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## **Influences of Emerging Beauty Industry for Men on Construction of Masculinities of Male Students of Dhaka City**

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# Influences of Emerging Beauty Industry for Men on Construction of Masculinities of Male Students of Dhaka City

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## **Abstract**

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Back in history, muscular and strong male body has always been used to promulgate masculinity. This idealized male figure was proliferated mainly for spreading the notion of male superiority in relation to power and to give a strong base to the social construction of masculinity. This study targets to disclose the perception about the attributes masculinities among the male students of Dhaka city regarding male beautification. It attempts to unveil young men's perspectives regarding their masculinities and beauty. From history, we can see men have always been assumed as the ambassador of roughness but in recent time the emergence of fashion-conscious men can be seen, who are slowly occupying a handsome position in the society. Concerning study attempts to bring out the way in which such changing trend of male beauty is perceived among the male students of Dhaka city. What could be the ideologies of these young men who are being involved with it? What is influencing them to be part of such arena which, to a great extent, is still considered as a female domain? Is their perception about the construction of masculinity is shifting from the so-called idealized masculinity? The study tries to find out the answers.

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**Keywords:** Masculinity, Male Beauty, Identity, Body.

# Influencias de la Industria Emergente de Belleza para Hombres en la Construcción de las Masculinidades de los Estudiantes de Dhaka

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## Resumen

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En la historia, el cuerpo musculoso y fuerte del hombre siempre se ha utilizado para promulgar la masculinidad. Esta figura masculina idealizada proliferó principalmente para difundir la noción de superioridad masculina en relación con el poder y dar una base fuerte a la construcción social de la masculinidad. Este estudio tiene como objetivo revelar la percepción acerca de los atributos de las masculinidades entre los estudiantes varones de la ciudad de Dhaka con respecto al embellecimiento masculino. Intenta desvelar las perspectivas de los hombres jóvenes respecto a sus masculinidades y la belleza. Históricamente hemos podido ver a los hombres que siempre han sido asumidos como el embajador de la aspereza, pero en los últimos tiempos se puede ver el surgimiento de los hombres conscientes de la moda, que poco a poco ocupan una posición hermosa en la sociedad. Además este estudio intenta poner de manifiesto la forma en que esta tendencia cambiante de la belleza masculina se percibe entre los estudiantes varones de la ciudad de Dhaka. ¿Cuáles podrían ser las ideologías de estos jóvenes que están involucrados con ella? ¿Qué les está influyendo para ser parte de este ámbito que, en gran medida, todavía se considera como dominio femenino? ¿Su percepción acerca de la construcción de la masculinidad está cambiando de la masculinidad idealizada? El estudio trata de averiguar las respuestas a dichas preguntas.

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**Palabras clave:** Masculinidad, Belleza Masculina, Identidad, Cuerpo.

**T**hree wishes of every man: to be healthy, to be rich by honest means, and to be beautiful’ – said Plato (Graham, 2009). The pursuit of beauty is a congenital human characteristic. It is one of the natural instincts of human beings to find beauty in every sphere of life. It is quite obvious that people will try to make them beautiful. As Dr. Nancy Etcoff (2011) described that from the beginning of human civilization humans have had the ability to recognize and admire the beautiful in different things. Therefore, from the dawn of civilization, we found human using various color and ornaments (made by wooden sticks, rock or metal etc.) to look them beautiful. Though enhancing physical beauty through using different products was seen as a domain of women, from recent past men are also entering and making own space in this arena. According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) (2013), globally more than 1 million men has gone through cosmetic procedures to enhance their physical beauty in 2013 and there has been over 273% increase in the total number of cosmetic procedures on men since 1997. From 1997 to 2008 surgical procedures increased by 50%, and nonsurgical procedures increased by 231% (ASAPS, 2009). Though there is unavailability of numerical information regarding the number of men involved in this practice of being beautiful but it is assumed that number of beauty conscious male who use different surgical/cosmetic products for personal beautification are increasing day by day. In her study, Iida (2005) found that the changing trend of men’s perception of male beauty has often been described as ‘feminization of masculinity’, in which the phenomenon is viewed as a logical outcome of the greater trend of the ‘feminization of culture’ in the ‘postmodern’ cultural condition where human bodies are transformed into visible representational surfaces.

