Who determines the ideal body? A Summary of Research Findings on Body Image

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Abstract

The globalization of media have paved way for Print and television advertisements to use images of thin female bodies to sell products and these advertisements are viewed by women all over the world. Through the media we are constantly bombarded with the western images of "beautiful women" and "perfect bodies". Many surveys have proved the fact that men and women feel negative about their body image not only in the west but also in other parts of the world and the feminist scholars have tended that one should try to view the portrayal of idealized body image critically . In this connection, this paper, through a survey of relevant literature on body image, attempts to understand the following:

1) The concept of body image

2) Various determinants that idealize a woman's body and define beauty standards

3) Influence of media on the body image of women

4) How the various determinants are interwoven targeting women, making them vulnerable to the idealized images.

Keywords: Body image**,** Determinants**,** Media

Introduction

"We don't need Afghan – style burquas to disappear as women. We disappear in reverse – by revamping and revealing our bodies to meet externally imposed visions of female beauty."
Source – Robin Gerber, author and motivational speaker.

Traditional notions of feminine beauty vary across cultures and generations. Stereotypes include a Latin American appreciation for petite women with curves; an Asian appreciation of oval faces, black hair, and average heights; and, Indian and African appreciation for women who have a healthy weight. While these stereotypes held true in the past, globalization is changing traditional notions of beauty. Many societies are now valuing an "international" standard of beauty, as propagated by international beauty contests.

The globalization of media has paved way for Print and television advertisements to use images of thin female bodies to sell products and these advertisements are viewed by women all over the world. Through the media we are constantly bombarded with the western images of "beautiful women" and "perfect bodies".

Nationwide Surveys conducted in US during the 1970s and 1980s and later in 1990s surveys indicated that both men's and women's body image perceptions have become more negative over time (Cash and Henry, 1995; Cash et al., 1986).

There are many such surveys which have proved the fact that men and women feel negative about their body image not only in the west but also in other parts of the world and the feminist scholars have tended that one should try to view the portrayal of idealized body image critically .

In this connection, this paper, through a survey of relevant literature on body image, attempts to understand the following:

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4. How the various determinants are interwoven targeting women, making them vulnerable to the idealized images.

Definition of Body image

Interest in the Psychology and Sociology of body image originated in the work of Paul Schilder in the 1920s. In The Image and Appearance of the Human Body (1950) Paul Schilder argues that body image is not just a cognitive construct, but also a reflection of attitudes and interactions with others. He defined body image as: *The picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves.*

Since 1950, researchers have taken 'body image' to mean many different things, including perception of one's own body attractiveness, body size distortion, perception of body boundaries, and accuracy of perception of bodily sensations (Fisher, 1990). The definition *"A person's perceptions, thoughts and feelings about his or her body"* incorporates all the elements of body image originally identified by Schilder: body size estimation (perceptions), evaluation of body attractiveness (thoughts), and emotions associated with body shape and size (feelings). Grogan (1992) defined *Body dissatisfaction is defined as: A person's negative thoughts and feelings about his or her body.*

Researches on body image

The study of body image originated at the turn of the twentieth century. The 1990s constituted a pivotal era in the evolution of body image scholarship. (Cash,2002)

There is ample evidence that body image concerns are prevalent in western societies. Heinberg and Thompson (1995) have reported about studies that have investigated the portrayal of both genders. These studies found that men and women are portrayed in markedly different ways in relation to body weight. Content Analysis (where the frequency of portrayal of particular images is coded) has reliably revealed that women are portrayed as abnormally slim in the media, whereas men tend to be portrayed as of standard weight.

For instance, Silverstein et al. (1986) found that, in thirty-three television shows, 69 per cent of female characters were coded as 'thin', compared to only 18 per cent of male characters. Only 5 per cent of female characters were rated as 'heavy', compared to 26 per cent of males. They also found that models in the magazines Ladies Home Journal and Vogue had become significantly thinner since the 1930s.

The systematic content analysis of the body type of fashion models (Silverstein et al. 1986) provide convincing evidence that women portrayed in glamorous roles in the popular media are thinner than the average woman. These studies report that the normative standards of thinness have increased in the last few decades. Popular women's magazines are often credited for exposing unrealistic, unobtainable body images to women of all ages (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995).

