



Associations between Chinese/Asian versus Western mass media influences and body image disturbances of young Chinese women



Todd Jackson^{a,b,*}, Chengcheng Jiang^a, Hong Chen^a

^a Key Laboratory of Cognition and Personality, Southwest University, Chongqing 400715, China

^b Department of Psychology, University of Macau, Taipa 999078, China

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we evaluated associations of experiences with mass media imported from Western nations such as the United States versus mass media from China and other Asian countries with eating and body image disturbances of young Chinese women. Participating women ($N = 456$) completed self-report measures of disordered eating, specific sources of appearance dissatisfaction (fatness, facial features, stature), and Western versus Chinese/Asian mass media influences. The sample was significantly more likely to report perceived pressure from, comparisons with, and preferences for physical appearance depictions in Chinese/Asian mass media than Western media. Chinese/Asian media influences also combined for more unique variance in prediction models for all disturbances except stature concerns. While experiences with Western media were related to disturbances as well, the overall impact of Chinese/Asian media influences was more prominent.

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Introduction

Rising rates of body image and eating disturbances among girls and women in non-Western countries have been attributed, in part, to “Westernization” and exposure to media portrayals of an ultra-thin feminine attractiveness ideal imported from the United States (U.S.), United Kingdom (U.K.), and European Union (E.U.) countries. Data from select cultures have been interpreted as supportive of this perspective (e.g., Becker, Burwell, Herzog, Hamburg, & Gilman, 2002), but the contention has not been directly tested in other non-Western groups. Toward evaluating this hypothesis in a Chinese context, we assessed the extent to which appearance portrayals in mass media from Western countries versus China and other Asian nations were sources of appearance pressure, comparisons, and preferences for young Chinese women. Associations between the women’s experiences with media from each cultural context and body image/eating concerns were also evaluated.

Considerable evidence has identified exposure to Western mass media as a potentially important influence on body image and eating disturbances among girls and women in non-Western countries. For example, Becker (2004) found that the introduction of television programs from Western nations to Fiji during the

mid-1990s was related to increases in drive for thinness and disordered eating among young women. She noted that, traditionally, fatness and larger body sizes were linked to wealth and higher status. However, televised portrayals of thinness provided her respondents with new role models and narratives for attaining material success, as well as upward social and occupational mobility in a society undergoing rapid modernization and social transition.

More recently, large-scale cross-cultural research on over 7000 participants from 26 nations indicated that exposure to Western media was a modest yet significant predictor of lower body weight ideals and increased body dissatisfaction in women (Swami et al., 2010). In contrast, exposure to local media failed to make unique contributions to either prediction model. Furthermore, results suggested that exposure to Western, but not local, media was associated with increased body dissatisfaction in women across the nations surveyed. However, the authors cautioned that these general trends might have obscured variations within specific cultures and noted that study sites in East Asia, South America, Africa, and Scandinavia were under-represented. For example, mainland Chinese participants comprised only 1.6% of the sample.

Finally, though evidence has been mixed, some researchers have assessed media exposure and body image among migrants from non-Western to Western cultures. In one such study, Swami, Mada, and Tovée (2012) reported that exposure to Western media was positively related to body appreciation and negatively related to weight discrepancy in Zimbabwean women who resided in

* Corresponding author at: Key Laboratory of Cognition and Personality, Southwest University, Chongqing 400715, China.

E-mail address: toddjackson@hotmail.com (T. Jackson).

Zimbabwe and those who had migrated to the U.K. Conversely, exposure to local (i.e., Zimbabwean) media was not related to increased body dissatisfaction in either group.

Notwithstanding distinct lines of work supporting associations between exposure to Western media and body image concerns in non-Western groups, experiences with Western media are not related, inevitably, to such disturbances. The meaning, importance, and impact of Western media are affected by the cultural contexts in which they appear (e.g., Anderson-Fye, 2004; Becker, 2004; Swami et al., 2010). For example, Anderson-Fye (2004) reported adolescent girls in Belize tended to “filter out” messages about thinness when viewing U.S. television portrayals of appearance. Instead they actively selected and adopted messages about beauty and the body that were consistent with the local ethnopsychology of self-care. As a result, few experienced extreme distress over body size or showed prolonged eating disturbances (e.g., excessive food control or exercise to lose weight).

Other recent reviews have highlighted how other macro-level factors including socioeconomic status, urbanization, and modernization influence body size ideals. Swami (2015) reported that the largest discrepancies in body size ideals are no longer observed between Western and non-Western cultures. Instead, the thin ideal is more likely to be embraced by groups living in socioeconomically developed, urban areas compared to those residing in less developed, rural areas. Such data suggest that effects of Westernization and Western media on body image perceptions are not easily disentangled from the impact of other economic and social forces.

