Media, culture and young women's body image practices in Taizhou, China: An exploratory study

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Abstract

Contemporary China has witnessed a growing prevalence of female body dissatisfaction and weight loss practice. Previous research on Chinese women has primarily used quantitative methods to identify correlations between media/culture and body image concern. This study qualitatively investigates how media and culture play a role in young women's body dissatisfaction and body image practice in China through an exploratory study with twelve young women (six high school students and six undergraduates) from Taizhou (a small city in southeast China). Through semi-structured in-depth interviewees it's possible to move beyond correlation toward examining some of the ambiguities and complexities of lived everyday experiences at the nexus of media/culture and body image dissatisfaction and body image practice. Further, this approach enables the young women's to articulate in their own way their experiences. The results confirm that media exposure of thin female images contributes to the young women's thin ideal internalisation, which brings about body dissatisfaction. However, it was also found that when media influences opinion leaders in the young women's life this leads to also plays a key indirect influence on their body dissatisfaction. That is, there is a broader learning web. This web connects young women's body image concern and practice with repeated confrontation with shape/gender stereotypes, patriarchal ideology, and ongoing self-body-surveillance and self-objectification.

Introduction

[1] It was only a few decades ago that eating disorders were hardly heard about in Asia (Bordo, 2003). However, dieting has become "the essence of contemporary femininity" (Wolf, 1990, p. 200; cited in Holland, 2004, p. 32), with Asia no exception (Bordo, 2003). Quantitative methods have been used to analyse relations between media, culture, Chinese women's body dissatisfaction and body image concern (e.g. Chen and Jackson, 2009, 2012). However, there are few qualitative studies looking into how these relationships form and that provide an avenue for young women's to speak in their own terms about their lived experiences of those relationships, with all the concomitant complexities and ambiguities that go along with this. This article addresses this gap by using in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore how media and culture play a role in Chinese women's body dissatisfaction level and their body image practice, as well as how they experience this and reckon with this.

[2] This study is exploratory and focuses on young women from Taizhou, a small coastal city in southeast China. Given the cultural specificity and small scale of this study the findings should not be extrapolated to the wider populace of China. The emphasis is on contextual specificity. That said, some of the key themes and findings may point toward similar in other contexts that could prove a starting point for further research.

[3] The research findings and analyses proceeds according to four major themes: how body dissatisfaction occurs if we consider the findings through social comparison theory and self-ideal discrepancy theory; the second thematic progresses through considering weight loss methods used by interviewees and the influence they believe this has on their physical and emotional condition; the third thematic is how media contributes to thin ideal internalisation; the last thematic demonstrates how these women practice the "normalisation" and reinforcement of shape/gender stereotypes and gender inequality in what is a patriarchal cultural environment, and how they have consequently become entangled with processes of self-surveillance and self-objectification.

Getting at the young women's practices and voices

[4] Although results from qualitative research usually fail to be statistically generalised due to the small sample, they can reveal the underlying structure of certain phenomenon in depth and breadth mapping "the range of views, experiences, outcomes, and of the factors and circumstances that shape and influence them" (Lewis et al., 2013, p. 350). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used for this mapping purpose. As Rapley (2007) explains, such interviews

enable access to people's emotions, thoughts and practice, expanding our understanding of the participants and their experiences. Since participants are actually part of 'broader collectives' (ibid, p. 30) (e.g. certain groups, categories) and broader context (e.g. (sub)-culture, society, discourses, power relations), rather than isolated and enclosed individuals, their thoughts and experiences throw light on how their cultures and environment shape the way they think/act and produce the very people they are. The interactive nature of the in-depth interview enabled first author Zhang to check interpretations of key issues with the women themselves and ask for clarification in the process, which limited potential inferential errors during later analysis. Twelve interviews, which lasted between one hour and two hours, were conducted during the period from March 5th to 25th, 2014. Two groups of participants were interviewed: six female Taizhounese students (aged from 18 to 19) in local high schools, and six female Taizhounese undergraduates (aged from 23-24) living in other cities in China.

