Body perception and body-shaming in China

Pilar Mejía Buenfil
1College of Liberal Arts, Shanghai University, P.R. China

*Corresponding author
Accepted: 14th April, 2020; Online: 18th April, 2020
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3753626

Abstract: We live in a world that is heavily influenced by media, where they show different body shapes and stereotypes that are taken as beautiful, and indicates that if one person doesn’t fit into that body shape or stereotypes, then you will not be considered beautiful. In China there have been different challenges to show off a slender body shape, mostly targeted to women, in which different objects are used to show a small waist of thin body, however, this kind of challenges only adds stress and psychological pressure to women to urgently fit in the social media standard that will make them feel beautiful.

Keywords: Body shaming, body perception, beauty standards, China

Introduction

We live in a world where we are constantly being reminded of certain beauty standards everywhere, starting from the media and extending it to our personal circles such as friends and family, in which your body image is the first thing that will be judged and criticized if it doesn’t fit with the beauty standard, and some other abilities and features pass to a second place and are no more important than your appearance. This, of course, leads us to have a certain body image within ourselves that is influenced by everybody everywhere.

The perception in our body image is mostly influenced by the media, showing us the beautiful models with an incredibly small waist or such a smooth skin, that it seems kind of impossible to attain a body figure like that without trespassing the line of the unhealthy body figure.
Nowadays, as social media increases its popularity, and where sharing pictures is daily, media exert more pressure in the way we look ourselves to fit in a beauty cannon because if not, we will be seen as something that is “not beautiful”.

But with all of this, who is the one that decides what is beautiful or not, what is perfect or not, what should be accepted or not? Just because the media says that a thin body is the way one is beautiful, should it be accepted and should be a way to live?

**Body perception.**

The body perception we have of ourselves not just consist of the skin-deep beauty, but it also contains the outward self, which plays an important role in the perception of ourselves.

Judy Lightstone, a famous phycologist and therapist specializing in eating disorders, defines the body image as “the perception, imagination, emotions and physical sensations of and about our bodies. It is ever-changing, sensitive to changes in mood, environment, and physical experience. It is psychological and influenced by self-esteem than by actual physical attractiveness as judged by others. It is learned and occurs in the family and among peers, but these only reinforce what is learned and expected culturally”\(^1\).

In her definition, we can see that culture plays a big role in our body perception since every culture has its own beauty standards according to history and tradition background, the image of our selves gets influenced by that in some way. Our body image is mostly influenced by our surroundings, so television, magazines, and social media can change one’s body image and lead to think about their weight.

Dove Campaign for beauty found out that only 2 percent of women worldwide consider themselves beautiful, where they also express that media sets an unrealistic standard for beauty that most women could never achieve. It was also found that many girls learn from magazines that the way she looks is more important than the way she thinks or the things she can do; teenagers

and youngsters become overcritical with themselves because they think that the only way to fit and be accepted by the society is by looking a certain way and by having a certain body type.

This also can lead to some eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia and some other disorders that can affect the health, by making a twisted image of the perception of the body leading to a result of a super thin and unhealthy body.

**Beauty standards in China.**

As in every culture, China has its beauty standards, which also have a historical background, in the ancient times, where the social classes where more marked, only the peasants where the ones that had tanned skin, because they were the ones that spent the most time in the fields, planting under the sun, and the rich elite, since they were always in an office or studying, they didn’t get tanned and had white skin, that is why nowadays, a girl with white and fair skin is considered beautiful, because before it was a sign of wealthy. Chinese have a saying, 一白遮三丑 (yī bái zhē sān chǒu) to express that “a white complexion is powerful enough to hide seven faults”; they even have a way to describe a white, rich and beautiful girl (白富美); that’s why a white skin in girls is more preferred and think that is beautiful.

During the Han Dynasty, the ideal size of a woman was small, thin and petite; even during that time, it was a tradition for women to bind their feet, so they can be small, men at that time thought it was sexy and attractive.

Of course, the beauty standard has changed as time goes by, and with that new beauty standard appeared, by the 19th century a white skin and a slim figure were still prevalent, but for nowadays, big eyes, double eyelid, and specific face shape in the shape of a “v” in the part of the chin, are then added to the already existing beauty standards.

