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Fetishizing Women: Advertising in Indian Television and its Effects on Target Audiences

By Madhusmita Das¹ and Sangeeta Sharma²

Abstract

Advertising today has become the major driving force behind the various definitions of beauty. It is not “size-zero” models who are responsible for one version of female beauty, but models with skimpy clothes, fair skin, and bare midriffs who assume influential paradigmatic roles in society. Such practices become problematic for India as the standard of beauty appropriated by the media is highly westernized. With this background, the purpose of this study is to explore young girls’ perceptions of media pressure through the portrayal of ultra-thin beautiful models in Indian TV advertisements; and to discover the factors responsible for the internalization of media images by the women and girls. The article reports on a survey of 150 college women, sought for their perceptions of media pressure. This is followed by a theoretical discussion and content analysis of some of the prime time Indian TV advertisements. The analysis was based on the frequency of occurrence of those comprising certain ideals of female beauty. A majority of the respondents agreed that advertisements mostly portrayed young and beautiful models, and respondents felt pressurized by such models to look beautiful and maintain a perfect body shape, influencing their eating patterns and sometimes leading to low self-esteem. The authors hope to educate the advertising industry about the impact of their imagery on women’s self-integrity and to encourage women to think critically about how they internalize such images.

Keywords: Indian advertisements, portrayal of women, body image, internalization, low self-esteem, Indian media

Introduction

Advertisements are a powerful means of social communication. They are an important tool used by marketers to promote their goods, services or ideas to their prospective customers. Kotler

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and Keller (2008) have defined advertising as any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor. Their main aim is to increase sales through positive impressions on audiences, about their products and services, by grabbing their attention, through persuasion in a very short span of time; before turning the page of a magazine/newspaper, before changing the channel of the TV; before clicking the new screen on a computer; and while driving on the highways. Advertising is omnipresent; one cannot escape from the influence of advertising. It has the ability to control the market by creating diverse personal needs, changing attitudes, self-images and preferences. While some consider advertising as a mere economic activity with the single purpose to sell (Frolova, 2014; Rekha & Maran, 2012), others considered it as the mirror and maker of culture (Harun, Teo, Hussin & Nasir, 2014).

Role of Physical appearance in Advertisements

In advertisements physical appearance plays an important role in the process of communicating and convincing, offering a consistent contribution to different kinds of marketing strategies (Lin & Yeh, 2009). As handsome and beautiful models have good brand recall value, advertisers generally try to associate idealized parts of the endorser's body with various products, and in the process, models set a standard of beauty for the audience. Studies have proved that both men (Pope, Phillips, Olivardia, 2000, Agliata & Dunn, 2004) and women (Stice and Shaw, 1994; Heinberg and Thompson, 1995; King, Touyz, and Charles, 2000), being repeatedly exposed to advertisements, try to imitate the models as their role models by using the advertised products. This process of self-modeling has resulted in depression, stress, low confidence, and body dissatisfaction (Mitchison, Harry, Griffiths, Murray, Bentley, Gratwick, Harrison & Mond; 2016), which has been recognised as a precursor to heavy dieting and eating disorders. While women are encouraged to control their weight through dieting; men are expected to mould their bodies through exercise. Thus, women are vulnerable to the culture of thinness (Heinberg, 1996); men are subjected to a culture of hyper-masculinity (Agliata & Dunn, 2004).

Though physical appearance is important for both males and females, and models in advertisements affects both the genders (Cash, 1997), Striegel-Moore and Smolak (2000) note that beauty is the core feature of femininity as portrayed by the media. Helgeson's study (2001) reveals that girls had a greater negative body image and lower self-esteem than boys. Hargreaves & Tiggemann (2004)'s study demonstrates that exposure to images of idealized beauty in the media on the body image of both adolescent girls and boys, led to increased negative mood and appearance comparisons for both; yet, the effect on appearance comparison was stronger for girls. In the Indian context a study conducted by Iqbal, Shah Nawaz & Alam (2006), reveals that though there was a negative correlation between the body image and depression of male and female students, males had significantly more positive body image than females.

Thus, while advertisements also have an impact on males' body image, the present study mainly discusses the impact of advertisements on females. According to Wells, Burnett and Moriarty (2003) in comparison to the other media, television has three key advantages: its influence on consumers perceptions is pervasive; it can reach large audiences in a cost effective manner; and, its sound and moving images create strong emotional and perceptual impacts (p. 280). Thus, this study mainly focuses on television advertisements. The main objective here is to explore how women perceive the impact of the portrayal of beautiful, ultra-thin models in Indian TV advertisements.