Body dissatisfaction

[5] With the expansion of the "tyranny of slenderness" (Chernin, 1981), there has been a growing body of literature on body dissatisfaction and body image practice. Social comparison theory and self-ideal discrepancy theory are useful to understand how body dissatisfaction occurs.

[6] According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), a lack of objective reference encourages people to self-evaluate by comparing themselves to others. If one selects an unrealistic comparison target they are likely to suffer from dissatisfaction and pressure to adjust (Wykes and Gunter, 2005). Questionnaires (Chen and Jackson, 2009; Shroff and Thompson, 2006; Vartanian and Dey, 2013) and media-exposure experiments (Ata et al., 2013; Durkin and Paxton, 2002; Friederich et al., 2007; Yamamiya et al., 2005) have been used to verify the relationship between female body satisfaction and their tendency to compare with celebrities and models. The results are consistent with women experiencing high levels of negative emotions about their bodies e.g. shame, anger and sadness. Such experience may lead them to pursue weight loss, with a frequent tendency toward eating disorders emerging (Chrisler et al., 2013; Friederich et al., 2007).

[7] In self-ideal discrepancy theory, Higgins (1987) posits three selves: actual self, ideal self and ought self (who one is supposed to be). Self-ideal discrepancy occurs when the actual self fails to match the ideal self. This leads to dissatisfaction, disappointment and a lack of self-fulfilment. Women are particularly vulnerable to body dissatisfaction because the media and culture that contribute to their sense of self have been reinforcing slenderness as concomitant with the ideal self i.e. a beauty ideal. Not only is self-ideal discrepancy itself negatively correlated with body

appreciation, confidence and positive emotions (Anton et al., 2000; Castonguay et al., 2012; Snyder, 1998; Swami et al., 2000), it also encourages a social comparison process which contributes to body dissatisfaction (Bessenoff, 2006).

Media

[8] Among all factors that can potentially incite women's body dissatisfaction mass media is often blamed for its hegemonic thin-ideal discourse and its leading role in perpetuating this. Wykes and Gunter (2005) argue that frequent exposure to slender female celebrities and models through mass media normalises thinness as the beauty ideal. Researchers have investigated such internalisation of thin-ideal media images by female audiences. The results show that exposure to thin-ideal media images does result in body dissatisfaction when there is a discrepancy between self-image and this thin ideal self (Durkin and Paxton, 2002; Groesz et al., 2002; Tiggemann et al., 2000; Vartanian and Dey, 2013). As Tiggemann et al. (2000) demonstrate via a series of focus groups, although most participants are aware that media images can be unrealistic and technically altered their satisfaction with their body it still influenced. Yamamiya et al.'s research (2005) shows that even a five-minute exposure to thin and "attractive" models in magazines can bring about higher level of body dissatisfaction in participants. However, the body dissatisfaction level significantly decreased when the participants were given media-literacy education before the exposure.

[9] It's worth recalling here that audiences are not passive. In his high impact article *Encoding/decoding*, Stuart Hall (1992) stressed the significance of audience subjectivities and different cultural codes/context in generating different reading positions i.e. interpretations. Considering the different reference codes or positions audiences bring to any mediated experience there can be, according to Hall, three major interpretation results. There is the dominant-hegemonic interpretation, where the audience shares and accepts the codes of the text with the effect being to reproduces such i.e. "common-sense" or "transparent"). There is the negotiated position, where there is a partial sharing of the codes of the text but the preferred reading is modified in some way to accommodate different cultural positioning leading contradictions. Then there is the oppositional position, where the audience understand the hegemonic textual codes however they contest–or indeed resist–them by using an alternative discursive framework that works against that of the hegemonic version transmitted. Given Hall's insightful explanation of the encoding/decoding process, it is important to take into account how the young women's in this study (and women more broadly) are not simply fooled by the media but caught up in complex discursive processes of positioning and articulation embedded in culture.

