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The Globalization of Beauty: How is Ideal Beauty Influenced by Globally Published Fashion and Beauty Magazines?

Yan Yan & Kim Bissell

The current research examined the portrayal of female beauty worldwide through a content analysis of 5577 female models in four top beauty and fashion magazines from 12 countries/regions. Different magazines used different standards to frame stories and select models, suggesting that the image of beauty was more a result of the editorial rooms than derived from objective standards. North American and European magazines dominated the beauty standards. Asian countries were relatively independent particularly in terms of sexual frames and sexual model selections. Magazines distributed in Latin America and South Africa were in danger of being assimilated into the Western norms of beauty.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Communication; Beauty; Body Image

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Introduction

Women are constantly bombarded by information in mass media which transmits and reinforces values, norms, and ideals of fashion and beauty via images of models, movie stars, and female celebrities in a variety of media formats (Polivy & Herman, 2004). Mass media often portray attractive people as more desirable, credible, and inspirational (Solomon, Ashmore, & Longo, 1992). This reflects the...
mainstream culture’s obsession with thinness and beauty (Chung & Bissell, 2009). Previous research has documented the significant influence of mass media on appearance norms, which suggests that increasing exposure to mediated beauty enhances internalization and fantasizing by women and girls about obtaining the characteristic body shape and facial attractiveness promoted by the media (Polivy & Herman, 2004).

The media industry’s over-emphasis on beauty and attractiveness is not just a phenomenon found in western countries; rather, it may be a problem or issue that is more global in nature. The women’s magazine Cosmopolitan, for example, is published in 36 languages, has 63 international editions, and is distributed in more than 100 countries. What is not known about the international distribution of the magazine is how much emphasis is placed on a narrow representation of beauty. For example, do the models look similar across editions or are they more similar to the magazine’s readership?

As western media content permeates societies and cultures worldwide, the globalization of a beauty and appearance ideal is gaining prevalence in non-western as well as western societies (Coward, 1984). “Traditionally, what exactly constitutes beauty has always been a locally indigenous evaluation. This fact is changing across the world” (Isa & Kramer, 2003, p. 41). A cross-culturally accepted standard of ideal beauty features high eyebrows, large eyes, high cheekbones, a small nose, and a narrow face (Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen, & Wu, 1995). Such westernized ideals have eroded the national beauty standards in Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil (Inceoglu & Kar, 2009), where the appearance norm is quite different from that of Caucasian women (Isa & Kramer, 2003). In this study, we seek to test questions related to appearance norms via a content analysis of four fashion and beauty magazines published in 12 countries/regions worldwide. This analysis allowed us to identify trends, patterns, and similarities in the representation of ideal appearance and beauty.

**Literature Review**

*The Effect of Media Images on Individual Perception and Identification*

Scholars have examined the role of physical attractiveness in personal perception and have found that attractive individuals are evaluated more favourably (Miller, 1970), being seen as more desirable (Dion, Bersheid, & Walster, 1972) and more successful in social interaction (Reis, Nazlek, & Wheeler, 1980).

Although the present study is not an effects study, it is important to have a justification for the study of content. Research on the effects of exposure to appearance-oriented content has consistently shown that it is damaging. Girls and young women in particular are extremely influenced by mediated images showing exceptionally thin female models and may take destructive paths filled with low self-esteem, body image dissatisfaction, anorexia, bulimia, and depression in order to
attain their ideal image (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Lavine, Sweeney, & Wagner, 1999). Psychological research has found evidence of syndromes such as body-image distortion and appearance anxiety (Botta, 1999; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002), which seem to be a contributing factor for long-term psychological effects.

Social comparison theory suggests that human beings have a drive to evaluate their own opinions and abilities by making comparisons with similar others (Festinger, 1954). The disparity between desired others and perceived self usually results in behavior to eliminate the perceived discrepancy. Typically, the more important and attractive the compared subject or group is perceived to be, the stronger the pressure toward uniformity becomes. As applied in body image and ideal beauty research, previous researchers argued that people tend to compare themselves to people and images that represent idealistic goals (Botta, 1999; Irving, 1990). The pervasive thin ideal disseminated by mass media increases the pressure toward ideal-beauty uniformity. Although people tend to avoid comparisons with others who seem ultimately different from themselves, especially those considered to be superior others, two types of situations did seem to prompt the comparison process. One type of comparison occurs when the attractions of the compared groups are strong. The other happens when people wish to remain a member of the specific group (Festinger, 1954). The advantages of being a member of an attractive group as well as the negative effects of deviation from this ideal-beauty standard have been documented (Bersheid & Walster, 1974; Riggio, Widaman, Tucker, & Salinas, 1991). Nevertheless, a forced comparison with ideal beauty seems almost inevitable for most girls and young women today.

