

Factors Influencing Physical Appearance Identity and Appearance-Management Behaviors among Young Adult Women in Thailand: A Qualitative Study

Daravan Rongmuang¹

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Abstract

In Western societies, race, media, family, peers, and cultural differences have all been identified as factors influencing appearance identity. However, little is known about Thai women. This study aimed to investigate factors that simultaneously influenced young adult Thai women's perceptions of their appearance identity; and the common management behaviors they used to alter their appearances. Data were collected from 94 young adult Thai women from four regions of Thailand using focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The collected data were then analyzed using content coding and thematic analysis.

The themes that emerged from the data revealed the participants' most common management behaviors to monitor and construct their appearances. They included taking glutathione, applying skin-whitening agents (of which some were illegible); altering dietary behaviors; altering exercise; taking self-medication diet pills, and undergoing cosmetic surgeries. The factors influencing the perception of appearance identity included self-awareness (such as self-confidence); extrinsic factors (such as family, friends, and the opposite gender); and sociocultural factors (such as media, values, and regional differences).

In conclusion, perception of physical appearance as an indicator of identity is influenced by internal, external, and socio-cultural factors that aim to meet normative expectations, which are practiced in response to gendered social norms, indicating the prevalent belief that the body is malleable and under individual control. Young Thai women's self-image manipulation behaviors include both desirable and undesirable practices. They should be encouraged to consider and/or advise on the risk of undesirable behavior practices in terms of altering appearance, image, and body weight.

Keywords: body image, risk behaviors, young women, appearance management

Corresponding author: พยาบาลวิชาชีพชำนาญการพิเศษ วิทยาลัยพยาบาลบรมราชชนนี สุราษฎร์ธานี คณะพยาบาลศาสตร์ สถาบันพระบรมราชชนก

Corresponding author, E-mail: drongmuang@gmail.com

ปัจจัยที่มีอิทธิพลต่อการรับรู้อัตลักษณ์ทางกาย และการจัดการกับ ภาพลักษณ์ของหญิงไทยวัยผู้ใหญ่ตอนต้น:การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพ

ดาราวรรณ ร่องเมือง¹

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาในสังคมตะวันตกพบว่าปัจจัยที่มีอิทธิพลต่อเอกลักษณ์ของรูปลักษณ์ภายนอก ได้แก่ เชื้อชาติ สื่อสาธารณะ ครอบครัว กลุ่มเพื่อน และความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรม แต่การศึกษาในผู้หญิงไทยยังมีค่อนข้างจำกัด การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาปัจจัยที่มีอิทธิพลต่อการรับรู้อัตลักษณ์ทางกาย และการจัดการกับภาพลักษณ์ของหญิงไทยวัยผู้ใหญ่ตอนต้น รวบรวมข้อมูลด้วยการสนทนากลุ่ม โดยใช้แบบสัมภาษณ์กึ่งโครงสร้าง ในผู้หญิงไทยวัยผู้ใหญ่ตอนต้น (n=94) อายุเฉลี่ย 20 ปี ในสี่ภูมิภาคของประเทศไทย วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลด้วยการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา และหาองค์ประกอบหลักของข้อมูล

องค์ประกอบที่ได้จากการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล พบว่า วิธีการจัดการกับภาพลักษณ์ของกลุ่มตัวอย่างที่ใช้ส่วนใหญ่ ได้แก่ การใช้กลูตาไธโอน การใช้สารที่ทำให้ผิวขาวซึ่งบางชนิดไม่ได้ผ่านการรับรองจากองค์การอาหารและยา การปรับพฤติกรรมการรับประทานอาหาร และการออกกำลังกาย การซื้อยามารับประทานเอง ได้แก่ ยาลดความอ้วน อาหารเสริมเพื่อลดความอ้วน และการทำศัลยกรรม ส่วนปัจจัยที่มีอิทธิพลต่อการรับรู้อัตลักษณ์ทางกาย ประกอบด้วย ปัจจัยภายในตัวบุคคล หรือการรับรู้ตนเอง เช่น ความมั่นใจในตนเอง ปัจจัยภายนอกบุคคล ได้แก่ ครอบครัว กลุ่มเพื่อน เพศตรงข้าม และปัจจัยทางด้านสังคมวัฒนธรรม เช่น สื่อสาธารณะ ค่านิยม และความแตกต่างของภูมิภาค

