



## Body dissatisfaction, engagement in body change behaviors and sociocultural influences on body image among Chinese adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

Body dissatisfaction and body image disorders are becoming increasingly prevalent in developing non-Western countries such as China, but there is a lack of research examining the sociocultural factors that in other contexts have been associated with these problems. The current study investigated body dissatisfaction, engagement in body change behaviors, and sociocultural pressures on body image, and the relationships between these variables among 517 adolescent males ( $N = 219$ ) and females ( $N = 298$ ) in China. Females reported greater body dissatisfaction than males, and males reported using strategies to increase their muscle bulk more often than females. Males reported pressure from a variety of sociocultural sources to increase their muscles or weight, while females reported pressure from the media to lose weight. For males body dissatisfaction was predicted by pressure from peers to increase their muscle bulk, while for females pressure to lose weight from peers, adult relatives, and the media was likely to increase body dissatisfaction. Pressure from the media and adult relatives was also predictive of body change behaviors in both males and females. The findings are discussed in relation to previous research in both Western and non-Western contexts.

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### Introduction

Body image disturbance and disordered eating have typically been seen as problems affecting women living in developed Western countries, and for this reason research has tended to focus on Western female populations (Kennedy, Templeton, Gandhi, & Gorzalka, 2004). Recent reports however, have shown an increase in body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in non-Western countries such as Japan (Pike & Borovoy, 2004), Malaysia (Mellor, Ricciardelli, McCabe, Yeow, Daliza, & Binti Mohd Hapidzal, 2009), China (Chan & Owens, 2005; Chen & Jackson, 2008; Ma, 2007) and Fiji (Ricciardelli, McCabe, Mavoa, et al., 2007; Ricciardelli, McCabe, Williamson, & Thompson, 2007). In a large survey study on body image involving over 9000 Chinese children, Li, Hu, Ma, Wu, and Ma (2005) found that rates of body dissatisfaction were comparable to those reported in Western populations. Among the children classified as healthy weight only 46.5% of boys and 43.0% of girls were satisfied with their bodies, and preferences for

thinner bodies increased with age (Li et al., 2005). In a recent study of 2103 young people living in China, Chen and Jackson (2008) found that 2.3% of their participants met the full DSM-IV criteria for an eating disorder or an eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS). Lee and Lee (2000) believe a further 3–10% of Chinese females may suffer from disordered eating at a subclinical level. Less is known about body image disturbances and body change behaviors of Chinese males; for instance, are Chinese males influenced by the drive for muscularity that is increasingly evident among Western males or do they aspire to traditional cultural ideas of masculinity? The current study aims to investigate levels of body dissatisfaction and engagement in body change behaviors to reduce weight, gain weight and increase muscle bulk among adolescent males and females living in China.

It is generally agreed that sociocultural influences play a significant role in promoting body dissatisfaction and preoccupation with body change behaviors by perpetuating largely unattainable body image ideals. Sociocultural forms of influence include social pressure to conform to a particular body type, teasing, and comparisons with other idealised body types, with the most powerful sources of influence being one's family, friends and the media (Jackson & Chen, 2008b). Social comparison and attention to cultural standards are important means by which people evaluate their bodies (Franzoi & Klaiber, 2007). The

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dispositional tendency to compare one's appearance to that of others has been found to be a potent predictor of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in Western populations (Stormer & Thompson, 1996; Thompson, Coovert, & Stormer, 1999; Van den Berg & Thompson, 2007). Morrison, Kalin, and Morrison (2004) found social comparison was the best predictor of body dissatisfaction, appearance self esteem, and engagement in body change behaviors, with universalistic sources of influence (media) exerting greater influence than particularistic ones (friends and family).

Some researchers claim that sociocultural pressure to be thin is the strongest influence on the development of body image disorders. McCarthy (1990) reviewed cross-cultural data on eating disorders and concluded that "all cultures that have eating disorders have the thin ideal. Further, no culture that does not have the thin ideal has eating disorders" (McCarthy, 1990, p. 210). There is ample support for the role of sociocultural influences in determining notions about ideal body types among Western samples, particularly females (Dittmar, 2005; Halliwell & Harvey, 2006; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999). However, there is a lack of research examining the relative importance of sociocultural influences and types of sociocultural pressures on body image in non-Western populations (Chen, Gao, & Jackson, 2007; Mellor et al., 2009). In light of this, the second aim of the current study is to investigate the sources of sociocultural influence and types of sociocultural pressure related to body image, as well as the predictive relationship between these variables and the body dissatisfaction and body change behaviors of Chinese males and females.