In an interesting psychology study by Marika Tiggemann and Esther Rothblum (1988), large groups of American and Australian college students were asked about their stereotypes of fat and thin men and women. They were asked to rate the extents to which eight qualities were typical of thin men and women and fat men and women. Men and women in both cultures reported negative stereotypes of fat people. Although fat people were seen as warmer and friendlier, confirming the traditional stereotype of the fat and jolly person, they were also viewed as less happy, more self-indulgent, less self-confident, less self-disciplined, lazier and less attractive than thin people. What was particularly interesting was that there were no differences in stereotyping between students who were fat and those who were thin. Even those who were overweight had negative stereotypes of fat people.

The tendency to link physical attractiveness with positive personal qualities has been documented since the 1970s, when Dion and colleagues coined the phrase 'What is beautiful is good' (Dion et al., 1972: 285). They suggested that people tend to assign more favourable personality traits and life outcomes to those that they perceive as attractive.

Grogan (1999)reviews evidence in this area through the study of Alice Eagley and colleague.The study suggested that the effects of the physical attractiveness stereotype are strongest for perceptions of social competence (sociability and popularity). Negative stereotyping of overweight people may be a specific aspect of the physical attractiveness stereotype that refers specifically to assignment of negative traits,assigned to those who have a body size and shape that is not considered attractive by dominant groups in Western culture.

A study conducted among 101 female university students ranging in age between 18 to 55 years reveal that on average women underestimated their body sizes by 4 per cent , and they typically wanted to be smaller than their actual body sizes. About two fifths of the women expressed moderate to strong feelings about both their individual body parts and their bodies as a whole (Monteath & Mccabe, 1997).David(2008) highlights that findings of Dejon, 1980; Ritenbaugh, 1982; Schwartz, Thompson, and Johnson, 1982 that slim bodies are regarded as the most beautiful and worthy ones; overweight is seen as not only unhealthy but also offensive and disgusting.

Many studies have attempted to explore the behavior patterns adapted by women to achieve the body ideals. Gregory Fouts and Kimberly Burggraf studied 18 situation comedies from prime time TV and discovered that the females in these programs were far more likely to be judged as being "below average" in weight as opposed to "average" or "above average". They found out that the higher the weight of the female character depicted, the more likely it was that negative comments were made by other characters about her or directly to her. These negative comments were often followed by a laugh

track that suggested to the audience that these negative comments were funny. The authors speculated that the combination of programming that presents a disproportionate emphasis on overly thin female bodies and creates a context that explicitly reinforces the value and attractiveness of this standard may amount to a huge social problem.

There have been researches done to prove that overly thin females in the media actually have an impact on the way young girls think or behave.

Two researchers, **Eric Stice and Heather Shaw**, randomly assigned 157 female college students to view pictures in magazines that contained either thin models, average models, or no models. Immediately after viewing the pictures, the students responded to a number of items on the questionnaire. The results revealed that the students who had viewed the thin models were more likely to report a variety of negative emotions such as stress, shame, guilt, depression and insecurity; they also indicated higher levels of body dissatisfaction.A second finding of the study was that, in general, students who reported high levels of body dissatisfaction, regardless of their experimental condition, were more likely also to report that they suffered from the symptoms associated with bulimia. (Sparks, 2005)

Helgeson (2002) refers to the study of Allgood and others that a negative body image is associated with depression in both males and females.In a study of ninth through twelfth graders, girls had lower self – esteem and more negative body image than boys in all grades. Girls' low self esteem and negative body image accounted for a large portion of the sex difference in depression.

Findings in another study highlight that receiving support from a romantic partner and general support from other intimates can be directly related to report levels of body image disturbance and anxiety associated with physical appearance. (Weller& Ziegielewski, 2005)

Indian Studies

In a study done among ninety-six adolescent and 93 adult females from Bombay, India, findings indicated that teasing and internalization mediated the effect of BMI on body dissatisfaction and in certain cases influenced drive for thinness. These findings replicate and extend previous work with U.S., Australian, and Swedish samples, suggesting that there are similar potential risk factors, cross-culturally, that may explain the development of eating and shape-related problems.(Shroff & Thomson, 2004)

Gupta et al.,(2001) in a comparative study on weight-related body image concerns among 18-24-year-old women in Canada and India found that among the Indian women, concerns about the weight of the upper torso (i.e., face, neck, shoulders, and chest) emerged as a distinct body image construct.