Under pressures from media and society, new media such as social networks and online forums provide platforms of psychological catharsis particularly for oversized and overweight people. In an analysis of women’s conversations in an online beauty forum, Kim (2009) found that participants gained psychosocial benefits such as social support, greater optimism about their body image, increased self-esteem, and decreased psychological distress by participating in online discussion. Yet even though the internet provides a pseudo space for self-disclosure, people still use social norms as references for their compliance and/or defiance. For example, women participating in an overweight dating site were more likely to sexualize their photos and to discuss their bodies than women who used a traditional dating site. This suggests that women on the overweight website considered their appearance substantially more important than women on the traditional website (Turner, 2007). While the overweight dating site provided a platform for the “co-culture” of overweight women, they were still under pressure from normalized ideals. In fact, online communication still conforms to the social norms in the real world. It was found that of people who posted face-threatening SNS messages in Facebook, those with lower physical attractiveness were more likely to be blocked than more physically attractive senders, reflecting online users’ greater tolerance toward good-looking persons (Pena & Brody, 2011).

In the past, commercial products or services such as cosmetics, fitness foods, and plastic surgery could only reach their audience via mass media or public
campaigns. Now they can lobby girls and young women through the Internet 24/7. A recent survey found that teen-targeted fashion magazines were among the most visited sites by girls ages 12–17. Teenage girls made up 50.7% of the unique visitors to CosmoGIRL!, 42.6% of those visiting TeenPeople, and 38.6% of visitors to Seventeen (Rickert & Sacharow, 2000). These sites, together with fashion blogs, gossip forums, and cosmetic products’ official networks, create and disseminate homogeneous fashion and beauty information to a worldwide readership. Fashion publicity was once restricted to twice-yearly collections and the monthly publications of magazines, but it is now “a permanent present, a situation the Internet has fed off and sustained” (Rocamora, 2012, p. 97).

Global Media and the Universal Ideal of Beauty

It has been argued that the growing trade and improved communication technology in the globalization process have led to an increasing level of global integration between cultures (Giddens, 1990). As a social construct, the ideal of beauty and attractiveness is not immune from the pervasive trend of globalization. Before the global age, each culture had a unique standard of attractiveness derived from traditional views about beauty as well as the physical features of the people. For example, the traditional Korean image of beauty was average or even overweight in size because it represented abundance (Han, 2003). In China and Japan, women with round faces and mild plumpness were seen as beautiful and healthy (Han, 2003; Jung & Forbes, 2006). Hispanic cultures valued oversized and curvy bodies and tinned skin as attractive and fertile (Cunningham et al., 1995), while scarification of the skin was a beauty process in parts of Africa (Frith, 2006). However, a phenomenon of cultural assimilation has been found in that local cultures that are being integrated into a universal standard of beauty dominated by western ideals such as round eyes, narrow faces, and pronounced noses (Kim, 2010).

In a cross-cultural study of perceptions of female attractiveness, Cunningham et al. (1995) found that sexual maturity and/or perceived sexual attractiveness appeared to be strong predictors of attractiveness evaluations across Asian, Hispanic, and White participants, reflecting a trend of cultural homogeneity toward the western standards of ideals. This trend was confirmed by Griffin, Viswanath, and Schwartz (1994), who found that models in Indian news magazines adopted poses and displays that closely matched those of models in the advertising of western nations, implying an adoption of western beauty standards in Indian culture. In a worldwide survey of 32,000 teenaged girls and women from 10 countries, only 13% of women were “very satisfied with their body weight and shape,” 2% considered themselves “beautiful,” and more than half of the respondents viewed their bodies as “disgusting.” For girls aged between 15 and 17, more than 50% of Japanese teen-aged girls desired to change their weight, body shape, and neck; nearly 40% of Saudi Arabian and Canadian teenagers as well as nearly 30% of Brazilian girls wanted to change their hair; and more than 30% of teenagers in Canada and Germany wanted to change their skin colour (Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, 2004). Asian women
are obsessed with skin whitening via whitening cosmetics and even surgery to achieve lighter, flawless skin. When asked to identify an ideal mental image of beauty, a large percentage of US and Korean girls offered US celebrities as examples or described an imaginary ideal who has mixed Asian and Western appearance, such as long straight hair, big eyes, and a high nose (Chung & Bissell, 2009). As Isa and Kramer (2003) stated, “even though they may bemoan the power of the beauty myth, most women still continually struggle to measure up to the increasingly mass-mediated, pervasive version of what is beautiful, desirable and acceptable” (p. 42).

Yet, there are contradictory opinions about the danger of exaggerating the cultural assimilation of fashion and beauty. Demure dress of female models in advertisements was found to be significantly more common in Asian than in American magazines. This reflected a clear distinction in dress styles which was consistent with the boundaries between a conservative Asian culture and an open American culture (Frith, Cheng, & Shaw, 2004). Although Americans sometimes generalize that Western Europeans have very similar cultures to Americans, an examination of female models in women’s magazines indicated that American magazines portrayed more smiling but less sexual models than their French counterparts (Morris & Nichols, 2013). Such findings suggest that the presentation of beauty still varies depending on cultural backgrounds and audience differences.