To reinforce this beauty standard, of the white skin, most of the cosmetics in China contains agents for whitening the skin; for the slim and thin body shape, the size of the clothes is smaller than in other countries; for the big eyes, there are contact lenses (circle lenses) that makes the eyes look bigger; and for the double eyelid, there are some products like a type of sticker or glue that
help to make a temporary double eyelid, there are people that even get surgery to have it. All of this, of course, is influenced and reinforced by the media.

**Body shaming in China.**

Body shaming is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “to criticize someone based on the shape, size, or appearance of their body”. This also can be called “Fat-shaming” but fat-shaming is criticized someone for having a big body or appear to be overweight, Nowadays no one can escape the fat-shaming, just because they don’t fit into the idyllic image of being thin by appearing overweight in the eyes of someone else. These critics, as proved by specialists, leave a negative mark in the way a person constructs its body image, leading the person that receives the negative concepts into eating disorders. As researches show that people at large are unhappy about their bodies, it is easy to become a victim of body shaming.2

While living in China, probably this can be more evident, since it was pointed out before, in this paper, China has a lot of beauty standard; also culture plays a big role in the appearance one should have. Chinese people sometimes is regarded as speaking things related with a personal appearance in a very direct way; in a daily basis, other people can make a commentary about your appearance such as “you look fat today” or “you look thinner today”, and maybe it could be part of the culture, but the person that says that kind of comment realize the effect that it provokes in the one receiving it?. That is body shaming.

In the past few years, there has been appearing many “challenges” in social media to prove how thin and skinny you are, some of these challenges are:

- **Collarbone Challenge**: Originated in China, the challenge consists of holding a stack of coins on the collarbone, the more coins you can hold, the sexier the person looks.

- **Bellybutton Challenge**: According to this one, if a woman can touch her bellybutton by putting her arm behind her back, she supposedly has the perfect figure.

- **Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge**: People used suction technique to plump their lips so they

---

looked like those of Kylie Jenner, an American reality television celebrity. The results of this challenge were horrifying where some individuals ended up causing damage to their lips.

- **Thigh-gap Challenge**: According to this one, the legs are so thin that the thighs don’t touch each other. So the wider the gap, the sexier a woman is perceived.

- **Finger trap Challenge**: This trend emerged in China again. Also known as ‘Beauty and Ugliness Identification Method,’ where a person puts their index finger against their chin and nose to see if they touch it. If they do, the person is held beautiful.

- **iPhone 6 Challenge**: This one consists of using an iPhone 6 in a horizontal way to cover both of their knees to prove that their legs are slender.

All of this challenge can be taken as body-shaming challenges, all of these challenges started in the social media, and where made to prove that you fit in that beauty standard of being thin and slim. But at the same time, we should not forget that with these challenges, the people, especially girls feel more pressure about their body image, and encourage them to put their health at a stake just to fit in the standard the society and the media are imposing.

**Conclusion**

It is true that the media and our circle of family and friend gives a lot of influence to the perception we construct of our body image, and because of the comments, we can receive from them the perception we create of our body image can be distorted of how we really look.

Even when media keeps sending messages of the ideal body, there are still positive results, in recent years more and more models called “plus-size models” called like that because they don’t fit in the body standard for models and actresses are taking up their position as socialites to talk about their bodies and defend it to be accepted by other in a positive way, even when receiving body-shaming critics from people around them, they confront them asking and putting an example of how every person should accept and love their own body despite what other people say.
Here is a calling for the media, especially Chinese, to represent all kind of body shapes, as much as possible, because we can’t forget that every culture has its own genetic charge that predisposes a certain body shape by nature, but still in the same culture are different body shapes; also a calling for the people that surround us to think of the damage a body-shaming commentary can create on the person that receives the comments, we should all accept everybody, because that is what makes every one of us different and unique.

References


Pilar Mejía Buenfil
BA in Design and Visual Communication, UNAM, Mexico.
Currently studying a Master’s Degree in China Studies - History at Shanghai University, Shanghai China

Acknowledgments
Thanks to Shanghai University, professors and supervisor for the guidance.

Dedication
Not mentioned.

Conflicts of Interest
There are no conflicts to declare.