,) wherein a person suffers some sort of eating disorder which doesn't exactly fit into Anorexia or Bulimia, is also given some mention. The study establishes that clinical eating disorders and sub-clinical instances of disordered

eating are a result of negative body image and excessive dissatisfaction with one's body.

The study goes back to the portrayal of women in the history of advertising in America. Essentially in the past decade, advertisements have always established a certain standard of beauty—whether it was the "clinched waist" or the "hourglass" figure. The major difference that has been noticed in the standard is that of the size. Over the years, thinner bodies have been given the ideal status. The use of celebrity figures like Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn in advertisements was done to establish standards of beauty.

In establishing the role of social media, the author argues that as there is an increased access to social media because of the technological transformation, the news feeds on these social networking sites (SNS) are flooded with advertisements which in turn exert pressure on individuals to conform to standards set by the same. Since sharing photos is becoming a crucial part of communicating with others, individuals have all the more opportunity to scrutinize or judge others as well as themselves.

The author finally describes psychological theories like Leon Festinger's *Social Comparison theory* and examining '*social physique anxiety*' by Ellen Fitzsimmons. Media theories like *Uses and Gratification Theory* and *Cultivation theory* and *Objectification theory* along with the aforementioned theories are described to be in correlation with each other as they work to establish the body image in one's mind. The point established here is that as women are exposed to the kind of media they consume, it leads to them comparing themselves with what they see. The dissatisfaction that results out of what women see around themselves leads to 'self-surveillance, self-objectification and anxiety.'

BODY IMAGE DISTURBANCES AND THE ADOLESCENT GIRL

By: Leila M. Persson

The paper discusses the effects of media on the body image of adolescent girls. The pressing need to be perfect leads to Body Image Disturbances (BID) among adolescent girls. BID essentially manifests itself in anomalies in either mental health or physical health.

The internal or mental health effects resulting from BID can range from anxiety, to familial issues to sexual promiscuity. The external or physical health disorders lead to disturbances in behaviour. These are mainly of three kinds: anorexia, bulimia or compulsive eating whereby a person binges on

large quantities of food even if he/she is not hungry.

While addressing the issue of body dissatisfaction among girls as young as nine years old, the researcher relates a number of reasons behind the same. For example, when a girl's body is going through changes during puberty, anything about her body which appears dissimilar to what she sees in magazines or on TV shows, is considered an anomaly. Thus, she begins to diet. This is where BID begins.

Many girls also relate success to their looks. They feel that in order to achieve things in life, they need to attain the ideal type of body and beauty standards. Looks could be correlated to popularity, attracting friends or male counterparts. Again, certain professions or activities which are most popular amongst women, lead adolescent girls to believe that they need to look a particular way. Hence, Dancers, athletes, models, etc., are often bent upon maintaining their figures in accordance with the already established standards.

The paper describes two different theories that explain how an adolescent girl can be acquire Body Image Disturbances:

First is, the *Sociocultural Theory*, according to which, an adolescent's family, friends and media-all play a significant role in shaping one's body image and also body changes. Conversations with friends about appearance can largely shape the way an adolescent looks at himself/herself. Similarly, criticism from friends regarding the same can also lead to the development of negative perception of oneself in one's mind.

The *Social Comparison Theory* comes next. The theory assumes that an individual will automatically compare himself/ herself with an image present in the media and will establish it as the ideal goal that they must aim for. The theory also purports that not all individuals who watch the television excessively develop body image disturbances. Instead, individuals "who engage in goal-directed behaviour comparisons and see those standards as attainable will engage in BID (Botta, 1999.)"

The study further establishes that viewing excessive television portrays a picture of real life among adolescents. Watching soap operas, especially forms these cultural beauty ideals which makes them aim toward thinness all the more.

When it comes to print media, the author explains, they specifically target girls. "The National Association of Social Workers (2010), (as cited in Guillen & Barr, 1994) challenges individuals to

think about this: a study of mass media magazines revealed that women's magazines had 10.5 times more advertisements and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines." It is further established that the more girls read fashion magazines, the more they diet and initiate weight-reducing exercises. Also, the pictures in media lead females to feel that they are overweight.

The author proposes that further research should be carried in order to add to the existing research findings. This should be done with a view to understand and thereby prevent the damaging effects of images in media.

Finally, solutions like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) are offered toward the end of the research. CBT addresses the problem of Body image Disturbances by increasing the awareness of personal thoughts and feelings among students. Apart from that, consultations with family and teachers are also remedial in case of BID.

BODY IMAGE AND THE MEDIA:

THE MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BODY IMAGE

By Julie M. Sparhawk

The paper studies the role of media in creating a negative body image among individuals. Media's endorsement of a thin ideal body leads to body image disturbances and eating disorders among women. According to Heinberg and Thompson(1995), females who were given exposure to appearance-based media were more dissatisfied with their bodies than females who were exposed to non-appearance based media.

