

HL: Here's looking at you

It seems that more people are awakening to the pernicious effects in hankering after that ideal summer bod that we are constantly exposed to in magazines. Nonetheless, we idealize the lean six-pack or firm butt enough to spent time in stuffy gyms, starve ourselves, gorge protein bars and even silently consent to the constant barrage of media images of physical perfection— ever wondered how often are they photo-shopped?

Repeatedly, surveys have exposed a prevailing sense of insecurity and body image anxiety that a growing percentage of people suffer from. These, when they manifest themselves, and rears its visage, can often result in physiological harm. The predominance in the media of wiry size-zero females on catwalks, beefy jocks, ads that bellow promises of weight-loss and beach-bodies, and marketed as if it were the path to a fairy-tale life - are a part and parcel of a culture obsessed with physical beauty.

While these body image issues may be etched within a youth's impressionable mind much earlier, it's in universities where these concerns can come to a head. These first years as a young adult - eager on making their own decisions, carving a singular image for themselves, and for many it means living away from the protective nest, and mingling with the opposite sex - there's a risk of nascent image issues completely clawing itself within us.

If you think that this is a disease of a modern superficial 'nip-tuck' age, you are partially right. It's actually a dormant hand-me-down from the Greeks that seems to have erupted with some ferocity these past decades. Obsessed with the male form – the Greeks sculpted it in its ideal manifestation time and again, this included a well-defined six-pack stomach, cut pectorals and exceptionally lean abdomen. No doubt sculpting was their equivalent to photoshop, since in reality, such perfection is impossible to achieve! Whether shrinks back then entertained masses of men who suffered from body images issues on their couches, we probably will never know, but I guess we better understand, where the phrase 'Greek god body' came from. It seems that the Pythian Apollo sculpture is so ingrained in the Western imagination, just as buxom woman painted by Rubens or sinewy model in Vogue. One has to wonder if such an obsession would have remained dormant had Sylvester Stallone kept his shirt on.

Yet what really is this image disease that's festering in our world? Body image refers to the perception that one has in regards to one's physical body. And since it's just a perception, it may greatly vary from how others may actually see you. We've have all caught ourselves feeling a little conscious ourselves at the oddest moments. At some point we may have wondered if the decent to social abyss really begins with pudgy love-handles. While these little moments may seem innocuous enough, it has its darker manifestations. Body Dismorphic Disease (BDD) is an unhealthy obsession and anxiety with perceived defects with the body, often imaginary – this also entails an excessive fear of judgment by other and is often a a part of a eating disorders. Anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating are amongst these severe ailments that have increased several-fold. Survey after survey has shown its increase in both diseases amongst the youth. Surveys have also shown the immediate skinning of confidence when one browses through fashion magazines. So why does the media continue to callously propagate unrealistic portraits? Because it sells. Plastic-surgery clinics, tanning studios, salons, weigh-loss programs, fitness centers, 1800-exercise contraptions, hair-growth and even hair-removal also have a vested interest in perpetuating such fantasies.

A quick search on the internet for 'purging tips' and you have endless means provided by 'pro anas' that help you to do so. Oprah Winfrey's public battle and failure to keep pounds off is perhaps an reflection of our culture that equates thinness with beauty. We've been silently consenting to a cold war against less than ideal body types, should we expect anything less than ugly ailments as a result? It's a failure of imagination if we believe that our worth is measured by our appearances and not the 'content of our character'. It also perpetuates harmful cultural stereotypes when a fat person is quickly judged as lazy and lacking in discipline. Or a when a lean and chiseled candidate has a better chance of landing the job over someone who is struggling with his weight, albeit their similar qualifications.

Closer to home, we have Zoe Tay and Michelle Chia plastered over magazines espousing weight-loss programs and pills. Along with Dove's launch of its Self-Esteem Fund, it commissioned a survey that found 84% of teenage girls in Singapore wish they could change their physical appearance, 5% confessed to throwing up or restricting their food intake, a quarter have reported dieting before they turned 17 and a fifth claimed they would consider plastic surgery in the near future. In 2007, SGH that there 6-fold increase in eating disorders since 2002, with 140 new cases annually.

The Trim and Fit (TAF) club that many of us endured back in school may have helped many increase their fitness levels, but one wonders if it had unfortunate consequence of decimating the esteem of these kids, by segregating them so at such a young age. Fortunately, it has been since changed into a more holistic program that looks into physical, mental and social health. Lack of confidence is one of the many reasons in a complex web of biological, social and cultural, psychological, and family factors may combine to contribute to the development of these disorders.

And by no means are these in anyway restricted to females. The Adonis Complex or muscle dysmorphia are where men are driven to achieve the epitome of masculine beauty is ubiquitous in men's magazines and on Calvin Klein adverts. It's naive to believe that men are impervious to such culture imbedding. And if girls are perceived to only 'go' for guys with such physical attributes, come summer, expect herds of men to continue heading to gyms, getting steroids injections and weight-gain formulas.

While it is tremendously difficult to pin-point the exact cause of these issues, there can be appropriate measures in place to alleviate the situation. Most of us have already been awakened from the matrix of perfected caricatures and often grow impervious to their influence. A popular [advert \(link\)](#) from Dove, showed how a regular looking female could be turned into Greek goddess with the help of computer software. Imperfections air-brushed away, and the beautiful face and form manufactured with a few clicks of a mouse. The advert is perhaps an indication that our long-held obsession with physical beauty is beginning its decent.

Universities, where often such body image concerns may prop up – we suggest you don't get caught up in the mire. Body image is another culture bound phenomenon that we will likely outgrow. There may be an age where your meticulously kept handle-bar mustache will be considered a sign of beauty instead of a steely 6-pack! The concept of beauty is fluid and changes with the times – concentrate on developing personal traits in your character and sealing those chinks in the armor, it's something that is unlikely to fade over time and will more likely lead you to success in the long-haul.

Oh yea, those glossy fashion magazines? Avoid them like the plague. Magazines that propagate looks over health and personal achievement underline the lost of our priorities and the superficiality

of our culture. Some universities, recognizing the severity of body image issues, have even implemented general modules that deal with these. Programs that instill healthy lifestyles over attaining physical perfection and that body image should really be about, at the risk of sounding cliché, 'loving for your body'.