**Identifying “Ideal” Beauty and Related Constructs**

The factors related to perceptions of beauty are quite complex. Saltzberg and Chrisler (1997) believe that beauty “cannot be quantified or objectively measured; it is the result of the judgment of others” (p. 135). However, the media may function in a similar way in other cultures and societies by transmitting norms about ideal beauty and appearance via mediated content.

Traditionally, studies analysing the identification of beauty rely on research that specifically examines faces in photographs. Yet, facial beauty is not the only factor in attractiveness, which also includes grooming, dress, cosmetic use, hairstyle (Cash, Rissi, & Chapman, 1985), nonverbal behavior, conversation skills, and humour (Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983; Purvis, Dabbs, & Hopper, 1984). These studies uncover the notion that attractiveness involves the combination of expressive, social, and communication skills with “static” beauty. However, while these earlier studies provide a framework to better understand the way women perceive beauty in other women, a variety of predictors are still largely undetermined. Moreover, the numerous cultural interpretations of female beauty make it unlikely that what makes a woman beautiful can be firmly defined or that an attempt to produce a “norm” for attractiveness will succeed (Langlois et al., 2000).

Previous studies have identified high cross-cultural agreement in attractiveness ratings of faces of different ethnicities (Cunningham et al., 1995; Jones, 1996). This suggests that “if different people can agree on which faces are attractive and which are not when judging faces of varying ethnic background, then … people
everywhere are using similar criteria in their judgments” (Eisenthal, Dror, & Ruppin, 2006, p. 120). Some constructs are widely used as standards of attractiveness between ages, races, and nationalities, including types of beauty (Frith, 2006), face attractiveness, body size/shapes (Frith, Shaw, & Cheng, 2005), poses and body displays (Griffin et al., 1994), and so on. As western media and media content have become more global, the homogenized representation of beauty and attractiveness results in more critical assessments of non-western-appearing people.

Furthermore, because of this perceived Americanization of beauty, ethnic standards of beauty—or any beauty that “deviates from the standard of whiteness—are displaced for their departure from pure” (Patton, 2006, p. 32). Thus, one question this study seeks to answer is how appearance and attractiveness are represented cross-culturally in fashion and beauty magazines published worldwide. Based on the literature reviewed and the overarching objectives of the present study, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: How are ideal beauty and its related constructs represented in four fashion and beauty magazines?

RQ2: How are ideal beauty and its related constructs represented cross-culturally in fashion and beauty magazines?

RQ3: How are specific beauty/attractiveness characteristics represented cross-culturally?

Methodology

Sample

We examined the primary editorial content of four transnational fashion magazines (Vogue, Elle, Glamour, and Cosmopolitan) in 11 countries (United States, United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, France, Switzerland, Slovenia, China, Korea, Japan, and South Africa) and one region (Latin America). The four magazines were selected because they are among the most circulated fashion and beauty magazines among young women and girls globally (Frith et al., 2004).

Procedures

Content was coded and analysed from 94 issues of magazines published between October 2007 and October 2010 across the 12 countries/regions. The stories teased on each magazine cover were also coded and analysed. The numbers of issues coded per magazine were not equal as access to internationally published and distributed magazines proved to be dependent upon what was shipped to bookstores and distributors in the United States. Nevertheless, even though the numbers are not equal, the broad representation of issues and countries allows for greater understanding of the messages communicated to readers about fashion and beauty.
Coding Categories

For each magazine, the following objective information was recorded: magazine (Vogue, Elle, Glamour, or Cosmopolitan) and country of publication.

Next, the cover model’s name, nationality, and profession were coded because cover models usually represent the ideals of appearance and beauty in fashion magazines.

Frames of cover page stories, that is, stories teased on the magazine cover, were analyzed because cover page stories mainly illustrate the preference of the editorial rooms. Story frames were recorded into the following categories: health, beauty, fitness, entertainment, sex, relationships, fashion, personal/self-improvement, or other.

Images of female models accompanying each cover story were coded for the following information: femininity (extremely masculine to extremely feminine), sexuality (extremely unsexy to extremely sexy), facial glamorization (very natural to very glamorous), and facial expression (smiling/laughing, blank expression, sexual gaze, pout/frown, or can’t tell), body type (conspicuously thin to conspicuously fat), body shot (total amount of body visible), and clothing (fully clothed, fully covered but shorter/smaller clothing, underwear/bathing suit, dress, and can’t tell).

Intercoder Reliability

Coders practiced on several issues not included in the final sample to achieve reliable agreement on each of these individual coding categories. Seven separate issues were coded by both coders, and the overall reliability was a .92 using Cohen’s Kappa. Individual reliability scores for each coding category ranged from a low of .78 to a high of .99.

Results

A total of 94 magazines published over a 36-month time period from October 2007 to October 2010 were coded. These magazines included 24 issues of Vogue, 21 issues of Elle, 24 issues of Cosmopolitan, and 25 issues of Glamour. Of the 94 magazines, 20 were from North America, 24 from the UK, 23 from other European countries, 20 from Asia, and 7 from other countries (four from Latin America and three from South Africa).

