

Body Image and Presentation of Self among the Women University Students in Sikkim

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Abstract: *The spread modern technology and global flow of ideas and practices expedited by globalization, transnational capitalism and social media platforms have generated new discourses on human body. Under the spell of new body discourses modern men and women look for new identities and new ways of presentation of self in their everyday life. This paper reflects on how the university going women students of Sikkim perceive and negotiate with diverse body images in their everyday life. The first section of paper identifies the agents that influence construction of ideas on body and beauty. It also attempts to trace how far the socio-economic background of the students determines their perceptions of body and beauty. The second section attempts to unravel the various determining factors relating to the body discourse. It also traces the revolutionized social and cultural construction of body discourse based on the lived experiences and close observations within the family. The final section of this paper situates the empirical findings in the light of theoretical arguments and present the body discourse from a sociological standpoint.*

Keywords: Body Image, presentation of Self, capitalism and body, self-identity, globalization and body.

Introduction

The current interest in the discourse of body has largely focused on addressing the immediate response to the impacting social changes that has been witnessed in the field of body discourse. The somatic society (Turner 1992) marked by technological innovations and postmodern conditions have led women to no choice but to live in a virtual reality (Varga 2005) where the realness or the naturalness of body can be questioned on the basis of its

rejuvenation and manipulation. This study of university going women students has focused largely on the discourse in terms of conflict and negotiation on self-identity, consumption pattern of individuals, body image and self-esteem. The field for the study was chosen to be Sikkim University situated in Gangtok, Sikkim. One can notice huge impact of emerging consumer society and prevailing discourses on body image and beautification practices among the younger generation of the Sikkimese society. The emerging trend combining marketing and consumption of beauty products, mushroom growth of body fitness training centers, gyms, beauty parlors/ salons and craze for online shopping has widely affected the presentation of self and body care and this is fast emerging as homogenized Sikkimese youth culture and this finds reflection among young students of Sikkim University, Gangtok.

Gangtok is the capital of the State of Sikkim, which falls in the East district and has several markets in and around the town namely, *Naya Bazar*, *Lall Bazar*, *Mahatma Gandhi Marg*, *Deorali Bazar* and many more. The contemporary period “marks the upsurge and influence of the Western culture in terms of dress especially in the urban areas among the younger population while the earlier worn traditional dresses has been kept aside for festive use” as pointed out in the Gazetteer of Sikkim (Rai 2016: 149). Sikkim Central University situated in the heart of Gangtok acts as a hub of diverse culture, ethnicity, religion, language and communities. The University, with its central library, facilities of residence, health center, transportation and gym create an ambience for students to express themselves with all their sense of fashion. Besides class room and students’ association meetings, the university students gather in large number to celebrate their annual fest *Ramailo SU-Khim* with sports, social, academic and cultural events. The cultural event is usually witnessed to be the most allied one where days of grand celebration including events like prom night, DJ Night, Battle of the Bands, Haute Couture are held which bear the imprint of Western culture. The university, therefore, seems adaptive to the global popular culture, which comes as a mark of the process called Westernisation. The *Ramailo SU-Khim* was designed to make the students (mostly female students) present themselves as beautiful, in trendy fashionable attire in the events. For some events dress codes were fixed like ‘Gowns for Ladies in Prom’. Such dress codes fix the standards

for the young girls and push them towards a particular mode of consumption; modern capitalist market thus creates cultural space to promote a particular type of consumer culture.

Against this backdrop, the paper makes an effort to record the daily practices of body care, the construction of the idea of beauty and body and the body perceptions of young university going women students. It discusses the changes found in the social and cultural construction of body discourse over time. By exploring the epistemological background of body this paper attempts to enhance the body discourse through empirical observations. In this disposition, the factors examined are religion (Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Others), culture, socio-economic background (parents' income from 10,000-15,000/ month to 50,000 and above), the courses taken (Science, Humanities, Professional) and body weight (least being 42kg and the highest being 98kg) of the respondents. The students were selected from different geographical (from different states of India), cultural (having diverse acquired cultures), religious and socio-economic groups using purposive sampling and snowball sampling method.