Body Image

Body image has been defined in many different ways. Banfield and McCabe (2002) have identified three aspects of body Image: 1) the cognitive dimension which relates to thoughts and beliefs about body shape, 2) body importance and dieting behavior, can be described as behaviors associated with grooming and dieting, 3) perceptual body image, which can be described as the accuracy an individual has when judging her shape, size and weight. McCabe et al, (2007) defined body image as a person's perceptions, attitudes, emotions and personality reactions in relation to his/her own body. It is often measured by asking the person to rate their current and ideal body shapes using a series of depictions. The difference between these two values is the amount of body dissatisfaction. Thus body image refers to the similarity between the actual and perceived ideal body shape (Iqbal et al, 2006). But body image is not static; it can change over time or in a few moments. Studies have demonstrated that it can be influenced by several factors including media exposure, pressure from the family, friends, peer and society.

Portrayal of women in advertisements

Today throughout the world, advertisements are becoming the driving force behind various definitions of beauty. They usually portray the "ideal woman" as tall, white, and thin, with a "tubular" body, and blonde hair (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). Advertisers often began with models, endorsers, actresses or singers, who are already famous, well-liked, thought to be attractive, and spend a lot of effort in matching the idealized part of the endorser's body to a series of products and services such as apparel, cosmetics, and hair accessories. (Englis, Solomon & Ashmore, 1994). The thin ideal is constantly advertised. Many of the models shown on television, advertisements, and in other forms of popular media are approximately 20% below ideal body weight (Dittmar & Howard, 2004), which most women cannot attain. Further airbrushing, digital alterations, and cosmetics surgery increases the unrealistic nature of media images (Thompson et al., 1999). Advertisers also try to spread the wrong message that slim women are beautiful and more successful in life.

The Indian Context

Traditional Indian Beauty

Traditional notions of feminine beauty vary across cultures and generations. India has been a traditionally conservative patriarchal society (Hofstede 1980), where gender roles are strongly related to the prevailing practices in religion and culture. In India, the image of women image has been casted and moulded by years of male dominance and female-subservience (Adhikari, 2014). Women's bodies, eating behaviour, style of dress, and the way women are expected to communicate with others, all represent the culture. Traditionally, the role of women has been viewed as homemakers, devoted wives—loyal, caring, and modest to the dominant husband. The body of women was morphed in accordance to the accepted social ideals of the time and not with their individual will. Every change in body shape was for the sole aim of attracting male attention and generating male approval. The bodies of Indian women were mainly considered useful for reproduction, and the ideal woman was the one who could produce many sons for the family (Zimik, 2016).

Ideals of feminine beauty existed in India since ancient times, which is evident from the preserved sculptures and paintings of female bodies. India has a very rich and long history

regarding the tradition of art and sculpture representing the images of women. Here, an attempt is made to discuss these briefly, before moving to the beauty concept of the contemporary Indian women. The most primitive images of the female figure in India belong to the Mauryan Period. They are a representation of the symbols of fertility or mother goddess. These images portrayed women with large breasts, wide hips and tapering legs. This type of the representation also continues during the Sunga period. The ancient schools of art such as Ajanta, Mathura, and Sanchi, followed a particular posture called the tribangha or pose of the three bends, bent at the hips, waist, and breasts, to provide an 'S' like shape. These sculptures are found at different historical sites of India. The shapes highlight some parts of women's bodies. This 'S' shaped curve had been the standardized beauty during the Kushan period (Bracey, 2007). Even the ancient goddesses, were portrayed with slender bodies, maidens of comely hips and moon-like faces (Dehejia, 1999, refer in Gelles, 2011). According to Gelles (2011) these shapes are idealized rather than natural and were untenable by any woman. The image of the ideal Indian woman has a fair to medium-complexion, a narrow waist but wider hips and breasts, large eyes, full red lips, and long black hair. This image has endured for centuries.

The beauty concept of modern Indian women

Factors including globalization, cultural exchanges, a growing market economy and the rapid development in education and employment; the subsequent participation of women in the labor force, equal rights amendments, led to transformations not only in women's roles but also in the status of Indian women in society (Sukumar & Venkatesh, 2011, p.129). The new Indian woman has a greater sense of empowerment and economic freedom, which is reflected in her changing patterns of consumption. Previously, Indian women concentrated mainly on purchases that were based on family needs and wants; but now, their criteria have been modified by increased exposure to various new ideas and information, and by women's new roles as career women. There is a need within her to look presentable and beautiful. (Gogula & Sreedhar, 200 p.171). The traditional notions of beauty are changing. Society now values an "international" standard of beauty, propagated by the advertisers, while sharing the television space with the advertisements of foreign companies (Poorani, 2012). Thus, women and girls of developing countries like India, have increased exposure to Western media images, which is resulting in a growing concern with physical appearance (Kapadia, 2009, pp.4-11). According to Munshi,

