

Cross-Cultural Perceptions Towards Effects of Social Media on Body Image

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Over 2.2 billion people are active participants in social media worldwide (Regan, 2015) and in the United States, 1.79 billion individuals engage with social media networks at least once a month, while users access social media for approximately 2.7 hours per day (Statista, 2014). Body image and physical attractiveness are typically determined by weight and body type and the ideals for an attractive physique vary from culture to culture. Sussman, Truong, and Lim (2007) found that Euro-American and Asian-American consumers idealize a thin body, whereas Hispanic and African Americans prefer a larger body. African American women were also found to have higher self-esteem and consider themselves to be more attractive than any other ethnic group. Consumers' negative perceptions of their bodies lies in the media's portrayal of women when promoting fashion. Models of different ethnicities and body types ought to be represented in the media. .

Framework and Method. The cultivation theory was applied in this study. This theory suggests that cultivation is when "the independent contributions television viewing makes to viewer conceptions of social reality" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 180). This theory implies that media effect is built with frequent viewing over period of time. Being exposed to media, may reinforce attitudes toward thin body ideals (Park, 2005; Shrum, 2009) women are exposed to and thus create negative image of themselves (Yu, Damhorst, & Russell, 2011). However, consumers today are exposed to a variety of body images from around the globe on social media, and they might be positively influenced by these images viewed on social media rather than by images seen on TV or fashion magazines (Williams & Ricciardelli, 2014). The purpose of this study was to examine the effect that social media has on consumers' perception and acceptance of their body image. These effects are important to understand because they have an impact on consumers' self-esteem and buying decisions. This study incorporated a diverse sample with a variety of ethnicities, including Asian American, Latino/Hispanic, African American, and Euro-American respondents. A total of 90 respondents participated in this study including both male and female participants age of between 18-35 years. Statistical analyses were conducted with SPSS using correlations and chi-square tests.

Results and Implications. Findings did not fully align with components of cultivation theory regarding perceptions of the effects social media has on body image. Consumers did not believe that social media outlets promote or help them maintain a more realistic body image (75%). However, more than half of the respondents felt confident about their bodies (60%) and they felt confident posting images of themselves on social media (75%). Consumers also agreed that seeing people on social media that they could identify with increases their body confidence (60%). When it comes to purchasing fashion products, majority of respondents agreed (63%) that their clothing size had the biggest effect on what they buy. The correlation testing indicated that those consumers who were confident with their body image ($r=.305$, $p=.004$) and also those who

were more confident with posting images of themselves on social media ($r=.389$, $p=.000$) would purchase more apparel products. Thus a relationship between positive body image and purchasing apparel was established.

Cross-cultural differences

The cross-cultural analysis results showed that there were significant differences found across the ethnic groups when it comes to social media and body image perceptions. Middle Eastern and African-American respondents were found to be the most confident with their current body image followed by Asian and white respondents. Latino respondents were the least confident about their bodies out of all of the ethnic groups in this study. Most ethnic groups, except the Asian group, believed their body image was influenced more by their culture than by social media. There were significant cross-cultural differences found in respondents' believing that their culture and body image are well represented on social media including blogs. Interestingly, all Middle Eastern respondents agreed that their culture and body image are represented on social media followed by more than a half of white respondents. However only a third of Asian respondents and less than a quarter of Latino and African American respondents agreed with that statement ($\chi^2=18.2$, $p=.05$). Respondents from all different ethnic groups also believed that their culture and body image has been more represented on social media than in fashion magazines, ads, and fashion shows (traditional media). Latino and Middle Eastern respondents believed their culture has not been represented on traditional media at all ($\chi^2=20.8$, $p=.02$). Findings of cross-cultural differences also did not fully align with components of cultivation theory, because only Arab-American and Euro-American consumers perceived to be positively affected by the images on social media. More changes need to be made regarding the representation of all ethnic groups on fashion blogs or ad on social media.

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