Culture

[10] Beauty practice can be a "harmful cultural practice" (Jeffreys, 2009, p. 28). Such practices "originate in the subordination of women" and "create stereotyped roles for the sexes" (ibid: p. 44). Although, not all beauty practice is necessarily harmful, Jeffreys' words illustrate the close connection between culture, gendered roles and body image practice and how they have come to set up "correct" or "incorrect" expressions. As Bordo (1993) pointed out in *Unbearable Weight*:

> The firm, muscled, developed body has become a symbol of correct attitude; it means that one 'cares' about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to 'shape your life' … When associations of fat and lower-class status exist, they are usually mediated by moral qualities – fat being perceived as indicative of laziness, lack of discipline, unwillingness to conform, and absence of all those 'managerial' abilities. (p. 195)

Body image links to gendered traits. For example, the hegemonic femininity in the contemporary world consists of assumptions such as slenderness (Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1999), vulnerability (Holland, 2004), deference (Jeffreys, 2009), fashion (Ussher, 1997) and self-adornment (Reynolds and Press, 1995; cited in Holland, 2004). However, these "feminine traits" are learned through "imitation" (Butler, 1999; Holland, 2004), "repetition" (Butler, 1999), "punishment" (ibid) and "self-normalisation" (Bordo, 1993). Judith Butler's (1999) concept of "performativity" is useful to explain the social learning process of gendered traits. Butler explains how gender is established but does not have an original, it is "parodic." Gender is "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (p. 141). Gender is "in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed | rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – a an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" which can be speech/language and gestural (p.392). In other words, there is no abiding feminine identity but rather the "illusion of an abiding self" (p.392). The feminine self is a socio-cultural construction, and socio-cultural processes through performative acts come to constitute the performance of feminine "ideals" of beauty (e.g. thin-ideal) that are repeatedly advocated, practiced, imitated and normalised to "become an object of belief" (p.393).

[11] Butler's work closely follows that of Michel Foucault (1977), where the body is understood to be an expression of discursive power. Through rules, practice, examination and punishment, it is discursively produced, manipulated, shaped and trained. Power is productive. Women's bodies are

produced by discourses and norms, resulting in categories and classifications. There is a discursive production of the very conditions by which judgement can be made and categories formed. There results self-surveillance, self-examination and self-correction. In contemporary society women's bodies are administered. As Foucault (1980) points out, there is a gaze

> An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself. (p. 155)

This concept of self-surveillance/self-gaze recalls John Berger's (2006 [1972]) arguments regarding the "male gaze' and "self-objectification." As Berger writes

> Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (p. 38)

Women learn to adopt a third-person perspective (usually the heterosexual males') to view, to judge and to objectify their bodies for self-monitoring, self-management and self-manipulation (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Crawford and Unger, 2004).

Culture, peers, and parents

[12] Appearance conversation is performative and another salient factor in women's body image concerns and practice. Body-image-related performative conversations emerge with with friends (Lawler and Nixon, 2011; Lee, 2013), peer appearance criticism (Bailey and Ricciardelli, 2010; Lawler and Nixon, 2011), and peer and parental pressure to lose weight (Xu et al., 2010) can increase levels of body dissatisfaction.

Research finds that Korean women are much more critical of their shape than US women (Jung and Lee, 2006). The researcher attributes this to the distinction between Korean collectivistic culture and US individual culture, arguing that "collectivistic cultures place greater gender-role expectations on women to be beautiful" (ibid: p. 363). We understand "greater" to mean a shared and mutually reinforcing sense of responsibility among key opinion makers to performatively reiterate gendered behaviours and beliefs and with them beauty norms. A similar case could be made for China given its own collectivist culture.