The Representation of Ideal Beauty via the Cover Model

The choice of cover model indicated some interesting patterns. In the 36-month time period, specific models appeared multiple times in publications in several countries, such as Jennifer Lopez, Kate Moss, Kate Hudson, Victoria Beckham, and Madonna. This might reflect the fashion agenda, when some celebrities were the focal point at certain time periods. The frequencies of some cover models’
appearances were also clustered within a limited time window. Particularly, the
same person usually appeared in the same month in different magazines or differ-
et country editions (e.g. Jennifer Lopez was the February 2008 cover model of
Glamour in France and Spain and of Cosmopolitan in the UK) or appeared in sev-
eral months in different magazines (e.g. Kate Moss on the cover of Vogue France
in February 2008, Vogue UK in March 2008, and Vogue France in April 2008; Lily
Allen on the cover of Cosmopolitan UK in March 2008 and Glamour UK in April
2008). This finding could simply reflect a model’s overall popularity or broader
social and cultural norms about the “type” of model that typifies female beauty. It
might also imply the editing strategy of internationally circulated magazines, which
tend to promote the same model in different country versions either due to cost
considerations or due to keeping the magazine style consistent globally. This phe-
omenon appeared again in selections of cover page stories.

The nationality of cover models demonstrated the domination of western fash-
ion and beauty culture. Some of the magazines preferred using models from the
country publishing the edition of the magazine; however, US and UK models were
most commonly found on the magazine covers. For example, 73.3% of the North
American magazines used US models, UK magazines used 48% UK models and
40% US models, Chinese magazines used one-third Chinese models and one-third
US models, and Spanish magazines used 16.7% Spanish models and 16.7% US
models. Of the French magazines analyzed, 25% used US models and 25% UK
models; only 12.5% had French models on the cover.

Most female models were coded as being highly feminine ($M = 4.46, \text{SD} = .57$),
highly sexual ($M = 3.75, \text{SD} = .83$), conspicuously thin ($M = 1.86, \text{SD} = .31$), and
deliberately glamourized ($M = 2.86, \text{SD} = .60$). Most of the models were wearing
dresses (73.8%), with the facial expression most often coded as smiling (45.2%),
blank expression (36.2%), or representative of a sexual gaze (18.3%).

The Representation of Ideal Beauty by Magazine

RQ1 asked how ideal beauty and its related constructs are represented in the four
fashion and beauty magazines. Fashion, entertainment, and beauty were the three
most frequently identified frames of the cover page stories. Fitness was the least-
used frame. The use of story frames conveys the magazines’ belief about what
aspects of women’s lives should be most valued and strongly recommended to the
readership. The result indicated a primary focus on external beauty (e.g. articles
featuring fashion, entertainment, and beauty frames) over and above internal
beauty (e.g. frames of personal stories, careers, and health).

A chi-square analysis indicated that story frames were significantly differentiated
by magazines ($\chi^2 = 101.48, p < .001$). As Table 1 shows, Vogue had the highest per-
centage of fashion and health frames and the second highest percentage of entertain-
ment frames, but ranked the lowest in all the remaining frames among the compared
magazines. In particular, none of the stories in Vogue were coded as having a domi-
nant theme or frame related to sex. Elle also had a huge percentage of fashion and
entertainment frames and the second highest percentage of beauty frames. *Glamour* had the highest percentage of entertainment stories and personal/self stories. *Cosmopolitan* had the most balanced distribution of frames among the selected magazines, with most frames comprising from 10 to 15% of the total number of cover stories. Beauty, sex, relationships, fitness, and other frames in *Cosmopolitan* were the highest in percentage among the four sampled magazines (Table 1).

The second unit of analysis was each female model portrayed in the 760 cover page stories. A total of 5577 female subjects were analyzed. Results of one-way ANOVA analyses indicated that the overall femininity score was very high, and the sexuality scores were around the middle of the 1–5 scale. Therefore, although subjects were highly feminine in their appearance, sexuality was not the focal point for the models portrayed in the fashion and beauty magazine articles overall.

As Table 2 shows, significant differences were found between magazines. For both femininity and sexuality scores, *Cosmopolitan* ranked the highest and *Elle* ranked the lowest, whereas *Vogue* and *Glamour* ranked in the middle on both measurements. The average body type score was lower than 3 (the mid-point of the 5-point scale), which means the subjects of all magazines were conspicuously thin. Specifically, models in *Elle* had the smallest body size and *Cosmopolitan* had the largest body size, even though its average score was still less than 2.5 (out of the 5 point scale). The average glamorization score was 2.82 across the magazines, which means the subjects used for these four magazines analyzed were often made-up for the shot. Specifically, *Elle* had the highest glamorization score and *Cosmopolitan* had the lowest glamorization score, although models found in these magazines were by no means represented in a more natural way.

In sum, while differences in the representation of ideal beauty were found across the magazines, there was an emphasis on femininity, thinness, and glamorization, although to varying degrees across the magazines.