กล่าวโดยสรุป การรับรู้อัตลักษณ์ทางกายของผู้หญิงไทยวัยผู้ใหญ่ตอนต้น ประกอบด้วย ปัจจัยภายในตัวบุคคล ปัจจัยภายนอกบุคคล และปัจจัยทางด้านสังคมวัฒนธรรม ซึ่งเป็นการตอบสนองความคาดหวังเชิงบรรทัดฐาน และปฏิบัติพฤติกรรมในการตอบสนองบรรทัดฐานทางสังคมทางเพศ ซึ่งชี้ให้เห็นว่าการรับรู้ภาพลักษณ์และความเชื่อเกี่ยวกับภาพลักษณ์ทางกายสามารถเปลี่ยนแปลงได้ และบุคคลสามารถควบคุม ดังนั้นจึงควรแนะนำให้บุคคลมีความเข้าใจ ในความเสี่ยงของการปฏิบัติพฤติกรรมไม่พึงประสงค์ในการจัดการกับภาพลักษณ์ และน้ำหนักตัว

คำสำคัญ: ภาพลักษณ์, พฤติกรรมเสี่ยง, หญิงวัยผู้ใหญ่ตอนต้น, การจัดการกับภาพลักษณ์

Introduction

Physical appearance identities are self-cognitions that are built upon past experiences and vary from person to person, i.e., different people have different social and cultural engagements.¹ There are many factors in developing one's physical appearance identity including individual factors and sociocultural factors such as family, friends, media, and culture.² In our previous work, we found that women living in different geographical areas of Thailand consider different aspects of physical appearance as most relevant. Women in the North placed the most importance on bright face skin; women in the Central region placed the most importance on body weight and shape; women in the Northeast placed the most importance on facial features (oval face, big eyes, and high nose bridge); and women in the South placed the most importance on body skin color.³

The greater concern with physical appearance leads to an increase in the use of laxatives, diuretics, diet pills, skin bleaching, and engaging in cosmetic surgery in Asian women.⁴⁻⁵ Moreover, women in the West use tanning beds and outdoor sun exposure to get a tan.⁶ These behaviors have physical health consequences such as decreasing bone mineral density, eye injury, skin cancer, neurological disorders, and kidney dysfunction, and mental

health consequences including low self-esteem, fear of fatness, depression, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors to achieve ideals of beauty.⁷⁻¹⁰ When women deem physical appearance as a centrally defining feature of who they are and their worth as a person, they often turn to extreme health-compromising behaviors to alter their physical appearance.

To date, Factors influencing physical appearance identity and appearance-management behaviors among women in western society have been documented. For example, talking about physical appearance with friends, family feedback, and sociocultural attitudes towards physical appearance (factors related to engagement in risky appearance management behaviors. Little is known, however, about the factors influencing physical appearance and appearance-management behaviors among young Thai women.

Purpose of the study

This study aimed to explore the factors that influence physical appearance identity and to identify what appearance-management behaviors were typically practiced among young adult Thai women.

Research Methodology

A descriptive qualitative study was conducted with 12 focus group discussions with semi-structured, audio-taped interview conducted with 94 young adult women (mean age 20 years), recruited from colleges in all four regions of Thailand. A convenient, purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants. The inclusion criteria included 1) women aged 18 to 24 years, 2) born and living in the geographic region of the study site and 3) willing to participate in the study. The researcher contacted the participant directly to obtain informed consent at the college in the study site and then using snowball sampling to reach more participants.

