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L'Impatto delle Influenze Socioculturali sull'Immagine Corporea e sugli Ideali di Bellezza tra le Giovani Donne Cinesi: Uno Studio Qualitativo

The Impact of Sociocultural Influences on Body Image and Body Ideal Among Young Chinese Women: A Qualitative Study

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Knowledge is not a destination, but a journey.

The end of one journey marks the beginning of another.

To those who never stopped loving, supporting, and believing in me.

INDICE

Abstract

Understanding the sociocultural factors influencing body image and eating behaviors is critical for coping the body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, particularly it is interesting to investigate the effect of the interplay between Westernization and traditional Chinese values on body image and eating behavior attitudes in China. Eating disorders and body dissatisfaction affect people of different cultures, ages, and genders. Here we selected a sample of Chinese study women aged 18-30 years old. They are at a special period of life: just coming of age, leaving their families to go to university or start working. Therefore, they have some special behaviors or thoughts. Based on this, it is necessary to know more about them, which can help us to develop better mental support for them. This qualitative study exploring how sociocultural pressures shape body image and furthermore influence eating behaviors in young Chinese women, and risk factors for body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in a population of young people of Chinese nationality.

Ten participants aged 18 to 26 were interviewed, and each lasted 30 to 60 min. The thematic analysis (TA) was employed to identify key themes related to body image, sociocultural influences, body ideals and eating behaviors. Three themes were synthesized: (1) Culturally Determined Eating Behaviors (2) Dieting for an Ideal Body, (3) Social Expectations for a Thin Body. Findings reveal that sociocultural pressures greatly influence body image and perceptions of the ideal body shape, which in turn influences young people's eating behaviors. However, young women are actively adopting healthy lifestyles to cope with these pressures and believe in their ability to resist them. In the future, we can explore the impact of sociocultural factors and emerging media on the positive body image and broad conceptualization of beauty of young women in China and promote healthier eating behaviors among them.

Keywords: sociocultural factors, body image, body ideals, social comparison, social media, qualitative research

Abstract in italiano

Comprendere i fattori socioculturali che influenzano l'immagine corporea e i comportamenti alimentari è fondamentale per affrontare l'insoddisfazione corporea e i disturbi alimentari, in particolare è interessante indagare l'effetto dell'interazione tra l'occidentalizzazione e i valori tradizionali cinesi sull'immagine corporea e sugli atteggiamenti alimentari in Cina. I disturbi alimentari e l'insoddisfazione corporea colpiscono persone di diverse culture, età e sesso. Qui abbiamo selezionato un campione di donne cinesi di età compresa tra i 18 e i 30 anni. Si trovano in un periodo particolare della vita: sono appena diventate maggiorenni, lasciano la famiglia per andare all'università o iniziare a lavorare. Pertanto, hanno comportamenti o pensieri particolari. Per questo motivo, è necessario conoscerle meglio, per aiutarci a sviluppare un migliore supporto mentale per loro. Questo studio qualitativo esplora il modo in cui le pressioni socioculturali modellano l'immagine corporea e influenzano i comportamenti alimentari nelle giovani donne cinesi, nonché i fattori di rischio per l'insoddisfazione corporea e i disturbi alimentari in una popolazione di giovani di nazionalità cinese.

Sono state intervistate dieci partecipanti di età compresa tra i 18 e i 26 anni, per una durata di 30-60 minuti ciascuna. L'analisi tematica (AT) è stata utilizzata per identificare i temi chiave relativi all'immagine corporea, alle influenze socioculturali, agli ideali corporei e ai comportamenti alimentari. Sono stati sintetizzati tre temi: (1) Comportamenti alimentari determinati culturalmente (2) Dieta per un corpo ideale, (3) Aspettative sociali per un corpo magro. I risultati rivelano che le pressioni socioculturali influenzano notevolmente l'immagine del corpo e la percezione della forma corporea ideale, che a sua volta influenza i comportamenti alimentari dei giovani. Tuttavia, le giovani donne adottano attivamente stili di vita sani per far fronte a queste pressioni e credono nella loro capacità di resistere. In futuro, potremo esplorare l'impatto dei fattori

socioculturali e dei media emergenti sull'immagine corporea positiva e sull'ampia concettualizzazione della bellezza delle giovani donne cinesi e promuovere tra loro comportamenti alimentari più sani.

Parole chiave: fattori socioculturali, immagine corporea, ideali di bellezza, confronto sociale, social media, ricerca qualitativa.

Chapter I Introduction

1.1 Body Image

Body image is a multidimensional concept that refers to perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about physical appearance (Grogan, 2016). The term was introduced by Paul Schilder (1953), who described body image as the mental representation of one's body that each person forms. The development of body image is a dynamic process influenced by an individual's physical attributes, such as body size or body shape; and psychological traits, such as perfectionism or low self-esteem; as well as the sociocultural environment, including cultural beauty ideals and social media pressure to achieve an ideal appearance (Wertheim & Paxton, 2011).

Body image was originally considered a continuum with negative and positive body image situated at opposite ends (Webb et al., 2015). However, the field of body image research has evolved to recognize that negative and positive body image are inversely related constructs, but they exist on separate, independent continuums (Bailey et al., 2016). Although many people feel relatively satisfied with their bodies; evaluative studies reveal that a significant number of individuals—across genders and age groups—experience dissatisfaction and desire to alter some aspect of their bodies. On average, women are more dissatisfied with their bodies than men (Jiotsa et al., 2021).

Body dissatisfaction is associated with poor mental health, including low mood, low self-esteem, and psychiatric illnesses including eating disorders (Stice & Shaw, 2002), and can lead to health risk behaviors, including disordered eating, excessive exercise, substance abuse, and dieting (Burlew & Shurts, 2013). It is, therefore, leaded with numerous negative consequences. While positive body image represents protecting the self through feelings of appreciation, compassion, and care for the body. It is related to a number of positive health outcomes such

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as fewer depressive symptoms, higher self-compassion, more intuitive eating and fewer unhealthy dieting behaviors, and regular exercise not motivated by appearance concerns (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a).

1.1.1 Negative Body Image and Body Dissatisfaction

Body dissatisfaction is defined as a negative attitude towards one's own physical appearance and is the effect of a perceived discrepancy between actual body image and the desired ideal body image. Body dissatisfaction occurs when there is a discrepancy between a person's actual and ideal body shape (Heider et al., 2018). Factors contributing to the development of body image dissatisfaction include biological factors like gender, age, race, weight changes and socio-cultural factors (Voelker et al., 2015). Body dissatisfaction arises from the relationship between one's perception of their actual body image and their ideal body image. These two types of body image differ primarily in how the concepts of 'self' and 'body size' are connected. Specifically, beliefs about one's actual body reflect a descriptive relationship (e.g., "I am thin"), while beliefs about one's ideal body represent a relationship of desirability (e.g., "I want to be thin") (Heider et al., 2018).

Body dissatisfaction, characterized by negative emotional responses toward one's physical appearance, heightens the individual's aspiration for thinness and intensifies the fear of weight gain. Body dissatisfaction may lead people to take extreme actions to change their body shape (Muris et al., 2005). For example, an accumulation of evidence to suggest that body dissatisfaction may influence disordered eating through certain mediating factors (Zhang et al., 2023). Among others, negative affectivity (e.g., depression) is a potential candidate for mediating the effect of body dissatisfaction (Brechan & Kvalem, 2015). In addition, body dissatisfaction has been conceptualized as both a motivator and a barrier to exercise (More et al., 2019). An increased level of body dissatisfaction

may simultaneously reduce the level of exercise, increase the sleep quality score, and indirectly affect the development of depression (Hao et al., 2023).

Although the specific route is unknown, some researchers have suggested that dieting may be directly and indirectly linked to obesity and eating disorders (Tang et al., 2021). One commonly accepted explanation is that body dissatisfaction may mediate the relationship between body mass index (BMI) and dietary restraint (Chen et al., 2020). BMI, which divides weight in kilograms by height in meters square, is a commonly used international measure to evaluate human body fat and health (World Health Organization, 2000). From a view of sociocultural, Stice and Shaw (2002) believed that the higher an individuals' BMI, the greater the risk that he will be dissatisfied with own body image, and in turn, will diet more rigorously. Additionally, many studies explored for another way; they link dieting to binge eating. Studies have shown that both BMI and body dissatisfaction are important forecasters of eating disorder behaviors (Hill et al., 2013).