Kapadia (2009) in her research on body image in Indian women as influenced by the Indian media examined how Indian women felt about their body size and shape, what factors affected how Indian women viewed their bodies, perceptions of how women are portrayed in Bollywood movies, and the influence of Bollywood on how Indian women perceived their bodies. Twenty-six women of Southeast Asian descent were interviewed in focus groups of five to six participants. The findings revealed that Indian women reported dissatisfaction with their body shape and size. The role of other women, especially friends and family, was an important factor in influencing body change. Women tended to use social comparisons with friends, family members, and actresses.

Participants reported that they have noted a trend for women in Bollywood to become slimmer over time, which had also affected the perception of body image in Indian women.

Race, Ethnicity and Nationality as a determinant of body image

Race, Ethnicity and Nationality shape perceptions of attractiveness and thinness. Despite the high levels of agreement about what comprises beauty in current society, there are examples of changes over time.

In the 1950s, a fuller faced and figured woman was more popular than currently. In the 1960s and 1970s, before the widespread recognition of the dangers of skin malignancies, a deeply tanned face was fashionable (once again, an external sign of affluence for those who could afford to travel to sunnier climates). Traditionally, culture in United States has emphasized a more Anglo-Saxon concept of female beauty— blond, blue-eyed, and busty. **(Aiken, 1998).**

In recent decades, an increasing value has been attached to a youthful appearance in many walks of life. An increased emphasis on the desirability of appearing fit and healthy, together with pressures in the employment market have all conspired to denigrate the visible signs of ageing. (Rumsey, 2005)

Banergee (2002) describes the reach of American television noting, "Supermodels and multinational advertising campaigns have a global audience, including women in developing countries where hunger and poverty are still prevalent. As Western based television genres saturate the global marketplace, women's exposure to programs that originate in the United States will undoubtedly impact how they understand themselves and their environment.

Media Portrayal as a determinant of Body Image

Mass media is all pervasive and advertisements are always seeking out to grab people's attention. Every day people are constantly bombarded with images of beautiful looking models, who vow to make every woman's life perfect. In other words, it appears as though the advertising industry thrives on people's vulnerability to buy into the *'beauty myth'* which the people in media have successfully stereotyped (Mayne, 2000).

So pervasive and powerful are media images that more than two-thirds of girls interviewed in one study said that magazine models influence their idea of the perfect body shape. (Patzer, 2008)

Advertising has long been blamed for projecting certain stereotypes that have a strong influence on society.The relationship between American women and American advertisements has caused great concern among many Western feminist scholars who have been opposing the stigmatization of women as *'weak'* and *'inept'* elements of society (Frith et al., 2005). Gender stereotyping in magazines targeted at young women show that although stereotypical white women rule the mass media coverage on beauty advertisements, Asian women seem to be receiving attention in technology oriented advertisements (Sengupta, 2006)

Some studies have observed that some Asian women when living in the West feel even more dissatisfied with their body and overall beauty appeal. The cultural setback among these practices has been ascribed to the widespread appeal of the *"Western Beauty Ideal"* in the East. International advertising and the world wide popularity of western

magazines have been held responsible for representing women in an overtly sexual manner (Nelson and Paek, 2005)

Author and Lecturer Jean Kilbourne (1999) recognized that advertising sells much more than the product. She argued that because advertising is so pervasive, it has an immense cultural impact, especially on women and girls. She observes that women and girls are particularly vulnerable to the addictive power of advertising. Kilbourne claimed that the advertisement contribute to eating disorders by normalizing and glamorizing unhealthy attitudes toward food. She also criticized advertisements targeting adolescents for exploiting that market's insecurities, offering product as solutions: The right pair of jeans or perfume or beer offers status and concurrently confirms one's femininity or masculinity. Women and girls are, in Kilbourne's words, twice seduced: once by ads and once by products.