### Table 1 Story Frames Represented by Fashion and Beauty Magazines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average (%)</th>
<th>Vogue (%)</th>
<th>Elle (%)</th>
<th>Cosmo (%)</th>
<th>Glamour (%)</th>
<th>χ²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/self</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
Two sets of chi-square analyses were run to test the variances of specific characteristics of ideal beauty by frames and by magazines. As Table 2 indicates, body shot was closely related to story frames ($\chi^2 = 160.53, p < .001$). Full-body shots were usually associated with fashion and entertainment frames, whereas waist up and chest up shots usually appeared in health, fitness, sex, relationship, and personal stories. Head (and shoulders) shots were mostly associated with beauty frames.

Significant differences of body shot were observed among magazines ($\chi^2 = 140.08, p < .001$). In particular, *Vogue* had the highest percentage of full-body shots, which might result from the large percentage of full-page photos in its fashion and/or entertainment stories. In contrast, *Cosmopolitan* had the lowest percentage of full-body shots partially due to their decreasing emphasis on fashion frames and increasing emphasis on beauty frames, which usually depicted only the head
and face of the model. *Cosmopolitan* had the most balanced body shot distributions, partially due to its balanced story frame distributions.

Clothing was significantly associated with frames ($\chi^2 = 241.42, p < .001$). Dresses and fully clothed models were closely related to fashion and entertainment frames, whereas underwear/bathing suit was usually associated with health, sex and relationship frames. Significant differences in clothing were found across magazines ($\chi^2 = 218.81, p < .001$). *Vogue* ranked the highest in dresses and the lowest in shorter clothing and cannot tell clothes (because the photo was of the face or head). *Elle* also had over 50% dresses and nearly 30% fully clothed models. *Glamour* ranked the highest in fully and shorter clothed models and had the lowest in percentage of underwear/bathing suit shots. *Cosmopolitan*, again, had the most balanced clothing distributions among all magazines.

Facial expression was also closely related to story frames ($\chi^2 = 94.43, p < .001$). Models with blank expressions appeared most frequently in beauty, fashion, and personal/self frames, whereas models with a pout, frown, or sexual gaze often appeared in stories coded with a sex frame. Models that were smiling/laughing were often found in stories associated with health, fitness, relationships, and other frames.

Significant differences of facial expression were observed by magazine ($\chi^2 = 295.90, p < .001$). Specifically, *Vogue* had the highest percentage of blank expressions, which might be closely related to its large percentage of fashion frames. *Glamour* had the lowest percentage of sexual gaze and pout/frown, whereas *Cosmopolitan* had the highest percentage of smiling/laughing and sexual gaze models.

The Representation of Ideal Beauty by Country

RQ2 asked whether culture influenced the stories and their related constructs represented in fashion and beauty magazines. Magazines from 12 countries/regions were re-categorized into four regions according to the race of the readership: North American, European, Asian, and other countries. A chi-square analysis found that country affiliations influenced the story frames slightly ($\chi^2 = 39.88, p < .05$). Magazines published in different countries tended to have roughly similar percentages of cover story frames: fashion and entertainment frames were used most frequently across countries. This might be a product of a consistent editorial principle of each magazine across countries, or possibly other factors. For example, the same article (with the same models) sometimes appeared in the same magazines in different country versions in the same months (e.g. “sex do’s and don’ts” in *Glamour* US, December 2007 and UK, April 2008; “10 success secrets your boss will never tell you” in *Cosmopolitan* Spain, January 2008 and UK, April 2008), which might reflect the consideration of publishing effectiveness (to save extra effort in writing, editing, and photographing), or to keep a consistent image of a specific magazine across countries.

Minor frames were significantly different across countries. Despite a similar use of major frames, US and UK articles were different in almost all the other story
frame categories. US magazines were more likely to discuss sex, relationships, health, and fitness and less likely to use personal/self stories than the UK magazines. This finding challenges the notion that there is a uniform cultural status between North America and Europe. Magazines from Latin America and South Africa had the highest percentage of sex, relationship, and other frames and no cover page stories about health and fitness. This is very different from Asian magazines, which had the highest percentage of personal/self stories, but ranked the lowest in sex, relationship, and other frames. This reflects an eastern tradition which is conservative about sex and highly concerned about integrating personal experience into the community.

The types of story frames were examined by each of the magazines cross-culturally. Culture significantly influenced the story frames in Vogue ($\chi^2 = 30.26, p < .01$) and Cosmopolitan ($\chi^2 = 29.26, p < .05$), but not in Glamour ($\chi^2 = 17.59, p = .35$) and Elle ($\chi^2 = 12.13, p = .09$). This indicated an interaction of the magazine features and cultural traditions about which aspects of women should be most valued and preferred. It seems that Cosmopolitan and Vogue have developed an approach that maintains their uniqueness as well as targets their readerships. For Elle and Glamour, on the contrary, the preference seemed to be communicating a universal standard of beauty to their audience. It is hard to forecast which editing strategy will be more prevalent in the future. The current results could only indicate a mixed future: a swing between homogeneity, which was represented by the editing strategies of Elle and Glamour, on the contrary, the preference seemed to be communicating a universal standard of beauty to their audience. This reflects an eastern tradition which is conservative about sex and highly concerned about integrating personal experience into the community.

