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Body and Self-Image

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After interviewing my three respondents and after analyzing their interview data to find an issue to compare and contrast between the three, it was very apparent that all three of them have had very different, yet interesting experiences regarding their body and self image, and much of these experiences have resulted from the country they grew up in and the culture that surrounded them. In my paper, I will firstly introduce my respondents and give a brief description of their experience with body and self image. I will then compare and contrast their experiences, and attempt to analyze how they vary based on the impact of culture and the different countries they grew up in.

Emma is a Caucasian twenty year old female, born in the United States and raised in New Zealand. She attended an international high school as her parents wanted her to receive a high school diploma that would qualify her to attend a university in the United States, but she decided to stay in New Zealand and go to the university an hour away from home. During her high school years, Emma was very comfortable in her own skin and believed her school mates were very accepting of who she was. This may have been due to the fact that the majority of students at her high school were multicultural, coming from all over the globe, appreciating and celebrating individuals and their cultures. However, when she started college with predominately white New Zealanders, even though she is Caucasian, she felt different because she was American and didn't relate to many of the same issues and topics of the 'typical Kiwi girl'. When she began making new friends, she found that many of her peers were overly concerned with their appearance, image and in general, seemed to be much more superficial than her friends from high school. In recent years, she has found herself to become more cautious about her appearance, and has therefore found herself to be more judgmental about that and her body.

Janice is an Asian twenty-one year old female, who was born in the United Kingdom, but was raised in Hong Kong where she also attended an International school, primarily associating with Caucasian or “white-washed” peers. These “white-washed” peers would be more formally classified as American Born Chinese, British Born Chinese, or any other ethnic group that identifies with western culture social norms. She felt that within her social group at school, she was very well accepted for her size and the way she looked. However, within her household, there was a lot of pressure to be a particular size as Asians tend to be smaller than other races. Her mother and other relatives put a strong emphasis on staying slender, by attempting to regulate what she ate, what foods were kept in the house, and explaining the benefits of maintaining a certain size and weight. Janice also felt that when she left her social group, and interacted with the local Hong Kong community, she was very much judged because she was “bigger” than your typical Asian female. She would not fit into most of the sizes available in many local clothing stores, leading her to believe that people of her race were tailored to be one certain size and therefore, had a significant impact on her body image.

Lauren, a twenty-two year old college student, was born and raised in Natick, Massachusetts and now attends the University of New Hampshire. She attended a public high school, where she felt she had a good group of friends, who accepted her for who she was. It was not until she started college that she began to question her body and its appearance. She attributes many of her body image issues to the media and other social pressures to be a certain way. She also tries to explain them by the lack of education her high school had on having a healthy body image, especially with younger girls who are so vulnerable to the images the media communicates. During college, Lauren developed an eating disorder, and has sought help using the university’s resources, such as Health Services and Counseling services. Although she believes it has helped, she thinks she could have benefitted greatly with her family’s support. During the time her eating disorder was at its most critical stage, her family didn’t seem to

understand as it didn't seem like a "real disease". Lauren was therefore, left to seek help herself from her friends and the school.

The "body image experiences" of these three women are without a doubt, very different. However, there are also many similarities that can be observed, especially concerning how the media impacted their experiences as they were socialized in primarily "westernized" societies. All three women grew up with western media, presenting Caucasian females as your "average" female. Additionally, cultural images have emphasized a thin body ideal (Fackler 2003), and have presented these images through fashion magazines, television and other forms of mass media. Emma, Janice and Lauren have, to great but varying degrees, been exposed to these images throughout their childhood, adolescent years and currently. Emma and Lauren both grew up in a household where television was a main source of entertainment, and for Janice, these images were widely exposed through massive billboards around the city and through other forms of mass media. All three women claim they feel they were educated enough to understand that these ideals were not typically achievable in a realistic world, that not every female can look like a six-foot model who weighs 120 pounds. However, despite the acceptance that they will most likely never reach this ideal, they admit it is almost impossible to reject it and turn away. The inability to do this is what impacts their body image and what results in dissatisfaction with their physical appearances. They are constantly being bombarded with representations of this socially constructed ideal, whether the source is a film, a television program or a commercial advertising a diet product. Because they so frequently encounter an "unattainable, unachievable" image, they all admit to have flirted with the possibility of being able to achieve it. They realize this image is culturally constructed, but it *is* real, and can be seen on the streets of any city and town, or in any school – there *are* these thin, "beautiful" people, who appear to be happy and also, become successful. Lauren explained that her eating disorder came about when she moved away from her hometown and came to

a much larger university, where these “perfect” people were seen much more often. This socially constructed ideal became more real and attainable, and she started to believe that if she had more control and willpower, she could achieve this ideal and would be more liked and accepted. Suggested by a western ideology of individualism, free will and choice, the body is malleable and women can attain the ideal if they have motivation and self discipline (Fackler 2003). This is exactly what went through Lauren’s mind during the peak of her eating disorder. Very similar to Lauren’s experience was Janice’s desire to obtain the society’s ideal of a perfect woman.

However, unlike Lauren and Emma, although Janice was exposed to western images of models and actresses, which did impact her concept of self and body image, she was more greatly affected by the local media of Hong Kong. Contrary to what a lot of studies have found about more positive body image in different cultural groups, such as the fact that thinness is very often seen as a sign of malnutrition and poverty in non-western cultures (Fackler 2003), Hong Kong takes on a very westernized perspective and sees thinness as a sign of beauty and femininity.

