

Body Image and Young Chinese Women in Contemporary Media: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Body image perceptions among young Chinese women have been influenced by the boom in social media and the diversification of aesthetic standards. This paper reviews existing literature over the past four years, analysing the role of media in shaping representation, particularly focusing on the interplay between traditional Chinese cultural ideals and global aesthetic influences. Based on 200 research papers in three databases for this study, this research study reveals that Western media impact in China is limited in terms of affecting Chinese body image judgements, compared to previous expectations. Instead, the persistent ideal of traditional Chinese ideal of being "fair, young, and thin" continues to dominate preferences. These traditional values and larger global standards are competing sources of body standards, making it very challenging for young women to navigate these expectations. Moreover, social media is also quite influential. It leans towards thin ideals, which strengthens body anxieties. While the Xiaohongshu platform presents some unconventional Chinese body images, but only for a specific audience. With a synthesis of previous findings, this paper highlights the complex dynamics between cultural values, global forces, and media representations, to bring into sharp focus the media's part in the puzzle to Chinese young female's body dissatisfaction.

Keywords: Body Image, Young Chinese Women, Representations, Ideal Body Standard

Introduction

Body image, considered as part of a mental health construct, is defined as how a person thinks, feels, and understands their appearance (Grogan, 2021). Body image is not fixed, but evolves and is influenced by internal and external elements like cultural norms, expectations, and media examples (Grabe et al., 2008; Ando et al., 2021). These influences are especially

relevant for young Chinese women as they are enrolled in influencing individual and familial attitudes relating to broader social discourses. In order to make sense of the emergent of body image for young Chinese women, it is important to attend to the factors that shape, compound, and contribute to individual, social, and cultural influences.

Historically, ideals of physical appearance present in China are embedded in cultural norms and traditions. Chinese ideals of beauty for women adhere to traditional values with an emphasis on paleness, youth, and slenderness. These ideals of beauty are represented in cultural products including literature, folklore, and art. Traditional Chinese views about female beauty have been complicated by an increasing exposure to Western beauty ideals brought about by globalization, as well as digital media consumption (Kwan-chue, 2017). Now, it is necessary to navigate the complex interplay between traditional Chinese values, exposure to Western media, and considering the role of digital media in how the body is portrayed in China.

Scholars divide body image into positive body image and negative body image. The concept of positive body image has typically been characterized by an acceptance and appreciation of one's body, a sense of confidence and comfort in one's body, and a rejection of society's beauty norms when they are unrealistic (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). There has been a wave of body positivity as a global phenomenon, promoting the acceptance of all bodies. This global conversation about body positivity has begun to echo through social media and other forms of media in China, particularly among the youth, or more tech-savvy, digital media consumers. The reception of the body positivity movement in China has been mixed, indicating that integrating body positivity values into the specific cultural context of China needs further exploration (Ren et al., 2018). This suggests that while body positivity is gaining traction in China, cultural and societal barriers hinder a more comprehensive adoption of these values.

On the other hand, negative body image refers to the dissatisfaction one has with one's body, and is linked to damaging psychological and physical outcomes (Thomas et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2021; Hewitt & Murray, 2024). In China, the ideal body image for women is complex, there is a worrying degree of pressure for people to adhere to multiple ('traditional' and 'global') ideals, which can leave self-esteem and mental health especially vulnerable. Young people in China grow up in an environment where the prototype body is slim and fair, and it is of particular relevance that social media is a vehicle for amplifying these ideals and provides a constant stream of images which ultimately reinforce unrealistic standards of beauty. This process has a clear impact on the formation of negative body image and its consequences. Numerous studies have also confirmed that body image dissatisfaction is closely associated with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (Doumit et al., 2016; Teh et al., 2021; Legey et al., 2023). Although body image has been documented as a risk factor for these issues, it has not yet received sufficient attention from public health authorities, even as China now ranks among the countries with the highest rates of eating disorders worldwide (Li et al., 2021). Implementing intervention measures is therefore imperative.