The author purports that popular fashion magazines lay emphasis on the physical characteristics of women—whether it is their face or bone structure or shape or clothing. Rarely do these magazines talk about the importance of being smart or knowledgeable.

According to a research conducted by the American Anorexia and Bulimia Association, about "1000 American women die of anorexia each year and that people with eating disorders have the second highest fatality rate of the psychological disorders."

The paper talks about Body Dysmorphic Disorder wherein a person has an imagined defect in one's appearance. Any deviation from the normal body shapes is constantly obsessed about, which eventually leads to distress or problems in social or occupational engagements.

Media has always portrayed an unrealistic image of women in the society. The standards that are set by

the tall and super thin models are practically unattainable by most individuals in the society. The perfection that the media showcase is achieved with the help of make-up artists and the way they are made to pose in a certain manner so they look glamorous. These standards are not possible to acquire by people in men and general and one cannot have a stylist by themselves at every point of the day nor is it feasible for them to pose the way models do.

Since exposure to media makes people want to attain a certain weight and body type, many people take drastic steps to lose weight. Development of eating disorders is the most common of all. Others include smoking more in order to lose weight, undergoing reconstructive surgeries, and so on.

The objectification of women by media leads women to form distorted opinions about themselves. They believe themselves to be “bigger, fatter, wider” than they actually are. This ultimately leads to lower self-esteem. The bodies of women become an object for others and even themselves—as objects that can be criticized when looking into the mirror.

The media moreover, sends mixed messages to people. As cited in the paper, Unger and Crawford (1996) found out in a study that women’s magazines feature articles on maintaining a fit body, dieting, etc. At the same time, they even sent out messages to eat food through advertisements of sweets, recipes, etc. Thus women end up in this confused state of mind where they want to gorge on food but maintain a thin body at the same time.

Sociocultural Theory explains how culture affects the way a woman carries herself—be it eating, dressing, hair style and so on. Society has come to believe that the physical appearance of a person is what matters the most. The study establishes that pressure from family or friends, teasing about weight lead to body image disturbances among people. Girls are made to believe that if they are not thin, they would not prosper in professional or personal life. In fact, past studies have also found that women hesitate to conceive in fear of the weight puts on during pregnancy. It is becoming increasingly common for people to criticise people for being overweight but obesity as a disease is not readily accepted in general.

3. Media and Body Image

As past researchers have found, media plays a crucial role in building body image. The models on the covers of fashion magazines, in all their impeccability, put a pressure on people to look perfect. People are becoming so obsessed about

how they look that their own self-esteem stop to count after a certain point of time.

The advertisements today too, sell products that are endorsed by models who have practically unattainable beauty standards. Fairness creams are perhaps the biggest example of the media is selling a construct of body image. According to *Statista.com*, in 2016, the global skin care market is estimated to be worth about USD 121 billion. I mean, why are only fair women perceived as beautiful?

Articles about what one should wear, how to style one’s hair, how to reduce weight are being largely circulated by the media today. This shows how people are relentlessly chasing the ideal construct of beauty. Instead of making people feel comfortable in their own skin, media is bombarding them with ways to look like everything else but themselves.

Celebrities like Kim Kardashian have become quintessential ideals of beauty. In the year 2015, after Kim Kardashian featured on the cover of *Paper* magazine, women started to freeze their butts in order to look like the American celebrity. Similarly, in August 2015, an extremely popular fashion magazine in India featured an actress whose photo was photoshopped to such a level that she was unrecognisable.

The media is thus establishing standards which are niche to a certain field and yet are all pervading. Women who are highly exposed to media become highly concerned about their body and looks and go distances to fit in. Similarly, when it comes to men, the six-packs take the trophy away. Even though the pressure on men is not as much when compared to women, it does seem increasing as we see chiselled bodies of men becoming more common in media.

Body shaming is the extract that comes from body image. As researches show that people at large are unhappy about their bodies, it is easy to become a victim of body shaming. Body shaming is about passing negative or derogatory comments on the way a person looks. For instance, calling a thin person “too skinny” or calling a fat person “too fat”—any hurtful comments related to one’s body or appearance amount to body shaming. Here is a look at certain body shaming challenges that were a rage on the internet.

Recently in China, women are trying to cover their knees with an Iphone to prove that they have slender legs. The trend, which emerged on *Weibo*, comes in line after several similar body shaming challenges:

- **Collarbone Challenge:** In the year 2015 in China, thousands of women uploaded selfies holding a stack of coins on their collarbones. According to this social media challenge, the larger the number of coins that you can hold, the sexier the person looks.
- **Bellybutton Challenge:** According to this one, if a woman can touch her bellybutton by putting her arm behind her back, she supposedly has the perfect figure.
- **Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge:** This was another body shaming where people used suction technique to plump their lips so they looked like those of Kylie Jenner, an American reality television celebrity. The results of this challenge were horrifying where some individuals ended up causing damage to their lips.
- **Thigh-gap Challenge:** According to this one, the legs are so thin that the thighs don't touch each other. So the wider the gap, the sexier a woman is perceived.
- **Finger trap Challenge:** This trend emerged in the year 2014 in China again. Also known as 'Beauty and Ugliness Identification Method,' here a person puts their index finger against their chin and nose to see if they actually touch it. If they do, the person is held beautiful.

