

Psychological and Social Motives for Fashion Magazine Use Among Shanghai's Female College Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of psychological and social motives for the use of fashion magazines among female college students in Shanghai, China. The results of an online survey showed that psychological motives, such as enhancing current body image and preparing for future career roles, were significant predictors of fashion magazine use. The findings also suggest that the desire to satisfy consumerist needs do not motivate students' fashion magazine use.

Keywords: Chinese fashion magazines, fashion magazine readership in China, fashion magazine use, uses and gratifications,

Introduction

In 1988 *Elle*, the French fashion publication, became the first international magazine to receive official license to publish its Chinese version in mainland China. Five years later, one of its chief competitors, *Cosmopolitan*, entered the market. *Cosmo* was followed by *Harper's Bazaar*, which began publishing its Chinese edition in 1998. *Marie Claire* went into circulation in 2002, and *Vogue* opened with a circulation of 300,000 in 2005. Before *Vogue's* arrival, international fashion magazine groups already held 85% of the market in terms of advertising revenues (Gorman, 2004). In addition to publications originating in Western countries, Japanese fashion magazines were widely circulated in the mainland (Craig, 2000; Feng & Frith, 2008). Today, the five biggest international fashion magazines fiercely compete for Chinese audiences. In 2010, all the top eight magazines in China in terms of advertising revenues were about fashion and lifestyle (Meihua.com, 2010).

The success of international fashion magazines mirrors the newfound affluence of highly educated career women. Most of those who read these magazines are between the ages of 20 and 35, highly educated, financially stable, and fascinated with fashion (Wu, 2006). But these magazines also target young women, especially female college students who pay close attention to fashion trends. The magazines are expensive—about 20 RMB (roughly U.S. \$3)—while other magazines are sold

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for only about 4 to 5 RMB (about 70 U.S. cents). Given their willingness to pay the higher price, these young women likely represent the next generation of consumers of luxury goods and items featured in these magazines.

Why do female college students in Shanghai, China's commercial hub, read fashion magazines? What motivations do they have for subscribing to these publications? This study aims to determine the factors that contribute to the popularity of fashion magazines among young female audiences and to explore the relationship between two types of motivations—psychological and social—and individual media use. The motivations behind magazine readership in China are discussed in the context of the contemporary Chinese consumer culture. The findings add to the existing scholarship on international magazine markets and are expected to assist international fashion magazine publishers in learning more about the Chinese market and the nature of its readers.

Context

The popularity of fashion magazines is one of the consequences of the Chinese government's "reform and open policy," which has also led to tremendous changes in social values and popular culture, as described by Wei and Pan (1999):

Since 1979, China has been engaged in a reform program to re-orient its economy toward establishing a consumer market.... Shortly after the Tiananmen crackdown and with tacit official encouragement, public energy has been channeled into an unprecedented wave of entrepreneurial and consumption activities. (p. 77)

As a result, Chinese society is now enmeshed in widespread consumerism (Xu, 2007). Shanghai, the most internationalized and commercialized city in the country, where consumerist values prevail, is also a melting pot whose universities and colleges attract about half a million students from all over the country each year (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2006). As China's business center, the city offers young women tremendous opportunities for white-collar jobs (Wei & Pan, 1999; Yang, 1994).

The media play a major role in promoting consumption (Ferry, 2003). Glitzy and glossy fashion magazines are important advertising channels for the promotion of luxury goods and services (Feng & Frith, 2008). Previous studies have focused on these magazines' editorial content and advertisements. Cheng (2006), for example, found that 73.2% of models featured in the advertising pieces of the global fashion magazines' Chinese editions are Western women. Asian models were shown mainly to represent the classic Eastern beauty familiar to Chinese audiences. Liu, Prior-Miller, and Yan (2011) analyzed the editorial content of *Elle China* over the past 20 years and found that local celebrities and models were increasingly used to present Western lifestyles, a category that occupied 90% of the publication's editorial content. Perhaps because Japanese fashion magazines use images of women who come closer to the classic ideal of Asian beauty, these magazines outperform those originating in the West in terms of circulation. This finding also suggests that Chinese readers prefer to get fashion cues from magazines with images that are congruent with their physical appearance (Craig, 2000; Feng & Frith, 2008; JETRO, 2006; Karan & Feng, 2009).