Body dissatisfaction and restrictive dieting have traditionally been seen as issues predominantly affecting women in developed Western countries. As a result, earlier research has primarily concentrated on female populations in these regions (Kennedy et al., 2004). However, more evidence shows to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders have been recognized as a serious global problem, particularly in the Chinese culture background where these issues are prevalent among young adults (Sun et al., 2020). In China, physical beauty has historically been a significant aspect of feminine identity (Xu & Feiner, 2007). Traditional East Asian ideals of female beauty often emphasized features such as round faces and slightly fuller bodies (Han, 2003). However, as Xu and Feiner (2007) note, modern Chinese society now holds women to a dual standard, requiring them to embody both Anglo-European notions of beauty and traditional Chinese virtues, such as submissiveness and nurturing qualities. Thus, greater

pressure would be placed on women in contemporary China to obtain body image, which includes the Conflicts between Western physical standards and traditional Chinese aesthetics.

1.1.2 Positive Body Image and Body Appreciation

Positive body image was initially defined as an opposite concept to negative body image (Smolak, 2012), thus, a decrease in body image dissatisfaction was associated to an increase in positive body image traits (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). In this perspective, positive or healthier expressions of body image have been characterized as merely low levels of negative body image. A study showed a strong, time-invariant negative association between body dissatisfaction and body appreciation (Ren et al., 2023).

However, increasing evidence suggests that negative and positive body image are not simply opposite ends of the same continuum, but are instead distinct constructs that are negatively correlated (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). In this view, positive body image is recognized as a distinct construct that encompasses unique elements such as respect, appreciation, and acceptance of the body (Webb et al., 2015).

Avalos et al. (2005) originally defined body appreciation is exemplified by an intentional choice to: (a) accept one's body regardless of its size or bodily imperfections, (b) respect and take care of one's body by attending to its needs through engaging in health-promoting behaviors, and (c) protect one's body by resisting the internalization of unrealistically narrow standards of beauty promulgated in the media.

An emerging consensus suggests that positive body image is theorized as a complex construct that is distinct from negative body image (Alleva et al., 2023; Tylka, 2019). Positive body image consists of multiple components, such as body appreciation, acceptance and love of one's body, broadly conceptualizing beauty,

adaptive appearance investment, realizes the body's functional capacities not just its appearance, recognition of inner positivity, and information filtering in a body-protective way, are consistently and independently linked to indicators of positive mental health (Alleva et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2015; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). However, a core component is the facet of body appreciation is defined as "accepting, holding favorable opinions toward, and respecting the body, while also rejecting media-promoted appearance ideals as the only form of human beauty" (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2015b).

Body appreciation has been shown to be associated with positive outcomes in a broad range of life domains. On the one hand, body appreciation is inversely associated with a range of indices of psychopathology (e.g., symptoms of depression and anxiety). People high on body appreciation also reported better overall well-being and emotion regulation skills and fewer mental health problems (Linardon et al., 2022). On the other hand, studies showed that body appreciation is inversely related to disordered behaviors and attitudes towards eating (Junqueira et al., 2019). For instance, body appreciation is a core component of the Acceptance Model of Intuitive Eating (Avalos & Tylka, 2006), which posits that body appreciation contributes to adaptive eating patterns and protects against eating pathology symptoms (Messer et al., 2022).

Over the past twenty years, researchers are conducting a growing number of studies to explore gender differences in positive body image, as well as the adaptive and maladaptive experiences that contribute to these gender differences. A study conducted with a Chinese sample found a significantly higher level of body appreciation in females than in males. Additionally, gender-specific analyses showed that higher levels of body appreciation were significantly associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and suicidality among women, but not among men (Liu et al., 2022).

BMI is another prime candidate factor influencing body appreciation. The negative association between body appreciation and BMI among both males and females suggests that higher BMI is linked to lower body appreciation (He et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the latest study shows that a new concept protective filtering ("women used their protective filter to process and respond to information, typically in a self- and body-preserving manner"; a later definition is, "accepting information that is consistent with positive body image while rejecting messages that could endanger it") is a protective factor against body dissatisfaction (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a; Alleva et al., 2024), thereby protecting and promoting body satisfaction among women. The term "protective filtering" was first coined by Wood-Barcalow and his colleagues (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). In other words, it is a strategy for processing information that facilitates the construction of a positive body image, thereby helping women to counteract the negative effects of external negative or stressful information on their body image.

Although the concept of body appreciation has been proposed for many years, with numerous studies demonstrating its role as a protective factor, there is still a gap in research regarding the impact of positive body image and body appreciation among Chinese participants.

1.2 Body Ideal and Internalization

Cultural ideals of appearance and beauty are often used as norms for what people see as, which in turn affects how an individual evaluates and feels about his or her appearance in a given social and historical context. Therefore, 'beauty' is not fixed or monolithic, but is considered a socially and culturally fluid concept as time goes by. In Western and Southeast Asian societies, the two indicators used to judge whether a woman is beautiful or not are body shape and size (the

two main indicators: BMI and waist-to-hip ratio) (Swami & Tovée, 2007). However, societal perceptions of the ideal female body shape have changed over time.

Over the past decade or so, the thin ideal has been gradually becoming the dominant standard of female beauty around the world. Unfortunately, the 'ideal thin body' is inaccessible to mostly women, which has led many women to develop body image disturbance, engage in unhealthy eating behaviors, and even develop eating disorders (McComb & Mills, 2022; Paterna et al., 2021).

In recent years, a new ideal body to counteract this is becoming common and gradually replacing it as the most popular one. The 'fit' ideal is a body ideal that is a more toned and athletic figure that is becoming increasingly popular (Donovan et al., 2020). To have a fit body, people are encouraged to follow a healthy and active lifestyle, which is characterized by doing more exercise to gain muscles and eating more healthy foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, and high-quality proteins. However, exposure to internalization of the fit ideal have been found to be associated with increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating among young women (Boepple et al., 2016; Donovan et al., 2020). Betz and Ramsey (2017), the fit ideal caused more detrimental in terms of objectification and body image.

Women now face a broader spectrum of body ideals beyond the thin ideal. Regardless of whether the ideal emphasizes a thin, fit, curvy, or alternative body type, it is likely to exacerbate self-objectification among women, along with the resulting negative outcomes (Betz and Ramsey 2017).

1.2.1 Thin Body is Ideal

The thin ideal, defined by a slim physique with low body fat, remains one of the dominant beauty standards embraced by women in urbanized societies (Swami, 2015). the widespread acceptance of the "thin is beautiful" ideal has led to increasingly stringent standards regarding body shape and appearance, with

individuals striving for more rigid and narrowly defined aesthetic goals. An increasing number of individuals seek to alter and regulate their body shape through dietary interventions (Polivy, 1988). Thin-ideal internalization or positive expectancies for thinness predicted onset of eating disorders (Stice et al., 2017). In our modern consumerist society, women's bodies are often seen as a form of capital that somehow represents identity, symbolizes social status and facilitates life with more social resources (Cheng, 2015). In addition, women with perfect body are considered more attractive (Mastro & Figueroa-Caballero, 2018), happier (Swami et al., 2015), and also imply having more opportunities and greater achievements (Luo, 2012), as well as successful social networks and romantic relationships (Stokes & Frederick -Recascino, 2003). Therefore, in order to achieve the goal of ensuring group conformity and acceptance, women actively or passively internalize the thinness ideal (Vartanian & Hopkinson, 2010).

Because of the many benefits comings with a perfect body, thinness is portrayed as a pathway to positivity, change, and renewal, and successful weight loss is portrayed as a 'comeback,' 'potential,' or 'inspirational'. The media convey and exaggerate these messages through language and imagery, linking thinness to happiness, success, self-control, and discipline while emphasizing the importance of having a slim figure and being beautiful in a competitive society (Chen et al., 2019). Under the influence of social media, women who internalize the ideal of thinness are more likely to associate thinness with psychological (e.g. happiness, self-esteem), social (e.g. satisfying romantic and interpersonal relationships), and physical benefits (e.g., job opportunities and increased income) (Engeln-Maddox, 2006). The thin ideal is the primary standard of female beauty and is widely promoted through various forms of media (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Much of the content on social media about thinness can create the illusion that a thin body is an achievable goal for anyone willing to engage in restrictive diets and exercise (Carrotte et al., 2017).

In China, both male and female celebrities are typically characterized by a pretty face and a thin or fit body. The public's expectation of male celebrities is that they maintain low body fat and have visible muscles, but the muscles should not be too toned, and ideally they should be 'thin in clothes and muscular out of clothes'. As for female celebrities, fans want them to be thin, but also want to see their firm abs and beautiful muscles on their arms and back, but not very visible muscles on their legs. The media often associates thinness, with words such as beauty, success and self-discipline, spreading and reinforcing this message through the idolization of celebrities (Chen et al., 2024).

