Dismantling the Beauty Myth: Critiquing Social Media Impact and Body Politics

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Abstract

Defining beauty and body has always been a major concern of societies of different periods. Multiple discourses provide the image of 'ideal body and beauty' which plays a pivotal role in structuring the minds of people, based on which they make themselves fit for that era. There always exists a visible constant struggle between people and the norms that are set by the hegemonic power groups. This paper strives to place its primary focus on how the beauty norms and structures of society have constructed a generation of people having manipulable bodies through the strong influence of social media. In analyzing this prospect, Michel Foucault's concept of "Docile Bodies" has been used, a term he introduced in his work Discipline and Punish (1975). This paper attempts to draw attention to how Foucault's idea of docility still works in the field of beauty and the ways in which these are exerted.
Keywords: Docile Bodies, Body Images, Beauty Standards, Body Positivity, Hegemony, Consumerism.

Beauty and body image have long been subjects of cultural, social and individual perception. These images have a strong influence on people in how they see themselves and in determining one's self-worth, confidence and even identity. These constantly evolving ideal images of beauty are frequently portrayed through media, advertisements and fashion which pressurizes people to conform to them to fit in the society. Therefore, the concept of beauty blurs the line between self-expression and societal expectations. In the 1950s and 60s, the beauty of a woman was associated with a curvaceous body, and therefore a full-figured woman was the ideal woman of beauty for a very long period. Now the idea of 'getting beautiful' has completely altered. The time has changed from an age when beauty was considered to be inborn, to an age when beauty has become something that could be made out of. This paper is an attempt to trace this shifting approach towards the concept of beauty and how it has drastically affected the creation of body images. This paper also strives to analyze how Michel Foucault's concept of docility pervades the field of beauty creating docile bodies of beauty.

Women are the only category who are mostly subjected to idealization and objectification based on beauty and body. By dressing up, putting makeup on, doing hairstyles, and following a particular trend, women tried to compete with these ideal images of beauty.

Though both men and women are affected by these ideals, the insecurities induced in women about having self-worth and identity, force them to chase these images. American feminist and writer Naomi Wolf in her work *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (1990) provides her observations on how society is using the concept of beauty to socially control and oppress women by infusing insecurity and self-doubt. She argues that beauty standards were imposed to keep women insecure, submissive and distracted, preventing them from realizing their true potential. From her observations, we could also understand how fashion, cosmetic and dieting industries profit from women's insecurities and self-doubt. While the book explores issues like eating disorders and cosmetic surgeries, it also delves into the emotional burden carried by women trying to meet impossible beauty standards.

> Female fat is not in itself unhealthy. But female fat is the subject of public passion, and women feel guilty about female fat, because we implicitly recognize that under the myth, women's bodies are not our own but society's, and that thinness is not a private aesthetic, but hunger a social concession exacted by the community. A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession with female beauty but an obsession with female obedience. (Wolf 187)

In the context of beauty standards, this highlights how societal ideals are not just about aesthetics or appearance but also about control. The pursuit of a particular standard, whether it is thinness or any other ideal, reflects how women are encouraged, even pressured, to regulate their behavior, habits, and lifestyle to align with these norms. Wolf's argument is also proof of how body ideals have changed over centuries and beauty has become a myth that is associated with the thinness of the body. In short, now thinness has become the new body ideal. We could draw attention here to how women compete with an ideal body image by creating a body that is compliant and self-regulating, shaped by the constant surveillance and reinforcement of cultural ideals. The emphasis on these standards, therefore, became less about personal expression and more about adhering to societal rules, subtly enforcing obedience and conformity under the guise of beauty. This aligns with Michel Foucault's idea that power operates not through force, but through the internalization of norms, making people active participants in their disciplining.