Most American magazines extensively conduct audience analyses to tailor content and style to specific segments. This is not true in China despite the growth of magazine titles and the popularity of fashion magazines in the big cities. Scholars report that few studies have examined what women do with the information derived from fashion magazines. Even rarer are studies that discuss what motivates young readers to subscribe to fashion-oriented publications (Campo & Mastin, 2007; Hermes, 1995). To put this literature in a theoretical context, the next section will explore theories of media use that best frame our goals and research questions.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications

Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) summarize the factors emphasized in the uses and gratifications approach as involving the following:

- (1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones. (p. 20)

In this model, the audience is seen as actively seeking media content, and theories about the hierarchical and linear effects of media content on knowledge, attitudes, and behavior are suspended. It is said that scholars who use this theory “ask not what media do to people, but ask what people do with the media” (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985, p. 11). The uses and gratifications approach, therefore, answers the need for more audience-centered theoretical frameworks by scholars who aim to understand what motivates the media consumption habits of specific audience groups. McLeod and Becker (1981) explain that audiences’ motives or gratifications sought for media uses are shaped by their basic needs, social situations, and background. The theory is concerned with individuals’ motives that, when realized, lead them to refer more often to the mass media.

Both psychological and social motivations may trigger media use (Carey & Kreiling, 1974; Katz et al., 1974; McLeod & Becker, 1981; Palmgreen et al., 1985; Livingstone, 1997; McQuail, 2005). A number of scholars (e.g., McLeod & Becker, 1981; Palmgreen et al., 1985) have examined the psychologically motivated gratifications sought and obtained from the use of a particular medium. Although there is evidence to support the contention that many uses of the mass media are rooted in social structures and processes, mass communication scholars have only begun to understand such theoretical linkages (Palmgreen et al., 1985; Ruggiero, 2000).

Two perspectives appear relevant to explaining the motives that drive college students to buy and consume fashion magazines—symbolic interaction and consumerist points of view.

Symbolic interaction and role perspectives. Symbolic interaction theory proposes the concept of “self” as a psychological construct involving systematic mental perceptions integrated into two entities: the “I” and the “me” (Charon, 1985; Kaiser, 1990; Mead, 1934; Morris, 1977). During the process of self-construction, the socially shaped component, “me,” provides a social conscience that

incorporates the concept of the “other,” such as social norms, community attitudes, and group values that guide the active, creative, impulsive, and spontaneous component, “I.” By recognizing others’ social function in a group, and by trying to think as others think, a person could predict others’ assessment and evaluation of himself/herself (Charon, 1985; Kaiser, 1990). In this perspective, the self is seen as a composite of past experiences and observations of others’ experiences.

The “me” component in the symbolic interactionist mode also refers to the individual’s definition of the self as a role player in a specific relationship (Solomon, 1983). Because a person has various roles in social situations (i.e., a female college student is also a daughter, a girlfriend, an intern, or an employee at the same time), everyone has a separate “me” for each of these roles. According to Solomon (1983), when lacking internal cues or actual experience, one relies on situational or external cues to determine appropriate role behaviors: “The role player who depends on external cues will undergo reflexive evaluation; his/her self-image will be determined largely by a projection of how others see him/her” (p. 325).

But where does one get these external cues? How could one undergo reflexive evaluation, especially when he/she has no personal experiences in the role? Previous studies provide empirical evidence of the mass media’s effects on the process of symbolic interaction. When Peterson and Peters (1983) studied how adolescents construct social reality, they found that the peer group is conceptualized as a “proving ground” for role behaviors observed on television. An important aspect of this conceptualization is that social roles are components of television content and peer realities that adolescents interpret and use to structure their own self-identities. Trevino, Lengel, and Datt’s (1987) findings indicate that symbolic interaction is an appropriate theoretical approach with which to understand media choice processes for managerial communication.

Following this perspective, the current study expects that female college readers might see information in fashion magazines—mainly made up of fashion tips and comments—as important resources with which to observe others who perform specific roles and imagine what may be expected of them, should they come to occupy the same roles in the future. These expectations may include the proper attire and body image for specific role functions. In addition, Hamermesh (2011) finds that people with better physical appearance are more likely to be successful in their careers. Thus, as college students, they position themselves today and develop expectations of themselves as future career women. Fashion magazines may provide rich information to help them meet these identified role demands.

Considering this, it is hypothesized that

H1: Students use fashion magazines as resources to form their current body images.

Current body image refers to a respondent’s sensitivity to her self-image fitting the role of a college student.

H2: Students use fashion magazines as resources to create a future body image that they see as appropriate for their potential careers.

Future body image refers to a respondent's sensitivity to her self-image fitting the role of a career woman in the near future.