Even more surprisingly, many counterintuitive and highly unhealthy aesthetic waves have appeared on the Internet in recent years, such as 'butterfly back' (where the protruding part of the shoulder blades resembles a butterfly), 'chopstick legs' (a reference to thin legs resembling chopsticks), 'A4 waist' (waist circumference not exceeding the width of an A4 sheet of paper), "coins nestled in the clavicle" (a recessed clavicle fossa where coins can be placed), and "a good girl does not weigh more than 50 kilograms" are terms that are often emphasized, which perpetuates subtle discrimination against those who do not fit into these areas.

What is more, 'be thin or die' has become a buzzword circulating on social media, affecting many young women and teenage girls (Chen, 2019). More importantly, media reports often convey the message that weight is highly correlated with popularity and that wanting an uncontrollable life requires controlling one's weight first (Chen et al., 2019)

In addition to strict to perverse requirements for body image, contemporary China is often referred to as 'the era of face-judging', a concept that particularly affects women (Du, 2015). In addition to this, several beauty standards are widely spread among young Chinese women, including features such as a watermelon seed-

shaped face, a sharp chin, a small face, big eyes, double eyelids, and a high nose bridge, as well as physical features such as being tall and thin (Ma, 2023).

A BMI <18.5 is considered underweight, BMI from 18.5 to 25.0 is considered normal weight, BMI from 25.0 to 28.0 is considered overweight, and BMI >28 is considered obese (World Health Organization, 2000; National Health and Family Planning Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2013). Numerous studies have shown that, in western countries, despite being normal or underweight, many women perceive themselves as being overweight (Wardle et al., 2006). This tendency also has emerged in Asia. Some researchers have suggested that young women in Asian countries have adopted ideal body types thinner than their actual figures.

1.2.2 Fit Body is Ideal

Research confirms that in recent years the body type to which women aspire has shifted away from the traditional thin ideal toward being fit and toned (i.e., the fit ideal). Some studies found that compared with thin body and curvy body, female valued thin-muscular images more attractive (Bozsik et al., 2018; Betz & Ramsey, 2017). Many people simply believe that will a fit body is better and healthier than a thin body. However, a study suggests differently, internalizing the fit body ideal, like internalizing the thin body ideal, can lead women to compare themselves to others, experience body dissatisfaction and develop unhealthy eating and exercise habits as well (Donovan et al., 2020).

The social media movement of "fitspiration" is a primary reason for the population of the fit body (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Cataldo et al., 2021). Fitspiration encourages people to achieve an allegedly fit body through images that encourage exercise and healthy nutrition (Boepple et al., 2016). On the face of it, these contents were generally considered to be positive because they seem to promote healthier information, like self-care, a salubrious diet, and encouraging

users to exercise more (Talbot et al., 2017). In addition, the fit ideal is marketed as attainable to any woman who invests time and effort into a healthy lifestyle (Robinson et al., 2017). However, research has also demonstrated that exposure to fit-ideal images lead women to worry more about body image and has no significant impact on actual exercise engagement (Robinson et al., 2017). It can be even more harmful to women's body image than a thin-ideal body (Betz & Ramsey, 2017; Donovan et al., 2020) because the fit ideal may oversell its attainability. Once women cannot achieve it, they feel worse about their bodies (Robinson et al., 2017).

Due to the prevalence of this ideal body image (thin, very toned, athletic body with flat, smooth muscles) (Rodgers et al., 2018), pressures to increase muscularity are growing among women (Thompson & Cafri, 2007). thus, muscularity-oriented disordered eating is receiving increasing attention, which refers to an array of eating disorder symptoms driven by the pursuit of muscularity, for example, high consumption of protein-dense foods, severe dieting behaviors for nonprotein related food components, liquefying or blending food for easier intake a large proportion of calories, use of appearance and performance-enhancing drugs and supplements, and so on (Griffiths et al., 2013). Recent research showed that muscularity-oriented disordered eating contributed to significant psychosocial impairment and distress (Messer et al., 2022).

Surveys have shown that approximately 20% of fitspiration content contains information related to food and eating behaviors (Carrotte et al., 2017). Individuals browsing fitspiration posts often come across content featuring 'clean eating,' which they typically use to learn about health and fitness (Raggatt et al., 2018). Clean eating refers to a restrictive diet that emphasizes the consumption of whole, unprocessed foods while excluding certain food groups, such as wheat and dairy, representing a more extreme form of 'healthy eating' (Allen et al., 2018). A search on social media for the 'clean eating' hashtag typically brings up food-

related images, a set of comparison photos of changes in body shape or appearance, tips for 'cheat' meals, and advice on the health benefits of specific foods (e.g., foods believed to improve skin health). A cross-sectional study found that women who followed clean eating training had greater dietary restraint compared to those who did not (Allen et al., 2018).

1.2.3 Sociocultural Influence and Tripartite Influence Model (TIM)

The term "sociocultural environment" in the context of eating disorders and ideal body research typically refers to peers, family, and the media. It also encompasses broader cultural, social, and gender norms related to appearance, beauty standards, and eating behaviors. Sociocultural factors have been extensively studied as potential risk factors for body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. These factors include perceived pressure from media, peers, and family to lose weight; weight-based teasing and discussions among peers and family members; parental and peer modeling of disordered eating behaviors and attitudes; and exposure to and internalization of narrow cultural beauty ideals that prioritize thinness in media and advertising (Diedrichs, 2017).

To explain the causes and effects of thin idealization, Thompson et al. (1999) proposed the Tripartite Influence Model (TIM). According to the TIM, societal pressures to be thin stem from three primary sources: family (e.g., comments about weight and dieting), peers (e.g., weight-based teasing), and media (e.g., exposure to thin ideal images in magazines and on television). These pressures subsequently impact body image and eating behaviors through two psychological processes, thin ideal internalization, and the tendency to make appearance-based comparisons to others (social comparison). The model suggests that both social comparison and internalization of the thin ideal result in body dissatisfaction, which then leads unhealthy eating behaviors or eating disorders aimed at achieving the perceived ideal thin body.

Furthermore, the relative influence of these three pressure sources are thought to be transmitted via two processes—perceived pressure to be thin and modelling of disordered eating behaviors (Stice, 1998). Perceived stress of ideal thin body is defined as comments or behaviors by others that may perpetuate or reinforce the thin ideal (e.g., critical comments about weight, encouragement to diet, and exposure to social media content containing images of the thinness ideal), whereas modelling is defined as the process of learning from, or directly replicating, the behaviors of others (Bandura, 1969).

Donovan et al. (2020) validated the internalization of the thin ideal (fig. 1) based on the original TIM and further developed the model for the internalization of the fit ideal (fig.2).
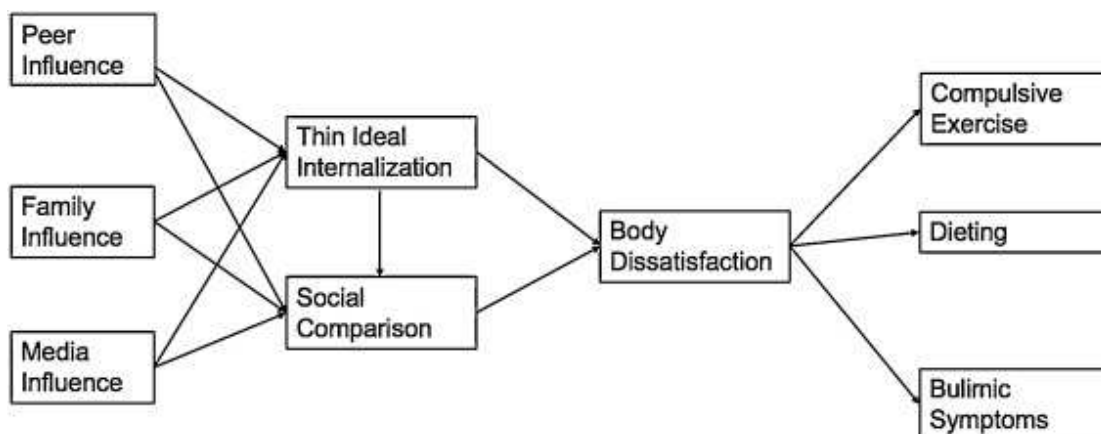