During the interview, Janice explained how advertising for thinness in Hong Kong is very often, taken to the extremes. Advertisements for slimming centers, laser treatments and diet pills are plastered all over the city, on the subway, on buses, on huge billboards. Due to the economic liberalization in Hong Kong, censorship and regulation have dramatically decreased, allowing the diet industry to advertise media images that could promote dangerous slimming techniques and products (Reedy 2009).

Although Janice is comfortable with her body, and feels that she has always been well educated on the health risks that come with these diet products and slimming services, there is nothing you can do but to consume these images and wonder, “am I too fat?”

The three respondents' experiences with body and self image and social pressures from friends, family and schools they attended are all quite different.

Emma has always felt that her parents emphasized the importance of health – eating healthily and staying fit. They would always make sure she ate all three meals and rather than underlining the “importance of looking good”, they stressed the significance of eating right and exercising to be healthy and live a lifestyle with less illnesses and disease. Emma feels that the education on health and wellness that she received from her parents was grounded enough to stray her away from any serious pressures placed upon her from peers in college. Undoubtedly, like these body issues occur with many of us, even those of us who think we have the healthiest, most positive outlook towards our bodies, there were times during her college years where she felt that she was a little bigger than she wanted to be. What Emma did feel uncomfortable with; however, was her identity as an American coming into a school predominantly filled with New Zealanders. Emma was used to being surrounded by peers who came from a variety of different cultures, religions and races and therefore, experienced some sort of culture shock when she first attended a public school in a country she was raised in. This was a very unusual finding for me, and like Janice who also attended an international school in Hong Kong, she felt as if she had never interacted or connected with her local community.

Similar to Emma's lack of attachment to her own home city, Janice also feels that she never left her sheltered community of “foreign” friends in Hong Kong. Because Janice generally socialized with friends who came from England, America, Australia or other Western countries, she would sometimes feel like she didn't fit in as she was Asian. The fact that she looked different from her friends and came from a family that did things differently, such as celebrated festivals her friends didn't celebrate, or emphasized the importance of studying rather than socializing, made her sometimes wish she wasn't Asian. Growing up, she remembers times when she wished she had bigger eyes, whiter skin and a narrower, less flat nose. Combined with images portrayed through the mass media, her Caucasian

friends had a huge impact on the way she saw herself, and the identity she wished she had. She remembers thinking that if she looked less “Asian”, people would regard her with more respect and would accept her more. At time, she did not want to look so Asian, because this was associated with the stereotype of the Asian race, and this was generally: “nerdy, boring and submissive.” This may relate to some issues many Asian women have, regarding facial features and not only the desire to look more attractive but the desire to obtain a certain set of features considered more “prestigious in society,” (Kaw 1993).

Janice’s mother was also a huge influence on her body image growing up. Unlike Emma’s parents who emphasized the importance of health rather than appearance, Janice’s mother did the opposite. Looking good and presentable was of utmost importance – especially if you wish to be attractive to a male counterpart. Janice’s mother would monitor her meals, making sure she did not overeat and would, on my occasions, purchase diet pills for her daughter. The fact that Janice never developed more serious psychological issues or a serious eating disorder is remarkable, as she was exposed to so many risk factors that could have made her have an incredibly negative body image and thus, incredibly unhealthy eating habits and mindset.

Very different to both Emma and Janice’s parents, who were both very involved with their daughter’s health and wellbeing, Lauren’s parents were very absent when it came to educating her about health issues. Growing up, watching television was not regulated or monitored, which left Lauren to consume mass amounts of images portrayed by the media and diet industry.

During the onset of Lauren’s eating disorder in college, her parents chose to ignore the symptoms and did not attempt to deal with it when Lauren confided in them. This left Lauren to turn to her friends and to the school for guidance and help. However, despite feeling resentful of her parents, she knew they were concerned and would help if they had the right education themselves. Lauren felt that her friends were incredibly supportive during her struggle to recovery, and pushed her to see

counselors and go to health services. At this current stage, she feels much more comfortable in her own skin, and because her peers were always supportive, she knows they're not there to judge her body or who she is. It is the culture of different social communities, I believe, that influence the way parents react to or attempt to address an eating disorder. Because Lauren's parents were relatively uneducated about the impact of eating disorders and issues many females face with body image today, (possibly because issues like that never directly affected them) they did not have access or knowledge of the right resources. They weren't able to identify the subtle symptoms Lauren showed, especially during the initial developments of her eating disorder. If Janice ever developed a severe eating disorder, or had serious psychological issues relating to her body image and health, I would hypothesize that her mother would also be uneducated about how to address the problem. The prevalence of eating disordered females in Asian countries is significantly lower than in Western countries, and therefore, less research or resources would be available.

Interviewing these three women and receiving their responses was eye-opening. I hypothesized that culture would have a significant impact on the way one perceives her body, and self image, but after listening to their stories, I have come to learn that there are so many dimensions within culture, such as the type of media, or the people that play a role in your life whether it be friends or family, that will influence the way you see yourself and impact your health.

[Kwan, Samantha and Jennifer Fackler](#), “Fact Sheet: Women and Size”
Sociologists for Women in Society:

Katherine Reedy, Ads Pressure Hong Kong Women to Whiten Up, [WomenseNews.org](#) 2009

[Kaw, Eugenia](#). 1993. Medicalization of Racial Features: Asian-American Women and Cosmetic Surgery. [Medical Anthropology Quarterly](#) 7 (1).