The focus group discussions were led by the first author. Three focus groups were conducted in each of 4 regions of Thailand. Each focus group included 8-9 participants. Three focus groups were conducted in each region of Thailand. The participants were asked to discuss questions primarily aimed at assessing Thai women's perceptions of factors influencing their beliefs about physical appearance and their appearance management behaviors including 1) what are the factors influencing their ideal of beauty? 2) why is it important for women to be beautiful? 3) how you can achieve your ideal of beauty? and 4) what appearance-management behaviors have you or others you have known practiced? The participants were asked to talk freely about factors influencing their physical appearance identity and physical appearance management behavior. The focus group discussions lasted for approximately 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

The author fully transcribed all tapes from the discussions and reviewed all transcripts along with field notes and flip charts for accuracy. The data were analyzed using content coding and thematic analysis. The thematic analysis was performed by two coders and consisted of 6 phases as follows: 1) reading through the data and paying attention to the words and phrases used by participants at least two times before coding and searching for the ideas, 2) providing the initial codes for the data manually using a highlighter, 3) independently

coding the content into themes by using mind maps, 4) reviewing themes by re-read all the data to make sure that all data fit into themes, 5) naming themes and finalize the thematic map, and 6) writing the report. Twenty-five percent of the codes were randomly selected for inter-rater reliability and showed that inter-rater reliability was high; Cohen's kappa was .92.

The researcher provided in the results section verbatim quotations from participants to support the conclusions they have drawn in the Thai language. Relevant quotations were selected to support the findings. All quotations were translated systematically into English by the researcher, who is bilingual with Thai as the first language. To validate the translations of the English quotations, the linguistic scholar who bilingual with Thai as the first language and English as a second language read all quotations and verified the accuracy of the translations. The researcher and the linguistic scholar discussed the use of appropriate vocabulary and sentence structures.

Ethical approval

The study protocol was approved by the Internal Review Board at the University of Illinois at Chicago, USA (protocol number 2009-0548).

Results

Participants were female undergraduate students who were between the ages of 18 and 22 (Mean =20.29±1.02). The body mass index (BMI) of the participants ranged between 15.82 and 27.24 kg/m² (Mean =19.45±2.16), underweight (n = 35; 37.30%), normal weight (n = 57; 60.6%), overweight (n = 2; 2.10%). Sample characteristics are shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1 Sample Characteristics (n=94)

Characteristics	n	percent
Region		
North	25	26.60
Northeast	22	23.40
Central	25	26.60
South	22	23.40
Age (yr),	Mean 20.29±1.02	Range 18-22
BMI Mean, kg/m ² (±SD), Range	19.45±2.16	15.82-27.24
Underweight (<18.5 kg/m ²)	35	37.30
Normal weight (18.5-24.9 kg/m ²)	57	60.60
Overweight (25.0-29.9 kg/m ²)	2	2.10
Obese (>30 kg/m ²)	0	0

Findings reveal 3 themes of factor influences physical appearance identity: 1) intrapersonal (self-confidence), 2) interpersonal (family and friends, men), and 3) sociocultural factors (geographic region, cultural value, and media). Some the young Thai women engage in unhealthy weight and appearance management behaviors.

Factors influencing physical appearance identity

The main factors influencing physical appearance identity among the participants were family and friends, men, media and cultural values, individual psychology, and environment. The participants expressed that the most significant influences on their physical appearance identity were often a combination of the above influences.

Interpersonal factors**Family and friends**

Family members appeared often to influence the participant's physical appearance identity. Parents, sisters, or brothers were often cited as directly influencing a participant's physical appearance identity, either negatively or positively. Especially mom and sister were more likely to talk about body weight. One of the participants discussed that her mother encouraged her to lose weight:

My mom always complains to me about my weight, she wants me to lose weight but she wouldn't actually say I need to lose weight she just says "honey if you stopped snacking that much and exercised more, then you could get rid of that belly" but I think she only wants me to be thinner.