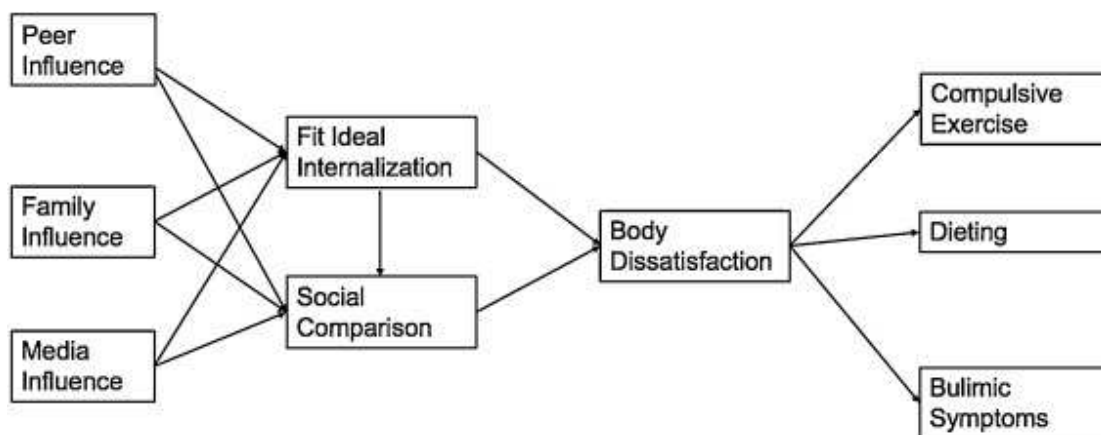Fig. 1. The Tripartite Influence Model -- Thin (Donovan et al., 2020).

Fig. 2. The Tripartite Influence Model -- Fit (Donovan et al., 2020).

In the culture context of China, social orientation can be categorized into four distinct dimensions: relationships, authority, family, and others. Social orientation refers to adaptive behavioral patterns that enable individuals to integrate and cooperate within their social environment. The "others" dimension reflects a heightened sensitivity to external psychological and behavioral influences, such as societal opinions, norms, praise, and criticism. Individuals with this orientation tend to prioritize making favorable impressions and aligning their behavior with prevailing social expectations (Yang, 2005). China is a typical collectivist country, Chinese people tend to be concerned about what others think and evaluate, and are prone to feeling interpersonal pressure (Huang & Chang, 2005), reflecting a desire to avoid differences, to try to align with the collective and to protect themselves. In contrast to Western cultures, Chinese culture places greater emphasis on appearance, including body image, which may drive individuals to adhere to social norms and standards set by others, often leading to negative self-evaluation. As a result, body image among Chinese young adults is particularly susceptible to influence from mass media and peers within their collectivist culture.

Meanwhile, an individual's values and self-image are subtly influenced by parents, peers, and significant others (Ricciardelli et al., 2000). However, as women reach adulthood, their main living and social environments shift from home to school or the workplace, reducing their contact with parents and increasing their interaction with peers and significant others. As a result, the influence of peers gradually strengthens. In the context of the current study, peer communication refers to discussing topics related to body image with peers, such as appearance, image, and attractiveness (Jones et al., 2004). This appearance-related communication creates an environment in which body image concerns are focused on, interpreted, and gradually come to be valued. Peer conversations about appearance are common in the daily lives of young adult women, indicating that

individuals focus on body image during social interactions. Several studies have found that when women discuss appearance more frequently with friends, their sense of comparison about their bodies also increases (Arroyo & Harwood, 2014). Furthermore, when women discuss body image with friends, they often evaluate their body or appearance by comparing themselves with peers, which is associated with more severe negative body image and disordered eating (Dimas et al., 2021). For young individuals, peers serve as primary social referents. Peer interactions significantly influence the attention given to physical appearance, the establishment of ideal body standards, and the development of body image perceptions (Wu et al., 2016). Peer influence plays a role through conversations, comments and teasing related to physical appearance, etc., which can occur on social media, ministry real life or both together. Discussions about obesity usually take place in female friend groups and topics always revolve around body size, weight and eating behaviors, which have been shown to negatively affect body image perception and cognition (Wu et al., 2016). Studies found that more severe experiences of peer teasing lead to greater dissatisfaction with appearance and more negative body image (Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Michael et al., 2014). Regular talk about obesity in a woman's group of friends is a form of 'self-parody' (Cruwys et al., 2016) and tends to increase women's negative experiences of body dissatisfaction. Other people's comments about body image can have an even greater impact on Chinese people as they are sensitive to and care about the opinions of others due to social positioning (Huang & Chang, 2005). A study involving Chinese college students revealed that peer opinions significantly affect both male and female students, particularly concerning their perceptions of body image, especially when those opinions are negative (Shen et al., 2022). In Chinese culture, reputation and maintaining face are of paramount importance. Traditional Chinese individuals often view others as constant observers and evaluators. Consequently, Chinese people are adept at collecting social

information and managing their self-presentation. This involves actively seeking feedback and engaging in frequent self-monitoring, which promotes comparison, internalization, and ongoing adjustments to self-presentation to maintain a positive reputation (Yang, 2005). As a result, when participants compare their body images with those of their peers and engage in self-evaluation, they mentally compare themselves to idealized body standards. This process leads to the internalization of societal and peer body standards, impacting their confidence and resulting in negative emotions and adverse body image perceptions (Shen et al., 2022).

1.2.4 Body Ideal Internalization

For sociocultural pressures to negatively impact an individual, they must first be internalized. If a woman does not internalize these pressures, they are unlikely to result in disordered eating or body dissatisfaction. However, when a woman adopts the thin ideal and its associated values as part of her worldview, this internalization is likely to produce harmful effects (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012). In China, internalization of societal norms may arise from a prevalent psychological inclination among traditional individuals to avoid divergence and seek consensus. This tendency towards social conformity reflects a strong inclination to align with collective norms and expectations (Yang, 2005). Therefore, when a woman internalizes a certain "ideal body," she views it as an important and achievable goal to pursue. As a result, she may become overly focused on ensuring that her body and behaviors align with this ideal. When her actual or perceived body fails to meet the ideal standard, she may experience negative emotional reactions, such as guilt and shame (Gilbert, 1997).

Internalization is thought to lead to an individual's dissatisfaction with their body, as one's appearance or body shape will inevitably fall short of a narrow, strict ideal. Further, this in turn leads to dieting, over-exercise and negative emotions

and other health-harming behaviors, ultimately triggering eating pathology (Zhang et al., 2023).

Internalization of a body ideal happens when an individual meets three conditions: firstly, accepting and aspiring to align with the ideal; secondly, incorporating the importance and significance of that ideal into their personal values and beliefs; and thirdly, adopting behaviors that align with the ideal (Uhlmann et al. 2020). Furthermore, Uhlmann et al. (2020) proposed the three internalization domains that can explain the thin and fit body ideal.

The first domain, idealization, refers to the process by which individuals accept and internalize a societal standard of beauty, incorporating it into their personal value system. This internalization fosters a cognitive and emotional drive to adhere to a specific body ideal, leading individuals to view the ideal-congruent appearance and behaviors as essential to maintain (Uhlmann et al., 2020). Consequently, when women internalize the societal thin ideal, they perceive it as a significant and achievable standard. This perspective often results in a heightened focus on aligning their appearance with the ideal (e.g., achieving thinness) and engaging in behaviors that support this goal, such as dieting and exercising. Any actual or perceived failure to meet this slim body standard is likely to evoke negative emotions, such as guilt and shame (Tracy & Robins, 2004).

The second domain of internalization, overvaluation, pertains to the incorporation of societal attitudes and the significance attached to a specific body standard into an individual's personal belief and value system (Uhlmann et al., 2020). When individuals internalize these societal values, it signifies a heightened emphasis on the thin ideal within their personal framework.

The third domain of internalization, behavioral drive, involves the extent to which individuals adopt behaviors that align with the ideal, such as dieting and exercising for weight management or muscle gain (Uhlmann et al., 2020). Women

who internalize the thin ideal are thus more likely to be motivated to engage in such behaviors to attain and maintain this ideal body standard.

