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Body image and lifestyle in young women from Poland and Japan [Body image and lifestyle in Poles and Japanese]



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SYNOPSIS

The aim of the study was to compare chosen aspects of body image and lifestyle in female students from Poland and Japan. The study was attended exclusively by women due to the criterion of homogeneity of the research group and the importance of research variables in the study area characterized by female population. Students ($N = 203$) completed a questionnaire about self-evaluation of appearance, preferred pattern of female attractiveness, physical activity, nutrition, and mental hygiene. Differences between groups were related to: sense of body proportionality, imitation of the model of attractiveness presented in media, ideal of femininity, ways to improve appearance, the most important aspect of body, the most important attribute of femininity, leisure time activities, the reason for dieting, kind of food eaten most frequently, places of buying of prepared meals. Students from Poland and Japan were similar in self-evaluation of their own appearance and mental hygiene. However, they differed in their preferred model of physical attractiveness and in some aspects of nutrition and physical activities.

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Introduction

The age of globalization and common Internet access creates the opportunity for both information and cultural values to interpenetrate, merge, and unify. Electronic media are used in the areas of goods, services, communication, and entertainment, especially by young people in higher education. Exposure to electronic media causes the unification of models concerning lifestyle and physical attractiveness promoted by mass-media across the world. Its impact appears to be equal on the recipients of the media regardless of where they live. These models play a part in shaping young people's identities, including, their body image (Van Vonderen & Kinnally, 2012). Body satisfaction and dissatisfaction in turn affect individuals of all ages and have the potential to influence lifestyle choices (Bednarzyk, Wright, & Bloom, 2013).

The theoretical background of the study is based on the concept of self construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and social

comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). The first describes the impact of the culture on the functioning of an individual, involving such aspects as cognition, emotions, and behavior, while the latter explains the significance of social comparison in the formation of self-evaluation and self-enhancement. The authors' interest centered on the way in which the beauty model promoted by the media affects the youth for whom the Internet is a vital source of knowledge and a social life platform. The scope of this study encompasses the search for similarities and differences concerning chosen aspects of body image and lifestyle in women who belong to two cultures which are seemingly completely different.

Cultural standards of beauty

Cultural standards set norms for physical attractiveness, body weight, shape, and size. They also dictate on what is and is not acceptable. Though the ideals may differ from culture to

culture, increasing globalization and the commonness of Internet access contribute to the unification of beauty standards across the world. In the developed countries, the ideal of the young, slim, and beautiful female body prevails, therefore, low body weight is seen as essential (i.e. thin model). The consistent decrease in body weight of female images in mass media can be observed alongside with increase in real body weight of average women. The ideals presented by media (especially in advertisements) often contradict female bodies shaped by natural factors (Berberick, 2011).

Exposure to the thin-ideal may result in the tendency of individuals to compare themselves with other women and to them becoming more sensitive to other people's opinions about their appearance. Exposure to the thin ideal may also induce a woman to take up extreme or fad diets and exercise in order to try to achieve the goal of an ideal which for most will remain unachievable. Research has shown that dissatisfaction with one's own appearance affects psychological wellbeing and self-esteem and constitutes a risk factor for eating disorders (Daniali, Azadbakht, & Mostafavi, 2013; Forsén, Bergsten, & Birgegård, 2014).

Media reports concerning the standard of feminine beauty are clear and in terms of globalization (mainly access to the Internet) reach equally to Europe and to Asia. At the same time, there are patterns of native cultures, standards, and stereotypes about women's image. For example, the authors chose these particular two countries, which have traditional symbols of female beauty—i.e., Japan (where is important skin, feet, petite physique) and Poland (where a symbol of femininity are breasts, buttocks, lips). These countries have been exemplified also because until now there was no comparative studies. The aim of the study was to examine to what extent the uniform standards of American popular culture affect body image and self-esteem of women in both countries, which unify the symbols of femininity and how to defend themselves rooted in their own culture standards. The construct “self-construal” was so recognized due to the fact that Poland and Japan are the two opposite poles (Polish for “independent” Japan to “interdependent”), the authors assumed that it could impinge on the issue of attachment to tradition vs. openness to new standards coming from America. Because in Japan, family, tradition, human relationships have the same meaning, it can be assumed that young women searching for their identity – also the physical – will be more inclined to rely on these patterns, so build yourself. In Western culture, which is important to rivalry, self-expression and individual goals can be assumed that when women get new patterns, it is more likely to follow them, because they want to be “forward.” For this reason, choosing these two countries was associated not only with geographical and cultural distance but with differences in building their identity – in the flesh – resulting from cultural diversity.

The concept of self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991)

The concept of self-construal is based on the assumption that Eastern and Western cultures differ in the influence they have on the shaping of self-identity. Western culture promotes self-expression, achieving personal goals, and being better than others. An individual is seen as not being dependent on the social context, is unique, has separate

consciousness and emotions. Western culture underlines autonomy and independence and, therefore, may be referred to as supporting the independent self-construal. Eastern culture, on the other hand, sees an individual in the social context. The identity of an individual is shaped with ties to the social environment, history, tradition, and social relations. Self-identity is dependent on the identity of others and is adjusted to others; this is referred to as the interdependent self-construal.

Japan is an example of a country which the concept of interdependent self-construal refers to. The traditional values of this collectivistic culture are based on the multigenerational family which provides the sense of safety and support in exchange for loyalty. What is more, the relations with other social groups (as for example the group of students or co-workers) are also based on the traditional values of respect and cooperation (Sugimura & Mizokami, 2012). Although Poland is a country which used to be a part of the so-called Eastern Bloc, the downfall of communism in 1989 has opened Poland to Western influences leading to gradual economic growth, cultural transformation, and regaining the access to material goods. Polish society has acquired many Western values and models connected with social life and culture people born in Poland after the 1990s are living in Western culture.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954)

Humans have the need to learn about themselves in order to construct a valid image of themselves. If valid and objective reference points for the evaluation of their emotions, opinions, and abilities are not available, humans compare themselves to others. Self-evaluation may be accurate when we compare ourselves with people who are similar to us in some aspects, e.g. sex, age, social status. However, sometimes upward and downward comparisons are made. The first term refers to a situation of a comparison with someone who is “better” in a certain aspect. In this way, the person who performs the upward comparison may find a goal they hope to achieve, though sometimes it may in fact be an unattainable ideal. Downward comparisons, on the other hand, occur when we compare ourselves to people who are “worse” than us in a certain way. By doing this the we may reinforce our self-esteem and improve wellbeing.

A common aspect for social comparisons, especially in women, is appearance; there are no objective criteria of women's beauty. The media provide us with material for social comparisons by showing us attractive models, actresses, and presenters. Research proves that being exposed to attractive models of the female body in magazine advertisements causes lowering of mood and increased dissatisfaction with one's body (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). The impact of models on the wellbeing of women can be explained not only through social comparisons but also the commonly co-occurring process of internalization. Internalization is a process of adopting external values as one's own and identifying with those values. Internalization of the thin body ideal causes uneasiness and anxiety connected with one's appearance which may lead to taking measures to change body shape (Dittmar & Howard, 2004).

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