The relation between masculinity and male beautification is a least developed arena of masculinity and sexuality studies. Very few works have been done in this sector, most of which are based on the content analysis of the advertisements present in various visual and print media (Burton, 2008). Other works which refer to relation of beauty with masculinity mainly deals with the ideals of a typical masculine figure that is constructed through the patriarchal masculine mindset of society (Cafri & Thompson, 2004; Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Frederick, Fessler & Haselton, 2005; Holliday & Taylor, 2006). The change in men’s behavior regarding their beauty which is gradually shifting from typical construction of masculinity to a more

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ambiguous form is still an unexplored terrain regarding the social science researches. Though there are very few works regarding men's changing trend and perception about male beauty could be found in recent days (Sowad, 2010), a little handful of works are seen to try to induct scholarly endeavors in this issue.

As a consequent result of the evolution of men's perception of own physical beauty in the more developed global north, the concept of nurturing male beauty has hit the developing global south as well. In respect to Asia, majority of such studies to mark the causes and the outcomes of the men's changing trends about physical beauty have been taken and literature have been developed has been directed from a southeast Asian perspective focusing on Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, Japan etc. As previously discussed Iida (2005) tried to discover the implication of the rising trend of male beauty by observing and analyzing the expressions, strategies, and intentions of those young men aesthetically representing themselves. In context of Japan she assumed that the changing trend of beauty among male would take them to a closer situation with female counterparts, their gender identity will have a more ambiguous form. This emerging gender ambiguity may help to diminish the vital form of patriarchy in a steady process as people will then be less sturdy about their certain gender identity and will think before trying to oppress the people of different gender identities.

In Bangladesh, research on masculinity and sexuality is almost an unexplored territory. The concept of male beauty and its relation with masculinity, change in social trends and construction of new masculine concepts are new to the researchers. As an academic discourse, masculinity is an emerging concept in Bangladesh and scarcity of local literature is prominent. Changing trend of beauty among men has caught attentions of only a few researchers over the world and in Bangladesh, there are still no mentionable scholarly endeavors. The young generation is seen as the trendsetters in the field of fashion of a nation. A large portion of the male population of Bangladesh especially the young population who are said to be the future leaders of the future generations of the country are being attached to the enhancement of own physical beauty will were generally seen as women's arena even in a recent past. Like other existing Patriarchal societies, Bangladesh, that always see gender construct as an unchangeable phenomenon are now facing a divergence in strict gender attitudes; one of

the divergences is men's interest in personal physical beautification. The rapid growth of men's beauty parlors in Bangladesh brings out the very issue of physical beauty enhancement of men in front of us. At the moment there are lots of male grooming parlors are visible in big cities of the country like Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet etc. The questions are now arising, is the long existing traditional concept of 'men as rough diamonds' going to break in Bangladesh now? Is this the time when strict distinction among women and men regarding own physical beauty is going to break here? Nurturing own beauty, which was totally seen as an arena of women, are going to be shared by men also from now on? If the concept of personal physical beauty, which was totally seen as a feminine issue for centuries, are now changing can we not hope that the idealized form of masculinity which seems static now can be changed with time to a more gender sensitive, gender identical way

### **Masculinity/Masculinities**

Masculinity has its own view regarding beauty and in common notion, all men have to follow that in order to be perfectly masculine. Though masculinity was introduced as a singular concept, subsequently in the 1980s it was gradually substituted by plural masculinities to acknowledge the complexities and to contextualize historically (Hooper, 2012). Clatterbaugh (1998) has questioned the rationality of masculinity/ masculinities as he proposes that identity of men are too diversified to be termed as masculinity and even use of the term masculinities is not enough to clarify what institutes the integral parts of this plural and who or how are people consigned to these integral parts. Present constructions of masculinities are erected upon previous notions of masculinities that once enjoyed hegemonic influence (Blazina, 2003). Basically, masculinities are perceived as the cluster of values, norms and behaviors endorsed on male members of the society. Connell (1995) proposes, mainly four strategies could be used which helps up to define masculinity and to distinguish the category of person who is masculine. These approaches are easily distinguishable in terms of logic but are often combined in practice. The fundamental problem with this Connell's approach is this approach does not offer any clench on masculinity at the level of personality (Imtiaz, 2009, p.14). Ouzgane and Morrell (2005) also reject the notion of homogeneity of men and when they

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write about African masculinities they reiterate that they start from a ‘position of diversity’ because ‘the variations are infinite’.

In discussing men’s perception of masculinity and the changing trend of male beauty hegemonic masculinity plays a significant part because beauty and beautification are always seen a property of a specific gender group (women) and has been kept out from another group (men). Moreover, these concepts of beauty and beautification are always seen as an undermined concept as men do not need to polish his beauty because he is beautiful as he is. On the other hand, women are always told to be beautiful to attract men and to be their playmates. Here superiority of men has always been highlighted over women by creating a hegemonic stand. In the existing idealized concept of masculinity in Bangladeshi society male beautification is not a well-accepted phenomenon. Yet as the construction of masculinities is contextual we can assume that someday this concretized stigmatization of beautification among men may lose its acceptance in our society.