Many advertising scholars have offered cultural critiques of advertising. Some of the emergent themes in their works investigate the beauty myth. Wolf (1991) argued that portrayed images of beauty present impossible standards for women to achieve .She claimed idealized beauty is unrealistic.

Kilbourne noted in her work that around 1979, fashion models weighed 8% less than the average female. Twenty years later, models weighed 23% less than the average female. As Kilbourne suggested , the underlying criticism with advertising messages and cosmetics products is that women are flawed when it comes to beauty and the solution is to buy a product.

In their study conducted on college men's third-person perception in relation to body image factors using an experiment that involved a convenience sample of 148 male college students of Chinese descent in Singapore, Chia and Wen (2010) found that the college men reported that the effects of media's idealized body images on female friends were greater than the effects on themselves. Their perception of media effects on the self was positively associated with their body dissatisfaction and intention to engage in body image behavior.

Cultivation theory posits that the more television a person watches, the more that person will believe television life is "real life" (Gerbner, et. al 1994). Other researchers have both implicitly and explicitly explained a connection between media exposure and body image using Gerbner's cultivation theory as a framework.

A theoretical backdrop for researchers studying the relationship between media and body image is Bandura's social cognitive theory (Harrison & Cantor, 1997) Social cognitive theory assumes that people learn and model the behaviors of attractive others (Bandura, 1994). Proponents of social cognitive theory posit that young women find thin models in the media attractive and try to imitate them through dieting and, eventually, the development of eating disorders. If young women do attempt to imitate the figures they see on television and in magazines, they would exhibit a greater degree of eating pathology.

In 1996, Saatchi&Saatchi, then one of the world's biggest international advertising agencies with offices in dozens of cities around the world, conducted a poll to see how women perceived the ways in which they were portrayed in ads. Among their many findings was that advertising, which in previous generations aimed to make women feel guilty about having a dirty house, now makes women fear becoming old or unattractive. 4 Other research suggests that advertising adversely affects many women's body image, which may lead in turn to unhealthy behavior as they strive for the inappropriately ultrathin body idealized by the media (Patzer,2008)

Feminist researchers have underscored how women do not frequently critique larger cultural norms as problematic; rather, many self-blame and internalize a sense of private bodily failure, embarking on fitness routines, plastic surgery, and dieting practices to rectify anxieties about bodily lack (Bartky 1988; Duncan 1994).

Studies by researchers Myers & Biocca (1992) and Monteath & Mccabe (1997)have proven that overly thin bodies are glorified in media.

Aesthetics as a determinant of body image

Flattened by the camera, an average model appears heavier on a screen or a page. The preferred solution is a thinner model, who when photographed looks like a person of average weight. As a rule of thumb, photographing the average human tends to add about 10percent to the person's apparent width. So, a 200 pound man looks like a 220-pound man; a 120-poundwoman looks like she weighs 132 pounds. Clothes look better on thinner people because they hang closer to vertical; there are fewer wrinkles and they appear closer to the two-dimensional design from which they originated.

Through a century of advertising images, however, thinness gradually became the standard of feminine beauty. The typical fashion model today is not 10 percent lighter than her ''normal'' feminine counterpart but 23 percent lighter. So the average American woman between eighteen and thirty-four years of age has only a 7 percent chance of being as slim as a fashion or runway model. A typical fashion photographer's model is slimmer than 93 percent of women her age. (Patzer,2008)

Media Economics as an important Determinant

The economics of an institution is an important determinant of its practices and its texts. The intensely competitive commercial environment that the media operate in at present shape media practices and texts.

The press and commercial broadcasting are pre-eminently profit making organizations, they make their profits by selling audiences to advertisers and they do this by achieving the highest possible outlay.

In their article, Silverstein and Sayre (2009) cite that as a market, women represent a bigger opportunity than China and India combined. They control about $20 trillion in annual consumer spending. In the United States alone the market for diet food has been growing 6% to 9% a year and is worth approximately &10 billion, while the worldwide market is about 20 billion. The U.S. Health club industry generates revenues of about $14 billion annually. Facial skin-care products have grown into a $20 billion category worldwide. Apparel –including accessories and shoes is a $47 billion global industry.

