CHANGING PERCEPTION OF BEAUTY IN INDIA

NITIKA SETH

India

KEY WORDS	ABSTRACT
	What do we perceive as beautiful and why? Is it a reflection of the social scenarios, economic backgrounds or perhaps our history that influences us? The paper investigates and analyses the reasons for the stereotypical perceptions of beauty and discusses the slow but evident transformation that is taking place in our country. With access to the world via social media there is an interesting emergence that seems to have gained momentum in the last decade. This instantaneous and uninterrupted access to all forms of media has left one either trapped in the hope to achieve superficial perfection or towards a sense of liberation. There is enough evidence that the hurried homogenized half-digested content being offered has led to an overwhelming obsession with one's appearance. Feeding on the insecurities has benefited many organizations and individuals. The advent of this digital culture has also led to a change in the cosmopolitan ideal and the millennial woman of India does not want to conform to norms. Whether the consumption of both print and digital media as well as the visually illustrious embodiment of the shift in social power to the developing lifestyle results in a new wave for the legacy of perfection remains to be seen.

GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE ACADEMICS

1. Introduction

Beauty in India is multifaceted as the country is diverse - a happy, boisterous, co-existence of tradition, spirituality and ancient rituals on the one end of the spectrum, glossy Bollywood-inspired aspirations on the other and many fast-evolving variations in-between. In northern India specifically, the stereotypical idea of a beautiful woman is confined to fair and slim, while her demeanor should include being soft, and demure. She is expected to be domesticated and subservient to her husband and his family. Economic backgrounds, social scenarios and history, all influence these stereotypes that we have inherited that continue to linger in what is primarily a patriarchial society. My paper focuses on the perception of beauty in urban India and how that is gradually changing.

Over the last few decades, there has been a visible shift in urban India. To begin with, the role of the man was always that of the primary bread earner of the house while the woman was meant to be the homemaker and child bearer. Today with education and globalization, in several urban cities, these roles have either been divided or in some cases even reversed. Educated women are self-sufficient with well-paid jobs to support their lifestyle and that of their families. A strong independent woman is considered beautiful by broad-minded men and their families where height, complexion and domestic skills are not considered. Being self-reliant with successful careers impacts the way women feel about themselves both internally and externally.

Based on my surveys and research, most women professionals in India come from either smaller cities, or mostly professional backgrounds. Business families would still prefer their daughters and wives to work within the family or remain homemakers. One sees this kind of attitude difference on a daily basis among friends and family, as well as at the workplace. Interaction with parents of several young students suggests the same. Women under these circumstances often suffer from low self-esteem and confidence as they are financially dependent on their spouse.

The matrimonial section of a majority of dating websites and national newspapers suggest that typecasts still exist. The preference for a fair, light-eyed slim woman that can cook would be far more desirable than a career driven or well educated woman.

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://lighthouseinsights.in/dove-break-the-rules-of-beauty.html/

The workplace is an area that many of the participants of my survey, found to be partial to their physical appearance. It was established that looking a certain way, made it slightly easier to get a job while a few were rejected on account of their body weight. The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of the ladder of success, on the other hand she quietly suffers age old mindsets and traditions afflicted by society. More often than not, one hears that a woman can either be a good mother and wife or have a successful career.

2. Research methods & analysis

Surveys were conducted among almost 100 women from different cities of urban India and from age groups ranging from 18-65years. While quantitative methods have been used by researchers in the past to understand the delicate relationship between body image and variables such as peer pressure, social, economic & cultural influences, very few qualitative approaches can be found.

The analysis of this paper has been done mostly by taking a qualitative approach to explore the complex feelings women had about their appaearance. Specific objectives for this research with women were (a) to explore body-image satisfaction (b) to explore motivations for changing or enhancingappearance including those related to feelings of power, (c) to examine relationships between appearance and self-esteem, (d)to understand and examine the adverse effects of social pressure , (e) to examine if self-reliance plays a role in self-assurance and (f) to examine and understand positive or negative effects of digital culture.