Another objective of the current research was to identify whether the specific beauty/attractiveness characteristics of models were more representative or reflective of their target audience cross-culturally. A one-way ANOVA was run to test RQ3. As Table 3 shows, femininity, sexuality, body size, and glamorization varied by country. In particular, North American magazines used the most feminine and sexualized models, whereas Asian models were the least sexual and glamorized. South African and Latin American magazines were similar to US and European magazines in terms of all indexes.

However, although the differences were statistically significant, the effect size was relatively small given the large sample size. A series of one-sample $t$-tests were performed to compare the scores of beauty-related constructs in each region with the overall average score. Results showed that only Asian sexuality score and glamorization score were significantly lower than average, $t(1139) = 26.00, p < .01$ and $t(1139) = 38.29, p < .01$, respectively. This demonstrated that South African and Latin American countries have adopted the western standard of beauty, but Asian magazines kept a relatively independent view in selecting models and therefore in defining beauty.
Discussion

As the top fashion and beauty magazines, Vogue, Elle, Glamour, and Cosmopolitan are published worldwide and have hundreds of thousands of readers. These magazines bridge the gap between the high-fashion world in Milan, Paris, and New York and small villages in South Africa or Slovenia. They also construct images of ideal beauty and attractiveness by deliberately narrating stories and intentionally selecting models that represent what they feel is ideal beauty. At the same time, these fashion and beauty magazines constantly shape beliefs, attitudes, and values of “ideal beauty” in the real world.

In this study, we examined four fashion and beauty magazines cross-culturally. The results indicate that different magazines highlighted different frames in their cover stories as well as different preferred images of “ideal beauty,” resulting in multiple norms of fashion and beauty across magazines. In addition, the westernization of fashion culture was evident in terms of the cover page story selection, as the stories teased on each magazine’s cover seemed indicative of a fairly narrow story-telling device that limited the ideal images to external rather than internal beauty. Finally, culture emerged as a crucial factor in influencing model selection even without the impact of frames.

Cover-Page Models as Being Dominated by Western Faces

Magazines try to attract readers and potential readers by carefully selecting cover subjects and interesting cover stories. In all of the magazines included in this anal-
ysis, cover models were all high on femininity, glamorization, and sexuality. An overwhelmingly large percentage of US and UK models clearly indicated a domination of westernization in fashion and beauty culture.

European magazines featured a relative balance between international (mainly US and UK models) and location models, whereas Asia, Latin America, and South Africa clearly indicated a preference for western ideals over local models. While female celebrities outside of the US and UK compete for the opportunity to be on the cover pages of top magazines, non-US and UK models (particularly Asian, East European, and South African models) have around one-third of the space of their US and UK counterparts in the local version of international magazines, and almost no opportunity to appear on the cover of US or UK magazines. In other words, fashion and beauty magazines do not view the non-US or UK models as the ideal image. Celebrities from these regions have few opportunities to be featured in US or UK editions of international circulated magazines. To make things worse, they are also somewhat discriminated against in local editions. In addition, unlike the cover page stories, whose similar frames or content might be based on cost considerations (which will be addressed below), cover-page photos for foreign celebrities usually take more time, money, and space than those for local models. Nevertheless fashion and beauty magazines still prefer western faces on their cover pages to make the magazine look high-fashion- and internationally oriented.

Standards of Beauty Defined Differently by Magazine

To some extent, the cover model represented the “ideal beauty” that all readers should aspire to and desire to be like, and the cover stories around the model resembled “follow me” instructions, telling people what to read within this issue and what to do to become the next “her.” Although all kinds of story frames appear in various articles in all of the magazines, some were more likely to stand out by way of being recommended on the cover page. Thus, cover stories represent an indirect attempt on the part of the magazine’s editors to emphasis specific themes, models, or topics. *Vogue* used the most fashion frames and no sex frames, which is sharply contrasted with *Cosmopolitan*, which had the lowest percentage of fashion frames and the highest percentage of beauty, sex, and relationship frames. It seems that *Vogue* is more concerned with telling readers what is fashionable than with telling them how to act in their sex lives or relationships. On the contrary, *Cosmopolitan* preferred to label itself as a “neighborhood friend” who shared secrets of relationships, gave suggestions on dating and sex, and provided “step by step” tips on fashion and beauty issues. *Glamour* was similar in the distribution of frames or themes with *Cosmopolitan*, except it had a higher percentage of personal and self-help stories. Most of *Elle’s* frame distribution was very close to that of *Vogue*, with the only exception being its characteristics of article, model, and apparel selection. Based on the analysis of cover-page story frames, *Elle* issues were in the middle rank between *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue*, which might target a readership in the process of transition from teenage girls to mature women.
Based on the different self-positioning, the four magazines are significantly different in their constructions of “ideal beauty.” Generally, all magazines preferred highly feminine models, but all except Cosmopolitan were low in the sexuality score. This is contrary to the common assumption that fashion and beauty magazines use sexuality as a key point to attract readers. Next, the body sizes of female models were conspicuously thin across magazines, which confirmed previous research that fashion and beauty magazines tend to use conspicuously thin models at the expense of models of average or overweight size. This finding ties into one of the main criticisms of western culture’s narrow definition of ideal beauty as including only very thin body types. In addition, the glamorization scores were overwhelmingly high across magazines, which further exemplifies another “beauty myth”—the more glamour, the better. This narrow representation of body type and made-up appearance presented by leading fashion magazines constructed the power of the beauty myth, which in turn drives most readers to feel as if they do not measure up.

