

Media, Gender and Beauty: The hegemonic role of media in the creation of idealised beauty with special reference to Mens Health magazine

Sabyasachi Dasgupta*

Abstract

The concept of idealised beauty has always been enchanting from the romantic periods till today. From Alice in Wonderlands, the paintings of Monalisa, to cinemas, advertisements and magazines, portrayal of beauty has been the hallmark of all representations. In fact, attracting men has become more important to women for adapting idealised body types. "Fortunately" the definition of what is ideal still remains enigmatic and this is exactly the reason that has made beauty and ideal body types always fleeting. The advertisers are smart enough to tap the sensitive element of a woman, that is her beauty and allure the consumers by connecting beauty to the brands. The focus of this study is to understand how the print advertisements in male magazine have depicted female figures in its edition. This study is taken on the basic assumption that these magazines are viewed mostly by men for fitness, but surprisingly there is a slow but steady percolation of the depiction of sexuality of women representing an idealised alluring figure, that are present in the advertisements of these magazines.

Keywords: Media, Hegemonic, Beauty, Body, Woman, Sexuality, Management, Social, Responsibility

1. Introduction

The World Health Organisation has defined health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity". When the concept of beauty is added to health, it acts like a wrapper to a product. The concept of beauty has from the very ancient times been a matter of allurements and possession. During the Romantic and the Victorian period, the importance of beauty had been specifically emphasised in the literature, paintings and other artistic discourses. Form has changed, but the theme of beauty remains an underlying current even today in different magazines and books. The portrayal of such beauty, which in the Romantic and Victorian times were thought to be ideal and there was a desire to achieve it, today has opened an industry of itself. But the basic foundation of the concept of "ideal" still remains and is one of the salient features which are driving the beauty industry today. The word "ideal" is evasive and elusive and to attain it is to walk on a misty path. The idea of beauty today is mixed with pornography, sexuality, intimacy, clothing, complexion, framing of words and ways of representation. In this paper, the endeavour is to take the Men's Health magazine, and do a critical discourse analysis which would discuss the representation of female model figure in the men's magazines. The paper would finally discuss where the beauty images are leading up to and media's responsibility towards a healthy future.

2. The "Situatdness of Men's Health Magazine"

The magazine Men's Health is essentially a "lifestyle magazine" which provides issues on matters of the health of men. It is basically positioned at teaching men about the arts of living well, having good relationships, looking and feeling, good focusing on physically vitality, great sex, challenging experiences, and enhancing self esteem. According to Professor Pramod Nayar, "Men's Health thrives on this insidious link between the desire to be distinctive and the "culture of expertise" that generates the rhetoric of desire and desirability. The magazine positions only to those male readers, who are affluent, can afford the fashion and are of a certain niche class of the upper strata of society. Of course these magazines strive between "global cultural homogeneity" and individual style. There is a certain sense of erotica in these magazines. The use of the word "erotica" is to signify that the creative communication has no artistic value rather than to stimulate sexual desire.

3. What are Women doing Here, Anyways?

It is an interesting endeavour to look into the advertisements of the Men's Health magazine to figure out the different products that males sell through the exposure of their body. This is expected in a magazine whose sole target audience is male. But what is surprising (and not usually expected) is the number of female that are figuring in the advertisements of the magazines creating sexual pleasure, percolating the concept of what an ideal beauty of a female should be, creating heterosexual imagery considering the heteronormativity of sexuality in India. These advertisements then become a discourse where sex, marriage, relationships, emotions, pleasure and pornography are intertwined. This discourse ranges from the medicalisation to erotica to "porno-chic" where the women's body is commodified. Hence it can well be inferred that the desirable woman becomes the focus of masculine identity. "Representation of women in these magazines" as Professor Nayar points out, "is simply objectification of their bodies". There always remains a potent question of whether, in an advertisement, there is beautification of the brand or the brandification of beauty. This testimonial would be evident in the critical discourse analysis of 4 advertisements spread over different issues of 2009, 2010 and 2011, depicting the hegemonic role of media in the advancement of the beauty industry. These advertisements have been broadly categorised into two divisions: the first set consists of advertisements which deals with the pornography of men and women together in a sexual interaction and the second set of advertisements consists of only female portraying their body to sell the product.

Beauty of sexuality: The concept of beauty in this section is brought about by the degree of sexuality that both men and women enjoy with each other and individually when they are in an erotic relationship. These set of advertisements are not shown with any sense of residency but the point of sexuality as a stimulator for purchase has been made prominent.