[13] Although in the past most studies on body image dissatisfaction and practice focus on Western women there has been a growing body of research about "Asian" women in recent decades. Most attention has been paid to women in Japan (e.g. Chisuwa and O'Dea, 2010; Kowner, 2004; Mukai, 1998; Yamamiya et al., 2008), South Korea (e.g. Jung and Lee, 2006; Jung et al., 2009; Kim, 2009; Park and Epstein, 2013) and Hong Kong (e.g. Lai et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2009; Lee, 2013; Sheffield et al., 2005), leaving women's practice and attitudes towards body image in Mainland China insufficiently researched. Among the limited publications on Chinese women, the majority (e.g. Chen and Jackson, 2009; Chen and Jackson, 2012; Huon et al., 2002; Jackson and Chen, 2007; Luo et al., 2005; Xu et al., 2010) have used a quantitative approach to verify the correlation between certain factors, with the process of formation and the mechanism of influence left weakly explored. Given this, the voices of the young women who live the complexity of how media, bodies and culture become entangled in the many specific settings (e.g. Taizhounese) of China are marginilised. However, we need to hear from them so as to collaboratively work on tactics to contest the dominant discursive performativity in the various specific settings perhaps even turning co-opting the variety of pressures which produce body dissatisfaction to validate bodily diversity instead.

The voices of Taizhounese young women about body image dissatisfaction

[14] The majority of participants in this study expressed different levels of dissatisfaction with their shape, while only one participant admitted to being satisfied. She no longer considered herself a "victim" of body dissatisfaction, as she used to feel in middle school. (Her case will be discussed in more detail later). The level of body dissatisfaction was not necessarily linked to the young women's current weight or body forms. For instance, while a young woman who weighed around 70kg/166-7cm was not very dissatisfied with her weight and shape some much thinner young women experienced long-term frequent unhappiness, sadness, anxiety and a lack of confidence due to their body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction varies for each person depending on their interpretation of weight to size ratio i.e. what they interpret to be appropriate or not given their particular contextual position.

[15] One participant explained

> I only compare my disadvantages to others' advantages … I don't compare my advantages to others, because, for me, my advantages are deserved while my disadvantages should be changed and eliminated.

Three young women compared themselves to thinner women while most of the others also seek comfort by making comparison to fatter young women after being irritated by thinner comparison targets. This indicates how certain types of comparison targets make a difference in young women's' body dissatisfaction level. While the choice of "fatter" comparison targets can somewhat reduce the negative feelings brought about through comparison to thinner targets it also fails to make the situation much better because as a participant said, "soon I come back to the reality." This result is generally consistent with previous findings that social comparison tendency can be a predictor in the increase of body dissatisfaction (e.g. Chen and Jackson, 2012; Durkin and Paxton, 2001).

[16] Some participants' reminded us of how self-ideal discrepancy generates or reinforces female body dissatisfaction (e.g. Castonguay et al., 2012; Snyder, 1998).

> Every evening, I weigh myself … "I ate little today, how come it remains this number!"… As long as my weight is not within my ideal range, even it is only 0.5kg more, even I'm not gaining weight I still feel very unhappy.

> I'm very unhappy with my present shape … When I was in high school, I considered my figure generally good, but now I realizse how fat I was … My expectation grows.

Although self-ideal discrepancy may play a role, the actual width of the gap between the real and the ideal cannot be assumed as the measurement of body dissatisfaction level. For example, when one participant was interviewed she was merely 0.5kg more than her "ideal" (acceptable) range. Although the gap between her ideal and present weight is the second narrowest among the participants she did not seem to be more satisfied with her shape. On the contrary, some of the other participants had a much wider actual gap between ideal and actual but they rarely felt unhappy about their weight. The media was agreed by the participants that the media drew their attention to such "gaps."