Research shows that most women feel dissatisfied with their bodies and sometimes powerless in social situations. In general, behaviors undertaken to manage one's appearance run the gamut from mild (e.g., daily grooming, exercising) to extreme (e.g., eating disorders, cosmetic surgeries). Often, it was the influence of others that served as a catalyst to engage in an attempt to change appearance. Family members often teased

participants about their weight or general appearance. Friends, family, school teachers and members of the opposite sex were strong influences during teenage years and continued during adulthood. Comments with regard to the need to lose weight, and to not step out in the sun lest they became dark were among the most common jibes.

2.1. Literature review

India covers many regions and each one is unique of its climate, ethnic groups and culture. The north, which stretches from Kashmir to Rajasthan, has the highest consumption of color cosmetics. Women there have Aryan features and light complexions. Women from the hot and humid east, with soft, Asian features, take extra special care of their skin even if this region is the poorest from an economic standpoint. In the south, where complexions are darker, the tradition of natural products is highly regarded and hair is given particular attention. Lastly, a melting pot of different faces characterizes the west, where the big cities like Mumbai are located. The influence of Bollywood stereotypes and westernization is evident there.

> A rounded, curvaceous body was prized as fertile, "a body for procreating" and remain a symbol of femininity and beauty today. However, there is an additional dimension of slimness that was not as important before. Today, women still value long, dark tresses but they also want their hair to be shiny, soft and smooth. These beauty codes frame the pan-Indian beauty ideal, which exists despite the regional diversity and are embodied by adulated beauty icons such as Aishwarya Rai and Kareena Kapoor. For example, the word "gori", which means "fair", has become a byword for a beautiful woman. (Loreal, Jan 2013)

The Atlas of Beauty is a photography project by a young lady by the name of Mihaela Noroc, who decided to photograph and capture in images the varied notions of beauty across the world. Every woman in her images comes from a different background, culture, society with different restrictions or freedoms and how each one represents certain notions of beauty true to the regions they belong to.

> She thinks that our world needs an Atlas of Beauty to show that diversity is something beautiful, not a reason to conflict" and that the portraits can challenge and question the misconceptions that exist around the word. She believes beauty can teach us all to be more tolerant. (theatlasofbeauty, Jan, 2019)

An example of westernization on non-western beauty is the obsession towards pale skin among East and south Asians. Pale skin is not only an ideal of Asian feminine beauty but also a sign of nobility or aristocracy where the Asian cosmetic giants offer an array of products for their customers to brighten and lighten their skin. (Bray, May, 2002)

Several academic papers talk about the various notions of beauty around the world, specifically the portrayal by the media. One such paper discusses and aims to encourage the celebration of women's bodies and help understand the co relation between self-esteem and body image. It refers to several instances of how body dissatisfaction is mostly influenced by fake illusions of beauty created by the media. The media serve a variety of ideas which influence our choices and perceptions but we need to weigh the negative and positive effects before forming opinions. (Sheena Alcala, March, 2013)

A book I read during my research for the paper discusses the co relation between inner and outer beauty. The chapters cover various aspects of sense of self worth, self esteem, confidence and the importance of belief in one's own abilities that contribute to a more powerful physical presence. Apart from the importance of a healthy lifestyle the ultimate aim remains to be happy with oneself. (Cassandra A. George Sturges, July, 2007)

3. Digital media

The media has a big hand in calling the shots on beauty standards today. The biggest Bollywood actors and actresses endorse skin whitening products. Dark skinned people are presented much lighter in glossy magazines, TV shows and films. Today there are Instagram filters, Snapchat beautification filters and other apps that offer "better lighting." India's skin bleaching business racks in over 450 million a year! *Fair & Lovely*, a skin whitening brand that launched in the seventies is still one of the most profitable brands. Indians never questioned color when the British colonized India back in the eighteen hundreds. They just accepted the idea that the lighter you are, the more of a connection they had with the lighter skinned race. Essentially, power was associated with lighter skin. Pre-colonialism, *Rajas* and *Ranis* (King and Queens) were depicted as light skinned Mughals on murals. The glorification of fair skin within Indian societies goes far beyond simply vanity; it's associated with self-worth, intelligence and privileges. The Indian community believes the paler you are, the more beautiful you are.