### **Masculinity and Male Body**

Body is a significant instrument to perform gender roles by acting specific tasks over time (Butler, 1993) and in construction of masculinities body also plays the major role. The representation of male strength has always been characterized through the visualization of a strong, well-shaped and toned male body. Body has always been a prominent field to visualize masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity patronizes facts like strength, aggressiveness etc. that needs the male body to be well-toned. Unlike women, Masculine body for men is always meant to be a muscular body with a rough look. The rough outlook was the representation of powerful, dominating masculinity which occupied a careless attitude. An existing study on the body and masculinity reports a growing concern among men in improving their physical appearance (Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein & Striegel-Moore, 1986). One factor contributing to this development is the increased cultural attention given to the male body, notably the revival of male body images within popular culture and the media (Wienke, 1998). The previous rough version of men is now being replaced with the beauty conscious male. The recent male figure shows the body of men without any bodily hair, faired look, wrinkle free face and most of the time with a gentle smile. Today’s the much-needed fairness of men for the existing culture

reminds us the historic representation of women in the media and brings an analogy of both sexes in front of us.

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted among the male students of Dhaka city. The respondents were selected through random sampling. The age group of the respondents was from 19 years to 25 years and was studying in undergrad and postgrad levels of different universities. In this study, the qualitative findings are supported by the quantitative data. Data and information from both primary as well as secondary sources have been gathered and used for this study. For the first phase of the study, a questionnaire survey among one hundred (100) male students from Dhaka was conducted to get a quantitative understanding of this phenomenon. After doing so, the questionnaires were assessed and few respondents were sorted out who seemed interesting for the next phase of the study. In the second phase, ten in-depth interviews were conducted where the interviewees shared their views about masculinity, concept of beauty and male beautification. Through the interviews, it has been tried to find out how young male students view the social construction of masculinity and perception about the changing trend of male beautification.

### **Beautification of Men**

The concept of beauty embedded in the mindset of people helps to distinguish anything as beautiful. whether by societal consent or from an individual stand, the concept of beauty is often based on some amalgamation of Inner and Outer Beauty; which includes psychosomatic features such as behavior, attitude, civility, honesty, grace; as well as physical dynamics such as health, youthfulness, facial symmetry and complexion. Beautiful – the term once used only for women is now by the grace of the capital market being adjacent with men as well. The existing beauty industry today is emphasizing, creating and circulating the images of beautiful men. Beautification of a person generally means the procedure of making visual enhancements to a person's body and face. Historically beautification occupied a place on women's sphere. In the existing setting, women are compared with 'body, nature, immanence, joy and life' (Jaggar,

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1992, p.364) and are seen as ‘introvert, wishful, dreamy or fantastic’ (Firestone, 2000). The process of beautification, through which one enhances own beauty was primarily introducing to make women more presentable to men. Smooth skin, young look, fair outlook all were the ideals of a beautiful woman. Currently coming out of the age-long trend, men are also being involved in this process of physical beautification.

As beauty is seen as a feminine arena, generally it was never associated with masculinity till very near past. The traditional masculine male was anticipated to be masculine by having a strong, rough, and wrinkly face. Male ideologies controlling the market were mainly omitting the inclusion of men in the arena of beauty as it may impair the existing male superiority over the society. Men may have been afraid to enhance their physical appearance in the past through the use of grooming products because, as Etoff (2011, p.87) noted, ‘Beautiful men may get questioned about their sexual orientation’. The concept of male beautification is now coming into our everyday life. With the evolution of masculinities, it becomes clear that the changing of men’s body construct would not be able to hamper the spreading of patriarchy over the society as the oppression is deep rooted and bound in a systematic process. So to expand the market, the concept of beauty of men was also brought to the media.

### **Masculinity and Beauty: Exploring Men’s Perspective**

#### **Featuring Men, Unveiling Masculinity**

Men the chief agents of patriarchy exercises masculinity in all spheres of their life. It is not always true that each and every man willingly exercise the attributes of hegemonic masculinity to dominate or to subjugate other people especially women but the socially imposed attributes become inherent amongst almost every man through their socialization. When unveiling the construction of masculinity among the respondents it has been tried to understand them on basis of some indicators that represents the socially laid up construction of masculinity. Before going to the analysis of men's view on their bodily beauty and beautification process it was important to unveil their construction of masculinity and their ideal construction of a 'man'.