[17] In talking about the media most participants thought that celebrities and models do have certain influence on people's concept of beauty, shifting their attention to body concerns. However, these young women also argued that the influence was limited, weak and temporary. Although 10 out of 12 young women are aware that celebrities and models in the magazines and advertisements look thinner and "better" than in reality, most of them commented on it only when asked. They also admitted that they did not really think much (about truth/reality) when consuming media products for "entertainment." This may explain why participants in Tiggemann

et al. (2000)'s focus group argued that they knew the unrealistic nature of media images but in daily life their body satisfaction remained influenced by thin ideal exposure.

[18] While most participants said that they do not need to be so perfect as celebrities, they do consider slender media celebrities (including models) as the embodiment of the beauty ideal. They do not directly compare themselves to celebrities as such an ideal seems unattainable. Neither do they expect themselves to be as thin as celebrities and models. However, almost all of the participants work toward the hegemonic thin ideal celebrated in the media. One participant explains

> I'm not sure whether I really compare myself to stars/models. I haven't consciously done it, but I may have unconsciously done so … I think that media plays a role in directing people's understanding of the beauty … After having seen many thin models in the media, we may begin to consider the thinness as the beauty standard

It is not the achievement of an ideal but the *working toward* that reiterates problematic discursive gendered performative acts of "beauty" that produce ongoing body dissatisfaction.

[19] Some participants' reported few media (thin-ideal) exposure, arguing that they are much more influenced by their friends. However, their friends may be influenced by thin female figures in the media. If one of them happens to be an opinion leader, media influence extends to the friendship group. One of the participants is such an opinion leader

> Interviewer (Zhang): Have the thin ideal and weight loss ever been popular in your environment?

> Participant: Yes. I'm the one who led this fashion. I encouraged my peers to form a weight loss group by showing some very thin and muscled online female figures to them. We dieted for a week, during which we hadn't had even a meal. We ate little, thus suffering a lot from starvation and stomach ache

Media influence can be indirect. It can influence people by influencing people around them.

[20] However, not every audience is equally influenced by the media as their decoding process involves their own subjectivity and cultural codes (Hall, 1992). One interviewee was the *least* dissatisfied with her body shape. Her case is helpful in explaining how one's self-expectation, taste and types of media consumption make media influence on him/her distinct from others.

> Participant: The most ideal woman I want to be is the very old female diplomatist – Fu Ying … I think that an elegant, intelligent and upright women is more feminine than sexually attractive women … My concept of femininity came from media …
>
> Interviewer (Zhang): Why? Don't you think that most celebrities/models are more attractive than intelligent?
>
> Participant: I rarely watch entertainment programmes. Neither do I care about celebrities and fashion. I pay most attention to topics such as the economy, politics and socialisation in the media

By choosing to consume differently-constituted media content the participant actively participates in diluting the emphasis on women-beauty discourse. The participant appears to benefit from the reduction of the influence such would possibly contribute to body dissatisfaction. The participant also evidences how media literacy education and feminist theories can play a role in female audience's interpretation of media information. The participant began to pay attention to weight-loss-related information in the media when she was dissatisfied with her body image in middle school. At that time, she had limited knowledge about media representation. When learning more about the media and feminist theories due to her university studies her attitude toward female images in media and weight loss practice changed. Although she is now about heavier than in middle school she is satisfied with her present shape. As she explained

> After coming to the university, I'm quite aware of the difference between media representation and the reality … One reason could be my enriched experiences. After seeing and experiencing much, I know more about the hidden truth … The second reason is related to my major where I learnt much specialised knowledge on media and developed more critical understanding of the thin body ideal

[21] While the media is influential it has been shown to be managed by some participants. Such negotiation also takes place when it comes to the circulation and production of stereotypes that tie body image to personality among peers and the broader population. Most participants' associate "obese" female strangers with having an inferiority complex and being sensitive to body-related topics, although a few young women also mentioned the possibility of certain "obese" women being happy with their bodies and being optimistic. As for what some referred to as "a-bit-fat" women, they are generally considered as outgoing/happy/lovely and easiest to get on well with. Another three types of women–"a-bit-thin" women, "extremely thin" women and women with "perfect shape"–are regarded as hard to get along with due to a supposed

pride/arrogance borne of their closeness to the body ideal. Among these three types, "a-bit-thin" women are generally thought of as normal, while "extremely thin" women are associated with over-dieting and poor health. According to the interviewees, these stereotypes came from people with certain characteristics that they know in daily life. For example, when talking about the first impression of an unacquainted "obese" young woman the participants mentioned the same young woman (the "fattest" in their class) thinking that other obese young women must be equally self-abased as that person.