To avoid and address psychological difficulties related to body image, it is essential to comprehensively understand the elements influencing the body image of young Chinese

women. The importance of this study lies in its ability to accurately identify specific contributing elements through prior research, therefore offering more exact evidence for scientific prevention and intervention. This simultaneously aids young women in comprehending their body image, fostering confidence through affirmative self-perception, and alleviating worry stemming from detrimental body image notions. Therefore, this study will systematically review existing literature to identify and analyze the multiple factors influencing young women's body image in China, providing theoretical support for future health intervention measures.

Representation of Women's Body Image

The representations of body image among young Chinese women are intricately influenced by a complex interplay of traditional Chinese cultural norms and global aesthetic trends, with the media playing a pivotal role in shaping these representations. Historically, Chinese beauty ideals have been characterized by notions of fairness, youthfulness, and slimness, ideals deeply rooted in cultural heritage and reinforced through various cultural mediums (Jackson et al., 2020; Frederick & Reynolds, 2021).

However, the rise of globalization and the ubiquity of digital media have introduced Western beauty standards, blending them with traditional ideals to create a new, amalgamated set of expectations that young Chinese women are expected to embody (Jackson et al., 2020). This hybridization of beauty standards not only poses a challenge for young women in reconciling conflicting ideals but also underscores the transformative power of media in shaping cultural perceptions of beauty.

While existing literature offers significant insights into the factors influencing body image representations among young Chinese women, there are notable gaps and limitations that warrant attention. For instance, while Vandenbosch et al (2020), provide a comprehensive examination of the historical origins of Chinese beauty ideals, their analysis lacks a deep exploration of the role of contemporary social media platforms in shaping modern body image perceptions. Similarly, while Yang and Seo (2022) focus on the impact of mainstream social media platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat, on body image perceptions, they do not extensively investigate the influence of user-generated content on these perceptions. These gaps underscore the need for further research that delves into the nuanced dynamics of social media and user-generated content in shaping body image representations among young Chinese women.

Furthermore, while studies by Lazuka et al (2020), and Tiggemann et al (2020), acknowledge the importance of the body positivity movement, they fall short of specifically examining its impact on young Chinese women. This critical gap underscores the pressing need for further research that delves into how the body positivity movement is perceived and embraced by this demographic, offering a more nuanced understanding of its implications.

Additionally, several studies have focused on specific facets of body image representations among young Chinese women. For instance, Vandenbosch et al (2022), conducted an analysis on the influence of celebrity influencers on social media in shaping body image perceptions. Their findings revealed that celebrity endorsements of beauty products and lifestyles often contribute to the propagation of unrealistic beauty standards, consequently leading to body

dissatisfaction among young women. However, their study failed to explore the broader cultural and societal factors that underpin these body image representations, indicating a need for more comprehensive investigations.

Similarly, Liu et al (2020), explored the impact of peer pressure on body image perceptions among young Chinese women, particularly focusing on peer comparisons facilitated by social media platforms. Their study uncovered that such comparisons often result in feelings of inadequacy and a desire to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. While this study offers valuable insights into the social dynamics influencing body image perceptions, it overlooks the role of traditional cultural ideals in shaping these perceptions, pointing to a significant gap in the existing literature.

Table 1

Literature Review on the Representation of Women's Body Image

| Authors | Objective | Methodology | Key Findings | Limitations |
|---------------------------|---|-----------------------|---|--|
| Jackson et al. (2020) | Historical origins of Chinese beauty ideals | SLR | Chinese beauty ideals: fairness, youthfulness, slimness | Lack of focus on contemporary social media's role |
| Yang & Seo (2022) | Impact of mainstream social media on body image perceptions | Empirical research | Weibo and WeChat influence body image perceptions | Limited focus on user-generated content |
| Lazuka et al. (2020) | Body positivity movement | Quantitative analysis | Importance of body positivity movement | Lack of specific examination of young Chinese women |
| Liu et al. (2020) | Peer pressure and body image perceptions | Empirical study | Peer comparisons on social media lead to body dissatisfaction | Overlooked role of traditional cultural ideals |
| Vandenbosch et al. (2020) | Historical Chinese beauty ideals | Historical analysis | Historical origins of beauty ideals in China | Lack of exploration of social media's contemporary influence |

Although existing studies have highlighted the influence of media and social interaction in shaping and reshaping female body image, there are still certain limitations (Table 1). Therefore, this study analysed existing research on body image representation among young Chinese women to identify key themes and trends and explored the role of social media and user-generated content in shaping body image perceptions, as well as the impact of body-positive movements on Chinese women. This review contributes to a detailed and

comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the body image representation of young Chinese women in the modern media and cultural environment.