1.3 The Influence of Social Media and Social Comparison

1.3.1 The Influence of Social Media

The social media landscape evolves at an unprecedented pace, social media are web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share and engage with user-generated content (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2017), and it is a powerful vector for spreading sociocultural standards and expectations, such as ideal size, weight, and aesthetic standard (Yang, 2007). One of the important ways in which social media differs from traditional media is that content is user-generated. Not only can users view the content posted by others, but they also can post their own material and interact with others through features such as commenting, liking, and forwarding (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). In addition, compared to traditional mass media, social media encourages upward appearance comparison (comparing oneself to a body perceived to be more attractive than one's own) with both peers and celebrities compared to the previous mass media that mainly focused on celebrities, which has been found to have a pronounced impact on women's appearance-related concerns and beliefs (Fardouly et al., 2018). While traditional media also promotes images of fitness and slimness, social media, due to its specific nature, relies heavily on images, is accessible at all times, and is used more frequently, especially in today's age when everyone has a mobile phone.

Social media has become the dominant platform for communication and information dissemination, particularly among young people. In China,

approximately 21.4% of college students actively use social media services such as WeChat and QQ, with 40% of their cell phone usage dedicated to these platforms, averaging about 10 hours per week (Jia et al., 2022). Within a socio-cultural framework that emphasizes health and the pursuit of an ideal body shape, body image management and healthy eating have emerged as significant concerns among young people on social media. Consequently, the impact of social media on eating behaviors has become an important issue (Fu et al., 2022).

Online media effectively propagate images of the ideal body and reinforce the societal standard of "thinness is beauty." In the context of China's collectivist culture, individuals are more likely to be influenced by the online environment and are driven to conform to societal ideals of body image (Shen et al., 2022). media engagement or exposure to image-related content may negatively impact body image and food choice in some healthy young adults (Rounsefell et al., 2020). However, exposure to body positivity/neutrality content did not have protective effects (Sanzari et al., 2023).

Many college students today regularly share their photos on social media platforms and receive feedback on their appearance from peers and others, including negative comments. Comments, whether intentional or not, such as "You look a bit heavier in that dress," prompt individuals to compare their body shape to perceived "ideal" standards. This process of comparison and internalization of these "ideal" body standards often leads to the development of a negative body image.

On the other hand, media influences showed stronger associations with thin/fit internalization, social comparison and body dissatisfaction, which may be related to the heavy use of social media and the large amount of content therein that displays images of thinness and fitness. Thus, social media may have a particularly strong influence on body dissatisfaction, either directly or through

ideal internalization and social comparison. Indeed, social media is a new-age form of media that could theoretically incorporate images from a variety of sources, including adverts, celebrities, peers and family. In one way, it brings together all the influences of peers, family and society in one place.

1.3.2 Social Comparison

The relationship between internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction is also influenced by the process of social comparison of individuals (Thompson et al., 1999). Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that human beings are naturally wired to assess their own progress and status in life. When there is a lack of objective standards, people compare themselves to others to understand where they currently stand. In other words, people compare themselves to those around them when confronted with somethings that lack a uniform, fixed standard (Corning et al., 2006).

Upward social comparison refers to when a person compares herself or himself to someone she or he perceives as 'better equipped', and such comparisons usually lead to negative emotions and behaviors (White et al., 2006). People tend to compare themselves with those whose abilities and traits are superior to their own, which leads to negative self-evaluations. Therefore, people's focus on the perfect image in social media leads to upward social comparisons (Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Downward social comparisons occur when a person compares herself or himself to someone she or he perceives as 'worse' (Myers & Crowther, 2009), whereas downward comparisons usually have positive consequences (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989). However, comparisons related to appearance are typically upward (Morrison et al., 2004), and research has demonstrated that upward comparisons are more frequent than downward comparisons and are associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction (Coelho et al., 2023). Despite the fact that such upward comparisons often lead

to feelings of dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction (Thompson et al., 1999), women cannot help but engage in such comparisons on a regular basis.

Additionally, Festinger (1954) also hypothesized that people generally have a drive to make comparisons that produce favorable rather than unfavorable outcomes, and wherever possible, individuals compare themselves to those who are most similar to them and whose lives often intersect (i.e., particularistic targets, e.g., friends, peers, family members) rather than those who are perceived to be more dissimilar and who have no relevance to their lives (i.e., universalistic targets, e.g., distant sources of influence such as mass media) are compared (Morrison et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the Tripartite Influence Model (TIM) suggests that comparison of one's appearance is a predictor of thin ideal internalization. Specifically, increased exposure to idealized body images in mass media facilitates the process of upward comparison and enhances the degree of internalization of these ideals. Individuals who place significant emphasis on body-related content in the media are more likely to engage in upward comparison and thus experience a higher level of internalization of the thin ideal. (Shen et al., 2022).

1.4 The Present Study

In summary, sociocultural factors have a significant impact on body image, ideal body types, and their internalization. Chinese women are influenced by both Western culture and traditional Chinese culture. This study mainly focuses on young women aged 18 to 30. Most of them belong to the Millennial generation, influenced by diverse foreign cultures from a very young age, while still being raised in traditional family environments. As a result, their thoughts and behaviors differ from their parents' generation. Additionally, they grew up during a period of rapid internet development, with the internet and social media impacting them in ways we can hardly imagine. Finally, they are in a unique phase of life: they have

just entered adulthood, left their families, and are either attending university or starting work. The influence of family is gradually decreasing, while peers and social media are increasingly occupying a large part of their lives. Therefore, conducting research in this unique context and face to this population seems particularly intriguing.

The aim of the present study is to explore how sociocultural pressures shape body image and furthermore influence eating behaviors in young Chinese women, and risk factors for body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in a population of young people of Chinese nationality. We will more specifically focus on the influence of Chinese traditional culture.

Chapter II Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This observational, and exploratory study is based on a procedure that is qualitative, phenomenological, and inductive. Qualitative methods appeared to us to be best suited to the in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and representations. It enables the study of the relations between several factors and the integration of the impact of social context and is thus particularly appropriate to the topic of this study.

In fact, at the beginning of the study, we chose to use a questionnaire to collect data. However, difficulties were encountered during the questionnaire collection phase. The willingness of Chinese participants to participate in the questionnaire survey was low. We tried to place the questionnaire on several social media platforms and waited long enough, but less than 20 questionnaires were collected. We think that this may have been caused by the fact that the questionnaire was in English that is difficult for most of to understand and that it was long, taking about 30 minutes to complete. Therefore, we finally opted for an interview study.

2.2 Participant Selection

Following the ethical approval from the University of Padova (reference number is 351-b), participants were recruited through various social media platforms (SMPs). Recruitment was conducted via posts on popular Chinese SMPs such as Little Red Book, Douban, QQ, and WeChat. Eligibility criteria included being Chinese (with both parents being Chinese, born and raised in China) and the ability to complete an interview in English.

This sample was comprised of ten female participants aged 18–26 years old (M=23.00, *SD*=2.62). Through this procedure, participants completed an online

interview, which could last 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted according to a strict plan developed and organized by our team. All participants were born and raised in China and have spent most of their lives in China (one participant came to live in Italy with her parents when she was in junior high school, but in general has lived in China for a longer period of time). Three of them now live in Italy and the others in China. All of them were well-educated women (they were either undergraduates, studying for a higher degree or had already graduated) and they were fluent in English. Many had also studied abroad (e.g. in the UK, Singapore and Italy).

The average BMI of participants was 20.81 kg/m^2 (*SD* = 2.52). One of them is overweight (BMI=25.71), one is underweight (18.03), and the remaining eight are within the normal range. Table 1 presents other demographic information.

Table 1. Demographic Information

	N	M	SD
age		23.00	2.62
gender			
female	10		
sex			
female	10		
sexual orientation*			
heterosexual	9		
bisexual	1		
education level			
high school diploma	3		
bachelor's degree	3		
master's degree	4		
employment status/ occupation			
student	7		
part-time employment**	1		
full-time employment	3		
marital status			
single	7		
in a relationship	2		
married	1		
BMI		20.81	2.52

Notes: * one participant refused to reply this question and one participant choose both heterosexual and bisexual. ** One participant is a student and has a part time job as well.

2.3 Materials

In this study, the data collection phase employed semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insights into participants' perspectives. It aimed to gather participants' thoughts and feelings about their eating behavior and body image. We also explored how sociocultural pressure influences them.

During the interviews, we used a semi-structured interview guide with key questions such as "*How does your relationship with food impact your well-being?*" and adapted questions flexibly based on participants' responses to explore their viewpoints and experiences in depth (full interview questions see Appendix 1). These interview questions were mainly changed from some questionnaires such as the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4) (Schaefer et al., 2015), Thin Ideal Internalization Assessment (THIINA) (Kidd et al., 2023) and The Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2) (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a).

