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Beauty and the beast: When our obsession with looks gets out of hand

There are advantages to looking good but when individuals and societies get preoccupied with physical beauty, things can get ugly.

Chong Siow Ann

The other side of pretty privilege is lookism, which is a form of bigotry with its prejudice and discrimination against the unattractive, says the writer. Studies in image-obsessed South Korea report that 20 per cent to 40 per cent of young people experience discrimination based on appearance. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: PEXELS

"At 50, everyone has the face he deserves," wrote George Orwell. As I'm way past that milestone, I have, more or less, accepted that there isn't much that can be done in that department. Time takes its toll as one year passes to the next. But on some mornings, vanity would overcome good sense.

Looking at the reflection in the mirror, I would scan in my face for what plastic surgeons irreverently called the "holy trinity": changes that make a person look older. First are the wrinkles and age spots. Second is the shrinking of the fat layers in the cheeks which give one a sad, deflated look. And third is the overall drooping and sagging. On those mornings, I would try to push those undeniable signs of creeping decrepitude off my mind as fast as I checked those boxes.

DYSMORPHOPHOBIA

As a psychiatrist, I know how tyrannical and mentally unhealthy it can be for us when our physical appearance becomes an overriding obsession. There are patients who get so acutely self-conscious about a perceived facial or body defect that it becomes an all-consuming preoccupation that they spend an inordinately long time scrutinising in front of the mirror.

Such are the psychic afflictions that plague individuals who suffer from body dysmorphic disorder or BDD – a syndrome first described by Italian physician Enrique Morselli in 1891 who used the term "dysmorphophobia", which means the fear of having a deformity.

People with BDD are convinced that they have a physical disfigurement. This could be in any part of the body, but mostly tends to be the face and head, with concerns most often involving the skin, nose shape and size, and hair, and the symmetry of their body even though there are no perceivable defects. Implacable insecurities and terror lurk within them. Some won't leave the house and become housebound.

Those who do go out try to camouflage the area of concern but may suddenly flee and hide when they think someone is staring at them. Such is their distress that it could lead to thoughts of or even actual suicide.

They often seek cosmetic surgery to correct whatever defects they feel they have, but this often fails to relieve their anxiety because the altered appearance almost always falls short of their expectations. They seek additional changes. And even if the treatments modify one presumed defect, they often spot other defects – spiralling into a vicious circle of costly and often deforming surgeries. That ideal of perfection remains always beyond attainment; failures on the other hand do not diminish the power of the ideal – more often than not, they may even feed it.

Theories abound to explain the possible root causes of BDD. Some trace their problem to a childhood emotional trauma like being teased about their appearances, others on parental neglect, or emotional, sexual or physical abuse.

Cultural and social forces seem to play a role – including social media platforms which spread beauty ideals, and filters and apps like Facetune, which can digitally modify appearances. These edited and filtered pictures create an alternative reality, and along with it, unrealistic expectations about how people should look and what can anatomically be done by plastic surgeons.

It used to be girls and women who felt the pressure to be attractive, but men have now been seared by portrayals of other bare-chested men with chiselled and ribbed physiques and the invariable six-pack abs on the Internet. Many hanker for a bigger and more buff body. At the extreme of this desire is a type of BDD called muscle dysmorphia, where the individual would hit the gym in a frenetic and often steroid-fuelled quest for an Arnold Schwarzeneggerian physique – an obsession so overwhelming that nothing else figured.

POWER OF BEAUTY

To be sure, beauty is a form of power – the power to attract a partner, the power to kick-start a career, and the power to propel one up the social ladder. There is an abundance of studies confirming that physical attractiveness is a certifiable privilege.

Attractive individuals make more money over the course of their career, as has been shown by economist Daniel Hamermesh, from the University of Texas. He coined the term pulchronomics, which is the economic study of beauty whose basic principle is that beauty is an engine for economic success.

In a famous study, he and his colleagues showed that workers who were judged more attractive (this was surreptitiously rated) than average, earned a 5 per cent premium over those of average attractiveness, who in turn earned about 10 per cent more than those who were judged less attractive than average.

Physically attractive people also tend to pursue professions that capitalise on their looks (attractive people are widely perceived – whether justifiably or not – to be more competent leaders, harder negotiators, and smarter and more sociable workers). One study even found that when unattractive criminals committed an offence, their fines were about four times more than those of attractive criminals.

To a very large extent, our response to beauty is visceral, and that desire to look good is human and an expression of self-respect rather than an indication of superficiality and vanity, but it is after that point that things become problematic. And often, this is fostered by the pervading culture in society.

Most societies place a premium on physical beauty, but some more than others.

In South Korea, the value of beauty is pervasively prized: commenting on others' looks aloud is common and not considered rude even if it seems mean; and by some estimates, South Korea holds the record for the highest ratio of cosmetic procedures per capita in the world (parents gift their children cosmetic surgery when they graduate from high school). There is even a Korean phrase "oemo jisang juui", which translates into "looks are supreme" (and there is its other complementary popular Korean saying: "Your god creates you, but your doctor-god really re-makes you").

The Korean wave of pop culture (called hallyu) has promulgated a beauty ideal that is embraced by both sexes within and beyond Korea, and many are resorting to cosmetic surgery to achieve that elfin, anime-like look of their K-pop idols.

The inescapable message is that there is a link between appearance and worth, where physical beauty is a sign of inner beauty and overall worth and the standard by which we judge ourselves to be a success or a failure.

The other side of this pretty privilege is lookism, which is a form of bigotry with its prejudice and discrimination against the unattractive. Studies in image-obsessed South Korea report that 20 per cent to 40 per cent of young people experience discrimination based on appearance, which had compelled many to either undergo cosmetic procedures or make plans to do so. Some even contemplate suicide when what they want is out of reach.

The reality is that most people are not beautiful, and physical beauty that is endowed by nature is something that we can't control. Discriminating against people for something they cannot control (like race and gender) is patently wrong. Most reasonable people would agree with that and also acknowledge that, when it comes to perfection, we all fall short and that time will take its inevitable toll. But with that arsenal of beauty-enhancing and anti-ageing implements so readily at hand, how many of us would have the resolve and equanimity to resist?

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