Michel Foucault's introduction of the concept of 'docile bodies' in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975) provides an insight into how the body was manipulated by the state. In "Docile Bodies," he speaks about how over a century a soldier's body has turned to be something pliable from that which is naturally possessed. The seventeenth-century soldier was "someone who could be recognized afar" bearing "certain signs" of his strength and courage. These are people who are naturally lively, and alert, and possess "an erect head, a taut stomach, broad shoulders, long arms, strong fingers, small belly, thick thighs, slender legs and dry feet". But by the eighteenth century, the body never became a hindrance to becoming a soldier. By that time, the body had become a "formless clay" from which anything could be made. Body befitting a soldier's profile was not necessary anymore to fit into the profession, even a poor peasant could be made one through vigorous exercises and discipline (Foucault 135). Similarly, in terms of beauty also, the body has turned to clay, which could be made into desirable forms and shapes creating docile bodies of beauty.

If we trace the past, we get a vivid idea of how the notion of beauty has undergone tremendous change over time. Movies, magazines, and advertisements are often the reflections of society's beauty standards. Earlier beauty standards were connected with class and wealth, and therefore the distinction between the rich and the poor was evident. During the Elizabethan age, beauty was based on the paleness of the skin for which royal and wealthy women applied lead on their faces neglecting its side effects on the body. The use of the 'golden-ratio' by the Greeks, in order to measure the attractiveness of the face, was another notable criterion through which a person's

beauty was measured. Having perfectly symmetrical thirds was another touchstone of measuring beauty even though the question of measurability of beauty remains unanswered. The body became the central focus of analyzing beauty in later periods. In the 1950s and 60s, the ideal figure of beauty was a woman possessing a voluptuous and curvaceous body. Marilyn Munroe and Grace Kelly were two 'full-figured' women who set the standard for beauty. In ancient Greece, Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual love and beauty, was often portrayed with curves. Hourglass body shape is still one of the most ideal shapes of body a woman could possess. In the past, corsets were used by European women to enhance body shape. Although these trends still exist, the concept of beauty has now been focused on molding the body into any desired body type.

Manipulating body structure based on trends and beauty standards is one of the recent phenomena that is globally exercised by people. Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and YouTube play pivotal roles in influencing people's lives in a way that they make us follow various strategies to maintain a perfect body. Health and beauty have now become indistinguishable. But social media is creating a false notion that leading to very scheduled and strict habits of food and exercise make us attain a toned and fit body. People still cannot grasp the fact that the physique of a body is not always the point of reference for being healthy. Everybody is made different, and thus the 'healthiness' of one body is not the same for the other. In a way, social media is having a bad influence on people by confusing them with beauty and health. Following a healthy lifestyle as a way to attain a perfect body specifies this. The essence of life has become achieving an ideal body by restricting and controlling ourselves from eating our favorite food, by compromising in 'healthier' ways. Achieving an ideal body was once owned by the rich and elite communities as it was only accessible and affordable for them. The popularity of social media platforms has contributed to spreading these images of an 'ideal' body, which created an impact on people making them rethink the beauty standard. There has been a shift, from the time when plastic surgeries were only done by celebrities, to a condition where now it has become feasible for people regardless of their eminence. This shift occurred as a result of the influence of social media.

For the last few years, there has been a shift in social media content in terms of beauty. Instead of projecting a particular body image, social media and influencers began to celebrate the diversities and varieties of bodies possessed by people. This in turn boosted the shattered confidence of people and reduced body dissatisfaction. This shift could be associated with the emergence of body-positive movements which began as a resilience to ideal body images and body negativity trends that once circulated in the media. In this context, social media at present is using a different strategy through which they inflict body consciousness in the minds of people. Social media is filled with health and lifestyle-related content instead of the previously transmitted ideas. The lifestyle they pose, which is very systematic, diet and exercise-oriented, develops in the minds of users the need to lead a healthy lifestyle. They mostly show a life of increased cost of living, which is now a reflection of a high quality of living. Social media through its strong influence has now generated a health-conscious society. But this health consciousness is just a part of achieving a 'desirable body'. Social media uses health consciousness as a conduit to impose body consciousness on people. Thus, beauty is being medically imposed on people using the notion of health.