The paradox of the beauty myths lies in that the magazines which presented the beauty myths broke down their constructs constantly. For example, Elle models had the smallest body size and the highest glamorization scores, but also the lowest sexuality scores. While there is no mathematical formula which states that the representation of ideal beauty must include thin body shapes, high glamorization, and high sexuality, previous research in the area of advertising seems to suggest that this is often the case. Models in Cosmopolitan had the largest average body size, comparatively, and the lowest glamorization scores, but ranked the highest in both femininity and sexuality scores. These comparisons across the four fashion and beauty magazines, therefore, cast doubt on the false assumptions of “ideal beauty”—neither the thinner the better, nor the more glamorous the better.

As it relates to beauty constructs, the models in Vogue and Elle subtly display an air of affluence, superiority, and separation from their readers. Both magazines used the highest percentage of full-body shots of models, the majority of which wore very expensive dresses or suits, were professionally posed, and gazed at the reader with a blank expression. It seems that Vogue and Elle tried to define a high-fashion oriented beauty. On the other hand, Cosmopolitan and Glamour reinforce their roles as “neighborhood friends” by using a larger percentage of smiling/laughing models wearing what could be considered “more accessible” clothing (shorter clothes, underwear, or bathing suits). The differences of model selection were consistent with each magazine’s marketing positions: Vogue preferred a higher-end market which targets mature, upper-class readers whose daily life is more related with self-styled looks and professional work. Cosmopolitan and Glamour, on the other hand, seem to be targeted to girls and young women who need fashion advice and more guidance in their relationships with others.
Agendas of Beauty Vary by Country Only in Minor Frames

Culture influences the frames of cover-page stories; however, this influence is only found in the less dominant frames. In other words, the most salient topics (i.e. fashion and beauty) were homogeneous across cultures, as represented in magazines published worldwide. This might be due to the consideration of economic effectiveness, as using the same or similar articles across different country versions saves costs, improves publishing effectiveness, and keeps a consistent image of the particular magazine across countries. This might also be due to the very nature of international magazines, which are predisposed to carry western ideals to the global market. In other words, the primary goal of international magazines might not be to discover indigenous beauty in every country, but to disseminate the ideals of beauty which they were familiar with and originated from. Standardized editing principles are created in the head offices of international magazines in the US (Vogue, Cosmopolitan, and Glamour) and Europe (Elle) and run in branch offices overseas. Journalists, photographers, and editors in these branch offices receive western-oriented culture throughout their careers and sometimes even get their training at the magazine headquarters. Intentionally or not, a homogeneous beauty norm is communicated to women and girls worldwide, blurring or even erasing the cultural boundaries that are supposed to be diverse and broad. The traditional images of beauty that may be based on local and indigenous evaluations are subject to assimilation by a westernized, global standard.

However, for the minor frames, significant differences emerged across countries. Asian magazines were least likely to discuss sex and relationship topics. This is consistent with the conservative culture in Asia, which regards sex as a private, taboo topic that is not appropriate for public conversation. In contrast, Asian magazines used beauty frames the most. This is reflective of eastern traditions which primarily define beauty in terms of a “pretty face” rather than “lovely body” (Frith et al., 2005).

In contrast, magazines published in South Africa and Latin America used the highest percentage of sexual frames and the lowest percentage of frames about personal stories, health, and fitness. The preference for sexual frames might reflect Latin American culture which is relatively open-minded about sex and relationships. Furthermore, magazines in these two regions had the highest percentage of “other” frames, including shopping recommendations, business suggestions, and daily horoscopes. This may reflect the situation that in Latin America and South Africa, the fashion and beauty market is not mature enough to engage in segment marketing. In the US, UK and Asian markets, specialized information such as shopping recommendations, discount messages, and career suggestions are covered by other, readily available types of magazines, so Vogue and Elle mainly focus on fashion and beauty topics. In Latin America and South Africa, Vogue and Cosmopolitan play wider roles, instructing their readers about diverse aspects of their lives. These functions may be replaced by other professional magazines once the fashion and beauty market matures.
Generally, western culture has indicated its power in dominating story frames across the world. The most salient frames were not differentiated by countries; South African and Latin American frames have been highly homogenized into the dominant frame, and only the minor frames in Asian magazines reflected traditional cultural values such as respecting conservative, moderate, and private principles. Moreover, minor frames in Latin American and South African magazines were less influenced by western themes, probably due to the immature fashion and beauty markets there.