Body image, self esteem and identity

An awakening upsurge on the question of self-identity is often closely associated with the notion of self-esteem among the young women in the contemporary time. Body image, self-esteem and self-identity are intertwined to construct one's sense of beauty. Body and beauty is often associated together for several reasons especially when pointed at external/physical characteristics of body. Also because the body by virtue consist a part i.e. face which today is highly marketised, commodified and stigmatised. Peer influence and the impact of media also contribute to shape body image of the young women. Following that, the media projections and public perceptions, the male gaze, the desire to be liked and loved, the desire to have a boyfriend, the desire for appreciation make the young women conscious about their body and beauty. Bodies in this line remains an open arena of discourse as they open up to influences of external forces and agents marked by an era prone to judgments and informal competition with the visual (as projected in the dominant media culture) reference group. The heightened role of both the influences and opinion, judgment of

others on one's body conditions the way bodies are perceived and the idea(s) of beauty is constructed. A twenty-four-year-old student pursuing post-graduation who weighs 59 Kgs commented:

I am very happy with the body I have because I receive a lot of appreciation from others saying I have a toned body. My stomach does not gain fat no matter what and how much I eat; I am lucky in that case. I love my body but my calves...During school days I was teased for having really fat calves, the boys used to tease me as I had to wear skirt as my uniform. Also my friends back then suggested me not to wear skirts while going out. I never wore a dress or a skirt that revealed my calves back then. However, my friends in the university are different and they encourage me to wear dresses and compliments me when I do which really boosts my confidence.

The young women's bodies in the contemporary time under the influences of modernity demands some form of management and the presentation of bodies become evident in carrying the modern self and identity. In this line, bodies (especially women bodies) fall prey to consumerism and transnational capitalism. A constant dilemma between the theoretical notion on body conflicting the dominant ideas on body and beauty that is projected by media and as reported by the women students being "inner beauty, personality, character" and their practical engagement in body management practices becomes apparent. Women students in majority indulged in beauty and body care including visits to beauty salons/parlor for shaping their eyebrows, hair spas, cut and coloring, facial cleansings, waxing of body hairs, buying and using body and beauty products from market, exercising at home to getting gym memberships as routinized practice or indulging in these practices occasionally indicates 'hegemony of beauty politics'. Consumerist ideas drawing upon the factor of marketization of beauty and body care practices therefore, cannot be refuted. Using of basic and minimal beauty products on hair, body and face such that of SPF (sun protection factors) face creams and body lotions, moisturizing creams, hair conditioners and serums as routinized practice, to eventually using full-fledged cosmetics and following body care regimes in terms of situational demands concerning presentation of self in public has been institutionalized. The basic products depend upon each individual

and the needs addressing their skin/body care schedules. There are innumerable beauty and body care products available in the market at different price ranges suiting to one's affordability and easy accessibility. The advent of globalization has extended wide scope of choices and preferences to several beauty and body products, practices. With regard to body and beauty care practices the women students narrates:

Being presentable, beautiful and receiving compliments makes me feel good about myself. It makes me happier and confident. And as an adult I think I should take care of my skin and body. I rarely use make up/ cosmetic products but I use tan-removal face packs and peel of masks to get rid of my blackheads twice a month. This is a routine.

Similarly, another student remarks:

I started using makeup products since 2015 when I joined college. I started because I saw girls in Sikkim using make-up every day and all look beautiful. Though I use minimal like lipstick, eyeliner and necessary skin care including use of facial cleanser, toner and creams regularly but I like to take extra effort and do full make-up during events and occasions like parties, events of University like fest, festivals.

The prominent role of modernization, westernization, advertisements, media, internet, consumer culture can be situated in terms of internalizing the body and beauty management practices. The mentioned factors also irrefutably remain influential to the way young women in the contemporary time are perceiving their body and constructing their ideas on body, beauty. However, the interplay of cultural and religious influence in everyday lived experiences also play an important role in how one constructs idea(s) on beauty and body and thereby purpose their presentation of self.

A twenty-five years old post graduate student drawing on the cultural influence on her desired body image and self-presentation states:

My role model is Illena D-Cruz (a Bollywood actress). She has a very good figure with curves. I often dream of having that curves when I wear sari as I am a Bengali and I think culturally we have it in us that we have to wear Sari, which I don't mind as I like to wear it.

Another twenty-eight years old research scholar perusing her PhD from the university with regard to her religion commented,

I like simple clothes and mostly 'kurtis' and that is exactly how I feel I should be dressing. I go to church every Sunday wearing the same and everywhere else. I feel comfortable and simple. My religion teaches me not to dress in a manner that is too loud or overdress but to be unadorned, simple and that is how I want to carry myself.