3.1. Magazines & print media

Back in the 1990s in the US, we saw Demi Moore, a leading Hollywood actress posing nude and proudly showing off her pregnant belly on the cover of Vanity Fair. It may have taken 20 years but finally in India one sees the likes of leading Bollywood actor Kareena Kapoor and top model Lisa Haydon celebrating their pregnant bodies on covers of fashion magazines. It has inspired several women to appreciate, accept and celebrate their pregnancies and believe that every change in the body is beautiful. Women at baby showers are now seen wearing well-fitted clothes highlighting their baby bumps rather than camouflaging it like women over the years have done.

Print media now features women from different age groups celebrating and accepting the process of change in their appearance. They hope to reach out to more women to help them believe in their beauty, irrespective of age or color. The likes of Bollywood actresses Rani Mukherjee and Kajol who are older than the usual brigade of young film stars and ones that don't conform to the stereotypical norms in terms of complexion, height or weight are gracing magazine covers.

Successful women from varied age groups and with different body types are featured in magazines, women with unconventional lifestyles that inspire others from all walks of life to believe in themselves and to celebrate their imperfections. This is a refreshing change from the emaciated bodies that are heavily photo shopped to perfection. Looking at such imperfect features gives women the confidence and inspiration to appreciate their own physical appearance. Top fashion shoots now don't just have models with fair skin. In fact, one mostly sees dusky models in fashion editorials. Some of the most successful models are tall, lanky and dusky which in itself is a testament to the acceptance of a different kind of beauty.

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/07/30/kajol-elle-india_n_7903928.html

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.pinkvilla.com/entertainment/magazine-covers/vouge-india-april-2010-cover-celebration-indian-skin

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.highheelconfidential.com/tag/vogue-cover/

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from Http://media.vogue.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/cover-cropped.jpg. (n.d.).

4

The flip side still continues at a strong and steady pace. Despite film stars and top models being in shape their bodies are still heavily photo shopped to create the illusion of perfection in the mind of the reader. The images are worked on to create the myth of a perfect body and face which is far from the truth.

Sadly, most models with skinny bodies are preferred by magazines and designers alike. It is a widely known fact that models have been getting their molars removed to have an accentuated jawline.

To remain skinny and to avoid feeling hungry, unhealthy habits such as smoking and use of drugs are on the rise. Aspiring models with dreams of entering the world of fashion and media starve themselves and go through extremes to try and fit the unrealistic definitions of beauty.

With the influx of foreign models, the off shoot has been that the existing Indian models are not getting their due.

3.2. Social media

Access to all forms of social media has brought the world to our doorstep. The obsession with taking selfies and using several filters to enhance how we look can be found all over the internet. Anorexic unhealthy bodies and ones that have been surgically enhanced are being flaunted. Concocted forms of visual representation are being sold and circulated freely on the internet. Impressionable minds are easily influenced by such accounts which lead to further insecurities and the obsession to look perfect continues. In trying to ape their favorite stars a lot of young women are willing to undergo cosmetic surgeries to change their physical appearance. Peer pressure to look a certain way only adds to their misery. Eating disorders and chronic diets are what many people are resorting to in order to lose weight.

However, the survey suggests some positive angles as well. Positive campaigns and wellness blogs are all over, inspiring women of all age groups to choose a healthy lifestyle and to become fit rather than becoming skinny. Majority users of different forms of social media are young people that are choosing health and fitness and resorting to well-balanced foods and yoga practices to lead better lifestyles to enhance their overall appearance. Also, somewhere the awareness and acknowledgement that feeling good, means looking good is gaining momentum.

There has been a great boom in some professions as people are motivated to consult nutritionists and dermatologists instead of undergoing cosmetic surgeries. While back in the day women would let go of their bodies post child birth today young woman are leading healthy lifestyles to get back into shape. Surveys with participants suggest that women would rather choose being authentic over projecting superficial identities.

3.3. TV & film

The Indian film industry is a classic example of the stereo types that exist within Indian society. The mainstream hindi movies & television channels reinforce the ideal woman as one with fair skin, light eyes, longer hair and a slim body. While the media in the south the projection of an ideal woman is one that is voluptuous.

Unconventional looking women like Vidya Balan, Kajol, Rani Mukherjee, Huma Qureshi are now playing lead roles in films.