My younger sister is overweight. Mom and dad want her to lose weight. It is not for beauty but they are concerned about her health.

Another subtheme that was prevalent when participants discussed influences on their physical appearance identity as friends. This category includes classmates and best friends.

One participant discussed the negative impact her best friend had on her physical appearance, stating that:

My best friend always tells me that I am getting fat. She not only talks about my weight but also my skin color. She is often comparing her skin to mine and gets happy when she looks whiter than me.

Men

Throughout the discussions, the perceived influences of men on participants' physical appearance identity were apparent. The influences of men on physical appearance identity were mostly negative pressure. One participant discussed her feelings regarding men's effect on women's physical appearance identity, stating:

Men are generally more influential than other factors. I think men prefer thin women. If my boyfriend tells me that I am fat, I will lose my confidence. I am afraid that he will look at other women.

Sociocultural factors**Regional Influences**

The results showed that living in different geographic regions (Central, Northern, North eastern, and Southern) can influence physical appearance identity (e.g., white is beautiful, thin is perfect). Living in a big city, i.e., Bangkok in the Central region of Thailand was associated with pressure to be thin more so than in the other regions. Thai women in four regions of Thailand have differences in physical appearance. Women in the North have a light skin color and the facial feature of Chinese. In the Northeast, women have a flat nose, high cheekbone, and prominent jaws. Women in the South tend to have dark skin than other regions. The participants

discussed their experiences with the regional influences that affected their physical appearance and identity, stating that:

Living in a big city affects women's physical appearance concern. I feel like other people are staring at me when I am walking everywhere. Most of the women I see on the street have thin figures and perfect body shapes. Nowadays women place importance on body shape and facial features. If women were not overly concerned with physical appearance, we (women) will feel happier. Because we live in a society so we have to take concern.

Cultural value and media

Cultural value shapes the standard of female beauty such as thin is healthy and beautiful and the media portrays these physical appearance standards to women. The impact of media such as magazines, television, and advertisement was expressed by the participants. Korean women's image is the most cited ideal physical appearance for young Thai women. The participants said:

The images in magazines, advertisements, television, and music videos usually portray a standard of a woman as being tall, white, and thin. I wanted to look like a character on TV.

The trends in physical appearance among young adult Thai women are mostly from Korean trends and Korean pop culture idols for example having big eyes and a fair complexion like Korean movie stars.

Having a good body shape is the core value for pretty and good-looking women right now. The social value determines the characteristics of female beauty. The value of female beauty exists only for some time. Today's value of female beauty in Thailand is the features of Korean women.

Most fashion magazines (e.g., Kawai, I like, Spicy, and Star news), shows pictures of fashion models who are tall, and thin, with big eyes, small face, and light skin as Korean models. When I view the image of women in magazines, I do like them a lot. I like women who have fair skin. Most of the movie's stars also have white skin complexion.

Intrapersonal factors

Self-confidence is one of the important factors that influence physical appearance identity among young adult Thai women. A person with high self-confidence (i.e., strongly believe in their thought) and has a positive view of one's self. On the other hand, those who feel that they are not beautiful; may lose their confidence and have low self-esteem. The participants discussed their experiences with how self-confidence shapes physical appearance and identity, stating that:

My close friend is confident in herself, and you can see it in her body language. I think being confident is very important to look beautiful. People are drawn to her because of her looks and they want to be friends with her. She isn't afraid to be herself and that's why I admire her.

Appearance-management behaviors

Appearance -management behaviors included healthy behaviors (exercising, diet control such as diet restriction and portion control, applying makeup, and clothing) and unhealthy behaviors (skipping meals, using diet pills, self-induced vomiting, long-term self-administration of laxatives, and glutathione injection).