Aside from psychologically based motivations, researchers who have examined cross-cultural audiences' uses of and the gratifications they derive from popular soap operas provide evidence of the effect of social and cultural background on audiences' media preferences (Liebes & Katz, 1990). This study continues such an exploration by examining the influence of the social and cultural environment of Shanghai on readers' use of fashion magazines.

Consumerist perspectives. More than 20 years ago a study by Tse, Belk, and Zhou (1989) showed that advertisements in the mainland Chinese market tend to emphasize utilitarian appeals, promise a better life, and focus on desired states of being as consumption themes. Are the same appeals present today? Xu (2007) assumed that consumer values have now become the core of contemporary Chinese people's ethos—consumption is intended to fulfill one's desires, support economic development, establish a lifestyle, and symbolize success. According to Wei and Pan (1999), "since 1979, China has been engaged in a reform program to re-orient its economy toward establishing a consumer market" (p. 77). They add that in contemporary China, three stable consumerist-value orientations are reflected in mass media content: (1) conspicuous consumption, (2) aspiration for self-actualization, and (3) the worship of Western lifestyles. Conspicuous consumption refers to the tendency to view consumer products as social symbols. Aspiration for self-actualization is the need to fulfill one's inner desires. The worship of Western lifestyles refers to people's preference for Western brands, products, and spokespersons, among others.

These trends are more obvious in Shanghai than in any other part of China. Visitors observe that both a rich past and a vibrant present are evident in this sprawling city (Hewitt, 2007). Shanghai has the historical legacy of being the center of the nation's first faltering interactions with the Western world that began in the middle of the 19th century. "To arrive in Shanghai in the early 21st century is to be plunged, with jaw-dropping intensity, into a vision of China's modernization" (p. 32). The rapid expansion of this metropolis began in 1992, when the main government showered it with preferential treatment as an offshoot of the country's economic reform policy. As money from around the world poured into the city (Yang, 1994), its stunning economic performance over time prompted pundits to suggest that the city does capitalism better than the U.S. (Karon, 2011).

Driven by the current capitalist force, the students in Shanghai might read these fashion magazines to join the consumerist climate. In addition, these magazines are expensive products that the students would display in public to heighten some perceived social standing.

Considering the consumerist perspectives this social phenomenon engendered or strengthened, we propose the following:

H3: Students use fashion magazines to satisfy consumerist needs.

Consumerism refers to people's tendencies to equate personal happiness with consumption and the purchase and ownership of material possessions.

Method

This study was based on data from an online survey of female college students in Shanghai. Web-based surveys represent the most commonly used method in Chinese audience research (Zhang, Bi, Lu, Tang, Zhang, & Hiller, 2007; Zhou, Dai, & Zhang, 2007). Considering the sensitive nature of some of the questionnaire items, an online survey freed respondents from social conventions that might otherwise hamper their willingness to provide information in a face-to-face situation or telephone interview. The survey questionnaire was in Chinese.

The population of this study was all female college students in Shanghai. Because of the lack of available sampling frames, the respondents for this study were selected using convenience sampling. To recruit them, permission to post a link to the survey on the Bulletin Board System (BBS) of colleges and universities was solicited from 22 educational institutions. The BBS is an electronic message center that serves specific interest groups. It allows users to connect with one another using a terminal program. Once logged in, users can upload and download software and data, read news, and exchange messages with other users via either electronic mail or public message boards. In Shanghai students generally use their educational institutions' BBS to exchange information because most colleges and universities do not provide students with email accounts.

According to the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (2006), there are 61 colleges and universities in the city. Among these, 22 have online BBS for students' use.¹ The survey was conducted over a three-month period from November 28, 2009, to February 28, 2010. The participants were told that the study aims to assess their uses of and the gratifications they get from reading fashion magazines.

A total of 264 questionnaires were returned. Of these, 24 respondents (9.1%) who never read fashion magazines and four respondents (1.9%) who did not report their reading frequency were excluded from further statistical analyses, creating a final sample size of 236. Another group of 30 Chinese students was used as the pretest sample to (1) determine the reliability of the indices developed, (2) solicit suggestions for questionnaire organization and wording, (3) determine whether respondents understand what was being asked, and (4) ascertain how long it took to complete the questionnaire.