The other influential agents or sources that affects the perception on body and beauty is the geographical or regional factor. Gangtok having the cosmopolitan flavor remains highly adaptive to fashion and beauty culture. It is through these globalized adaptations in the light of neo-liberalism the internalization of practices associated with beauty and body takes place. This argument can be traced from the narrative presented below:

In my state Assam, I can wear slippers and go to market. But when I came to Sikkim for my studies I noticed that even from young to old women they are always well dressed. They maintain themselves and even in the streets they look very presentable. I also observed that when I go to the market to buy clothes if I am wearing good clothes here, the attendant welcomes me and attends me well.

The heightened role of transnational capitalism also accentuates the way young women are shaping their perception on ideal or 'perfect' body and thereby constructing ideas on body and beauty. The 'size availability and trendy clothes' have now been a marker to a beautiful body among women irrespective of their size and body shape. The role of capitalist industrial management does not only manifest into accelerating consumerism but in latency helps in internalization of the set standard size for body. Modern clothes comprise of variety but the 'trendy clothes' are made so to fit only into the standard body size. Since all young women do not fit into this dominant body image often a crisis is felt largely among the women who do not fit into the set standards of body size and beauty. In this way clothes being sold in the market makes one conscious of their body and arouses a feeling of deprivation regarding one's body. Capitalism in this regard provides easy and structured solution to the crisis deliberately created by marketing and fashion-beauty industry. To substantiate, if you're lean you

have food supplements in the market, if fat, there are fitness regimes, if dark in complexion fairness products are easily available in the market and if too fair of a complexion tanning creams are made available. Hinting on the role of capitalism, the students narrates:

I would like to have a body which is very fit. I want to be able to go to any store, pick up any cloth item and wear it. It is like my dream. I usually wear XXXL sized clothes and the easily available sizes in the market are small, medium, large and XL. I find it very difficult to get clothes of my size, especially the ones of my choice.

I am very thin as you can see and I find it very difficult to find undergarments of my size. I also get constantly commented on my hands as it looks very thin. Friends say that it looks like a man's hand.

The solutions provided by capitalism in form of commodities, however, thrives on the exchange value and therefore, it becomes important to explore if the dominant concept of beauty and idealized body is class specific. The empirical study by taking socio-economic background attempted to explore the role of economy in body care and beauty management practices. Interestingly, it can be inferred that class of young women do not manifest dominance on adaptation of mainstream beauty and body care practices but however it delimits the degree of involvement in practices and the brand of products being used. The notion that processes of 'governing the body' does not manifest social inequality as Bourdieu's theorization on body points out. One's social location which for Bourdieu is the economic capital of class based condition therefore, does not bring inequality in the contemporary time due to easy availability and wide range of affordability of products in the market. Also negotiations on part of the women students of Sikkim University plays an important role which makes everyone look equal in physical presentation of self and by appearance it becomes difficult to differentiate who comes under which class strata in society. Habitus on the other hand is solely dependent on their encounters to larger structural forces and educational awakening depending on the field as the field if taken as being that of academic, the women students carried a notion that it was normal to look average and not overdo with

their body image and presentation of self because that is “*how majority of academicians look*”. Bringing in the element of taste, among the women students it is often based on the field of academia but a fluctuation on minor basis becomes observable in terms of situational demands like for instance, the annual fest of the University, *Ramailo SU-Khim*. The negotiations in this regard is observable however the complete resistance to the modern, dominant body image and beauty cease to prevail. The socio-economic background on the other does not have a major role to play because young women today are coming up with different alternatives in order to negotiate on their maintenance and management of body and self. The alternatives can be traced from following narratives presented below:

A 23 years old student persuing Bachelor’s degree states,

As I am a student and adult simultaneously it becomes hard for me to waste my parent’s money so I buy and use Patanjali beauty care products which I find very reasonable, both quality and price wise. I also stay in a hostel and sometimes we circulate clothes amongst us (friends). When we shop some beauty products and clothes online, we together place orders and Dutch the money. This way we all use the beauty products and avoid repetition of clothes every day.

Another 25 years old post-graduate student remarks,

I am a student but also an agent of the beauty brand Oriflame which gives me beauty and body care products as gifts based on points earned through sale of their products. My family members are agents too and we choose to take the products as credit points instead of money and that way I hardly have to buy anything.

In the similar line a 29 years old research scholar perusing her PhD degree said,

I along with my hostel mates play ‘sorrow’ where eight of us in the beginning of the month contribute Rs.500 each. At the end of each month one amongst us takes all money collected which makes Rs.4000 and in that way we circulate and distribute the total amount. I also give home tuition to one kid who pays me Rs.2000 every month. Therefore, I

don't find difficult in fulfilling my needs including body care and beauty needs.