Until the 1980s, it was fine to be well-rounded and even voluptuous, and films and advertisements of those years reflect this; with the advent of the 1990s, Indian cinema and advertising reflected the arrival of the perfectly sculpted body to meet exacting international standards. It no longer matters that the international blueprint for beauty does not match the time-honored, indigenous one: way taller than the average Indian woman with never-ending legs, (200, p.85)

Advertisers have been quick to cash in on, and use these images to their advantage, creating certain needs and wants according to the behavior and expectations of society. Artificial wants are being created in the name of new looks, beauty, glamour, and power; real human needs and values are interchangeable with consumer goods (Rathee, 2010). To create these desires, advertisers exploit the insecurities of women, thereby creating more uncertainty and anxiety. Since most products fails to deliver what they advertise, consumers continue to look for new and improved

ways to fill a void that was constructed by the advertising world in the first place (Wallowit, 2007 p. 18).

In the contemporary urban Indian context, the media-driven consumer culture mirrors western ideals of the perfect body—perfectly shaped, toned and exercised. Advertisements take advantage of the Indian craze for fair skin, especially for girls. Young girls have become the target of various skin lightening creams, encouraged to become fair to either attract a husband or to get a job. It seems that fair skin is the only ticket to success and all other qualifications and qualities are irrelevant (Munshi, 2001). The redefined, idealized notion of Indian feminine beauty represents a toned, slim, fair-skinned, and tall woman who can relate with western notion of beauty and blend easily among these ideals. The entry of models and heroines of Indian origin in western fashion and entertainment industries are also partly responsible for this huge change (Zimik, 2016).

The effect on women

Limited studies have been conducted on this issue in the Indian context. Therefore, we draw on studies in the western context, to examine how women have been affected by idealized notions of beautiful and ultra-thin models portrayed by the media, especially in advertisements.

The models, often used in advertising are comprised of exaggerated features and are very thin, using technology to make them smaller. Only a small percentage of women can meet the criteria the media uses to define “beautiful”; yet, so many women are repeatedly exposed to media images that send the message that a woman is not acceptable if she does not match society’s “ultra-thin” standard of beauty (Dittmar & Howard, 2004, pp. 478). Stice and Shaw (1994) observe that exposure to ultra-thin models make women unhappy, feel shameful and depressed, resulting in low self-confidence. Unger & Crawford (1996) also explore the parallel results that women, when exposed to the thin ideal, consider themselves bigger, fatter, and wider than they really are, and thus develop distorted body perceptions. Harrison (2001) found that exposure to the thin ideal of media is associated with increased eating disorder symptoms in girls. Thus Wolf (2002, p.74) is right in observing that advertisements force women to dismiss their mothers’ teachings about beauty, adornment and seduction. Hargreaves and Tiggermann (2004) reveal that exposure to the thin ideal also has an indirect effect on male expectations of female appearance, which indirectly has an effect on female body image.

Reserach conducted by Jung (2006) sought to discover the effects of exposure to attractive models in the media, on women’s mood and body image. Findings suggest that the thin ideal of attractiveness may negatively affect women’s moods. Grabe, Ward & Hyde (2008) similarly report that constant exposure to the thin ideal depicted in the media may be linked to body image disturbances in women. A meta-analysis of 47 experimental studies by Want (2009) reveals that girls and women experience greater body dissatisfaction when they are exposed to thin models compared to the average size models. Mask and Blanchard (2011) demonstrate that body dissatisfaction and eating disorders among the women are directly linked to their exposure to the thin ideal. Similarly, Sheehan’s study (2013) also reveals the relationship among media portrayal of the thin ideal, self-image and self-esteem of college going girls.

In the Indian context, a comparative study conducted by Gupta et al. (2001) of girls between 18-24 in India and Canada, found that Indian girls were more concern about the weight of their upper torsos (i.e. face, neck, shoulder and chest). Batra (2007) carried out a study on body dissatisfaction experienced by Indian women who are regular readers of foreign print magazines,

revealing that all the women are not affected to the same extent but vary by the degree to which they are exposed to visual imagery.

Karan's study (2008) revealed that a majority of the respondents in Hyderabad and Andhra Pradesh blamed advertising for glorifying fairness and compelling them to use fairness products. Kapadia (2009), while doing research on the influence of media on the body image of Indian women, noted that a majority of Indian women were dissatisfied with the size of their bodies. She also highlighted that women were aware of the impact that the media had on their body image and they usually compared themselves with their friends, family members and movie actresses.