### **Ideal Masculine characteristics**

When it was tried to see the deeply rooted constructions of masculinity among the young men in Bangladeshi society, the characteristics which men give the supreme importance for being a 'man' was first sorted out. When respondents were asked to mention the ideal masculine characteristics they mentioned punctuality, determination, carrier consciousness, responsibility, decision-making capability, bread winner, helpfulness, personality, wealthy, honesty, smartness, strong physical structure and attributes, autocratic mind and ill temper. Among these characteristics, most of the respondents have mentioned breadwinning or the monetary responsibility as the most crucial characteristic of a man. Being the breadwinner of the family a man should be responsible for fulfilling the needs of the family members. Secondly, a man should also have the decision making power. The third most important characteristic is men have to be physically strong. In general, the ideal masculine characteristics that came out from the analysis of the narratives of the respondents are the common socially ascribed characteristics. The patriarchal setup has captured the mind of these people so well that most of them cannot think out of it.

### **Household Responsibilities**

Generally, when the discussion comes to masculinities, the responsibility of household works is a secluded and stigmatized area. Men are always kept away from the domestic arena by the so-called traditions of the society and taught to see domestic works as the domain of women, where they are best suited to. Most of the respondents had the same typical and biased view about the domestic responsibilities of gendered division of labor which was clearly portrayed in their answers. Almost all of the respondents said a man should not do domestic works in the house as they think it demeans the quality of a man. Still, some of the respondents are agreed to help their partners in domestic works but only in case of emergency, when no other options are available. These men are also interested in staying beside their partners when their partners will do this entire works which are the responsibilities of women. These respondents do not think directly see

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women as secondary but they support gender division of labor and think gender division of labor is important to run the society smoothly. Their perception brings to us in front of the age-old construction of persistent politics of patriarchy that men do not think men and women can be equal. Still, the situation is going to a silent positive change. One of the ten interviewees has expressed his opinion against the existing gender division of labor.

### **Strength and Power**

The concept of masculinity is to a large extent based on power. Connell (1995, p.41) argued that men perform and represent diverse patterns of masculinity depending on their positions within a social hierarchy of power. It is power that determines the social positions of men. It is always expected in the society that men will fight not only for him but for his family as well. A man has to protect his family from all types of problems. To achieve that position a man definitely needs power. Such power can come in various forms like social, economic, physical, psychological etc. If a man is not powerful enough he would be stigmatized in the society. All of the respondents agreed that a man needs to be strong and powerful. He should have a power to make his word established, to keep his superiority and to be in a leading position. The respondents also consented that most of the men in our society do not match these characteristics. Only a handful of men in the existing situation are as strong and powerful as it is expected.

### **Decision-making**

Decision-making capacity is an important characteristic of masculinities. Does a man should always take the decisions regarding the household and family matters? Respondents got divided into groups while answering the question. The majority of them thought men should take all the decisions because of their superiority as women lack strength, power, quality and/or capability to have the final word. These people expressed their views almost similar to the traditional patriarchal values where men see women as a subjugated object; they never give women space for their full humane capabilities to be flourished. The few remaining respondents said that they will consult with their partners when taking any decision as sometimes they

might be wrong and their partners may come with a better solution, but still decision will be taken by men. Their view represents the existing male superiority of the society. Being socialized in a hegemonic masculine environment, men always learnt to see women as a secondary being. They think a woman can never take a better decision without a man's concern. On the brighter side, some of the respondents believed that a man is not out of humane errors and can never be always right. The decision taken is more important rather than the person taking the decision.

### **Men Perceiving Beauty**

Man and beauty – till the last decade these two terms were seen as contrasting rather complementary. With the change of time, social system, tradition, mind sets of people are also changing and Men are now being increasingly conscious about their own beauty. When talking with the respondents it was always tried to understand their indicators of being a beautiful man, the characteristics of beauty as a concept that is drawing attention of men to change them and how they distinguish the beautification of men from the beautification of women. In this segment, the perception of male students of Dhaka about the idealized notion of masculine beauty has been tried to be explored.

### **Preferred Beauty of Men**

Power is a term related to strength and to become powerful one has to be strong. Commonly, a strong man denotes a man with a strong physical characteristic rather than psychological. Most of the respondents have preferred a muscular body as their ideal male figure. From the answers given by respondents one thing became clear that still when questions arise regarding male beauty, most of the men prefer a tall and muscular body. Body is directly related with masculine power and masculinity. If we look into history, we can see a picture of a muscular body has always been the representative of masculinity. Another important fact is body color has not been emphasized by the respondents. It implies that though men are becoming beauty conscious their main intention is not becoming fair but they need a fresh look and handsome dress up that makes them presentable in any situation. Typical perception regarding male beauty that man should

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be muscular has not been changed because if a man does not have a strong body he will be less capable of dominating other persons especially women, which will make him prone to lose his hegemonic stand. These days a tall polished muscular body is the ideal beauty of male which has slightly been deviated from the previous perception of male beauty which was just tall and roughly muscular.