**Visual Image of Ideals as Relatively Independent across Cultures**

Visual images of female models in cover page stories were not as homogeneous as the story frames. Culture emerged as a crucially influential factor in the portrayal of “ideal beauty” when all magazines were considered. Overall, North American and “other countries” preferred models who were highly feminine, seductive, and natural, whereas European countries used a higher percentage of neutral models who were less feminine, conspicuously thin, and scored as very glamorous. The results cast doubt on the assumption of homogeneous fashion cultures between North America and Europe. In this study, American magazines were more likely to portray “ideal beauty” as sexy, healthy, and easy going, whereas the European magazines preferred models to be neutral, indifferent, and distant from ordinary life.

It is a dangerous trend for the “other countries” (i.e. Latin America and South Africa) to adopt a similar standard of beauty with the North American magazines on certain indicators. It might be not very surprising to find cultural assimilation between Latin America and North America, given the geographic proximity and cultural communications between the two regions. However, it might be the seeming similarities between South and North American cultures that rendered the process of cultural assimilation less obvious. Although Latin American magazines kept certain unique features, such as a relatively larger body size and higher sexuality score than all the other countries, the models were still significantly thinner than the average body size of the target readership. The once-valued oversized S-shape Latin American body is being replaced by the North American standard.

It is surprising to find the obviously westernized trend in South African magazines. US and European models were much more common than native African models even though the Caucasian ideals have few physical similarities with the readership. A majority of pictures in the fashion frames were snapshots from New York or Milan fashion collections, portraying models with typical western features, such as blonde hair and slim, tall bodies. Appearance, make-up, and dress styles of African American Hollywood celebrities were occasionally portrayed as beauty ideals for readers to imitate. It seems that South African fashion and beauty magazines are presenting the mainstream Caucasian standard of beauty as the paragon of attractiveness on the one hand and showing westernized African American celebrities as achievable goals for the readers to pursue on the other hand.
Asian magazines kept a relative independence from western standards. This might be mainly due to the maturity of the fashion and beauty markets in Asia. In particular, Japan, Korea, and China are important economic entities in the global market, and Japanese and Korean beauty-related products are exported worldwide along with the Asian standard of beauty. This might help to resist the westernizing trend. Secondly, because eastern culture is so different from western culture, certain traditions have preserved the Asian beauty standard from being assimilated into universal norms. For example, Asian models showed the lowest sexuality, which was consistent with the traditional Asian cultural emphasis on conservative values about both oneself and interpersonal relationships. In addition, the obvious differences in body, face, hair, and so forth between the Western standard and Asian reality might be another driving force underlying the independence of the Asian beauty standards. However, other studies have showed that such independence is relative. In fact, the Asian ideal has adopted some western standards of beauty in that high noses, round eyes, and narrow faces are becoming the ideal images of Asian girls (Chung & Bissell, 2009; Kim, 2010). Although models in Asian magazines still have eastern faces, the nuances of their appearance, makeup, and gestures of body poses all reflect western ideals.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the sample of this research was very large: 94 issues, 760 stories, and 5577 female models. Statistically, the huge sample may make insignificant differences significant. Thus, the finding of relative independence among magazines and across cultures might be less positive than it looks. Taking this into consideration, we still believe that since the westernization of fashion and beauty are being communicated worldwide, minority cultures are confronted with the possibility of losing their independence in setting up standards of ideal beauty. This loss of cultural identity may ultimately lead to more pressure for non-western women, who may feel that it is impossible to match the Anglo-Saxon definitions of beauty.

Limitations and Further Research

While we believe the present study sheds light on the way ideal beauty is constructed by fashion and beauty magazines cross-culturally, we acknowledge that the results presented here are not entirely generalizable to all magazines or to all countries. Particularly for magazines from Asian, African, and Latin American countries, the numbers and countries are too few to be representative. Further studies should include more magazines from more countries. Secondly, the current research analysed only cover page stories. Although it was deemed easier and more convenient to examine the editorial intentions of specific magazines, it cannot be said that cover page stories are representative of each magazine’s editorial philosophy. Further research with different story-selecting methods might lead to different results. Lastly, coding visual images relies more on affective judgments than does coding textual information. One coding category, the femininity score, had an
intercoder reliability of $\alpha = .78$. Although the overall reliability of $\alpha = .92$ is acceptable, the coding book should be refined more in the future. We also recognize that a broader, more comprehensive selection of variables might have yielded a more detailed picture of the way that ideal beauty and its related constructs are portrayed, represented, and shaped.

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Notes

1. *Vogue Latinoamérica* was analyzed rather than *Vogue* in different Latin American countries.
2. North America is the region representing the mainstream of western culture, with a majority readership of Anglo-Saxon persons. Europe represents another mainstream of Western culture and also mainly targets Anglo-Saxon readership. Asia is the region with primarily yellow race readership. The “other countries” category included Latin America and South Africa, representing Latin Americans and Africans, respectively. Issues from the two regions were so few that the investigator combined them together into an “other region” category, with a readership that was distinguished from Anglo-Saxons and Asians.

References