Dixit et al. (2011) carried out a study among adolescence girls to find out their views of their body image, revealing that the level of dissatisfaction was higher among the girls from urban areas compared to rural girls. They found that girls who were already perceived as thin nonetheless, wished to be thinner. Another study conducted by Rekha and Maran (2012) in Chennai found that 30% of women in the study claimed they felt pressure from the advertisements. Women overestimated their body sizes and held as ideal, a thinner image when exposed to thin models in advertisements. The study highlighted that the culture of thinness in advertisements leads to body dissatisfaction among women which further manifest into eating disorders.

Even within the contemporary advertising milieu, standards of beauty have continued to change. Park (2005) noted that the body size of women portrayed in the mass media has been steadily getting smaller. According to Kover (2009) body mass, bust, and hip measurements have decreased; however, height has increased. Dittmar and Howard (2004) state that ultra-thin models are so prominent that exposure to them is unavoidable, indeed *chronic*, constantly reinforcing a discrepancy for most women and girls between their actual size and the ideal body.

In addition, researchers have found that body dissatisfaction is correlated with different forms of psychological impairment. The prominence of dieting and maladaptive eating patterns has become an increasingly prevalent concern in adolescent and young adult populations (Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012; Tiggemann, Polivy, & Hargreaves, 2009). Approximately two-thirds of adolescent females report dieting at some point (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002). Body dissatisfaction and preoccupation with food, shape, and weight are some of the core features in the diagnostic criteria of both anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Binge eating is a central feature of bulimia nervosa. This includes eating an unusually large amount of food in less time than one might normally take and having no sense of control over eating during the episode. Other diagnostic criteria for bulimia nervosa include utilizing inappropriate compensatory behaviors to prevent weight gain, like self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives, fasting, and excessive exercise (Kapadia, 2009. p. 14).

Besides these, eating disorders may induce secondary health issues including severe malnutrition, menstrual problems, sexual and social maladjustments, and massive weight fluctuations. Media exposure predicts body dissatisfaction, thin body ideals, and eating disorders among preadolescent girls and young women (Harrison & Hefner, 2014).

Objectives

The primary objectives of the study are:

- To explore how young girls perceive the impact of portrayal of ultra-thin beautiful models in Indian TV advertisements in their own lives;
- To find out why people internalize media imagery;

- To suggest possible solutions to prevent the impact of advertising.

Methodology

Primary data was collected from the students of BITS Pilani, Pilani campus. The institute was selected purposively, as it is one of the top ranking private engineering institutes of India (Outlook, 4th July, 2016; India Today, 21st May, 2016). It is purely a residential institute and 90% of its population are from outside Pilani, representing different parts of India, thus comprising a heterogeneous group. Since a four-year degree programme is offered by the institute, the sample size constituted female students across the four years. A questionnaire was distributed randomly to girls in their hostels, i.e. in every alternative room in the presence of the researcher. Girls, all between the ages of 18-24, were given 90 minutes to complete the questionnaire, and in between they were given the freedom to ask questions in case of any doubts. Out of 310 questionnaire 170 questionnaires were returned, of which 20 were rejected as incomplete, while in some, the same option was marked for all the questions.

After exploring respondents' perceptions, the study sought to discover factors responsible for their internalization of media imagery, harnessing theories of internalization, and through content analysis of some cosmetics advertisements. Advertisements that were broadcasted in the five top rated private Hindi general entertainment channels (Star plus, Sony, Sab TV, Zee TV, Colors) in Indian TV were watched during prime time for a month (1st March 2016–31st March 2016). Channels were selected on the basis of their TRP. Ads with at least one woman character were taken in to consideration. Ads with cartoon characters, public service advertisements; without any female character, with males or children were excluded from the list. Finally 576 advertisements were recorded of which 48% related to personal care products or cosmetics. Ads that were repeated most frequently became the focus of the study with the objective of exploring how young girls perceive the impact of the portrayal of ultra-thin beautiful models in Indian TV advertisements, in their own lives. The study also highlighted the prevalence of cosmetics and personal care products as dominant product category on prime time in Indian TV.

Significance of the study

From the above discussion it is clear that the ideal of ultra-thinness is constantly advertise, associating fairness and beauty with increased marriage eligibility, career achievement, and other positive outcomes. As women and adolescent girls in particular, become increasingly exposed to the constant pressure of such ads, they also become increasingly concerned about their appearance. As stated above, limited studies have been conducted on this issue in the Indian context; therefore, this study contributes the body of data created by the few existing studies. Kavita Karan's study of skin lightening intersected with women's achieving other personal goals (Karan, 2008). Rekha & Maran (2012) explored the relationship between advertisements and perceptions of women's body image. The present study incorporates these aspects and also seeks to discover the factors responsible for the internalization of the media images, while offering solutions.