[22] Stereotypes seemingly lead to a conclusion that so-called "fat" young women, especially "a-bit-fat" ones are much more valued and preferred. However, the participants still tend to exclude fat (both "a bit fat" and "obese") peers and to consider the fatness as abnormal. For example

> Interviewer (Zhang): Normally, you talk more about fat or thin girls?

> Participant: The fat, of course. Fat girls bring a completely different (larger) visual impact. We think that fat ones are different. People with normal or thin bodies are one group; the fat is another.

Some of the young women prefer to make friends with thinner and more attractive young women even if they actually do not like them, because such association can enable more "positive" attention from young men. On the contrary, if they stay with "fat girls" who are usually teased or excluded by boys, they may risk being bullied and excluded as well because of that association.

[23] It is also "problematic" for the young women to be muscular. According to some participants, muscles make women appear "too powerful/strong/mighty," "incongruous," "hard/tough," "less slender," "less soft/gentle" and even "disgusting." In contrast, men with muscles are considered "normal," "good-looking," "fit," "sportive" and "healthy." This is a typical and traditional gender binary stereotype which functions in females' weight loss activities. As one participant explained, she and her peers in middle school chose dieting and diet pills rather than exercise, not only because they thought these methods would be easier but also because they were afraid to have muscles.

[24] Although gender binary stereotypes remain in Chinese society as norms some changes have come to today's China. A few participants are beginning to feel that women with some muscle, especially abdominal, look good. Reasons why they think so vary.

> Previously, I considered pure thinness as good-looking. Now I think that women with some abdominal muscles are even more beautiful … They look cool and vigorous.

> The perfect shape … needs a bit of muscle … Otherwise, when we sit down the flesh is out of shape, our thighs look bigger/fatter … If we have muscles, our flesh is firm and tri-dimensional which makes us appear thinner.

Notwithstanding this, it remains debatable whether the trend of muscled females will bring positive changes to females' body condition and gender equality or whether it will be a new form of gender oppression as it becomes a new beauty ideal still attached to the male gaze.

[25] Body shape links to not only general associations with certain personalities and characteristics, but also the gender code (cf. Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1999). The young women explained that good body shape functions as a critical part in one's femininity construction. A typical feminine woman in China is said to be (much) shorter/thinner/weaker than men (especially her partner), curvaceous (i.e. big breast, slender waist, a sexy hip, long and slender legs), gentle and (sexually) attractive. One participant argued that women must be thinner than their partners.

> Interviewer (Zhang): Why do you remain dissatisfied with your figure?
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> Participant: The primary reason is that my boyfriend is too thin. When we're walking in the street, I'm always afraid of being laughed at e.g. 'Look! The girl is so fat and her boyfriend is so thin. They just don't match'… Passers-by must have said this, because when we see couples like this, we do talk behind them in this way
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> Interviewer: If you see a couple in the street, "a-bit-thin" young women and an "over-thin" man, do you think that the women is too fat and needs to lose weight or that the man is too thin?
>
> We still feel that the woman is too fat for matching this man … We usually take the male partner's figure as the reference standard to criticise the female partner's shape … We would say that they look mismatched, wondering why the woman hasn't tried to be thinner … Even she is not fat she should lose weight for her boyfriend

This dialogue reveals the difficulties women face in contemporary China. Their body dissatisfaction rises from the comparison to not only female peers, strangers and celebrities/models, but also their male partners.