Dieting, workouts, exercise, massages and surgeries are some of the processes indicated by the influencers to maintain a healthy body. Imperialization of markets has occurred as a result of the emergence of this new 'diet trend', which replaced traditional food with Western food items. The rapid invasion of markets with imported food products like oats, berries, nuts and yogurts signifies the same. People consciously or unconsciously now relate the concept of health with Western food culture. Replacement of Indian breakfast with overnight oats and smoothies, meals replaced for salads, and dominance of vegan and plant-based products for food preparation are suggestive of

the new health consciousness. The surge of 'gym culture' is also associated with the same notion. Yogas, and Zumba classes have also become a very common aspect in many households unlike in the past. In both these cases, health consciousness is availed as a strategy to satisfy people's body consciousness.

In this consumer-driven society, health and lifestyle are marketed to appeal to people's desires and aspirations. Influencers promoting dieting, workouts, and other body-enhancing practices as a part of a 'healthy' lifestyle, are effectively turning health consciousness into a commodity that can be sold. The emerging "diet trend" is a direct reflection of consumer culture where health and beauty are packaged as purchasable goods. From fitness programs to imported food products, the health industry thrives on achieving a desired body. Moreover, the idea of health that can be bought by consuming specific products elevates consumerism as the primary pathway to wellness. Large corporations and multinational companies control the food and fitness industries. Their ability to market Western products as necessary for health, by replacing traditional diets, reflects their dominance over markets. It suggests their power to determine consumer choices as well. This creates a power imbalance where the elite class's preferences become mainstream at the expense of local and traditional food practices. Therefore, we could say that the rapid shift in food habits, and lifestyle and the rise of gym culture are deeply rooted in the force of globalization and Westernization leading to a homogenization of culture, where the Western model of health becomes universalized. In this system, health becomes a commodified lifestyle, accessible primarily through products promoted by the elite, and imposed through the global marketplace.

People are now in a rush to transform and improve their bodies even through expensive surgeries. Rhinoplasty and Botox are just a few common methods of 'correcting' the looks (to the desired type). The Kardashians, Kendall Jenner are just a few devoted idols of beauty, which they achieved through various surgeries. According to people's convenience and popular trends, they are altering their body parts. Small lips once considered to be beautiful are now made bigger through plastic surgery. People tend to follow the lifestyles of these celebrities striving to create a hierarchy. The promotion of surgeries and Botox reinforces the idea that an ideal body, or instead, 'a desired body' is attainable, driving people to seek alternatives to satisfy their desires, because of which people imbibed this idea that beauty is not inborn but rather something that could be constructed (which proves the increased rate of consumerism). Besides these, the circulation of transformation videos and face massage techniques fully effaced the notion of unchangeable body structures. Instagram influencers like Valeria Veksler promote face massaging techniques to acquire desired face shapes and features like sharp jawline.

The peculiarity of all these contents promoted by social media is that none of them emphasises or praises a particular image of body as the ideal, or, is not projecting body negativity, but rather opens up the possibility of sculpting our body into desired forms through control and discipline. Social media uses this desire to create content thereby supporting the global market, medical industry, and large companies. Hence, social media creates an impact that people can choose what they desire. But in reality, through the 'desire' of the people, social media is exhibiting power over them through the means of governmentality. The desire of the people is used as a strategy to exert biopower over them by the hegemony and capitalist society thus constructing "docile bodies" of beauty.