Results and analysis

Objective 1: To explore how young girls perceive the impact of the portrayal of ultra-thin beautiful models in Indian TV advertisements in their own lives.

The questionnaire consisted of 13 items. Responses were recorded through the five point Likert scale (Strongly Agree–5 to Strongly Disagree–1). The reliability of the questionnaire was checked by measuring the Cronbach’s alpha. Reliability refers to the dependability or consistency of the data which is repeated or recurs under identical or very similar conditions (Neuman, 2006, p. 188). The Cronbach’s alpha of the questionnaire is .839; which can be considered enough for the instrument to be used for the study. According to Hair, Black, Badin, Anderson and Tatham (2007) a value of .60 to .70 is considered the lower limit of acceptability (p. 126). To discover perceptions of adolescents, the mean of each item was calculated. According to Harry and Deborah (2012) if the Likert questions were stand alone, they should be analyzed as Likert type items, where modes, medians and frequencies were the appropriate statistical tools to use. Therefore, the study while analyzing the perception of the audience through the structured questionnaire (item wise/ as Likert type items), also calculated the frequency and mode of the item.

Table 1 Perception of the respondents about the media pressure (in percentage)

Item no.	Items	SD	D	UN	A	SA
1	Majority of ads depict young and beautiful women	0.70	2.00	3.30	38.00	56.00
2	Ads generally suggest to women that beauty and body image should be their main concern	3.30	35.30	5.30	45.30	10.70
3	Majority of ads show female body excessively & unnecessarily	1.30	36.00	7.30	42.00	13.30
4	Ads generally show women as accessories for men’s products like men’s wear, shaving cream, razors etc.	10.70	34.00	2.70	42.30	11.30
5	Usually women models in ads are the role model for me to follow	12.70	30.00	2.60	53.30	2.00
6	Usually I can easily associate myself with the habit/dressing style/body image of model in ads	14.00	28.70	8.70	48.00	0.70
7	The cumulative effects of the ads force women viewers to compare their body and body parts with the models in ads	15.30	22.70	3.30	54.70	4.00
8	I feel pressure from the ads to look beautiful	22.00	26.00	0.00	41.30	10.70
9	I feel pressure from the ads to have a perfect body image	26.00	20.70	1.30	36.00	16.00
10	The constant exposure to the media image in ads influence my eating behaviour	30.70	18.00	4.00	14.70	32.70
11	The constant exposure to the media image led to the low esteem of the women and girls	10.00	24.70	6.70	50.00	8.70
12	Ads that show women as sexual objects encourage other women to feel free about their sexuality	4.70	28.70	4.70	56.00	6.00
13	Ads should use more normal looking women	1.30	54.00	6.00	27.30	11.30

*SD- Strongly disagree, D- Disagree, UN- Neutral, A- Agree, SA- Strongly agree

Table 1 demonstrates the data regarding the perception of the respondents on several items that were under the purview of the study. Ninety-one percent of the respondents believe that a majority of ads depict young and beautiful women; whereas more than 50% of the respondents believe that ads generally suggest to women that beauty and body image should be their main concern (56%); the majority of ads show the female body excessively and unnecessarily (55%); ads generally show women endorsing men's products like men's wear, shaving cream, razors and the like (53%); usually they follow the model in ads as their role model (55%). The cumulative effects of the ads force them to compare their body and body-parts with the models in ads (59%); they feel pressure from the ads to look beautiful (52%) and to have a perfect body image (52%); constant exposure to the imagery produced low esteem in women and girls (59%); ads that show women as sexual objects (62%). More than 40% of the respondents accept that the constant exposure to the imagery in ads influences their eating behaviors; moreover, typically they model their own habits of dressing and styling their bodies in the images of models in the ads (49%). Finally more than 55% of the respondents do not agree with the statement that the ads should use normal looking women. Given this background the next step in our research was to explore the factors that are responsible for such internalization of the media image.

Objective 2: To explore why people internalize media imagery?

The internalization of the thin ideal

From the above discussion it is clear that repeated exposure to these thin ideal media images is consistently linked with women's body dissatisfaction, internalization of the thin ideal, and eating disorders. But all the women and girls are not equally affected the same. The present study also highlights that more than 40% of the respondents disagreed with media pressure to have perfect bodies and faces, or that their eating patterns were influenced by them. These differentials can be explained via social comparison theory, cultivation, and self-schema theories, developed by psychologists about the internalization of media images into body dissatisfaction.