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.respectwomen.co.in/i-dont-owe-you-perfection-my-body-my-rules-curvy-huma-qureshi-says-in-the-femina-new-cover/

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.sify.com/movies/vidya-makes-it-out-of-disaster-zone-with-this-look-imagegallery-bollywood-nfunmWehdiisi.html

Perhaps the influence of western aesthetics and witnessing the acceptance of brown skin with Indian actor Priyanka Chopra in the US, has made us as a society dig deeper. The definition of beautiful is beginning to hold new meanings. Besides Priyanka Chopra, several other top female actors are dusky and do not have the perfect height or shape but are being widely accepted by fans across India.

Http://time.com/collection-post/4299686/priyanka-chopra-2016-time-100/. (n.d.).

Actors Kerry Washington and Viola Davis, two of the top most television stars in the US are African American women. This has inspired many television channels in India to experiment as well. Now, one does see dusky women on screen, not being restricted to playing negative roles but also the lead. The television and film industry folks are gradually becoming more open minded when casting and writing scripts. Celebrities are seen being candid and open about discrimination & superficiality within their fields. Movie star, Sonam Kapoor is one such celebrity that has been inspirational for several women by being vocal and busting the myth behind all the glitz and glamour.

> It takes an army, a lot of money, and an incredible amount of time to make a female celebrity look the way she does when you see her. It isn't anything to aspire to and that it isn't real. Flawlessness is a dangerous, high-budget myth, and it's time we shattered it. (Sonam Kapoor, Sep 2016)

However, a vast majority is still continuing the stereotypical portrayal of women in television shows owing to the fact that the Indian audience still considers fair as beautiful. The television audience is still an old-school, closed minded one. The fascination with fairness continues to be seen in films too.

> The preferance for white skin implies the existing appreciation for western beauty triggered by the ongoing representation in all forms of media.(Hunter, July, 2007)

The top most female actors in the mainstream film industry fit the stereotypical norms of fair, light-eyed and slim. More roles and choices are on their plate and careers last longer. The unconventional-looking women are therefore, offered more offbeat roles in films.

The cosmetics industry is a billion-dollar industry around the world and is a booming one in India as well. The popularity of fairness creams and bleaches specifically, are off the charts in India. There is so much more weightage being given to appearance owing to social media that an increasing number of people are motivated to alter their looks. Plastic surgerie are becoming very common practice as women aspire to achieve superficial perfection.

Popular physicians are however, highlighting the dangers of obsessing about one's appearance. One such physician stresses about the need for change in our definitions of beauty and talks about not allowing advertisers and mass media to influence us.

> We must be aware of being caught up in this over emphasis on apearance. As physicians, we contribute botox for wrinkles, silicone for saging breasts and diet pills to lose weight and in doing so perhaps, contributing to the problem. Beauty treatments and the desire to look attractive are not bad or wrong and neither are the health care providers who assist with them. The danger lies in allowing our focus on those treatments to pervade our internal self worth. (Jennifer Middleton, Jan, 2013)

3.4. AD Campaigns

Advertising can reinforce unrealistic ideals of beauty and other stereotypes. But a new batch of adverts on Indian television seek to challenge those stereotypes. A dark-skinned woman with a young daughter prepares for her second wedding. A single mother practices long-distance running with her son. A professional with a malfunctioning phone is helped by a housewife. These are some of the adverts now screening on Indian TV that reflect changing times. To depict the remarriage of a woman with a darker complexion can be regarded as ground-breaking, as second marriages are relatively uncommon in India and is evidence that attitudes are changing slowly. It is great to see creative agencies "breaking the mould and pushing progressive social values" as well as "redefining traditional representations" of women. (BBC Monitoring , Nov 2013).

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.wittysparks.com/an-ad-that-intends-social-reform-tanishq/

Upcoming, as well as established brands and designers are beginning to prefer real people for their promotions and campaigns. Emphasizing on the fact that these outfits are for real body types, they find that it helps the brand connect better with their target audience rather than projecting the illusion of the perfect body type by adorning clothes. E.g.: Clothing brand Raw Mango by Sanjay Garg.

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.luxluxmoon.com/blogs/luxluxmoon/a-day-in-angoori-bari-with-sanjay-garg-founder-of-raw-mango

4. Conclusion

Participants seemed to enjoy the opportunity to discuss their feelings regarding their physical appearance and body image. The ability to influence others through some aspect of one's looks was commonly acknowledged, as was being influenced by others regarding appropriate or desirable appearance. They understood that visual representation brings about social rewards and tried, through various means, to enhance their exterior image as much as possible.