In the United States, the cosmetics industry reached sales of $31.1 billion at the manufacturer's level in 2003. The diet industry earned an estimated $35 to $ 50 billion annually in 2002. A study by Kern and Foxworth reveals that women make 75% to 95% of all consumer purchases. (Creedon & Cramer, 2007)

Globalization has led many companies to target wealthy elites in an ever expanding number of countries – China, Japan, Korea, and India, for instance – who represent eager consumers for high end products. Expanding global markets for fashion, for example, have significantly increased the number of black, Asian and East Asian models represented, breaking with the tradition of using only light- skinned, blonde models to connote success.

Leavy (2004) in his study argues that   India is thus a striking example of the link between the global marketing of a Western body ideal and the capitalist interests which support and drive this mass mediated image of femininity.

Media Ownership as an important Determinant

Patterns of ownership are also an important, if indirect, shaping influences upon media discourse. Ownership is increasingly in the hands of large conglomerates whose business is the culture industry, so that the media become more fully integrated with ownership interests in the national and international economy, intensifying their association with capitalist class interests. This manifests itself in various ways, including the manner in which media organizations are structured to ensure that the dominant voices are those of the political and social establishment. (Fairclough, 1995)

Feminist writers argue that women are doubly disadvantaged since big businesses are not just run by capitalists but by capitalist *men*. Women are therefore at the mercy of both capitalist and patriarchal ideologies. Media and advertising images continuously display idealized versions of women – as good, beautiful, glamorous and feminine women caring for their husbands and children, or bad seducers and manipulators of men and uncaring "career bithces'. If women are seen primarily as consumers then it is women who are most duped by, and most supportive of, capitalism.

Many writers argue that we live in a media saturated society, and that our consumption of media content structures and perpetuates our ideas about gender. Furthermore, since media organizations are mostly owned and run by powerful white men, this inevitably has an impact on the kinds of products they produce, and in particular, on the ways in which men and women are represented.. (Richardson & Robinson, 2008)

Social Factors as an important determinant

Social factors are believed to be important in the development of a woman's body attitudes and perceptions. Throughout life, appearance is an important part of the self-concept. Physical attractiveness is a highly valued social asset. This is particularly true for women, for whom the sociocultural link between youthful beauty and sexual attractiveness is stronger. The "looking-glass theory," according to which people's view of themselves is the result of their perception of how other people view them, emphasizes the importance for social acceptability of looking good and behaving appropriately.

Gamer et al. (1980) reported that concepts of feminine beauty have varied throughout history in Western societies and that over the past century; the idealized female shape has changed from voluptuous and curved to angular and lean.

One way that societal body ideals are conveyed to the public is through stereotypes related to appearance. In Western society, an extremely negative stereotype of overweight people exists. Larkin and Pines (1979) provided evidence for such a stereotype by asking their participants to read and evaluate written descriptions of individuals who differed only in terms of sex and weight. They rated overweight people more negatively than they rated people of average weight. These findings suggest that a negative overweight stereotype exists. In contrast to this perception—that fat is synonymous with bad—is the stereotype that equates beauty with goodness. Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) investigated this stereotype by asking participants to evaluate photographs of attractive, neutral, and unattractive individuals. Attractive individuals were assigned more positive personality traits and, perhaps accurately, were assumed to lead happier, successful lives. This study provided evidence for the existence

of a beauty stereotype in Western societies and suggested that its influence pervades many aspects of life. (Monteath & Mccabe, 1997)

Drawing evidence from the study of Tseelon, Forrester (2000) emphasises the stigmatised nature of beauty for women. women are stigmatised by the very expectation to be beautiful, or at least try their best to present themselves in the 'best possible light': If a woman is not careful she will be considered as potentially deviant, not least if she fails to display that she is at least trying to be as beautiful as she possibly can be.

Myers and Biocca (1992) suggest that young women 'bond' with the models they are presented with and then fantasize themselves as thin, beautiful versions of themselves.