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory proposed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954 explains how individuals evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others, in order to reduce uncertainty in these domains, and learn how to define the self (Kramer; Ingledew & Iphofen; 2007). The theory explains how media images influence the way women feel about their bodies. People compare themselves through many different dimensions with other individuals who are similar to them. An upward comparison occurs, when an individual compares himself/herself to someone who is better than he/she in a particular domain. In contrast, downward comparison involve a person comparing himself/herself to someone who is not as well off as they are in a certain dimension. According to Schooler et al. (2004), upward comparisons have been found to correlate with depression of mood, whereas downward comparisons are more likely to elicit elevation of mood.

Advertisements provide a plethora of references for upward social comparison. Images in the media generally project a standard to which women are expected to aspire, though that standard is almost impossible for most women to achieve (Schooler et al., 2004). Actually the main objective of most advertisements is to target women to foster social comparison with idealized images, so that they can motivate women to buy the advertised products that will bring them closer to advertisers' ideal image. (Thompson & Coovert, 1999) Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, (2004) claimed that most of the time, when women compare themselves to other women

in the media, they are more prone to negativity and low self-esteem about their body Image. The level at which a woman reports comparing herself to other women seems to be associated with the level at which she internalizes the thin ideal. It has been proposed by many researchers that social comparison may be the mechanism by which unrealistic media standards are translated into actual body image disturbance in individuals. Women who report higher levels of social comparison are at greater risk to develop extreme preoccupation with weight and appearance, and are also more likely to display disordered eating patterns and/or clinical eating disorders.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory is a social theory, developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross that examines the long-term effects of television viewing. Cultivation theorists argue that as women are constantly exposed to the tall, thin, extremely beautiful media images, there is a cumulative effect over time, in that many adopt this unrealistic standard of beauty as reality. Many women come to view ultra-thin women as normal, thereby determining that any woman who does not live up to this ideal is abnormal (Schooler et al., 2004; Tiggemann, 2003). This ultimately leads to decreased satisfaction with their own bodies, a strong desire to be thinner, and disordered eating behavior (Schooler et al., 2004, p. 38).

Self-schema Theory

Self-schema theory was developed by Markus in 1977. It predicts that some people would be particularly sensitive to body-related media messages, and that information contained in media images would be incorporated into, and would affect, that person's concept of self (Markus, Hamill, & Sentis, 1987).

Schemas influence the processing of information about the self in a number of domains like personality, sex role identity, the social self, and body weight, shape or appearance. People who are schematic for physical appearance, they are more focused on their appearance or look, as a standard of self-evaluation and they would encode, process and react more to the appearance related stimuli than the normal people (Blood, 2005, pp. 26-27). (Sylvia K. Blood, 2005, *Body Work: The Social Construction of Women's body Image*; Routledge: London and New York, pp. 26-27)

Self-schema theory is based on three points, which women use to construct their perceptions of their own physical appearance: the socially represented ideal body, the objective body, and the internalized ideal body. The socially represented ideal body refers to what an individual believes is expected by society with respect to physical appearance and beauty. In contrast, the objective body involves a person's own evaluation of her body. The internalized ideal body involves the level at which an individual endorses the ideal image and aspires to achieve it.

If there is a large discrepancy between a person's internalized ideal body and their objective body, a person's confidence and satisfaction with their appearance is often negatively affected. With exposure to repeated images of ultra-thin women in advertisements, an individual's internalized ideal body often becomes much thinner. This increases the gap between what a person feels their physical appearance is, and what it should be. Sands & Wardle (2003) have found that women who have an internalized ideal body that closely resembles the socially represented ideal

body are at a particularly high risk to develop body image disturbance and disordered eating patterns.

We now move onto an analysis of some of the Indian TV advertisements that reflect the characteristics we have been discussing.

Analysis of advertisements

Fair skin in India is often said to transcend all other aspect of beauty. Tumato (2007) describes it as “Colonial Hangover.” Indian girls are taught from a young age that fair and lovely go hand in hand, which will lead to a successful marriage and career, while, on the other hand, darker Indian girls are berated for their darkness and compared to their lighter skinned kin. Marketers have exploited this phenomenon to their advantage in promoting fairness creams, lotions and soaps, spreading the wrong message that fairness is associated with increased marriage eligibility, career achievement, and other positive outcomes. Thus, the Indian market is flooded with these fairness creams. Overall, the ads promised not only the lighter skin, but also clear and radiant skin that glows, prevention of skin dryness, sunscreen protection, and long hair. The ads assert that users will achieve fairness in four to six weeks. (Karan, 2008)

Fair & Lovely, the largest selling skin whitening cream in the world, was launched in India in 1975 (Karnani, 2007). It claims to offer dramatic whitening results in four to six weeks. Its package also displays one face six times, in an ever-whitening progression, and includes ‘before’ and ‘after’ photos of a woman who presumably used the product. Its commercials typically contain the message of a depressed woman with few prospects, who gains a brighter future by either gaining a boyfriend/husband or a job after becoming remarkably fairer. The message indicates that fair skin and beauty are the sole requirements for a successful life.

