



PHOTOSHOPPING:

A DISTORTED PERCEPTION OF WOMEN'S BEAUTY IN PRINT AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA

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While I was researching for this article, the lawyer in me wanted to write an academic thesis with citations and footnotes but I realised that apart from feeling good about my writing, I would probably not communicate. So I opted for a more conversational

narrative embedding my own thoughts with those of countless others around the world.

Give me a few minutes of your time as I narrate to you a story about how the media is distorting our perceptions about beauty and what we can do about it. In my research,

I read about social issues that people face. I also watched a couple of videos about social experiments that gauge people's perceptions about beauty.

Media and the skewed perceptions of beauty today
Hollywood movies, the internet

and the print media, among others, have for long attempted to define beauty and create a standard for who is considered beautiful or ugly. Unfortunately, some of the perceptions portrayed in the media are that you are beautiful if you have a light complexion, an hourglass figure, long and straight western-like hair and fancy clothes. A beautiful woman is also portrayed as having huge pointy breasts, a large posterior and hips like Kim Kardashian or Nicky Minaj. You are beautiful and attractive if you wear body-revealing clothes that leave nothing to the imagination. These perceptions have had far-reaching implications for women.

According to the *Zambezi*, a Malawian daily, women in Malawi have taken to bleaching their skins so as to have a lighter complexion. Most of the reasons they give are centred on being more attractive to men since the men prefer lighter-skinned women to darker-skinned ones. This has seen the use of banned chemicals and substances to gain a lighter complexion at the risk of destroying one's own skin and being subject to a multitude of other issues, such as cancer. These perceptions not only undermine black people but they also portray white people as having the best hair and skin, which is not necessarily true.

Heavy marketing of the fashion and cosmetics industry

The process of growing up takes us through multiple changes. It's a time when we are discovering ourselves and we tend to be vulnerable. Accepting a lot of what we see in the media without much thought, we begin to wish for things we do not have because the media says



they are cool. Others wish for bigger breasts, a larger posterior, a pimple-free face, better teeth, thinner lips, a smaller nose, a certain height, a certain weight and the so many things that we are uncomfortable with or do not like about our bodies.

It is at this critical time that the media bombards our young minds with what they want us to believe

is cool. If you do not fit within the cool bracket, they offer you solutions to help you fit in. They tell you that if you do not like what you see, you can change it. If you are dark you can be lighter-skinned. If you don't like your hair, you can change it to whatever texture or colour you like. In the process many women undergo body-altering



surgeries to achieve a certain look, most times at a very heavy cost.

The Economist wrote that the global beauty industry made \$95bn in 2003 and most of that resulted from people being insecure about how they look and feel. But beauty doesn't reside in cosmetics, plastic surgery, designer clothes and a lavish lifestyle, as portrayed by the media. Beauty is much more than that.

Research and social experiments

Dove, the Unilever-owned personal care company known for antiperspirants/deodorants, body washes, beauty bars, lotions/moisturisers, hair care and facial care products, has been conducting beauty research for a while and the results are often shocking.

In one social experiment, there were two doors on a building. On one door, they put a clear banner with the words 'Average' and on the other door was a banner with the words 'Beautiful'. The majority of the women who accessed the

building decided to pass through the 'average' door rather than the 'beautiful' one. This was a clear indication of what they perceived themselves to be. When asked later about why they decided to go through the 'average' door, they confessed that it was what they felt about themselves.

Dove's global research highlights a universal issue that beauty-related pressure increases whilst body confidence decreases as girls and women grow older – stopping young girls from seeing their real beauty. The Real Truth about Beauty: Revisited, a recent study, highlights some key statistics:

Only 4% of women around the world consider themselves beautiful (up from 2% in 2004).

Only 11% of girls globally are comfortable describing themselves as 'beautiful'.

72% of girls feel tremendous pressure to be beautiful.

80% of women agree that every woman has something about her that is beautiful but do not see their own beauty.

More than half (54%) of women globally agree that when it comes to how they look, they are their own worst beauty critic.

Setting the record straight: the photoshop craze

The images of the people we see on TV, in magazines and on the internet aren't really what they seem. They are Photoshopped. These people do not really look like that in real life. They have hired lots of experts to make them look a certain way. It is okay for you to have a huge nose or pimples or a dark skin. It is okay for you to be short or not skinny like the models in Vogue magazine.

There's no global definition of beauty and there shouldn't be. We need to celebrate the unique beauty in each one of us. We all do not have to be like the models, actors and musicians we see on the internet. An Arab hijab is as beautiful as a Maasai tunic, and the Amazonians, Southern African San/Basarwa and Karimojong, who prefer no attire at all, are beautiful just the way they are.

We need to build the confidence of our children and let them know that beauty is not Photoshop and Instagram filters with duck faces. Beauty isn't makeup, Brazilian hair, skinny jeans and designer clothes. Beauty is not only in physical appearance but it is in our minds and in the value we perceive ourselves to have.

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