Method

This study follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency and completeness in reporting the systematic literature review. PRISMA guidelines are recognised for their effectiveness in guiding authors through the reporting of various systematic reviews and meta-analyses, particularly those pertaining to health conditions. This review specifically focuses on examining the representations of body image among young Chinese women.

Search Strategy

This systematic literature search was conducted using key electronic databases, including CNKI, SciSpace, and Google Scholar, to ensure a comprehensive coverage of relevant studies. This study specifically focused on articles published in English between 2020 and 2024 to ensure the inclusion of recent research. Keywords such as “body image”, “young Chinese women”, “Representations”, “media influence”, and “Ideal body standard” were strategically chosen to retrieve studies that directly addressed the research questions.

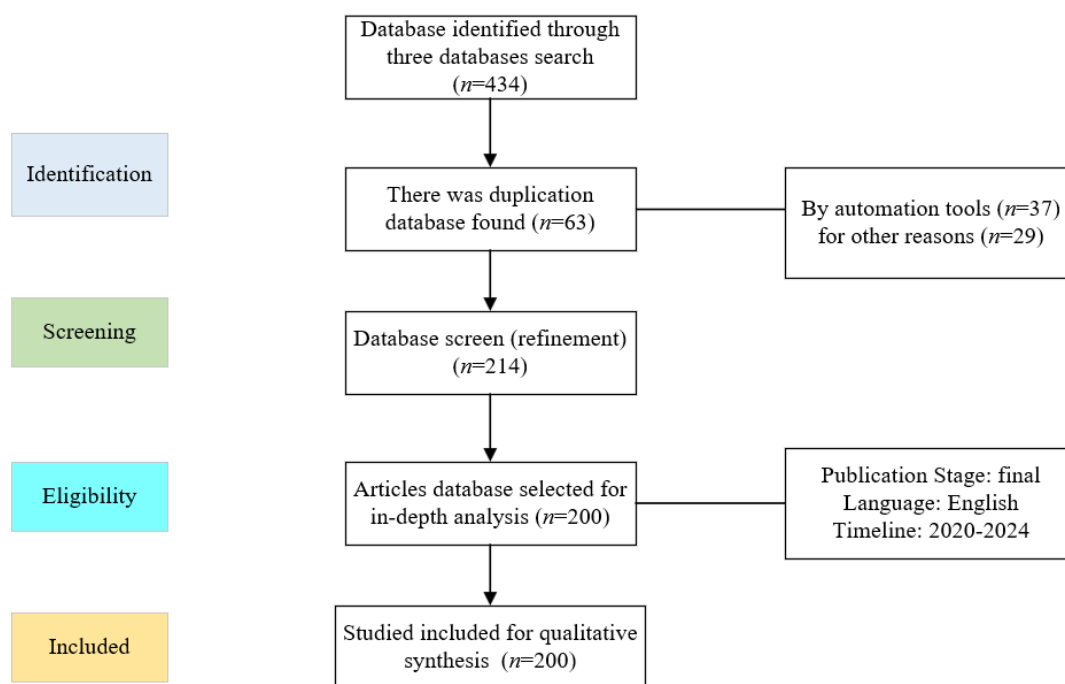


Figure 1. Flowchart Research Methods for Database Extraction

Data Screening and Extraction

As shown in Figure 1, the search yielded a total of 343 specific records in three databases. Following the removal of duplicates, the screening process involved a meticulous assessment of article titles and abstracts. Articles were included if they met the following criteria: (1) they focused on body image representations among young Chinese women, (2) they explored the influence of media and cultural ideals on body image, and (3) they were published between 2020 and 2024. Any studies that did not meet these criteria were excluded from the review to ensure the relevance and quality of the included literature.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data from the included studies were meticulously extracted and synthesized to identify key themes and trends related to body image representations among young Chinese women. The synthesis process involved a thorough analysis of the findings, which were then organized according to these themes to provide a comprehensive review of the literature. The quality of the included studies was rigorously assessed using appropriate tools for each study design. This meticulous evaluation ensured the reliability and validity of the findings presented in this review, enhancing the overall robustness of this analysis.