On a related note, the importance of Western mass media versus local or culturally-congruent media to body image disturbances is not entirely clear within non-Western contexts where exposure to Western culture and media has been accompanied by dramatic changes in domestic social institutions. As a case in point, since the late 1970s, China’s historic shifts in foreign policy toward promoting increased contact with the West were accompanied by domestic policy changes that have had important repercussions for the rise of its “beauty economy” and women’s employment opportunities (Yang, 2011).

Clear causal connections have not been established, yet ongoing societal changes in China correspond with increases in body image and eating disturbances among girls and young women (Chen & Jackson, 2008; Hackworth, 2012; Jackson & Chen, 2010a; Luo, Parish, & Lauman, 2005; Tong et al., 2014; Wen, 2013). Tong et al. (2014) recently estimated that rates of clinical eating disorders among undergraduate Chinese women approximate those of their U.S. counterparts. China also ranks behind only the U.S. and Brazil in estimated annual cosmetic surgery rates (Hackworth, 2012). Notably, high school and college age women are said to account for over 70% of the procedures performed in China (Wen, 2013); those who express concerns with their facial features and/or body fat are especially prone to considering future cosmetic surgery (Jackson & Chen, 2015b).

The proliferation of Western mass media and advertising accompanying increased contact with the West is often seen as a culprit of such trends (e.g., Lee & Lee, 2000; Liao et al., 2010; Madanat, Lindsay, Hawks, & Ding, 2011). Indeed, despite government censorship of specific Western media sites (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter), an array of Western and Chinese/Asian media content is cheaply and easily accessible in China via the Internet, cable television, movie theaters, and DVD sales, particularly in urban areas. China has the largest number of Internet users on the planet, with 92% of 18–29 year olds estimated to have Internet access and/or own a smartphone as means to Internet access and media consumption (Aki, 2014).

Popular Chinese Internet sites feature media content from Western nations, large selections of contemporary and historical movies or serial dramas from China and South Korea, and music,

comedy/variety, and animation programming from China, South Korea, Japan, and Eastern Europe. Chinese television and film content is often presented in the local dialect and/or the official national language (i.e., Mandarin) while programming from Western countries is typically presented in the native language with Mandarin subtitles.

Some researchers have implicated exposure to Western mass media as a critical influence on eating and body image disturbances in Chinese samples. In applying the nutrition transition model to a Chinese context, Madanat et al. (2011, p. 102) contended that “[W]estern media, fashion, and advertising promote thinness as the most desirable appearance, which leads to the pursuit of slimness. . . . Under this cultural influence, societies experience the next phase in the nutrition transition, restrained eating, which features the purposeful restriction of food intake and denial of hunger”. China-based researchers have made similar claims. For example, Luo et al. (2005) suggested that the nation’s opening to the West resulted in mass media and commercials that diffused new sexual attractiveness ideals and increased body dissatisfaction levels. Some authors have said that the effects of Western media are better understood in tandem with macro-level processes, such as urbanization, modernization, and consumerism (Lee & Lee, 2000; Yang, 2011). However, emphasis on foreign media as a central influence on disturbances implies negative effects of Western media should be a priority within prevention and intervention efforts.

In contrast to these assertions, at least three lines of indirect evidence suggest that exposure to Western mass media is not critical to the development of body image disturbances among young Chinese women. First, Xie et al. (2006) found that adolescent Chinese girls who reported their favorite mass media (television shows, movies, music) came from Asian countries were significantly more likely to judge themselves to be overweight, whereas endorsements of U.S. mass media had weaker, non-significant relations with weight perceptions. While the authors identified use of overly-broad media exposure scales as a study limitation, their results implicated Asian, rather than Western, mass media as the more powerful influence on weight concerns.

Other studies of Asian samples (e.g., Chen & Jackson, 2012; Jackson & Chen, 2010a, 2010b, 2015a; Yamamiya, Shroff, & Thompson, 2008) have used more refined, widely-validated media influence measures, particularly the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Scale-3 (SATAQ-3; Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). The scale was originally developed and validated in U.S. samples, but its item-content reflects key tripartite influence model processes (Keery, Van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006), including pressure from, and internalization of, attractiveness portrayals (in television, movies, magazines, videos) without specifying cultural context.

Previous studies have found that high SATAQ-3 internalization or pressure subscale scores are related to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in Japanese (Yamamiya et al., 2008) and Chinese samples (e.g., Chen & Jackson, 2012; Jackson & Chen, 2010a, 2010b, 2015a). Conversely, reported use of media as a source of attractiveness information has had modest and/or non-significant relations with disturbances (e.g., Jackson & Chen, 2010b, 2011; Yamamiya et al., 2008). Such findings underscore the salience of specific theory-based media factors, though not Western media factors per se. Fine-tuning measures such as the SATAQ-3 to assess mass media influences from China and other Asian countries versus the U.S., E.U., and other Western nations is one strategy that might disentangle the impact of Asian versus Western media on body image in a Chinese context.

Second, key facets of feminine attractiveness ideals, such as thinness, are not recent phenomena imported via Western media but have been present throughout Chinese history, independent of contact with Western nations (Leung, Lam, & Sze, 2001).

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