The alternatives and the ways of negotiation in everyday life profoundly determines that new innovative means are designed by women students to maintain a balance between their student life and demands of beauty standards. The research scholars also pointed out managing budgets with the fellowship granted by the University and UGC. While for some others their pocket money was quite considerable and sufficient to meet the body and beauty demands. The online shopping through discounts and sale offered on various types and brands ranging from high to low prices also serves purpose of affordability of the products. However, if the role of class and economy has to be situated in this context the only dominant concept of beauty that is class specific may be relevant in terms of top global and luxury brands which makes the prices of beauty and body care products beyond the reach to middle class and lower class strata.

Changing socio-cultural connotation of body discourse

The modern somatic society supplemented by scientific development, technological advancement, innovations in biomedical fields, mushrooming beauty industries has contributed in human bodies becoming "exceedingly malleable" (Giddens 1991). The larger victim of these bodies are female bodies by the virtue that it is often expected to be well kept, maintained and treated accordingly as to fit into both the societal ideals of beauty and the dominant body image. Beauvoir makes it explicit that the somatic modern society and culture constantly associates women with their bodies. Therefore, starting from the earlier existent traditional society to present day modern complex society, women feels the need to present themselves as a fit to the expected standard of beauty. Be it from older days of oiling and keeping long hair and using home-made beauty products to the current day innumerable practices associated with beauty and body. Practices related to body management and presentation of self in this regard is not a neo process but over the time, the body care and maintenance practices has evolved and become complex. In the contemporary time, a constant struggle to meet the dominant idea(s) of body and beauty and negotiations in daily life with

regard to the same, can be observed among women irrespective of their age. However, the factor of time and space do play a vital role. With time there has been noticeable changes and developments in relation to varied methods and ways in which body management can be achieved today. It is observed that the cultural and traditional practices associated with beauty, body care and presentation of self has changed significantly. The age old traditional practices though cannot easily wither away but the upsurge of modernity has allowed people to negotiate and mold the traditional cultural body and beauty practices in numerous ways. Such that of, wearing traditional attires and vermillion/'*sindoor*' only during festivals and occasions, getting body tattoos of cultural and religious symbols which is not likely to be questioned, opting for designer blouses and sari that matches with and/or enhances the body shape and many more. Nonetheless, the notion that women has to present themselves in a particular manner in her childhood, adulthood, before and after marriage and in old age is often seen as being depicted by the societal norms. On one hand, the hotbed of patriarchy within the family and in the society remains crucial in terms of how female bodies are compelled to follow the practices related to body that suits the norms of the patriarchal system. While on the other, the capitalist propaganda backed up by the globalization policies have made stereotyping of beauty and body profoundly prominent by making practices of body management an accessible necessity. The normalization of these two factors in the modern society makes it an objectified reality that more emphasis is laid on finding a fit between the norms and set beauty standard. And in this regard, the larger part of negotiation in the daily presentation of self and carrying a body image that fits the societal ideals thus gets reflected.

Conclusion

The body discourse may be viewed as an evolutionary process that endures and manifests itself over a course of time. The empirical study and its analysis has found out that the earlier existing culturally specific notion of body and beauty has now evolved into a homogenized concept. In the wake of modernity and its forces of globalization, consumer culture, transnational capitalism, media, internet and so on the body image demands enhanced and modified projection in the modern somatic society.

The role of several variables like economy, culture, religion, ethnicity comes to play in understanding how bodies mobilise and to what extent in undergoing the process of modification, management and presentation as demanded by the dominant beauty culture. The modern conditions of somatic society provide concepts of 'modern bodies', 'trendy bodies' and 'unvarnished bodies' as a useful catalyst for the body discourse. If on one hand, the somatic society is leading body to consumerist site then on the other hand, body has become a prime site of accelerating confidence and self-esteem among young women. However, the dominant role of globalization, advertisements, mass media and social media leads the young women into discontentment and dissatisfaction regarding their own bodies. The consumerist culture also leads to growing uncertainty in terms of body embodiment along the lines of arousing material (commodities available for consumption) and immaterial (natural bodies without any manipulation) scarcity. However, these scarcities are likely to be a relative rather than an absolute one i.e. created due to the wider exposure that invokes the desire to have a body like that of the created reference group as projected in dominant media.

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