¹ The 22 universities with a BBS system for students' use are Donghua University, East China University of Political Science and Law, East China University of Science and Technology, Eastern China Normal University, Fudan University, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Shanghai Gench College, Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Shanghai Lixin Accounting Institute, Shanghai Maritime University, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai Ocean University, Shanghai Sandau College, Shanghai University, Shanghai University of Electric Power, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Shanghai University of Politics and Law, Shanghai University of Sports, Tongji University, and University of Shanghai for Science and Technology.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Education. Of those who completed the questionnaire (N=236), 34.7% were graduate students, 19.5% were undergraduate seniors, 6.8% were juniors, 5.1% were sophomores, and 2.5% were first-year students. Most of the respondents (19.5%) reported majoring in literature; the rest majored in law (10.6%), journalism (10.2%), engineering (9.7%), business or management (9.7%), science (6.4%), medicine (4.7%), and art (3.0%).

Socioeconomic status. To measure socioeconomic status, students were asked to report their monthly living expenses and household registration places. The respondents reported average monthly living expenses of 1,109.38 RMB (SD = 577.65), or roughly U.S. \$160. In China all students are required to live in university residence facilities, and housing expenses are part of the assessed tuition fees. The living expenses do not include expenditures for vehicles or their maintenance—items that are normally beyond the reach of typical college students.

One hundred and ninety-one students reported their household registration places, which identify the area where they were born. Those who claimed their households were registered in a rural area constituted 7.2% of the sample, while 66.9% had households registered in an urban area.

Magazine use. To measure the use of fashion magazines, students were asked to indicate (1) the frequency with which they buy fashion magazines, (2) the number of fashion magazines they buy, (3) the extent to which they read through an issue of a fashion magazine, and (4) the frequency with which they read fashion magazines in public situations (i.e., in classrooms, cafés, dining halls, and other public places on campus or elsewhere). This magazine use index produced a Cronbach's alpha of .58, slightly lower than the prescribed .60 level for acceptable reliability (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), but it has been accepted in recent published literature in the field of psychology (van der Kloet, Giesbrecht, Lynn, Merckelbach, & de Zutter, 2012).

The majority (44.1%) of the respondents said they rarely buy fashion magazines, 40.7% said they buy fashion magazines occasionally, and 12.3% said they buy one or more magazines per month. Of the total number of respondents, 72.9% said they read fashion publications every two or three months, 18.2% reported perusing at least one magazine a month, and 8.9% reported reading more than one magazine a month. Of those who read fashion magazines, 38.6% said they read the entire issue. A little more than half (55.6%) reported reading half to about three-quarters of an issue, and another 5.9% reported reading about a quarter of each issue of the fashion magazines they buy. Likewise, the majority (55.5%) said they occasionally read these magazines in public, 16.9% said they almost always read in public, and a sizeable group (22.9%) said they rarely read in public.

In addition, the respondents were asked to list a maximum of seven magazines they read regularly. A little more than half of the sample (57.6%) read two to three of these publications regularly. Close to 24% of the respondents read four to seven, indicating high interest in this type of publication. *Ruili* (133), *Mina* (115), and *Vivi* (106), all Japanese publications, were the top three choices.

Table 1
Respondents' fashion magazine reading habits

Frequency of buying	n	%
Never	7	3.0
Rarely	104	44.1
Occasionally	96	40.7
Buy one or more magazines per month	29	12.3
Total	236	100.0
Frequency of reading	n	%
Every two or three months	172	72.9
At least one magazine a month	43	18.2
Read one or more magazines per month	21	8.9
Total	236	100.0
Amount read	n	%
About a quarter	14	5.9
Half	53	22.5
Three-quarters	78	33.1
All	91	38.6
Total	236	100.0
Frequency of reading in public	n	%
Never	10	4.2
Rarely	54	22.9
Occasionally	131	55.5
Almost always	40	16.9
Not reported	1	0.4
Total	236	100.0
Number of magazines read regularly	n	%
1	42	17.8
2	72	30.5
3	64	27.1
4	33	14.0
5	16	6.8
6	4	1.7
7	3	1.3
Not reported	2	0.8
Total	236	100.0

Hypothesis Testing

H1 proposed that students use fashion magazines as resources to form their current body image.

Based on previous indices (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990; Cash & Szymanski, 1995; Jung, Lennon, & Rudd, 2001), 12 Likert-scale items were used to measure the degree to which the respondents evaluate their physical appearance as college students. The responses to these items ranged from 1 to 5, where 1 indicated a low and 5 indicated a high evaluation of one's current physical attractiveness. The mean for the 12 items was 3.62 (SD = .41), suggesting that, on average, students evaluate their attractiveness as moderate or slightly above neutral. Table 2 shows the mean of the responses to each of the items this index comprises (Cronbach's alpha = .79).

