

View point

Influence of cosmetic advertisements on self and social identity of adolescents: What needs to be done?

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Self-identity is defined as a “*stable and prominent aspect of ones’ self-perception*”[1]. It is formed based on personal and social interaction. Self-identity is the psychological determinant of intentions, attitudes, individual norms, and perceived control over behavior [1]. A positive self-identity promotes positive intentions, attitudes, and behavior and vice versa.

Social interaction results in the labeling of an individual, which is commonly referred to as the individual's social identity. Although throughout life, but most crucial age group remains the adolescent and teenage (i.e., adolescence is 10-19 years; teenage is 13-19 years), which, according to Erikson, is the stage of identity development [2]. The primary concern at this stage is what and how the individual appears in the eyes of others. Identity development occurs by labeling an individual by self, peer group, family members, and society [2]. Family with two children tend to compare and label them as introvert or extrovert, clever or gullible; thus, labeling them and contributing to their identity development. Similarly, peer groups also tend to categorize their friends as helping and selfish, beautiful or ugly, and to a more physical level like tall-stout, black-white, hairy, pimples, or smooth-skinned, and the list is limitless.

One of the important things causing an imbalance in the formation of self-image is the advertisement industry, specifically the cosmetic advertisement industry. The advertisements show a dark, pimple-faced young girl facing rejection in marriage proposals, bullied in

college, and unable to get any job. Similarly, advertisements also portray that girl with good values; qualification and job were having difficulty in getting a suitable life partner due to their dark complexion and body shape. This negative portrayal of body shape and complexion propagates stigma and negative self-evaluation. The cosmetic advertisements mostly operate on the basis of social learning theory. People see their role model (a celebrity) using these products and attributing their success to it and hence, they want to buy it. All these soft psychological changes happen through development of a false perception.

Equally, a man getting rejected by females because of body odor or dandruff and, after using the particular product, becomes a figure of attraction and gets surrounded by several female-mates. These advertisements intentionally target the self-identity and social identity of individuals. By distorting the self and social identity, these advertisements create a need to be more acceptable at personal and societal levels. The cosmetic products are presented as a solution (magic formula) to resolve the distorted self and social identity [3]. As a result of which people, including the adolescents, perceive the cosmetic products to be the most desirable one that makes them acceptable in the society and it compels them to buy the cosmetic products. These industries promote products by creating a negative self-image, greater social rejection, and negatively affect the quality of life. These products are not essential for survival of an individual; however, emphasis is given to them as if these products are the survival needs.

It has been seen that advertisements and media portray body weight and shape in an erratic manner which propagate stigma. A responsible reporting (with body-positive advertisements /campaigns) may facilitate the acceptance of body shape and weight [4]. Adolescence is the age during which development of identity peaks [5], and adolescents mostly search for role models to develop their self and social identity. Advertisement contents are likely to

influence their self and social perception. A negative advertisement may promote stigma, discrimination, and subsequent peer rejection among adolescents.

These advertisements spend a lot of money to promote their products. Positive advertisement does not require extra money but a positive and healthy attitude. An advertisement of handwash just telling the importance of handwashing while and in the process showing their product name shows that they are worried for consumer's health rather than money-making. Similarly, an advertisement of a beauty product showing a dark to white complexion can promote their product by saying that their product brings moisturization and decreases pigmentation by so and so formulation rather than glorifying the white skin.

If self-identity and social identity of an individual are acceptable for oneself; it leads to greater self-esteem, contentment, optimism, peace of mind, satisfaction, and overall better quality of life [6,7]. Whereas if it is unacceptable to oneself then it leads to greater guilt, self-reproach, unnecessary blaming of self, and deteriorating life quality. The advertisements should focus more on empowerment, acceptance, and destigmatization, which will not adversely influence the self & social identity. As the adolescence period is the formative period of self and social identity, any biasing social influence may alter it significantly, which may have adverse consequences in later life too.

In India, cosmetic industry is a rapidly growing industry. As per a report, India's cosmetic industry is expected to grow by 25% to 20 billion US dollar by 2025 [8]. As per the recent data, India's cosmetic market is valued around 13191.23 million US dollars in the financial year 2020 [9]. As cosmetic industry is a large and rich industry, its activities should be regulated in responsible manner. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), has laid certain guidelines for sensible reporting and advertising with due respect to the rights and interests of the consumers [10]. Despite of the instructions of ASCI, many companies promote their products by violating the guidelines; hence, the law was made more stricter and

several companies promoting their products in unethical ways, were banned [11]. As a result of which many cosmetic industries revised their advertisement strategy and promoting their products in more acceptable manner. For example, there is change of name from “*Fair & Lovely*” to “*Glow & Lovely*”; L’OREAL promotes “every color is beautiful”; Dabur Vatika hair oil is promoting “*some people don’t need hair to look beautiful*”; similarly Victoria secret changed their slogan from “*Perfect Body*” to “*A Body for everybody*”; MAC has a tagline “*All ages, all races, all sexes*” with Dove being the pioneer and running “*Dove self-esteem project- helping young people all around the world build positive body confidence and self-esteem.*” However, some business companies trying to find way outs to by pass the law and continue to promote the products disrespecting the rights and interests of the consumers. Hence, there is a need to strictly and regularly monitor and regulate the content of the advertisements by some authority to minimize their negative mental health impacts. Similarly, the consumers should also be aware of their rights and should complain to appropriate authority for wrong advertisements which have negative psycho-social impacts.

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