Olay uses the film star Kajol to advertise a “total effect” cream. The ad first tries to make the viewers aware of different ageing signs such as dark spots and dullness, uneven tone, roughness, pores, lines, dry and patchy skin, before advertising the solution, i.e. Olay Total Effect, that promises to provide younger looking skin. The brand ambassador, Kajol, brought this idea to life, as she narrated her life story about how Olay Total Effect, has helped her look young and beautiful throughout her life. She explains how regular use of the cream helps to reduce the appearance of fine lines, soothes dry skin, evens and smoothens skin tone and texture, and minimises the appearance of pores, while helping to protect the skin’s moisture barrier for a firmer skin. On the whole it passes the message onto women that they should not neglect their body image or beauty, at any stage of their life. These should be their primary concerns, even if after their marriage and becoming mothers (Times of India, 2009).

Matlin’s (1987) sixth stereotype states that women’s bodies are used differently from men’s bodies in advertisements. Soap advertisements for men focus on good health, but for women it is only for attaining beauty. The Lux soap ad is an apt example of successful celebrity endorsement. It does not talk much about the product, but rather, concentrates more on the presentation and glamor. The brand has evolved its slogan from “the beauty bar of film stars” to “brings out the star in you”. It has always portrayed top actresses from Leela and Madhubala, to Madhuri and Aishwarya; who are, bathing openly and mouthing the magic words “meri sundarta ka raaz hai lux” (the secret of my beauty is Lux) and convey only a single message that beauty should be the sole aim of a woman, achieved only by using Lux.

Santoor soap one of the largest selling, popular soaps in India. The brand has a series of catchy advertisements, where the promise is ‘younger looking skin’ and looking younger than

one's age. The advertisement shows the protagonist, a married woman with a child, who is often mistaken for a college girl. The image capitalizes on the changing status of Indian women, from housewives, who stay at home to look after children, to educated, outgoing and career-oriented women. The brand imagery of mistaken identity remained constant, even while the Santoor woman moved from being a homemaker, to a woman who excelled in her career as much as she excelled as a mother. Thus the message conveys that whether a woman is a housewife or an educated, career-minded woman, her attention to her beauty should be primary.

Parachute Advanced Body Lotion's ad is very sensuous in nature, seeking to convey the message of soft skin that tempts you to touch it again and again, using the tagline "Love Dobra". The ad shows how a wife flaunting a low-waist saree, invites her husband to come and take the keys hanging from her waist. In addition, the size and shape of the bottle is something new. It recalls a curvy, female body, implying an ideal body—a less explicit source of comparison and potential self-dissatisfaction.

The L'Oreal Paris Shampoo ad, features the brand ambassador Aishwaraya Rai Bachchan, who conveys the brand's message through testimonial advertising, urging viewers to switch to L'Oreal's new total Repair 5 shampoo, as it protects hair from 5 problems: dryness, roughness, dullness, fall, split ends. She looks so beautiful and gorgeous in that ad that she attracts the viewers towards her in first few seconds and then towards the products. The advertisement fosters upward comparison among viewers, creating a large discrepancy between a person's internalized ideal body and their objective body, resulting in low self-esteem and potential body image disturbance. Gupta (2003) pointed out that celebrities may be successful in drawing consumers' attention by piquing their interest or desire.

Sunsilk's shampoo ad campaign in India features former Miss World and Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra, representing the dream of Indian women and girls: to have gorgeous shining hair. The main idea of the advertisements is to make your hair happen, since life can't wait.

In addition to the above mentioned advertisements, there are hundreds of others which are responsible for fostering upward social comparison, generating comparative and cumulative effects, misleading women regarding ideal body image and beauty, sensitizing them to body-related media messages and images. For instance: Veet cream advertised by Kartina, is supposed to provide youthful and moisturized skin within three minutes. Besides cosmetic ads, even ads for products that have no connection with beauty and body image, such as Complian health drink, Sani fresh toilet cleaner, Slice Amsutra, Sunfeast Dark fantasy biscuits, Tide detergent, Philips iron, TVS Wego and many more, all mislead women and girls, by portraying underweight, slim models, fixing a standardized body image and beauty in the public's imagination.