Certain measures were taken to change one's aesthetics and were accepted as normal. Mild behaviors were seen in daily grooming procedures such as increasing the use of makeup, frequent styling of hair, waxing & laser hair removal as well as regular physical exercise such as yoga, aerobics classes, playing tennis, jogging, and eating healthy balanced foods. For some, dieting and monitoring their calorie intake was typical. Extreme behaviors included crash diets, smoking, bulimia and other questionable practices. Several women reported their interest in undergoing cosmetic surgery.

Social expectations were often factors that drove the participants to mild or extreme measures.

Being accepted whether by family members and peers during childhood, the opposite sex during adolescence or by significant others and professional peers during adulthood, was an important factor for everyone. Feelings of self-acceptance were more common as the women got older as compared to when they were adolescents. Women with successful careers seemed more at ease with themselves.

Based on this research the conclusion that was formulated was that things are definitely changing for the better. Women are more aware and accepting of themselves. It is a result of education, globalization, and the exposure to all forms of media. Successful careers have given women the confidence to believe in themselves which in turn makes them feel a sense of self-worth. As a society we are more open to accepting and appreciating authenticity and natural beauty. More realistic definitions of beauty are being expressed. While some women did not express feelings of acceptance toward their bodies or general appearance, some certainly did.

Participants believe that personal and cultural factors affect how we evaluate our appearances and our subsequent feelings of self-worth and it will take time to overcome. Many women living in India continue to face great challenges and discrimination and are a great example of both strength and beauty. While the clichés in society with regard to beauty and perfection are deep-rooted, the process of change in the perception and definition of beauty has definitely begun.

References

George, C. A., Sturges. (2007). *The Illusion of Beauty: Why Women Hate Themselves & Envy Other Women Paperback*.

Rudd, N.A., & Lennon, S.J. (1999). Social Power and Appearance Management among Women. In K.K. Johnson & S.J. Lennon (Eds.). *Appearance and Power* (pp. 153–172). Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved May 14 2018, from http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/9781847887221/AANDPOWER0012

Twigg, J. (2013). Magazines, the Media and Mrs Exeter. In *Fashion and Age: Dress, the Body and Later Life* (pp. 97–118). London: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved May 14 2018, from http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/9781474290340/TWIGG0007

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.wittysparks.com/an-ad-that-intends-social-reform-tanishq/

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/07/30/kajol-elle-india_n_7903928.html

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from Http://media.vogue.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/cover-cropped.jpg. (n.d.).

Retrieved from http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-24899031

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://matadornetwork.com/pulse/captivating-portraits-indian-women-show-beauty-across-generations/

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2017-10/Breaking_the_Stereotype-2017.PDF

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/beauty/Have-your-own-definition-of-beauty/articleshow/52039834.cms

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.loreal.com/media/beauty-in/beauty-in-india/a-culture-of-beauty

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.loreal.com/media/beauty-in/beauty-in-india/a-culture-of-beauty/beauty-by-region

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.loreal.com/media/beauty-in/beauty-in-india/a-culture-of-beauty/the-evolution-of-traditional-beauty-codes

Https://www.buzzfeed.com/sonamkapoor/i-didnt-wake-up-likethis? utm_term=.mie7nZbWw#.ttevG2EVB [Digital image]. (n.d.).

[Digital image]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.youthvoices.live/2018/03/05/social-medias-effect-on-teens-physically/

http://theatlasofbeauty.com/

Https://www.businessinsider.com/atlas-of-beauty-photography-project-2016-4?IR=T#but-her-project-has-received-criticism-for-showing-a-narrow-a-definition-of-beauty-there-is-also-negative-feedback-sometimes-but-you-have-to-accept-it-even-if-you-find-it-unfair-she-says-below-a-redheaded-woman-posing-in-san-francisco-usa-34. (n.d.).

http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/east/05/13/asia.whitening/

http://www.academia.edu/3591665/Changing_Notions_of_Beauty_Media_Portrayal_and_Skin_Perception

https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b494/dfa711f2d4869c7c15a7adf9b99a0dbbccb4.pdf

https://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2013/01/change-definition-beauty.html