The first advertisement falls in the category of cosmetics, the brand being Axe. The advertisement has more of visual space than text space. The advertisement has strip pictures cut from

different moments of the enjoyment of a pleasurable sexual life of a couple. These strip pictures mostly show men and women, enjoying the moments of their touch and intimacy. The eyes of the woman look sly, furtive and filled with a passion of lust. A very seductive tone of the advertisement helps readers to associate with the pornography of the event. Lines like "All done. Now I'm gonna get ready" or "The moment of truth They touch" signify the fact. Even the benefit of the Axe was mentioned in a sexually provocative tone, "His skin can't stop, touching" with noises like "WHOOSH! ZZZAD!" Beauty here is defined as "physically attractiveness" in the advertisements. The female gaze of lust and the men's expression of satisfaction are expressed here. The female body is slim, erotic with half nude dresses, very similar to the Renaissance idea of beauty and to Freud's concept of beauty. The broader frame of the advertisement portray women as an object of sex and they are least cared with whom they are partners. They are enjoying this role and wants men to use more of such good smelling perfumes so that they are attracted to male body. The male readers can feel a sense of easiness to get a woman into sexual act by using a product like Axe is a point to be noted in this advertisement. The use of roughness, tough body and few texts with sounds has added to the ambience to strengthen the positioning of this product. The concept of beauty in this section is brought about by the degree of sexual attraction that both men and women enjoy with each other when they are in wild moments of eroticism.

The second advertisement falls in the category of after shaving lotion, the brand being Old Spice. The advertisement has an equal proportion of visual and text space. The advertisement has a still picture cut from a sea beach with a girl wearing a bikini and an inset picture of a furious tiger. This still picture shows how a product is associated with the nudity of a female body, as if using this product is an invitation to possess the model in the visual. The fierceness of the tiger in the visual shows a wild, primordial instinct to consummate the woman and the product. The use of tiger metaphor in place of man shows the passion and the fierceness of sexual instinct, possible after the product is used. The use of hand bending objects shows the machoism that is associated with the product. Lines like "if you're a man, we have a scent for you" or a line like "if you're not a man, please call me. I love you" bears testimony to seductiveness of the product. Whether there is any hint of bisexuality in this advertisement is also a matter of understanding. The concept of beauty has been percolated in these advertisements through the use of the sexual imagery. The definition of beauty as "it is an aggregate of qualities in a person that gives pleasure to the senses" has been portrayed through the advertisements. The female figure used in the advertisement is fair, seductive and almost naked giving an emphasis on complexion being the primary parameter of beauty. The model used in the advertisement is foreign and hence does not adhere to the average Indian complexion. The broader frame of the advertisement portray women as a Victorian image of commodity with make ups, sexually attractive and having good bath, creams and spas as the ingredients required to be beautiful. The male readers can decode from the advertisement that buying such a product would be a short-cut to get the woman of their aspiration and the product unconsciously increases their benchmark of beauty and the facilitation to their possession.

Beauty of body: The beauty of body shows single women in men's magazine showing their body parts to sell the product.

The first advertisement falls in the category of cosmetics, the brand being Curve. The advertisement has more of visual than of text space. The advertisement has one girl, in a seductive gaze, showing the cleavage of her breasts. This still picture shows a woman with an expression of attractive men to be her possession. The concept of beauty has been percolated in these advertisements through the use of the body imagery. The definition of beauty that "it gives pleasure to the senses" and that it is "graceful and of excellent quality" has been portrayed both in the visual and text of the advertisements. The female figure used in the advertisement is fair and slim and the cleavage of her breasts is the portrayal of the curve that exists in her body contour. This curve is in line with the brand. Edmund Burke was of the opinion that the different aspects of beauty are variety, smallness, smoothness, gradual variation, delicacy, purity, fairness, grace and elegance. The broader frame of the advertisement portrays women as an object of desire and a seller of her body to sell a product. Surprisingly her body and cleavage takes more selling space in the advertisement than the product shot. The male readers can decode from the advertisement that buying such a product would enable him to get such a woman of his choice.

The second advertisement falls in the category of mint, the brand being Ice breakers. The advertisement has more of visual than of text space. The advertisement has one girl, in a happy gaze, showing a slight portion of her cleavage. This still picture shows a woman with an expression of delight as if the secret of a woman's happiness lies in the consumption of the mint. A line like "bring out your flavour" is an example. The concept of beauty has been percolated in these advertisements through the use of the body imagery. The female figure used in the advertisement is fair and slim. According to Edmund Burke, beauty is primarily an objective quality of the body which arouses love that acts on human mind through the senses. The broader frame of the advertisement portrays women as an object of desire and a seller of her body to sell a product. Her pose of a dance highlights a sensual body posture being formed after having the mint. The male readers can decode from the advertisement that buying such a product would enable a woman to be so delighted that she can assume any posture that her male counterpart would want her to be in. To achieve that is to achieve a beauty figure of slimness and exposure.