There have been several of these body shaming challenges in the past. Now that social media platforms like Instagram is exceedingly popular and the hashtag always keeps trending, people go all the more berserk about these challenges.

4. Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology used in the study. The subjects and the sample size are described. Limitations of the study are discussed hereby.

Subjects:

- People aged 14 and above
- Almost all are students
- Both male and female

Sample Size: 100

Procedure:

A questionnaire is circulated to understand people's perspective of body image and how different traits of personality and social media habits disclose their body image.

Limitations:

- The sample size is not representative of the entire population.
- The people might not have given honest replies due to reasons unspecified—credibility is hypothesized.

5. Findings and Interpretation:

Out of 47 percent people who think models have ideal body and beauty standards, 26 were male and 21, Female.

On a scale of 1-5, for people with high self-esteem, looks matter around 3.3 on an average when it comes to dating a person

For people who wished they looked like someone else, 45 per cent of them think that models have ideal body and beauty standards while a whopping 75 percent of them would want to change the way they look because others judge them or have an opinion about their looks or body.

Again, 13 out of 20 people with low self-esteem would want to alter their body because of the opinion of the society. Most of them post pictures around once a month on their social media accounts. On a scale of 1 to 5, an average of 3.7 is the regarded scale of importance to look good on their social media accounts.

Of 35 per cent people who follow fashion magazines, about 35 percent of them think that models have ideal beauty standards and feel a complex when they see chiselled men and women in the media. Two photos were shown to the people who took the survey—one of an overweight model and another a slender one. 71 per cent people said that they found the thinner model more appealing.

6. Conclusion

Changing body imaging:

Even as our social media feeds are being bombarded by sermons on how to change our bodies and looks, there are several positive incidents that are going to be the harbingers of change, if it is to come, that is.

Recently, Carol Gracias, an Indian supermodel, walked the ramp with her pregnant belly at the Lakme Fashion week in India. This was lauded by people across social media and is indeed an action that sends out a positive message about body image.

While there are people who aspire to be like certain Television or Film celebrities, there are some celebrities who themselves are setting an example against negative body image. In May 2015,

Kangana Ranaut, a Bollywood actress, denied a very lucrative offer to advertise for fairness cream as she thought that it would hurt the sentiments of people who are not so fair.

“It gives me hope.”

Over a hundred people were asked about their views on the portrayal of natural body shapes in the media. While some were indifferent about the idea, some said that ‘thin’ is the way to go. However, most people answered in the affirmative. Their response had these things to highlight:

- The fact that all kinds of body shapes are given representation is great.
- Portrayal of natural body shapes must be courage so that young people don’t drive themselves to starvation or indulge in body shaming.
- Every body shape is beautiful—it should be readily accepted now.
- Perfection, they said, is just a state of mind.
- Fitness of body and mind should be promoted—thin doesn’t necessarily mean fit. Thinness as a key aspect of beauty is detrimental to the mental and physical well-being of an individual.
- The parameters of beauty cannot be rendered in terms of height or weight or colour. It is not such shallow a concept.
- Models represent only 1 per cent of the world’s body shape. Hence the media should start representing real people and not ideal constructs of the society.
- “The society also needs to let go of its hang up on what’s sexy and what’s not.”
- People will be able to identify with natural body shapes better.
- The portrayal of natural body shapes will bring about a “sea-change in the way we do body imaging, both for ourselves and others, solving a host of other problems like depression and chronic consumerism that often thrive on negative body-imaging which is indirectly fostered by the media.”

6.1. Suggestions

The development of positive body image among individuals is a slow process is something that will come with time. As the media plays a major role in telling people what is ideal, it can also help spread awareness. But before the media, it is our own understanding as individuals that will make things better.

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that all body shapes are perfect in their own way. People must be able to assert their idiosyncratic identities to be able to respect their body. As long as we do not stop comparing ourselves with others, body image disorders will keep occurring.

Next, the media should start portraying natural body shapes, as depicted by the results of the survey. This will come as a small step toward making feel comfortable about themselves. If thin models is what we see all the time, then it is quite apparent that people will want to be them. Hence, the construct never breaks.

Eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia should be given importance and steps should be taken to address the root cause of the same.

In light of the sociocultural theory discussed in the study before, people should make the environment at home conducive to the positive self-image of their children at home. Continual remarks regarding a child’s weight and looks may lead to negative body image amongst teenagers. Similarly, bullying and negative attitude concerning other people’s looks and body must be refrained from.

Furthermore, it is always nice to see people make a decision on being healthy and fit. But the demarcation between choice and pressure must be very clear. Today, many people are working day and night to remain fit and maintain a fit physique. It must be understood that ‘thin’ does not mean fit. If it is believed that bodies are temples, all body shapes must be given that kind of reverence it demands.

7. References

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