Healthy behaviors

Young adult Thai women were engaging in many different types of appearance management behaviors to achieve their ideal physical characteristics. The healthy behaviors that young Thai women use to alter their physical appearance including dieting control, eating low-fat foods to lose weight, avoiding sweet food, eating or taking dieting supplements that are approved by the Food and drug administration of Thailand, engaging in exercise and going to a salon. Participants said:

If we want to be thin, we have to exercise, don't eat sweet things, eat lots of vegetables and fruits, eat less rice avoid fried foods, and just eat salads and fruit for dinner.

Eating or taking dieting supplements that being approved by the Food and drug administration of Thailand. For example, if you want to have fair skin, you have to drink "Blink" and if you want to lose your body weight, you have to eat "LCH" All of the products are sold over the counter in the local store.

To prevent dark skin, if I must be exposed to the sun, I cover my skin by wearing long sleeves shirt, using an umbrella, or using arm sleeves. I think it helps a lot.

Unhealthy behaviors

Self-deprivation was a theme that was present in the data. Some of the young adult Thai women in this study were also engaging in risky physical appearance management behavior. The most mentioned methods that young women have heard about included skipping meals, using dieting pills, self-induced vomiting, getting glutathione injections or using a whitening pill, and getting cosmetic surgery. As some participants said:

I had a friend who induces vomiting to get rid of the food she had just eaten. I know it isn't a good way to do it as it can cause damage to the stomach and esophagus. However, she feels satisfied that she looks thin by doing that.

I know many women are using glutathione injections because they want to have fairer skin. They take intravenous glutathione injectables from various beauty and medical clinics. Some even buy their injectable through agents and have someone administer them to them, to save on the cost.

One of the participants stated:

Many women purchase diet pills – online or at local stores. One of my best friends is taking dieting pills. She bought them from a medical Clinic. She is thinner than me. I don't think that she is fat, but she still wants to lose weight. She gets fainting and dizziness after taking dieting pills.

One of the participants who had experience in getting cosmetic surgery told that:

After I graduated from high school, I had a nose rhinoplasty. My mom supported me with it and still does (supports and encourages me about how I look). It makes me look better. Some of my friends also had nose rhinoplasty. They look more beautiful because they have a high nose bridge (laughing). I heard that 4 of my classmates will get it too. If we have a high nose bridge, our faces will look more beautiful.

One of the participants stated:

Many women wear contact lenses that we call "Big eyes" this is to make their eyes look bigger. It comes in a variety of colors and different prices, ranging from very cheap to expensive. Some buy it from

the optical shop (on the sidewalk) the street, the flea market or order it from the internet.

Discussions and conclusions

This study explored the factors that influenced physical appearance identity and identified appearance-management behaviors that are typically practiced among young adult Thai women. The way Thai women perceive their physical appearance identity is influenced by a variety of factors such as family and friends, environment, men, individual psychology, cultural values, and media. Thai young women practiced both healthy and unhealthy behaviors such as exercise, dieting, eating disorder behaviors, and glutathione injection to enhance their physical appearance.

The result was made consistent with the previous work¹¹ found that family and friends are important factors that may influence physical appearance perception in Thai women. The numbers of friends who engage in dieting for weight loss are a source of peer pressure to lose weight in Thai female adolescents.¹² Like Indian women, Thai females frequently talk about physical appearance; tease about physical appearances, engage in dieting behaviors, and attempting to lose weight among friends. These factors may lead to the development of physical appearance identity as an important domain and physical appearance dissatisfaction in women.¹³⁻¹⁴

Among Thai women, pressure from the opposite sex is an influential source of pressure on women to be thin which is consistent with a study¹⁵ that found that Chinese males prefer the ideal female's thin body shape. They found that women who have thin bodies are more physically attractive to men in Chinese culture. This preference may affect mate selection criteria for men in China and it may cause women to have the desire to be thin to be physically attractive to men. Another study found that Chinese women want to lose weight because they believe that thinness is good and they want to be attractive to the opposite sex.¹⁶