Some may argue about the advantage of being docile and being able to choose a body that we desire rather than sticking to a particular body ideal. But for this, we may have to define what 'desire' is. In the present context, we can conceptualize desire as a socially constructed impulse shaped by the cultural industry, reflecting the collective values, ideals, and aspirations embedded in society's shared consciousness, that is subjectified and presented as an entity. Desire thus is cultivated and

directed by the cultural industry, which manufactures and promotes what individuals perceive as worthy of wanting. This desire aligns with the broader cultural norms and consumer patterns that the cultural industry instills within the collective consciousness. In this sense, desire becomes less about individual preferences and more about conforming to the culturally constructed and marketed ideals of beauty, body, or even success and happiness within a given society. Therefore, we cannot consider desire (in terms of body and beauty) as a concept that occupies multiple preferences of people. The influence of the cultural industry and collective consciousness decides what should constitute a desirable body. Not every type of body is desirable. There are certain criteria for a body to be desirable, which is marked by the dominating figures of this consumerist society. Social media, through the propagation of health consciousness, diet and exercises at its root, manifests a fit and toned body. This body highlighted by social media becomes the 'desirable body' of the people. Even though universalized beauty concepts have altered, desirable beauty is still a replica of ideal beauty.

In today's digital age, social media plays an increasingly powerful role in shaping thoughts, ideologies, beauty concepts, and desires. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube function as modern cultural factories, constantly producing and disseminating images and narratives about what is considered beautiful, desirable, and socially acceptable. Unlike earlier times when the media projected a fixed image of an 'ideal body', the current narrative offers a more flexible idea: individuals can achieve their desired body through discipline, exercise, dieting, and a variety of consumer-driven solutions. However, this shift has not diminished the objectification of bodies. Instead, it has contributed to a subtler form of self-objectification where individuals monitor and regulate their bodies. Social media platforms, with their barrage of influencers, fitness regimes, and beauty trends, have intensified the self-surveillance of bodies. Foucault's concept of the docile body becomes significant here, as individuals internalize societal standards of beauty and engage in rigorous self-regulation. The promise that 'any type of body can be achieved' if one follows the right routines places the responsibility of body perfection squarely on the individual, turning them into their watchdog. Social media encourages individuals to document and share their body transformations, often under the guise of health or self-improvement. However, this focus on achieving the 'desired body' results in the objectification of the body as a project, something to be sculpted, improved, and displayed. The idea of the 'desired body' is increasingly influenced by Western beauty ideals promoted through fitness programs, cosmetic procedures, and imported diets. The Western emphasis on individualism and self-discipline merges seamlessly with global markets as solutions to achieving bodily perfection.

The rise of social media, coupled with the globalization of Western beauty ideals and the dominance of consumer culture, has transformed the way bodies are perceived, disciplined, and commodified. While social media offers a more flexible idea of body image, the notion that any desired body can be achieved through discipline perpetuates a culture of self-surveillance, objectification, and control. Michel Foucault's concept of the docile body becomes crucial in understanding this phenomenon, as individuals willingly engage in the regulation and control of their bodies in response to societal pressures and market forces. In the process, the body becomes a site of both aspiration and oppression, molded by the invisible hands of consumerism and elite power. Ultimately, this system of control reinforces the hegemonic structures of power, maintaining a cycle of consumption and self-regulation that benefits the elite while individuals become docile subjects in the pursuit of ever-shifting beauty ideals.

This study has predominantly aimed to unveil how the generalisation of beauty standards and the influence of consumerist society has created bodies that could be shaped according to our desires. This has also brought about the understanding of how Foucault's concept of "docile

bodies" becomes relevant even in the present scenario, where the beauty industry and consumerist and capitalist society exert an invisible power over the people through the globalization of Western and elite ideologies especially through social media. Through the study, it became evident that this universalization of Western culture and Western notions of beauty, a strategy used by the consumerist society for the gain of profit, has given rise to a new culture that sculpts bodies into desirable forms. The paper holds its significance in the present as it is an attempt to address how social media and consumerist society together exert an unwavering and invisible power over society in manipulating both the thoughts and bodies of people. It also explores the conjoint play of the beauty industry and consumerist market by infusing the notion of health and body. Thus, even though social media and influencers voice against the notion of ideal body and beauty, the process of attaining a 'desirable' body just becomes a pathway that ultimately leads us to the same aspect of an ideal body that we all run away from.

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