[26] When participants' were asked which gender–sex is concerned most about their shape answers are consistent: women. Previous studies (cf. Xu et al., 2010) have also suggested that women have greater body dissatisfaction than men. There is cultural direct force (e.g. pressure from boyfriends to be thin) and indirect force (pressure from the need for marriage and romantic relationships). To begin with the former, many of the participants' narrated the sufferings of their thin female friends. For example:

> Participant: Many of my thin female friends were asked by their boyfriends to lose weight, so they had no choice but to do so … Among these girls, one's boyfriend directly demanded that she should reduce her weight to less than 45kg … Ironically, last Spring Festival, when her boyfriend took her to see his parents his mother didn't like my friend due to her "over-thinness" … Another girl asked to be thinner is just a little bit more than 50kg, 168cm

> Interviewer (Zhang): Why didn't these girls just refuse?

> Participant: They are little obedient lamps.

[27] The oppression of contemporary Chinese women comes from their own learned normalisation, obedience and reinforcement of patriarchal ideology. Women exert stereotyped opinions on themselves and people around them (e.g. daughters, relatives and friends): marriage is important; only thin women can successfully find a boyfriend/husband. Rarely do they reflect on what makes them think so. Most of the participants felt they had to "do what they are told," further contributing to the spread and enhancement of the gendered discourses about their bodies. Consider the following participant's narrative

> Participant: All of my female relatives (e.g. aunts) are very thin. They always say that I'm fat so I won't find male partner for marriage.

> Interviewer (Zhang): To your face? But you are not very fat are you?

> Participant: They are over-thin, fashionable and proud/arrogant. They said in front of me at the family party: 'How could you gain weight again! How can a girl be so fat!' I

was extremely angry, so I replied defiantly at the dinner table: 'Whether I'm fat or not is none of your business. Better mind your own child!' Then my parents scolded me for my impoliteness. The atmosphere of our family party is frequently spoilt by things like this. If I succeed in weight loss more boys will like me, and more boys will ask me for my phone number.

[28] Participants like this young woman are taught to monitor their bodies, to keep a "good" shape and to control their weight. Clothes, weighing machines, the tape measure and mirror are participants' tools for self-surveillance. Women's clothes are a dual-dimensional tool for body surveillance: socio-cultural surveillance on women's bodies and women's self-surveillance on their own bodies. At the socio-cultural level, restrictive and close-fitting female clothes can reveal body-shape. In this way, women's self-surveillance begins. The participants' try to eliminate the "extra" fat to fit themselves into clothes, and to watch out for the potential return of an unwelcome "otherness." As one interviewee said

> My father is quite fat. He has a big beer belly but he looks good in his clothes … Men's clothes don't require good shape … As for my mother, as soon as she gains a few kilos she immediately looks terrible in many clothes … Most female clothes show the women's waist. Only women with a good body shape can wear them … My mother is trying to lose weight to wear beautiful clothes.

A common feature shared by the participants is the self-monitoring process where they actively use clothing as a body surveillance tool.

> I don't dare to wear only a camisole in front of boys. It's too exposed. Others would think that I'm deliberately alluring the males.

> Boys' view is different from young women's. They usually look at young women's legs at first. If a girl's legs are fat they wouldn't be interested in the girl anymore. I don't dare to wear short skirts in front of boys due to my imperfect shape.

> I dare and like to wear short skirts in front of boys only when I'm not fat. I know that they will think much and talk about me. As long as I think their comments would be positive I'm happy to wear the short skirt and to be talked about … We are girls … To be talked about by boys means that we are attractive and popular.

Some of the young women do not dare to wear certain clothes or do certain things due to the potential male gaze/talk. The young women adopt the males' perspective to view their own bodies

before dressing in certain clothes in front of the males, or even before they actually put on these clothes. Whether young women's predictions of potential feelings in front of boys are shyness, unease, good feelings or a combination of these, all these are products of their own internalised male gaze.

