

# The Illusion of Beauty Elixir: The Cosmetic Industry and Women's Body Image

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**Abstract**—*Body ideals and beauty standards laid for women are no secrets. Women across generations have been imposed with endless benchmarks to be considered as 'beautiful'. The desperate desire of fair skin tone, slim body and no body hair has left many women with the "I am not good enough" narrative and body-image issues. Poor body-image is evidently related to low self-esteem. In order to fit into the beauty standards, women become a prey of the expensive cosmetic industry. The cosmetic industry across the world runs on this body-image and self-esteem cycle of women. The advertisements that depict flawless images of women lure other women to consume the beauty products in a hope that they will miraculously make them 'beautiful' as per how the society defines it. The paper seeks to explicate the dynamic interaction of women with the cosmetic industry and its psychological impact on women and society at large.*

**Keywords:** *Body Image, Self-Esteem, Beauty Standards, Media.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cosmetics and makeup products are expensive yet many women invest a lot of their hard-earned money on buying these products. It must take a lot of motivation to invest ones money on buying expensive makeup and cosmetic procedures. The motivation stems from a lot of psychosocial factors. Humans are social beings and seek social interaction and affiliation. Thus, most individuals feel it is very important to be accepted in their society. The desire for social acceptance makes individuals comply with the socially constructed norms that are even unrealistic sometimes. Beauty standards imposed on women also prove to be unrealistic and idealistic most of the times. However, in order to fit into the society and attain social approval, women implicitly or explicitly engage in behavior to achieve those standards set out for them. The most common example would be women availing expensive services to get rid of all the body hair and facial hair. They would get conscious even if an extra strand of hair is sticking out from their chin. The natural tendency of having facial and body hair is not well accepted by the society, especially in case of women. Similar other expectations from women leave them with no choice but to act in accordance with the norms to gain social acceptance and enhance their self esteem. The objective of this paper is to understand the interaction of

cosmetic industry with women consumers and its relation to their body image issues.

## 2. BODY IMAGE

Body image is the perception of one's own body that is created by the feelings, thoughts and beliefs they have for their own body<sup>[1]</sup>. Body image can be positive, negative or both. There are four facets of body image comprising the perceptual, affective, cognitive and behavioral body image (see Figure 1).

Body image can lie on a continuum from being positive to negative. A person is said to have a negative body image when they have negative feelings, thoughts and beliefs about their body. Negative body image leads to body dissatisfaction and is the primary cause of eating disorders such as bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa. It is also associated with several psychosocial consequences (see section 3). A person is said to have a positive body image when they appreciate and accept the body they have.

Body image of an individual can change over time as it is influenced by various internal and external factors. While individual traits do play a role in how a person perceives their body, other factors like society and media also shapes one's perception. E.g., a person who is criticized for their appearance by their family is more likely to experience body dissatisfaction.

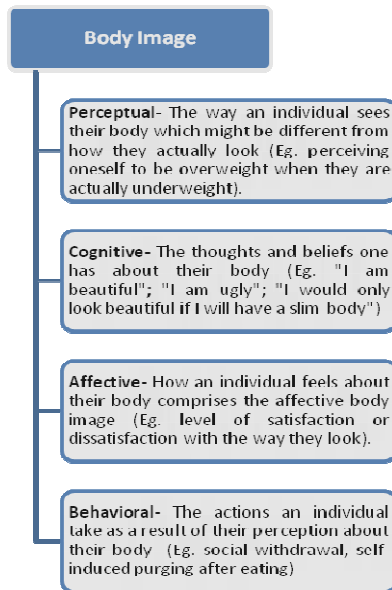


Figure 1: Facets of Body Image

### 3. PSYCHOLOGICAL CORRELATES OF NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE

The socially-constructed standards of beauty contribute to the development of a negative body image. A negative perception about one's own body impacts a person psychologically. Several psychosocial factors are found to be associated with negative body image.

A lot of research has been done on the relationship of body-image with self esteem. Studies have shown that negative body-image and body dissatisfaction is significantly associated with lower self-esteem across age and gender [2,3,4].

Prior researches have also revealed that negative body image is related to symptoms of depression [5,6,7]. A lot of factors interplay to cause depression among people with a poor body image. Dissatisfaction with one's body makes them feel inadequate and unworthy. In many cases such individuals also avoid social gatherings and engage in social withdrawal [8]. Body dissatisfaction is also associated with the development of social anxiety [9]. People with a negative body image feel they are not physically attractive and often feel undeserving of a romantic relationship [9]. Such distorted thoughts, behavior and feelings reinforce the depressive symptoms and ultimately impact the quality of life.

As a result of body dissatisfaction and negative body image, individuals become susceptible to eating disorders such as bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa [6, 10]. The desire for a slim body and "fear of fat" sometimes leads to unhealthy behaviors such a self-induced purging after eating, extremely limited intake of food, excessive exercising, etc.