2.4 Procedure

Based on the audio recordings, the interviews were transcribed, and parts of the interviews were translated by the authors (some of the content related to traditional Chinese culture, proper nouns, poems, etc. were talked in Chinese by the participants and therefore needed to be translated and explained). The authors were familiar with Chinese values and culture and were therefore able to transcribe, translate and analyze the interviews in a culturally sensitive manner.

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), a theoretically flexible method for qualitative research that facilitates the identification of themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2019). RTA is described as "collaborative and reflexive, aiming for deeper interpretations of meaning rather than seeking consensus on meaning" (Byrne, 2022). This approach posits that meaning arises from the interaction between the dataset, the conceptual and theoretical assumptions of the analytic framework, and the researchers' perspectives and subjectivities (Byrne, 2022).

We posted recruitment information online (social media, university forums), and recruited ten participants with good English listening and speaking ability. Interviews were conducted via video meeting to accommodate participants'

schedules and geographical locations. Each participant received a list of interview questions in advance, and we provided clarification if they asked (given that neither the researchers nor the participants are native English speakers, we deemed it essential to provide them with ample time to understand the questions thoroughly and accurately. This also ensures that the formal interviews can proceed smoothly). The interviews were scheduled at times convenient for them. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Before starting, we provided participants with an introduction to the study's purpose and ensured they signed an informed consent form and consent to the processing of special data. All interviews were recorded. After the interviews, a researcher transcribed the recordings verbatim, with multiple checks to ensure transcription accuracy. The transcribed texts were stripped of any identifying information to protect participants' privacy.

2.5 Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyze and report the results by theme identification, which is "independent of theory and epistemology" and has the advantage of being able to flexibly address most research questions and bring in more inspirational perspectives. To ensure the credibility of the result, a 6-phase guide was followed for the analytical process: (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining themes; and (6) completing a report.

Based on an RTA approach, the first stage involved familiarization with the data, so the transcripts were read and re-read by the researchers separately to produce notes on preliminary ideas and observations. This was done to attempt multiple, rich interpretations and explanations of the data, particularly given the diverse backgrounds of the researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Second, this process was used to generate initial codes across the data set (and codes here are

understood as individual data items which are the basic building units for later themes) (Byrne, 2022). Further familiarization with the data and the development of codes works together, and 47 initial codes listed by the authors were such as being afraid of others' comments, admiring or comparing with influencers, pursuing a fit body through exercise or increasing protein intake and body management is an important part of self-discipline. In the third stage, the codes were used to start to explore broader themes and connections across the dataset. In RTA, themes do not reside in the data ready to be 'located' by the researcher but are rather constructed via the researchers actively construing the relationships between their version of the codes (Byrne, 2022). This stage can lead to the combining, discarding, or renaming of particular codes, or finding contradiction or complexity within them (Byrne, 2022). As a result, 40 final codes (see Appendix 2) were determined, and the three key themes arrived at this stage: culturally determined eating behaviors, dieting for an ideal body, and social expectations for a thin body. In the fifth step, the thematic categories were analyzed in detail and data extracts that best represented these themes were selected for inclusion. In stage six, the writing then involved placing the themes in relation to sociocultural influence for understanding body image, ideal body and eating behaviors as well as contextually specific literature on sociocultural pressure, eating behaviors, body image and ideal body in the Chinese context.

Chapter III Result

In this research, three themes emerged from the analyses: (1) Culturally Determined Eating Behaviors (2) Dieting for an Ideal Body, (3) Social Expectations for a Thin Body. In Table 2, the three themes and their sub-themes are presented.

Table 2. Themes and subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Culturally Determined Eating Behaviors	Eating Less and Early for Dinner
	Food Preferences Among Different Regions
	The Lasting Influence of Traditional Eating Culture
Dieting for an Ideal Body	Dieting Leads to Negative Emotion
	Dieting Occurs in Different Contexts
	Balanced Diet
Social Expectations for a Thin Body	The advantages of a good body shape in the workplace
	A Thin Body as a Sign of Good Self-Control
	The Improvement of Self-Confidence
	A Healthy Body is the Best "Body Shape"

In the next section, we explain and discuss the meaning of each theme and subtheme specifically, as well as illustrative quotes. We use number to distinguish the different participants (e.g., P1).

3.1 Culturally Determined Eating Behaviors

Food choices and eating habits among young Chinese women are deeply influenced by cultural norms and traditions. Participants describe their adherence to culturally determined mealtime practices, food choices and the lasting influence of eating habits.

3.1.1 Eating Less and Early for Dinner

One participant reported eating less during dinner and having their meals earlier in the evening as a popular eating cultural habit.

"About the eating behaviors. I think the most popular one in China is that your parents would tell you that you need to eat very well for your breakfast, and you need to eat, make yourself full in lunch and eat less in dinner. […] I don't want to eat so much carbo hydrates for my dinner and I would like to control the fat intake for my dinner" [P1]

3.1.2 Food Preferences Among Different Regions

Regional food preferences play a significant role in participants' diets. Those from southern China prefer rice-based dishes, while those from northern regions favor noodles.

" When I lived in Shaanxi, I preferred noodle-based dishes, but since moving to Nanjing, my diet has shifted to rice-based meals." [P8]

In addition, there are also significant regional differences in people's choices of meat.

"[…] I'm a person from the northwest China, beef will be a more popular type of

meat more than fish or crabs. And when I'm currently working in south China, I feel their meals are sold here in the restaurant, there are more fish and more crabs, but less beef or labs. I think that is also kind of culture impact." [P1]

Participants also mentioned how moving to new regions or living abroad altered their eating behaviors but did not entirely erase their connection to traditional foods.

[…] when I was cooking, I would try to cook severe spicy food, which is chaocai (a method of cooking vegetables or meat. It is characterized by a lot of seasoning, oil, salt, and paper and very short cooking time.) in Chinese and that is also because my culture in Chongqing they usually do something like that. And when I study abroad, I still cook this and also like some families in fact don't like this because they like to eat some vegetables just without salt and oil, just boil, and something like that. […] For example, like, let's just use Italian spaghetti as an example. When I was trying to do a spaghetti, I put I see this material, this noodles. I was thinking, okay I'm going to try it in Chinese style. It is like putting some oil on it and some sauce and some oyster sauce and eventually making it in Chinese style. [P6]

"My cultural background have some significant influence in my eating behavior like in Xinjiang People will eat more meat and less vegetable and more fruits. So I still eat like this now in Jiangsu." [P2]

3.1.3 The Lasting Influence of Traditional Eating Culture

The influence of traditional eating culture extends beyond the family. Participants spoke about how they continue to follow traditional food habits, even when living alone or abroad.

"[…] I was raised in China, and I grew up with my family, with my grandparents. […] we will have rice every day and until now. […] I haven't had rice for like one or two days, I will really Miss it and I could say I can't leave without rice that much." [P5]

3.2 Dieting for an Ideal Body

Dieting is a prominent behavior among participants, driven by sociocultural pressures to attain an ideal body shape. Dieting often leads to negative emotions, and the context in which it occurs varies based on participants' social environments and transitions in life.

3.2.1 Dieting Leads to Negative Emotion

Participants frequently expressed feelings of sadness, frustration, and guilt while dieting.

"Eat less and drink less and more sport. So I can keep that for a week to a month, and after that, I feel so tired and sad, sad all day. I always cry at night. And after that, I am so emotional. […] When I was trying to lose weight. The poor eating habit makes me sad all day." [P2]

"[…] And changing my diet is very bad for me instead, so it didn't last a very long time." [P3]

"Like I would feel very depressed and angry when I'm when I'm hungry. And sometimes, you know, when I on a diet I would eating something like corn or potato that make you feel full but the emotionally. I just eat but I'm still feel depressed because I'm not eating meat or something sweet." [P5]

The emotional toll of restricting food intake was evident, with many describing moments of crying, anxiety, and a sense of failure after breaking a diet.

"Yes, sometimes I will feel anxious. During my weight loss journey, I became anxious about counting calories and ensuring I was eating the right amount of food. This maybe moderate and mostly occurred when I felt I might be overeating or not following my diet plan closely enough." [P8]

"Only after I eat some high-calorie food or have a big meal, then I will feel guilty for several hours, and that guilt will disappear the next day before I weigh myself." [P10]

3.2.2. Dieting Occurs in Different Contexts

Dieting is often context dependent. Many participants reported starting diets due to peer pressure at school or university.