Judith Williamson (1978) drew on the work of Roland Barthes (1957) to show how commodities are woven into a network of meanings in advertising. Barthes talks about 'mythologies' or ideologies and a system of 'signs' through which certain images come to stand in front of certain things. This system of linking things and meanings, and the process of uncovering those meaning is called Semiotics. One of Barthes' best known examples in of red roses. He explains that we cannot give someone a bunch of roses without meaning of love – or passion. We use roses to express love or passion. However, there is nothing about the rose itself that is connected to love. Love could be just as easily connected to an onion or cauliflower. However, over time using roses to express love has become congealed into a taken for granted idea. We can no longer think about roses without thinking about love, a connection that has become naturalized. Importantly, in order to express our love we have to purchase roses – a commodity.

Polivy & Herman (2004) assert that he societal glorification of slimness and disparagement of fatness causes many, if not most, young women to become dissatisfied with their weight and shape.

One clear assumption of the sociocultural model is that women feel bad about themselves when they are bombarded by the message that they are not thin enough. Many studies have shown that exposure to thin media images leads to body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem, and negative emotions in young women (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002).(Polivy & Herman , 2004)

A study by Hoeppner (2004) attempted to explore how the family mediates cultural ideas about thinness and how the family conveys these messages to family members. Open-ended interviews were conducted with 32 White, middle-class women (with and without eating disorders) on the topic of body image and eating problems. The findings indicated that a critical family environment, coercive parental control, and a dominating discourse on weight in the household are salient conditions in the production of eating disorders.

DISCUSSION

Every individual has perception, thoughts and feelings connected to one's body image. Estimating the body size and weight contributes to one's perception, evaluation of bodily attractiveness contributes to one's thoughts and how comfortable is a man or woman with one's body may evoke different feelings connected to body image.

It is understood that many studies across the world done by various researchers prove that men and women are victims of stereotyped portrayal of body image.Studies reveal that

women are portrayed as abnormally slim in the media, whereas men are portrayed as of standard weight, thereby increasing the normative standards of thinness.

Women's magazines, through images targeting women of all ages, exposing them to unrealistic, unobtainable bodies. The fashion model is presented as someone to emulate. These models create a feeling of inadequacy in women leading to poor self- esteem and a negative body image in them and the advertisements offer a solution, suggesting that thinness and attractiveness can be achieved through discipline, diet, exercise and the consumption of fashion and beauty products.

Since the 1970s, tendency of linking physical attractiveness with positive qualities and viewing a fat person as less happy, lazier and less attractive has employed through studies. Findings prove that physical attractiveness is viewed as a qualifier for success. Society values thinness, slim bodies are regarded as beautiful ones and overweight is seen as disgusting.Negative body image is associated with depression and low self- esteem. partners, negative body image creates anxiety and disturbance.

Capitalists have been able to sell any product to consumers through tall, thin, fair and beautiful models. The "selling" attempt through stereotyped body ideals has made the "body" part of the package. Capitalists have proved to be successful in selling the tallness, thinness, fairness and attractiveness to women irrespective of the age factor, social cultural set up and income level. The women consumers may not have necessarily bought every product or brand that they come across but various studies prove that they have unconsciously bought the idea of body ideals, faithfully internalizing them through the exposure to media images.

Because of the enormous profits flowing from the female body ideal, capitalists are have exported their body ideal to the rest of the world through distorted imagery and advertisements.
Race, Ethnicity, Nationality, Media Portrayal, Media Economics, Media Ownership and Social factors are the major determinants of an ideal body.
Media portrayal of a women's body, media economics and media ownership are intimately linked, favouring the interests of the capitalists. Beauty industry is a billion dollar industry and in order to create a market for the surplus goods, they create an artificial demand by propagating the "beauty myth". Television and Print run by media conglomerates thrive on revenues from advertisers and thus don't shy from portraying unhealthy images, ignoring the consequences of such portrayals. Products reach target audience through appeals to the values and belief systems of the consumers.Portrayal of slim, fair bodies could be directly linked with the role of media economics where in advertising prone media industries encourage and popularize beauty ideals to create a market.
Families, peers and society in general put pressure on women to look at their "model best" only because they too are exposed to the stereotyping. Thus, Models become role models when it comes to physical appearance.
Women should learn to accept their body, develop a positive body image and understand the fact that every body is unique and different. The body cannot be altered or tailor made to fit into the beauty standards that are constantly popping out of a   TV screen or a magazine advertisement.
Women need to eat healthy and stay healthy to live a better life.

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