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 [thewire.in/society/my-body-my-body-image-and-the-media-lens](http://thewire.in/society/my-body-my-body-image-and-the-media-lens)



Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty.

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Like many, my relationship with my body has been a complex and challenging one. I have spent years dissatisfied with my body shape and size (where is the hour-glass option I ordered?), premature greying hair (is this what they mean by 'distinguished?'), facial marks (as if life was not challenging enough!) and body hair (is this even normal for women to have or did I accidentally join a different club?). Truth be told – the list is longer.

Fortunately, academia gave me a platform to generate dialogue around this issue. “I can’t be alone in this”, I thought, “surely others have *bad body image days* too” and, thus, began my journey of offering an elective course on Body Image and Mental Health. I was eager to revisit my undergraduate and postgraduate notes on eating disorders and body image issues, dive into the empirical literature, listen to the views and experiences of 20-year-olds, and help them develop informed views. Most importantly, I wanted to help them recognise that most of us have “internalised” the societal standards of beauty without ever questioning it.

### **Early Lessons in Beauty**

Consider these statements:

“It’s my cousin’s wedding in eight months! I have to lose weight!”.

“If only I were more muscular and taller, I would have been more popular in school.”

But why the need to lose weight or to look taller and muscular? Why should one have to spend their precious time trying to look more attractive when one could be travelling, painting, learning new skills — or better yet simply resting? The next time you feel the pressure to look thinner or muscular, I urge you to pause and reflect. Why give in to yet another societal expectation? I get it. It is hard not to.

By engaging with the scholarly literature on body image and mental health, I have learnt that from childhood to adulthood – many factors shape how we see and feel about our bodies. But three stand out – family, peers and media. Today, I want to draw your attention to the role of media. Not only do we live in a media driven society but also for many of us, our earliest exposure to the ‘socially idealised body’ came from the Disney princesses, dolls or action figures that we grew up idolising.

### **The Pressure to Look Perfect**

Action figures like GI Joe and fashion dolls like Barbie may function as role models for many children. These could potentially shape their mental images of the physical attributes they are expected to embody in adulthood.

Scholars have observed that action figures have become more muscular over the years. This raises concerns about their impact on young boys especially as they grow older. Likewise, while Disney has introduced greater diversity with characters like Moana and Luisa, and Mattel has released more realistic and diverse versions of Barbie, the idealised body promoted by the early Disney princesses and Barbies, and internalised by many children at a young age are difficult to undo.

For long, television, magazines, and advertisements have perpetuated rather limited and narrow ideals of beauty and attractiveness. The ideal man is usually portrayed as having a sharp jawline, muscular chest and arms, and broad shoulders that narrow down to a lean waist. The ideal woman is mostly portrayed as young and thin, with fair and flawless skin. In both cases, media images set a standard that is far from the reality for most men and women. For someone who is low on self-esteem, and has never been comfortable in their own skin, regular exposure to such images and the pressure to conform to these unrealistic standards can lead to increased body dissatisfaction and low body confidence.