4. The Media's Mediated Hegemony

Apart from the advertisements that are present in Men's Health magazines, it is interesting to delve a little with the broader framework of media hegemony which is working as an all encompassing agent of the social construction of ideal beauty. An interesting point to ponder is why are standards of beauty being imposed on women? The roots, some analysts say, are economic. By presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain the cosmetic and diet product industries are assured of growth and profits. And it's no accident that youth is increasingly promoted, along with thinness, as an essential criterion of beauty. The stakes are huge. On the one hand, women who are insecure about their bodies are more likely to buy beauty products, new clothes, and diet aids. On the other hand, research

indicates that exposure to images of thin, young, air-brushed female bodies is linked to depression, loss of self-esteem and the development of unhealthy eating habits in women and girls. Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that media images of female beauty are unattainable for all but a very small number of women. Researchers generating a computer model of a woman with Barbie-doll proportions, for example, found that her back would be too weak to support the weight of her upper body, and her body would be too narrow to contain more than half a liver and a few centimetres of bowel. A real woman built that way would suffer from chronic diarrhoea and eventually die from malnutrition. However, advertising rules the marketplace and in advertising thin is "in." Twenty years ago, the average model weighed 8 per cent less than the average woman-but today's models weigh 23 per cent less. Advertisers believe that thin models sell products. The barrage of messages about thinness, dieting and beauty tells 'ordinary' women that they are always in need of adjustment-and that the female body is an object to be perfected. Media activist Jean Kilbourne argues that the overwhelming presence of media images of painfully thin women means that real women's bodies have become invisible in the mass media. Jean Kilbourne concludes that, "Women are sold to the diet industry by the magazines we read and the television programs we watch, almost all of which make us feel anxious about our weight." The real tragedy, Kilbourne concludes, is that many women internalize these stereotypes, and judge themselves by the beauty industry's standards. Women learn to compare themselves to other women, and to compete with them for male attention. This focus on beauty and desirability "effectively destroys any awareness and action that might help to change that climate."

5. Conclusion

It would be interesting to note that, the question and answer section of female magazines reveals the kind of efforts women are undergoing in order to achieve the "advertised" beauty and ultimately fall a prey to unhealthy lifestyle. Even more surprising is the motivation they are receiving from the expert medical practitioner to undertake this surgery and leading the rhetoric towards the "Medicalisation of Beauty". This is a vicious circle. The expectations of male attraction to female bodies have been socially constructed and hence Keat's" concept of beauty as deceiving remains virgin like his "Grecian Urn". These photoshopped images of the magazines increase the expectation of a man to get such a woman in his possession. Now men's "ideal matches" in matrimonial sites resemble the definition of beauty that they have experienced in magazines and other such media. This has lead women into matching with the beauty present not only in female targeted magazines but more so in male targeted magazines as they are frantically trying to match the source of the male definition of beauty to attraction. Once they become aware of the definition of beauty in male magazines, they become aware of what modifications they have to undergo in their body. They land up in the question and answer section of the female magazines to enquire to the experts. The experts instigate them that they are right and there are certain "deformities" in their body that needs rectification and this is a normal process. This leads these women to undergo medical corrections in doctor's chambers or hospitals and the use of different brands to match the "ideal beauty". The reaction of this in feminine circles in that a few gets noticed by the male gaze and others are left out. Hence,

this leads the "others" to become readers of the male magazines to understand why they are left out and the vicious circle is followed. While taking stocks of media, it is our responsibility to make a cautious review of the "vicious circle" and understand our responsibility towards creation of healthy feminine bodies rather than creating idealised beauty body which are unhealthy from inside. If the base of the body is not strong, the sustainability of the outer wrapper will fall in a short time. It should be the motto of the media to educate women to lead a healthy lifestyle and if the source of the definition of beauty for men is the magazines educating them the "ideal beauty", it may well educate them that a healthy female figure is the ideal definition of beauty. All the discourses of beauty around health whether in terms of product or advice should be towards a healthy lifestyle and censors should be strict enough to educate the genders in a right way. It should be our pledge to make media "an efficient vehicle of communication" and not an "efficient weapon of communication".

References

1. *Eco Umberto, History of beauty, Rizzoli international New York, 2004.*
2. *A Report on Mental Illness in Canada. (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2002).*
3. *<http://www.menshealthindia.com/mhindia.htm>.*
4. *Nayar Pramod, The Male Order Catalogue: Constructions of Masculinity in Men's Magazines, Conference paper at Sophia College for Women in "Representation of Gender in Popular Literature and Film" 18-19 January, 2008.*
5. *Anand Anita, The Beauty Game, Penguin, New Delhi, 2002.*
6. *Bordo Susan, Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture and the Body. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993.*
7. *Bishnoi Poonam & Dasgupta Sabyasachi, a conference presentation on "Selling the perfect body", IIT Gandhinagar, 2011.*