"Sometimes I will feel confused, because if I stay in the Xi'an and be around my family members, and they don't want to let me lose my weight. They think I have a good body and I'm healthy; they satisfied right now. They're satisfied with that. but If I go back to school, and all the girls around me there they have a good body and they just have an ideal body I want, so I will try to lose some weight and skip my dinner and do something to change my body shape." [P10]

While another participant mentioned the pressure from her mother, which might be one of the reasons for her dieting at home.

"Maybe comes from my mother. She thinks that girls shouldn't be too fat and eat too much. […] I tried to change my diet, such as in the summer holidays, but when I went back to school, it returned to the beginning." [P3]

3.2.3 Balanced Diet

Although many participants mentioned that they had experienced dieting, they also talked about the changes they had made: placing importance on eating a balanced diet that includes vegetables, protein, and carbohydrates.

"I think my eating behavior is comfortable and I'm eating a regular and healthy diet now with a wide range of food choices, including meats, vegetables, dairy products and even fast foods." [P7]

"My daily food choices are balanced and nutritious. I am quite satisfied with both of the quantity and type of food I eat daily. My diet includes a variety of nutrients and fits my lifestyle well." [P8]

Several mentioned trying to avoid high-calorie foods but noted that they did not feel guilty for indulging occasionally, as long as it did not affect their overall health.

"[…] currently I'm trying to avoid some high-calorie food but not in a strict way. I will have some cakes or dessert as a gift for myself. if I have some high-calorie food for a meal, I will not blame myself. I wish I could lose some weight, but I not do that for a strict way." [P10]

3.3 Social Expectations for a Thin Body

Societal standards that prioritize thinness as an indicator of success and self-control emerged as a dominant theme. Participants recognized these expectations and internalized them, linking body shape to professional and personal achievements.

3.3.1 The Advantages of a Good Body Shape in the Workplace

A participant explained how being thinness allows them to get a job offer easier or feel more confident in social settings.

"Some opportunities is for people to more aggressive to catch that opportunity, but sometimes I feel nervous and I anxiety about my body. I won't be that aggressive to get that opportunity. So that opportunity just slip." [P2]

In addition, she mentioned that a good body shape is also one of the criteria employers when selecting employees.

"I don't know if you are graduated and to find a job now. But it's really shocked me that the interview, its need a good body image." [P2]

3.3.2 A Thin Body as a Sign of Good Self-Control

A participant spoke about how being thin is perceived as a sign of discipline and control over one's life. There is a trend that associates their body shape with their ability to control other aspects of their lives.

"[…] when I was in China, when I was trying to do an interview face to face, the people will say if you cannot control your body shape, you cannot control anything. You cannot be effective in work or something." [P6]

3.3.3 The Improvement of Self-Confidence

For many participants, achieving a thinner body led to improved self-confidence. While societal standards framed thinness as a symbol of success, participants also found personal value in feeling more comfortable and confident in their appearance.

"Because my ideal body is to be stronger. So I think being stronger will make myself feel more confident because if I'm stronger I can do better in different sports." [P1]

"I think thinner will make me more confident, and I will be happier to… such take part in some social activities and to make more friends." [P3]

"For me, the ideal body is one that is healthy and allows me to feel confident and comfortable." [P8]

Furthermore, confidence can have a positive impact on romantic relationships and careers.

"If I can lose 20 kg, I will definitely be more attractive and be more confident when I am involved in some romantic relationship." [P10]

"Feeling good about my body has positively influenced my daily activities and work opportunities. Confidence in my appearance contributes to my overall confidence and helps me engage more effectively in my professional and personal life." [P8]

3.3.4 A Healthy Body is the Best "Body Shape"

Despite the emphasis on body shape and appearance, many participants underscored the importance of health over mere thinness. They expressed a desire to maintain a healthy body through balanced diets and physical well-being. Many participants agreed that the healthiest body is the most desirable body shape. They emphasized that, while societal pressures exist to be thin, their priority is to maintain a both physical and mental health.

"I think I'm not a person who pays a lot of attention to body weight or body

shape. Because I still believe that the first priority and the most important thing is to keep yourself healthy. Both the physical and mental health." [P1]

"For me, the ideal body is one that is healthy and allows me to feel confident and comfortable." [P8]

Chapter VI Discussion

4.1 Key Findings

This in-depth qualitative interview study explored the experiences and perspectives of young Chinese women regarding sociocultural factors, body image, and eating behaviors, revealing several key insights. The study reports that participants indicated a significant influence of Chinese sociocultural factors on their eating behaviors; specifically, our participants were consistently influenced by traditional dietary culture, and regional culture clearly affected their food preferences.

The dietary preferences of the Chinese population are significantly shaped by cultural factors deeply rooted in traditional Chinese beliefs. The meanings attributed to these dietary practices in the Chinese context are multifaceted and interwoven with cultural heritage. Numerous age-old expressions in Chinese folk culture reflect these complex beliefs, such as "maintain a slight sense of coldness and hunger for better health," "eat meals at consistent times and in consistent quantities," and "stop eating when you are 70% full to promote healthy aging." Additionally, principles like "consume seasonal and fresh foods" and "eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a commoner, and dinner like a pauper" illustrate culturally endorsed attitudes toward meal composition and timing. These traditional dietary guidelines appear to have been influenced by the principles of traditional Chinese medicine and have gradually become embedded in the collective social norms and values of Chinese society (Wang-Chen et al., 2022). Consistent with the findings of Chithambo (2020), this study shows that participants engage in dieting to achieve an ideal body shape. As expected, dieting led to negative emotions, as reported by Ackermans et al. (2022). Due to different sources of stress, dieting occurs in various settings. According to TIM, the main sources of stress are family, peers, and social media. The participants'

dieting behaviors in different situations demonstrate that these pressures are real and can significantly impact individual eating behaviors.

Furthermore, we found that our participants commonly expressed that an ideal body shape boosts confidence in various social settings. Particularly in the workplace, some researchers suggest that a good body shape makes individuals more ambitious and courageous in pursuing job opportunities. Employers also tend to favor candidates who have a better appearance and conform to societal body ideals, which is consistent with the findings of Grant et al. (2023) and Turkmenoglu (2020).

Finally, in our study, nearly all participants expressed a desire to lose weight or increase muscle mass, yet they consistently emphasized that mental and physical well-being are more important than achieving an ideal body shape. Participants described their efforts to maintain balanced diets and adopt healthier eating practices, such as limiting the consumption of high-calorie foods, as integral to pursuing a healthy lifestyle.

4.2 Study Strengths and Limitations

This study presents several strengths and limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

First, regarding sample composition, the study involved a relatively small sample size (n = 10). Despite this limitation, data saturation was achieved, suggesting that the number of participants was adequate for the study's objectives. Furthermore, the sample included participants with diverse backgrounds and experiences, although it predominantly consisted of university students, thereby reflecting the views and experiences of a young, highly educated demographic.

Secondly, the methodology employed for data collection warrants consideration. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in the interview process, enabling participants to thoroughly discuss their experiences and

express their viewpoints. All interviews were conducted by a single interviewer, which helped reduce variability in interviewing techniques and contributed to the consistency and comparability of the data across participants.

Finally, the participants' pursuit of an ideal body shape must be considered in the context of sociocultural influences. In this study, it was challenging to disentangle sociocultural pressures from individual aspirations, as it was not always clear whether specific behaviors were motivated purely by external societal expectations or by personal goals for self-improvement. Some participants indicated they would continue engaging in fitness activities and striving for a toned physique even in the absence of external pressures, suggesting a potential internalization of the ideal body image.

4.3 Future Research

This study highlights several promising directions for future research. Experimental, quasi-experimental, or observational studies could be utilized to quantitatively and more objectively examine the significant factors identified in this exploratory qualitative research, such as the short-term and long-term emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to sociocultural pressures within the Chinese context. The findings indicate that sociocultural influences play a critical role in shaping specific eating behaviors, while positive outcomes such as health-related knowledge, motivation, and behavioral change should also be systematically measured. These results support previous literature suggesting that sociocultural pressures may serve as mediating factors contributing to negative effects on body image and eating behaviors.

Future research should also consider focusing on diverse demographic groups. For instance, younger age groups, such as adolescents, or individuals with lower educational attainment may exhibit distinct behavioral responses to sociocultural

influences. Understanding these variations could provide a more comprehensive picture of how sociocultural pressures impact different subpopulations.