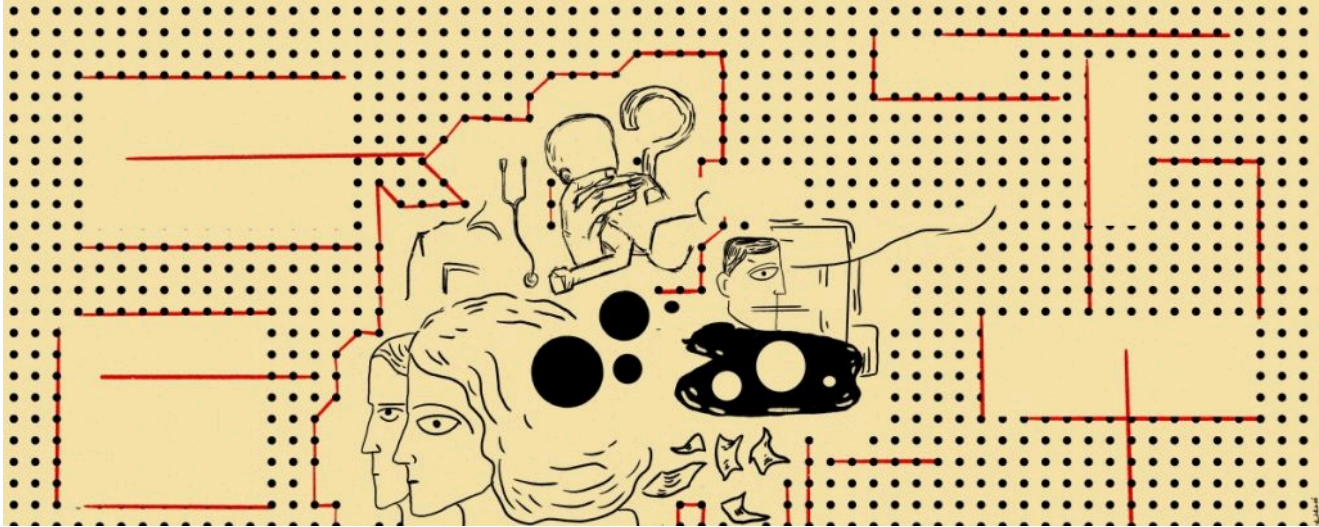


Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty

## Dual pressure

Body image scholars have pointed to an encouraging development in the media landscape: more women are being depicted in career-oriented and agentic roles. Unfortunately, more often than not, the protagonists continue to embody the socially idealised body. In other words, although women are shown breaking glass ceilings and defying traditional gender norms, the emphasis on physical attractiveness continues to persist. The pressure to be both successful and beautiful can create feelings of inadequacy among viewers and reinforce negative stereotypes.

It is important to remember that the media isn't just a source of entertainment. Time and again researchers have emphasised how the media shapes as well as reflects social reality. Thus, media portrayals are also highly likely to shape our views of beauty. Today, social media seems to have intensified this influence, and it can become a breeding ground for body image issues if not used mindfully.

## Filtered Realities

What we see on social media are often filtered realities – many influencers, celebrities and regular users often present idealized version of themselves – that may have been achieved through filters, editing or surgery. Besides, social media algorithms typically promote content that receive high levels of engagement. Often, such content includes images that conform to the societal standards of attractiveness. This constant exposure can lead to a culture of comparison and a pressure to look perfect – making one feel inadequate, unworthy and anxious – especially, if one believes that they fall short of these standards. A study on ‘fitspiration’ posts on social media even found that exposure to such images was related to increased negative mood states and decreased body image satisfaction among their viewers.

### **The Way Forward**

Both traditional and newer forms of media can be a force for good. For example, movies such as *Wonder* and *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* play a pivotal role in promoting greater sensitivity towards body image issues. Similarly, the rise of body positive posts on social media has given greater visibility to the body positivity movement and its emphasis on body diversity and self-acceptance.

At a time when body dissatisfaction, body dysmorphic disorder, and eating disorders are on the rise, we must be intentional and conscious of our media diet. Watching TV shows, movies and web series that promote body diversity (e.g., *Orange is the New Black*, *Gippi*), following accounts or hashtags related to body acceptance, and participating in discussions about the impact of media on body image (e.g., conversations on Reddit communities that are focused on body acceptance, body confidence, and positive body image) might be a good place to start. Experts also suggest keeping track of social media content or accounts that trigger one’s body image issues – and it might be in our best interest to unfollow or mute such accounts.

Please also remember to be kind to yourself on days when you feel negatively about your body. Do not consider a bad body image day to be indicative of a setback in your journey towards self-acceptance. These are the days when you need to remind yourself that your body does not exist to look beautiful, handsome or attractive to others, its purpose is to help you live a healthy and fulfilling life.

As Heidi Lane Powell wisely said, “Loving your body only when it’s in perfect shape is like loving your children only when they are well-behaved” – true love embraces imperfections and nurtures without conditions.

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