#### *Media influence*

The source of sociocultural influence most heavily criticised for promoting body dissatisfaction and body change behaviors is Western media, with its relentless portrayal of thin female bodies and emphasis on diet and weight control (Jung & Forbes, 2007). Rising reports of body dissatisfaction and preoccupation with body change behaviors in Western males have also been attributed to the increasing value placed on the male body in Western advertising (Yang, Gray, & Pope, 2005). It has been suggested that in non-Western countries exposure to Westernised media leads to the adoption of Western beauty ideals, which in time override traditional or previously held body type ideals (Becker, Burwell, Gilman, Herzog, & Hamburg, 2002; Williams, Ricciardelli, McCabe, Swinburn, Waqa, & Bavadra, 2006). This proposition is supported by evidence linking exposure to Westernised media with concurrent rises in body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in non-Western countries (Becker et al., 2002; Mellor, McCabe, Ricciardelli, & Merino, 2008; Mellor et al., 2009; Shih & Kubo, 2002).

It is likely, however, that the impact of Western media on body dissatisfaction is mediated by the cultural context in which it appears (Davidson, Welborn Thill, & Lash, 2002; Jung & Forbes, 2007; Mellor et al., 2008; Mellor et al., 2009). As Shih and Kubo (2002) have demonstrated, both Japan and Taiwan have been heavily exposed to Western media, both populations have relatively similar body sizes, and yet Japanese college women reported much greater body dissatisfaction than their Taiwanese counterparts. In another study Xie et al. (2006) found that while both Asian and Western media were influential in the body image perceptions of Chinese adolescents, Asian media had a slightly stronger influence. The authors concluded that the Western media approach to body image may be too culturally distinct from Chinese values to impact significantly on the attitudes and behaviors of Chinese people.

Asian media has not typically been associated with body dissatisfaction, because images and advertising tend to focus on the face more than the body (Jackson & Chen, 2008b). Advertisements for cosmetics and hair products, rather than clothes, are common in magazines targeted at Asian women and depictions of women tend to be feminine and demure, rather than sexy and alluring like the images of women portrayed in Western media (Frith, Cheng, & Shaw, 2004). Yang et al. (2005) compared the images of men in Western and Taiwanese magazines and assessed levels of body dissatisfaction in Taiwanese males. They found that Taiwanese magazines depicted undressed Asian men rarely, compared to the numerous representations of undressed Western men in both Western and Asian magazines, and that Taiwanese men reported significantly less body dissatisfaction than their Western counterparts. The authors concluded that Taiwan – whose population and culture are predominantly descended from China – is less preoccupied with male body image than Western countries. However, they raise the question: can Chinese attitudes and values regarding body image withstand the influence of Western culture? (Yang et al., 2005).

It is important to recognise that the cultural, political and economic reforms in China that have allowed the introduction of Western media have also resulted in changes to dietary and lifestyle habits (Chen & Jackson, 2005; Jung & Forbes, 2007). The growing prosperity of the Chinese population has led to increases in sedentary work and high calorie, high fat diets, the result of which has been a 200% rise in obesity rates for women and a 300% rise for men between 1989 and 1997 (Bell, Ge, & Popkin, 2001). These factors provide support for Jung and Forbes' (2007) argument that the relationship between body dissatisfaction and Western media is complex and multiply determined and highlights the importance of interpreting the influence of Western media within the context of the predominant culture. Several authors have pointed out that thinness and fragility have long been a feminine beauty ideal in Chinese culture and therefore reports of body dissatisfaction among Chinese women may not be reflective of a desire to conform to Western 'thin-ideals' at all (Jackson & Chen, 2008b; Jung & Forbes, 2007; Leung, Lam, & Sze, 2001; Ma, 2007). Masculinity, in traditional Chinese culture, is more closely related to a man's character than his physique (Yang et al., 2005), though Jackson and Chen (2008a) suggest that stature, as opposed to muscularity, may be a valued body ideal. Jackson and Chen (2008a) have further suggested that collectivist values and culturally defined ideals of femininity and masculinity may lead to high levels of sociocultural pressure to conform, unrelated to Western ideals of beauty that are disseminated by the media.

#### *Family*

The rapid economic growth and increasing Westernisation experienced by China since the adoption of the 'Open Door Policy' in the 1980s has resulted in a shifting cultural climate characterised by intergenerational conflict between modern and traditional values (Lee & Lee, 1996; Ma, 2007). These intergenerational differences have direct implications for relationships between children and their parents, whose upbringing was drastically different from that of the current generation of Chinese youth (Ma, 2007, 2008). While young people in China today are embracing Western values emphasising autonomy, independence and personal success, their parents were raised to value cooperation, obedience and group cohesion. These vast cultural differences are likely to impede effective communication between parents and children regarding issues of body image and diet, which are highly relevant to personal development throughout childhood and adolescence (Jung & Forbes, 2007).

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