### **Importance of Beauty**

Most of the respondents have mentioned tall polished muscular body as their preferred male beauty, and for that, they have mentioned grooming as an important factor. They emphasized on dressing sense and smartness in dress colors. They think in recent times outlook of a man is also very important. One of them thinks that a person who is not good looking cannot have common acceptance. Even being in public place when one needs to get the attention of people, a good and polished look may help him to do so. Plus, that time is no more when in job market women's beauty was the ingredients for getting a job and men was not to worry about their look. Now a day's good looking men are being preferred in job sector. Besides, young men of today think that a beautiful man is more accepted to women than rough and unpolished men. This notion completely challenges the age-old construction of patriarchy that manifests men as superior who will choose women for their service. In this time men are thinking about the women's choice of beauty and they are valuing women's idealized beauty concepts for men. Such situation is to some extent contrasting the existing patriarchal values.

### **View towards Male Beautification**

Before the last decade, the beautification process was only confined to the women. Men who are intensely interested in beautifying themselves are generally stigmatized as womanly in the society. Etcoff (2011, p.87) noted, 'Beautiful men may get questioned about their sexual orientation'. Interestingly, in this study, it was seen that a handsome number of men think male beautification is important and they regularly go to the beauty salons. They showed a very positive view towards the change in the trend of male beautification. The common conception that women should only

have access to the beautification is strongly contested by one of the respondents. Another respondent said that he has been encouraged towards this male beautification by his family. He has mentioned his growing interest in beautification as a 'learning process', which started from his childhood. That shows us that though male beautification is given least importance in the society; there are people who do not think it as an awful and unnecessary thing. When most of the respondents are expressing their view in favor of male beautification for getting a job and/or to get public attention or to attract the girls, one of the respondents stayed with the traditional belief stating that at least for attracting girls it's not needed for a man to beautify himself.

### **Perception about Own Body and Beauty**

The existing patriarchal society promulgates a strong body for men with a rough look because without roughness men will not be able to continue their hegemony. In reality, most of the men do not have that idealized beauty or body that is ascribed by the society. Some men are there who are not satisfied with their look because it is not close to the idealized notion of the male bodily beauty of recent times. The reality is this socially settled standard is almost unachievable. Such idealized notion makes most of the men feel humiliated as they do not match that standard of masculinity. On the other hand, the people who don't think the idealized form of masculine body is acceptable and are happy with their beauty, think society has settled wrong standard and people who try to follow that ideal are backdated. People who support this idealized form think that traditions are better to keep as they are. They think the male hegemony on the society is unchangeable as the tradition is age old. Being a man, the favor they are getting from society inspires them to support the perpetuation of gender hegemony. They are unaware of the truth that this hegemony is pushing them to a depression because of not having an ideal body and beauty. Other people whose oppose the idealized view of male beauty proliferate that society is not an unchangeable thing. It keeps changing its form and varies in time, place, culture etc. Social ideology regarding male beauty is going to face a much-needed change. The existing ideology is making men obliged to change their body according to social expectation, which is not an abnormal thing.

## Conclusion

Masculinity as a discourse has emerged to help male supremacy persist over the society. To keep women's secondary position perpetuating, they are always being represented as the symbol of beauty. This symbolization performed a political role by which women were secluded from the outer sphere by saying that it will put bad impact on their beauty. They were always told to remain inside and home and keep cherishing their beauty because a woman is always being valued by her beauty, not quality. The process of personal beautification which has been seen as feminine trait since long ago now suddenly is involving men in it as in recent times men are becoming beauty conscious on a large scale. These happenings imply that the traditional construct of masculinity is shifting from its stand. This study presented some qualitative facts to prove that the young population of Dhaka city to some extent is thinking out of the box. Though these young men most of the time strongly argued that male superiority should prevail in the society, their conceptualization of superiority is different than their predecessors. They think men should dominate women psychologically, even if there is no difference regarding physical outlook or other visible features. Such attitude proves that the construction of masculinity is a continuously shifting process. The perception of people regarding male beauty has faced a huge shift in last two decades in Bangladesh. Beauty that was presented as a typical feminine concept in the society is now seeing the involvement of men in the process which represents the changing nature of social constructs like patriarchy and masculinity. If construction of masculinity is changing its form regarding beauty, it is also possible that this construction someday will change its form regarding the other concepts of masculinity which now seems unchangeable.

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