The systematic search yielded a total of 434 articles. After the screening and selection process, 200 articles were deemed suitable for inclusion in the review. These articles were then meticulously analysed and synthesized to provide valuable insights into the representations of body image among young Chinese women, it is easy to see that in previous studies scholars have actively explored the reasons for the Chinese ideal body image, specifically in relation to mass media and cultural influences. This pressure, exacerbated by the influence of social media, intensifies body image challenges, resulting in heightened body anxiety and dissatisfaction.

Following a description of the records select the articles were thoroughly analyzed and compared according to their characters (topic, factors, media, standard) and occurrence frequency. This process resulted in the establishment of the following top four thematic categories:

1. Chinese Female Ideal Body Image
2. Cultural Factors
3. Media Representations
4. Western Aesthetic Standard

Results and Discussion*Results*

Table 2

Thematic Categories in Body Image Perception Studies among Young Chinese Women

| Thematic Category | Topic | Factors | Media | Standard | Occurrence Frequency |
|---------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Chinese Female Ideal Body Image | Traditional Chinese beauty ideals emphasizing fairness, youthfulness, and slimness | Cultural norms, traditional practices | Literature, Art, Traditional Practices | Chinese Aesthetic Standards | 80 (40%) |
| Cultural Factors | Influence of cultural norms on body image | Traditional Chinese ideals, societal | N/A | Chinese Aesthetic Standards | 50 (25%) |

| | | | | | |
|----------------------------|---|---|-------------------------------------|---|------------|
| | perceptions, body dysmorphic disorder, positive body image | emphasis on sports participation, BDD, positive body image | | | |
| Media Representations | Influence of social and mass media on body image perceptions | Social media, mass media | Social media, Television, Magazines | Western and Chinese Aesthetic Standards | 45 (22.5%) |
| Western Aesthetic Standard | Impact of Western standards on body image, cosmetic surgery attitudes | Exposure to Western appearance media, cultural differences and similarities | Appearance Media (Western) | Western and Chinese Aesthetic Standards | 25 (12.5%) |

Chinese Female Ideal Body Image

Several studies reveal that traditional Chinese beauty ideals, emphasizing traits like fairness, youthfulness, and slimness, continue to strongly influence body image perceptions among young Chinese women (Ma, 2023; Dimitrov & Kroumpouzou, 2023). These ideals are deeply ingrained in Chinese culture and are often reinforced through cultural mediums such as literature, art, and traditional practices, contributing to the formation of body image norms and expectations among young women.

Cultural Factors

The review also revealed the influence of cultural factors on body image perceptions among young Chinese women. Cultural norms, such as the traditional Chinese ideals of fairness, youthfulness, and slimness, significantly shape beauty standards and body image expectations (Frederick & Reynolds, 2021). Additionally, the societal emphasis on sports participation in China may also influence body image perceptions, self-efficacy, and self-esteem among young women (Ouyang et al., 2020).

Moreover, cultural factors can contribute to the development of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) among young Chinese women. BDD, characterized by a preoccupation with perceived flaws in appearance, can be influenced by cultural norms and societal pressures regarding beauty and body image (Cororve & Gleaves, 2022). However, it is essential to note that positive body image can also be fostered within cultural contexts. Cultivating positive body image involves embracing diverse body types and challenging unrealistic beauty standards (Healey, 2022).

Media Representations

Social media emerged as a significant influencer on body image perceptions among young Chinese women, as highlighted in several studies (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Lazuka et al., 2020; Jarman et al., 2021). Mass media platforms, like television, magazines are often reinforce the mainstream ideal of thinness, contributing to heightened body anxiety and dissatisfaction. The rise of digital media has made it challenging for young women to reconcile conflicting beauty standards and societal pressures, especially the social media (Hawes et al., 2020; Tiggemann et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2021).