Research done in the area of body image has shown that women, as compared to men, are more preoccupied with beauty concerns [4, 11]. This gender difference exists because the social agents primarily associate 'beauty' with women. Women belonging to different cultures and different age groups are compared with ideal benchmarks of beauty. Since childhood, girls are socialized in a way that body ideals are internalized within them. Even the dolls they play with are known to internalize beauty standards in their young minds. The '*Barbie Syndrome*' has been a topic of debate among researchers. Researchers have argued that *Barbie* dolls endorse unrealistic body proportions and sow the seeds of body dissatisfaction among girls at a very young age [12]. It was because of this wave of debate that a diverse set of *Barbie* dolls endorsing different body sizes, body shapes and colors were introduced in the market. While fairer skin tone and slim body is favored for young women, even those in the middle adulthood are expected to have a flawless and wrinkle free skin. Thus, impositions of beauty standards occur throughout the lifespan, especially in case of women and hence women form the major clientele sector of the cosmetic industry.

### 4. COSMETIC INDUSTRY AND WOMEN CONSUMERS

As we now know the psychosocial consequences of body-image concerns, we may see usage of cosmetic products and services as a coping mechanism employed by the consumers to enhance their body-image. A great deal of dynamic interplay exists between the cosmetic industry and its consumer's psyche.

#### 4.1. Advertising and Media

Advertisements are the medium to connect the cosmetic industry with the target audience. It is through commercials and mass media that the consumers get to know about new services and products that have been introduced in the market. Advertisements of cosmetic products and services occupy a major sect of all advertisements. Most households are regularly exposed to these ads through newspapers, television, radio, magazines, social media, etc. and therefore, such commercials are quite impactful.

The biggest concern with the cosmetic industry is that through its commercials, it plays upon the body-image and self esteem cycle of women, luring them into buying their products [13, 14, 15]. Most advertisements show women with a fair skin tone, proportionate body, voluminous hair and flawless skin. Often times, they project unrealistic and idealistic images of women. E.g., the bright lights flashed on the faces of the models in the commercials to portray fair skin tone is doubtlessly phony. However not all fabrications are so evident and just when they see such commercials, they begin to feel terrible about their own body. As a result, their self esteem dwindles and they feel they are not good enough [14]. Kim & Lennon (2007) conducted a study on 114 female college students (18-27 years

of age) and found a significant positive relationship between exposure to fashion magazines, dissatisfaction with physical appearance and eating disorder tendencies <sup>[16]</sup>.

Not only ads, other media including the movies, magazines, newspapers, etc portray actors and models with the 'idealistic' bodies. Women on social media also use numerous filters and photo edits to meet the yardstick norms set out for them. A lot of times the audience becomes the passive consumer of the content of media and fail to realize that the images shown to them are digitally enhanced, edited and manipulated by the artists and stylists. The audience creates an ideal image and constantly tries to meet that image to boost their self esteem. Failure to do so decreases their self confidence and self esteem. Seeing from the Carl Roger's humanistic perspective, such portrayals by media creates a huge gap between the real-self and the ideal-self.

#### 4.2. Hoping for a Miracle: In search of a Beauty Elixir

The cosmetic industry makes a tactical use of the negative body image and low self esteem cycle. As women are regularly exposed to such advertisements, they find themselves aligning with the "I am not good enough" narrative. Such ads reinforce the existing body ideals and when the audience feels that the product promises to offer them what they supposedly 'lack', they start falling for the trap <sup>[17]</sup>. They begin to hope that the product they will buy will miraculously make them a perfect fit for the ideal 'beauty' norms. The industry creates an illusion for women where they see those products and services as the ultimate 'beauty elixir' that would give them the body they desire and would never let their beauty fade away with age. No wonder, women end up paying so much on anti-wrinkle and anti-ageing creams!

Moreover, since actresses and models routinely go under the knife to get that 'perfect' shape for nose and lips, teenagers and young adults are also trying to catch up with them in availing these services. There has been a rise in the number of women opting for cosmetic surgeries across cultures <sup>[18]</sup>. In India, several cases of young college going girls opting to get a nose job or lip job done have been reported <sup>[19]</sup>.

Media and society form a vicious cycle. It is the society that shapes media and in turn, media shapes the society. Thus, the society and media together create pressure on women to achieve the 'perfect' body <sup>[20]</sup>. In order to attain social approval and social acceptance, women consume beauty products and services.

#### 5. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The intent of the paper is not to shun the cosmetic industry altogether. Cosmetic industry has a huge role to play in boosting the confidence of people who otherwise shy away from social situations because of dissatisfaction with their bodies. Sometimes, plastic surgery is the only option left for victims of road accidents and acid attacks.

The paper seeks to highlight the aspects of the cosmetic industry and society that creates a negative body-image and increases body dissatisfaction. The ultimate goal of the cosmetic industry should be to make its consumers feel good about their bodies and enhance positive body image. It is essential that the media and the cosmetic industry adopt a more realistic approach. It is important that they endorse and embrace natural flaws and body types. Instead of using edited images of models to depict unrealistic bodies, advertisers should not shy away from portraying models as their natural selves. For example, a campaign started by Dove in India reached out to women consumers to get featured in their ads to depict natural women with diverse body shapes, sizes and color.

#### 6. CONCLUSION

Use of cosmetics and beauty products should be more of a preference and a form of self-expression rather than an implicit imposition from the society to fit into the ideal and unrealistic beauty standards. The emphasis should be on self-care and maintenance of healthy and hygienic body rather than aiming socially constructed unrealistic standards of beauty. We must empower and instill confidence in the upcoming generations. It is important for them to know that use of cosmetics is a pleasant way to express one's creativity however, loving and accepting oneself the way they are is the first and foremost step to feel beautiful.

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