[29] In patriarchal society, women have been taught to adopt the male gaze to objectify not only themselves and female images in the media (by adopting the male spectatorship position – Doane, 1987; Mulvey, 1975), but also other women in their lives. Women view other women in the same way that men view these women, as (sexualised) objects. However, at this point in time men experience a far lesser degree of pressure and socio-cultural training to view themselves or other men in this way. As one interviewee described

> Participant: I like to view others' (female peers') bodies. The atmosphere in the whole school is like this … When we are wearing the school uniform this phenomenon is less salient. If we are out of school wearing own clothes, when I meet my (female) schoolmates, I always gaze at them for a long time
>
> Interviewer (Zhang): Gazing at one's face, body or other parts?
>
> Participant: The whole person, of course.

Because women themselves view other women in this way (by adopting the male gaze) they know how themselves, as women, are being viewed by others. The viewing results and the evaluation of different women's bodies are the place where social opinions about (good/bad) body image grow and how women's expectations of their own body images form. This male gaze can work without the consciousness of the self. It has been integrated into women's state of being. As another participant said

> Every time when I'm walking on the street, I always feel that others are staring at me and talking about my fatness …I know that they may not even have noticed me but I still feel in this way, so I always feel uneasy and uncomfortable in public places.

Here, the gaze which causes the participant's unease comes from the integration of her self-evaluation and social opinions. She projects these opinions to strangers on the street, feeling herself being looked at and discussed. This is consistent with self-objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Crawford and Unger, 2004). Women are looked at and objectified not only through the male gaze from others but also the male gaze internalised.

Conclusion

[30] With regard to the prevalent thin ideal and problematic female body image practice in China, this study aimed to investigate how media and culture contribute to Chinese young women's body dissatisfaction and weight loss behaviour. Through a combination of semi-structured in-depth interviews this article first looked at how body dissatisfaction occurs. The results supported both social comparison theory and self-ideal discrepancy theory. In the second stage, attention was paid to young women's body image practice. While healthy diet and exercise lead to better body condition and weight loss success, unhealthy weight loss practice usually ends in failure, bringing both physical and emotional suffering. The third stage explained how media both directly contributed to thin ideal internalisation (which is a critical part in self-ideal discrepancy and thus in body dissatisfaction) and indirectly influence young women's weigh loss practice by influencing people around them. However, the audience are active during the decoding process. Their different cultural codes, choices, tastes and knowledge can result in diverse interpretation (e.g. different understanding of femininity and the importance of shape). Culture was examined through five themes: shape stereotypes, femininity, gender inequality, self-surveillance and self-objectification. While "fat" people are considered easier to get along with they are teased, bullied and excluded by peers. Besides body shape stereotypes, gender stereotypes also force women to be thin(ner) to fit into their gendered role and to be more "feminine." These stereotypes that are concomitant with a patriarchal ideology are reinforced by both sexes. Under such pressure to be thin, young women learn to use a variety of body surveillance tools to control their weight. In addition, they are also taught to internalise the male gaze to consciously/unconsciously view (objectify) the bodies of other women as well as themselves.

[31] Media and culture are embedded in Chinese (Taizhounese) young women body dissatisfaction and body image practice in various ways–through direct media thin ideal exposure, as well as indirect forces such as opinion leaders, body shape and gender stereotypes, patriarchal ideology, women's own body surveillance and self-objectification.

This study provides complementary data to previous quantitative research on the relationship between media/culture and women's body dissatisfaction/image practice in China. By adopting a qualitative approach, it explored how the influence occurs and is experienced instead of stopping at determining whether such relations exist. Given that women of different class and sexual orientations may differ in their attitudes towards body-related topics future studies can look into a more complex variety and greater number of Chinese women. In addition, future studies may also

include a group of male participants to explore how they mediate media/cultural influence on female's body dissatisfaction and weight loss behaviour.

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