Given the extensive literature on "ideal body shape," "body image," and "sociocultural pressures," which underscores their potential harmful effects, and the persistent trend of pursuing an ideal body shape, it is essential to develop interventions aimed at mitigating or preventing the detrimental impact of these pressures on body image and appearance. Previous studies have demonstrated that psychoeducation can be an effective intervention, raising awareness about the risks associated with sociocultural pressures and enhancing individuals' media literacy and critical evaluation skills (McLean et al., 2016).

The findings of this study suggest that while young people are exposed to external pressures and diverse influences through online platforms, many still manage to prioritize physical and mental well-being. Nevertheless, the results also indicate that not all individuals can resist these pressures on their own. Therefore, further exploration and evaluation of potential interventions are warranted to support those who struggle with stress and body dissatisfaction.

As I mentioned before, we intended to conduct a questionnaire study at first. However, due to the low willingness of participants to fill in the questionnaires, a sufficient number of questionnaires could not be received, so we decided to do an interview study. In the future, perhaps we can choose those questionnaires that have Chinese versions. This will reduce the difficulty and increase the willingness of the participants to fill in the questionnaires. On the other hand, our sample will be more representative instead of being limited to the high educated people.

Another avenue for future research is to harness the positive aspects of sociocultural influences. Researchers could develop or adapt theory-driven behavior change interventions aimed at improving dietary habits and physical activity levels among young people, utilizing social media as a platform to

disseminate health-related information. Additionally, efforts to promote a more inclusive and diverse concept of beauty among youth are crucial.

4.4 Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that sociocultural pressures significantly affect body image and perceptions of the ideal body shape, subsequently influencing eating behaviors among young individuals. While these pressures can have detrimental effects, such as disordered eating, mood disturbances, and practical implications for work and social life, there is evidence that individuals are actively adopting healthy lifestyle strategies in response. Despite participants' awareness of the option to disregard these pressures and their belief in their ability to resist them, the impact of such influences may still persist.

Furthermore, it would be advantageous for future research to explore ways to redirect sociocultural influences toward more positive outcomes. Specifically, examining strategies to harness the supportive roles of family, peers, and social media in promoting healthy behaviors while mitigating the adverse effects could contribute valuable insights to this field of study.

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Appendix 1 The Interview Questions

1. What gender do you identify with and how comfortable do you feel with it?

    a. Have you always felt this way?

    b. How would you describe your experience with your gender/sexual orientation?

2. What is your nationality?

    a. Where were you born?

    b. Where do you live now?

    c. Have you always lived in……? or have you moved at all?

    d. How strongly do you identify with your culture?

    e. How close do you feel your family is with your culture of origin?

3. How do you feel about your eating behavior? Which thoughts do you have about it?

    a. How do you feel about what you eat/your daily choices?

    b. To what extent are you satisfied with the quantity and type of food that you eat on a daily basis?

    c. Have you ever made intentional changes to your eating behavior? (e.g., calorie deficit, going on a diet in general, counting macros, eliminating carbs). If yes, how did it go?

    d. To what extent do you worry about what you'll eat in a day?

    e. What kinds of preoccupation do you have (if any)? (e.g., how many calories you'll ingest during the day/how much you'll enjoy food you like later or how many proteins you still need to consume or leftovers in the fridge, or a slice of cake that's left over that you want to eat but deny yourself)?

4. (a) Do you think your culture has impacted on how you feel and think about food and eating?

    a. If yes, how?

4. (b) Do you think your culture has impacted your behavior regarding food and eating?

    a. If yes, how?

    b. Have you ever felt any pressure to change your eating behavior?

    c. If so, to what extent?

    d. If so, from whom (for example, family, friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, media, advertisements)?

    e. How/in what ways/could you describe an instance?

    f. How do you feel your behavior would be different if you didn't have any external pressure to behave a certain way towards eating?

5. How does your relationship with food impact your well-being?

    a. Have your eating habits ever made you feel anxious?

    b. If so, how, and to what extent?

    c. Has your eating behavior ever made you feel sad or depressed?

    d. If so, how and to what extent?

    e. Have you ever felt sick because of your eating behavior? If yes, in what ways (you ate too much too little)?

    f. In what ways has your behavior regarding food and eating impacted your social life, if it has done so?

    g. In what ways have your thoughts and feelings regarding food and eating impacted your daily activities, if they have done so?

    h. In what ways has your behavior regarding food and eating impacted your daily activities, if it has done so?

6. How do you feel about your body (when you look in the mirror or at photos of yourself)?

    a. How much time do you spend thinking about your body shape and weight?

    b. In what way? (e.g., do you worry, do you spend time checking things to change?)

c. To what extent do you monitor your weight and body shape, if you do so?

d. Are you comfortable in your body or is there anything you would like to change?

e. If yes, how and to what extent would you like to do so?

f. What would the ideal body be for you?

g. Would having your ideal body make you feel better about yourself/more comfortable or make your life easier in any way?

h. Have you ever taken any measures to change your body shape or weight (e.g., diet, exercising more, drinking protein shakes etc.) in order to be happier with them?

i. If so, how did you go about it?

j. How did it make you feel?

7. How do you think the culture you have been surrounded by, might have had an impact on how you feel and think about your body shape and weight?

a. Have you ever felt any pressure to change your body shape and weight?

b. To what extent?

c. If so, from who (for example: family, friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, media, advertisements)?

d. How/in what ways?

e. Could you describe any instance where you have felt bad because you were discriminated because of your body shape/weight?

f. How do you feel your satisfaction with your body and weight would be different if you didn't have any external pressure to look a certain way?

g. How much do you worry about others looking at your body?

h. If others didn't exist, how would you feel about your body shape and weight? Would anything change?

8. How does your relationship with your body impact your wellbeing?

a. Has the way you feel about your body shape/weight ever made you feel anxious?

b. If so, how, and to what extent?

c. Has your body image ever made you feel sad or depressed?

d. If so, how and to what extent?

e. In what ways have your feelings about your body impacted your social life, if it has done so (for example you didn't go to the beach with friends because you didn't want them to see your body in a bathing suit)?

f. Has the way you feel about your body ever impacted your romantic relationships? If so, in what way?

g. Has the way you feel about your body ever impacted your future (work) opportunities or daily activities?

9. How do you think your use of social media and the content you see on there has influenced your views on your body shape, weight, and eating?

a. To what extent do you compare yourself/and or what you eat with the people on social media?

b. How does that make you feel?

c. If you have ever seen content aimed towards weight loss or body modification (e.g., muscle gain, body recomposition, fat loss etc.), how has it impacted you?

d. If you have ever seen content aimed towards body positivity how has it impacted you?

10. How do you think your use of social media and the content you see on there has influenced your behaviors and worries regarding food?

a. Have you ever been influenced to change your eating behavior because of something you saw on social media (e.g., start a new diet, eliminate a food group, go into a calorie deficit etc. etc.)?

b. If yes, how was it?

c. If you have ever seen content aimed towards food and eating trends or recipes (for example macro friendly cooking, food alternatives, wellness eating, fad diets etc.), how has it impacted you in regard to your feelings about food and eating?

Appendix 2 The List of Codes

C01. Eating control/ Food choices for health

C02. Eating together is an important social activity in China

C03. Strict food choices because of the external pressure

C04. Family more care about their health, not appearance

C05. Internal motivation of pursue a better body shape

C06. Body shape pressure from mother or other relatives

C07. Chinese typical concepts of healthy eating behaviors

C08. Comparing with peers

C09. Losing weight by dieting

C10. Negative effects of dieting

C11. Pursuing fit body through exercise or increasing protein intake

C12. Strongly influenced by Chinese culture

C13. Regional differences in eating habits in China

C14. Body management is an important part of self-discipline

C15. Ideal body will increase level of self-confidence

C16. Counting calories

C17. Balanced diet

C18. Eating more vegetables and fruit

C19. Self-control

C20. Limiting high-calorie foods

C21. Restricting food intake

C22. Prioritizing health over appearance

C23. Negative feelings if breaking a diet

C24. Avoiding certain meats (e.g., beef, pork) based on cultural values.

C25. Avoiding snacks

C26. Sticking to a diet is hard

C27. An ideal body will make individuals happier

C28. Being good body shape is important in job interview

C29. Cooking traditional meals despite living abroad.

C30. Dieting at school

C31. Social media influence encouraging dieting

C32. Skip dinner

C33. Eat less for dinner

C34. Fear of judgment or comments to body shape

C35. Body weight is dynamically balanced

C36. Social media showcasing thin/fit bodies as ideal.

C37. Be skeptical of information on social media

C38. Regional differences in body shape in China

C39. Don't care about what their daily meals

C40. Being thin increases the ability to wear beautiful clothes

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