Having lighter skin has more advantages than darker skin tones.¹⁷ Cultural values of beauty and media are important factors that influence physical appearance identity among young Thai women. These factors lead women to the desire to achieve the standards of beauty in their culture. If women receive messages frequently in their everyday life, stronger images of cultural ideals of beauty in women are constructed in their cognition.⁵ In Thai culture, dark skin is considered poverty and working-class status. On the other hand, white skin is viewed as a representation of wealth and upper-class status.¹⁸

Direct messages from television and magazines (e.g., advertisements and thin models) may also be associated with physical appearance identity in Thai women. Media in Thailand often show that beautiful women should have slim bodies, be tall, have white skin, and perfect facial features.^{11, 18} Similar to other countries, the desire to be thin and look like a model as portrayed in the media is a salient factor in the development of physical appearance identity among female.¹⁴ A study¹¹ reveals that magazines and television are the primary and secondary factors influencing physical appearance identity among adolescents in Thailand. These messages are direct pressure on Thai women to aspire to be thin and tall. In this study, we found not only young Thai women wanted to be thin but also desires to have fair skin complexion. Moreover, in the same study, there is some point different than Western magazine influence the image of ideal women. However, in this study we found that magazines that portray the image of Korean actresses influence the ideal of young Thai women.

Physical appearance identity is influenced by intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors that causes young Thai women in this study to go to great lengths to manage their physical appearances, e.g., excessive dieting behaviors, self-medication including diet pills, laxatives diuretics, use of illegal body slimming or whitening cream and cosmetic surgery. The result from the previous study found that the university students in Bangkok, Thailand found that female university students wanted to be extremely thin because the trend for university uniforms is tight and slim.¹⁸⁻¹⁹ Only students who have thin bodies will look good in small and slim uniforms. Moreover, a woman who perceives herself as being fat or too fat is likely to engage in weight loss behaviors and disordered eating behaviors to control body weight and shape.²⁰ Turkish women who live in metropolitan cities wanted to have thin bodies more than those in towns outside the metropolitan city²¹ which is consistent with this study that young women living in the big city wanted to have a thin body shapes.

Young Thai women in this study reported that they know many Thai women getting glutathione injections to lighten their skin and using skin whitening products both approved and non-approved by the Food and drug administration of Thailand, consistent with the previous studies that show that young women apply unsafe skin lightening creams.^{18, 22} Other studies have found that women wanted to have lighter skin²³, which is different from Western women who intends to have tanner skin, either with indoor or outdoor tanning equipment or with the use of tanning products.⁶ Moreover, young Thai women desire to have a high nasal bride, so they get a rhinoplasty.

The different cultural norms of ideal beauty and social pressures to achieve ideals of beauty were influential factors in the development of physical appearance identity among young Thai women. Cultural values shape the standards of female beauty (e.g., thin and white is beautiful) and the media spreads the physical appearance standards to women. These factors lead women to the desire to achieve the standards of beauty in their culture. If women receive the messages frequently in their everyday life, stronger images of cultural ideals of beauty in women are constructed in their cognition. Even among young adult females from different regions within Thailand, the salience of physical appearance components was different. Moreover, some young adult Thai women still lack knowledge and information about appropriate ways and methods to use with regarding to altering their physical appearances. Giving the information about risky behavioral patterns related to physical appearance management is important to reduce or remove health risk issues.

Recommendations

Young Thai women use a variety of physical appearance management strategies. Their physical appearance identity appears to be influenced by intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors. Cautious attention to unhealthy appearance management behaviors is needed. Interventions to prevent unhealthy weight and appearance management behaviors must address these multiple levels of influence such as promoting the media to portray realistic ideals of Thai women, FDA Thailand should be strict in selling hazardous products to alter the physical appearance of the internet or in the market and promoting the self-perception of physical beauty among young Thai women not only appearance but also behaviors as well as promote their self-confidence in other domain rather than body-image.

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