The above discussion makes it abundantly clear that advertisements generally foster an upward comparison between viewers and advertisers' ideal image of women, by motivating them to buy the advertised products, gradually incurring various physical and psychological health related problems.

Objective 3: Solutions to prevent the impact of advertising.

Reducing the effect of media imagery

Psychologists have suggested that people can be made resistant to the negative effects of media imagery by changing their ways of interpreting social information. If social comparison theory is accepted as a valid explanation of the mechanism through which unfavorable comparisons are made, media literacy techniques are required to assist women's capacity to reject media images as appropriate targets for self-comparison (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995). Media

literacy interventions involving critical analyses of the content of media messages has been advocated to prevent internalization and social comparison processes (Levine & Piran, 2004). Maddox (2005) has suggested that since so many women make comparisons with media ideals, teaching women to focus on downward comparisons with the parts of their bodies that are superior to those of the models may be helpful. If women are motivated toward self-improvement, rather than self-evaluation then upward comparisons with media images do not increase body-focused anxiety (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004). According to Rita Freedman, body image disturbance is an individual problem caused by faulty cognition about the body, irrational thoughts, and unrealistic and faulty explanations. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) could be used to train people how to resist media pressure, by challenging faulty cognition when faced with idealized media images, and instead to develop new ways of conceptualizing incoming information (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995, Freedman, 1990).

Societal and institutional changes are necessary to de-emphasize unrealistic physical standards of beauty established by the advertisement world. An article in *Times of India* stated that ads for Maybelline, L'Oreal and Lancome were banned in Britain for being too airbrushed and projecting "overly perfected" beauty. Even Kellogg's 'Special K' advertisement has been banned in the UK for misleading customers about the calorific value of a bowl of cereal, but it is still aired in Indian TV. The Advertising Standard Council of India (ASCI) offers the explanation that it might not be the exact same advertisement (The Times of India, 2012).

Researchers have proved that women intended to be successful in reducing the weight related anxiety by adopting various interventional approaches (Yamamiya et al., 2005; Ogden and Sherwood, 2008, Ogden et al., 2011). NGOs can follow these approaches or can develop new interventions to address these issues by conducting training, counselling and development programmes on media sensitization, organizing street plays and workshops on health and nutrition, obesity management to make the adolescence girls and women aware of the importance of a healthy and sound body. Educational campaigns can help girls and women believe that they deserve an improved place in the world. Government should take the initiative to introduce the media literacy programmes at the ground level i.e. at school and college level to help the young girls to analyse the media and the message critically before accepting them. NGOs can sensitize the young girls about how the shape of the ideal media models have decreased over the years, resulting the increase in body dissatisfaction, the truth behind the media image- how unrealistic media beauty ideals are prepared using the technology like airbrushing and make-up. The schools and colleges or various community should organise focus group discussions with the beauticians of the beauty ideals, to demonstrate how the ideals portrayed in the media are often unrealistic. It can also include the before and after make-up photographs of the media ideals. The case study of the Dove Self –Esteem campaign can also be discussed in this context to reveal the truth behind the media images. The young girls and women should be given assurance that even each of them can be transformed into the media ideal by using the beauty tricks. They should strive for what Bordo has encouraged:

“Even when you hate your normal-sized body so much that you want to tear chunk out of it, you have to get up, eat your meal, and get on with your day; you have to learn to say those two terrifying little words: I'm hungry” (2010, p. 31).

Conclusion

The depiction of women in advertisements often represents unrealistic and unattainable standards of feminine beauty. The “Barbie Doll Figure” is constantly shown through advertising, which is impossible to achieve. Models shown in advertisements send constant message that women must sacrifice their physical and psychological health to be considered attractive by societal standards. This creates frustration and disappointment for women and leads to unhealthy eating behaviors. Advertisements never encourage women to be satisfied with their own shapes, or to have a healthy body image, but rather to work hard to attain low weight and toned bodies by using the advertised products. Yet, as the study clearly demonstrates, a majority of respondents nonetheless prefer contemporary portrayals of women and follow them as their role models. As Bordo rightly states:

"Society cannot grow and develop if half of its citizen spend their energies physically and psychologically shrinking themselves... Fear of female flesh is fear of female power, and reclaiming women's bodies must go hand in hand with reclaiming women's power. This cannot be achieved simply by purchasing expensive body lotion... Women should take some stand on their part; they should challenge traditional media concepts of slim as beautiful" (2010, p. 35).

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