Western Aesthetic Standard

This systematic review reveals the impact of Western aesthetic standards on body image perceptions among young Chinese women. Research by Stojcic et al. (2020) and Jackson et al. (2020), highlights how exposure to Western appearance media can lead to changes in body image concerns among Chinese women, it's highlighting Chinese female body image is influenced by both Chinese and Western aesthetic standards.

For example, Wu et al (2022), after compared body image and acceptance of cosmetic surgery between China and the Netherlands found that cultural differences and similarities, and provides insights into how cultural factors shape beauty ideals and attitudes towards cosmetic procedures, emphasizing the complex interplay between cultural norms and beauty standards. However, contrary to the expected clash between Western and Chinese aesthetics, the West's influence on Chinese perceptions of body image is relatively small (Jackson et al., 2020).

Discussion

The findings from this systematic literature review underscore the intricate interplay between traditional Chinese cultural ideals, Western aesthetic standards, and media representations in shaping body image perceptions among young Chinese women. The persistent influence of traditional Chinese beauty ideals, particularly the emphasis on fairness, youthfulness, and slimness, reflects deep cultural roots that continue to mold young women's body image expectations (Ma, 2023; Dimitrov & Kroumpouzos, 2023). This cultural influence is further complicated by the pervasive reach of Western beauty standards disseminated through global media channels, creating a dual pressure that exacerbates body anxiety and dissatisfaction (Stojcic et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2020).

The significant role of social media in shaping body image perceptions cannot be overstated. Social media platforms amplify both traditional and Western beauty ideals, often presenting an unattainable standard for young Chinese women. This dual reinforcement of conflicting standards contributes to a heightened sense of body dissatisfaction and anxiety, as young women navigate the pressures to conform to these ideals (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Lazuka et al., 2020; Jarman et al., 2021). The constant exposure to idealized body images on social media intensifies the internalization of these standards, leading to adverse psychological effects.

Cultural factors are crucial mediators of these influences. The societal emphasis on traits such as fairness, youthfulness, and slimness, combined with the nascent body positivity movement in China, creates a paradoxical environment. While the body positivity movement promotes

the acceptance of diverse body types and challenges unrealistic beauty standards, its impact remains limited and uneven across different social groups (Healey, 2022). This limitation highlights that, despite growing awareness and advocacy for body positivity, traditional and Western beauty standards still exert substantial influence over young women's body image perceptions (Frederick & Reynolds, 2021).

The review also emphasizes the importance of considering cultural and societal contexts when addressing body image issues among young Chinese women. The complex dynamics between traditional cultural values and global influences necessitate a nuanced understanding of how these factors shape body image perceptions (Ouyang et al., 2020). Effective interventions aimed at promoting positive body image must address the cultural context that perpetuates certain beauty ideals and integrate a more holistic approach to body image that values diversity and inclusivity.

The findings indicate that addressing the body image challenges faced by young Chinese women requires a multifaceted approach that considers the interplay of cultural, societal, and media influences. This comprehensive understanding is essential for developing effective strategies to support positive body image and mitigate the adverse effects of conflicting beauty standards (Hawes et al., 2020; Tiggemann et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This systematic literature review has examined the multifaceted factors influencing body image representation among young Chinese women, emphasizing the interplay between traditional Chinese cultural ideals, Western aesthetic standards, and media representations. This review underscores the predominant influence of traditional Chinese beauty ideals, revealing that Western aesthetic standards have a relatively minor impact. The perpetuation of the ideal of being "fair, young, and thin" through social media has exacerbated body anxiety among young Chinese women. Despite the rise of the body positivity movement in China, its reach and impact remain limited. Overall, this study contributes to the existing body of literature on the body image representation of young Chinese women, highlighting the need for further research to address the complexities of this issue and develop effective interventions to promote positive body image among this population.

Limitations of this study include the reliance on existing literature, which may not capture the most recent developments in the field. Additionally, the scope of the study may have limited the depth of analysis on certain aspects of body image perceptions among young Chinese women. Future studies could benefit from a more focused approach that includes primary research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of body image perceptions among young Chinese women.

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