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for the 12 items comprised by the index of current body image

	N	Mean	Std. dev.
1. I am good at coordinating my garments and the cosmetics I use.	216	3.20	.82
2. I exercise regularly to keep my body in shape.	216	2.95	.95
3. It is important that I always look good.	214	4.05	.78
4. I always know how to look appropriately for different situations and occasions.	214	3.85	.75
5. My peers often evaluate my appearance positively.	210	3.34	.72
6. I feel good when my peers give me positive evaluations of my appearance.	215	4.06	.70
7. I feel good when my peers follow the choices I make regarding how to improve physical appearance.	207	3.88	.78
8. I care very much about how my peers evaluate my appearance.	209	3.65	.80
9. I intentionally seek information on how to dress appropriately in daily life.	211	3.61	.75
10. Fashion magazines provide me with lots of useful information regarding how to dress appropriately.	211	3.52	.70
11. Money spent on garments and cosmetics constitute a big chunk of my monthly living expenses.	211	3.27	1.0
12. I consider garments and cosmetics necessary and worthy expenditures.	215	3.79	.76
Current body image index	190	3.62	.41

To test a linear relationship between students' perceptions of current body image and fashion magazine use, a simple regression test was conducted. The results indicate that sensitivity to current body image predicted the use of fashion magazines ($b = .21$, $F_{1,19} = 8.71$, $p < .01$) such that students who were more sensitive to their current self-images were more likely to read fashion magazines. H1 was supported.

H2 proposed that students use fashion magazines as resources to build a level of physical attractiveness they see as appropriate for their potential future careers.

Twelve Likert-scale items measured the extent to which respondents see themselves as confident about their body image as future career women. The responses ranged from 1 to 5, where 1 indicated a low and 5 indicated a high evaluation of future physical attractiveness. The responses to these 12 items averaged 3.55 (SD = .44), again indicating moderate assessments of future body image. The Cronbach's alpha for this index was .81. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for each item this index comprises.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics for the items comprised by the future body image index

	N	Mean	Std. dev.
1. I would have adequate knowledge of how to choose clothing appropriate to my expected career role.	195	3.26	.82
2. I would have adequate knowledge of how to use cosmetics appropriate to my career.	195	3.08	.92
3. I would have adequate knowledge of how to keep my body in good shape as befits my role as a career woman.	193	3.37	.79
4. I would have adequate knowledge of how to make myself always look good in whatever career role I will play in the future.	192	3.36	.76
5. I am confident that my peers will often evaluate my appearance positively.	195	3.18	.77
6. Positive evaluations and praises of my physical appearance will give me greater confidence.	194	4.10	.72
7. It will matter much to me if my peers follow the choices I make regarding how to improve physical appearance.	192	3.95	.71
8. I will care a lot about how my peers evaluate my appearance.	197	3.75	.72
9. I will actively seek information on how to dress appropriately in daily life.	193	3.57	.76
10. Fashion magazines will provide me with lots of useful information regarding how to dress properly in fitting with my career.	193	3.54	.77

11. I will consider money spent on garments and cosmetics as an important part of my monthly living expenses.	195	3.41	.85
12. I will consider money spent on garments and cosmetics as necessary and worthy expenditures.	196	3.93	.68
Future body image index	173	3.55	.44

To test a linear relationship between perceived future body image and fashion magazine use, a simple regression test was conducted. The results indicated that sensitivity to future body image predicted fashion magazine use ($b = .25$, $F_{1,17} = 11.53$, $p < .01$) such that students who were more sensitive to their self-images in future careers were more likely to read fashion magazines. H2 was therefore supported.

H3 proposed that students use fashion magazines to satisfy consumerist needs.

Based on an index developed by Wei & Pan (1999), 12 Likert-scale items were used to measure respondents' willingness to actively engage in a highly consumerist culture. The responses to these items ranged from 1 to 5, where 1 indicated a low and 5 indicated a high willingness. This consumerism index produced a mean of 3.48 (SD = .37), slightly higher than the neutral position. The Cronbach's alpha for this index was .71. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for each item that made up this index.

Table 4
Descriptive statistics for the items comprised by the consumerism index

	N	Mean	Std. dev.
1. The possession of luxury goods indicates success in life.	187	2.70	.90
2. Material things, such as houses, cars and fine clothing give me a sense of self-fulfillment.	185	3.72	.73
3. These days, a fashionable and chic appearance is emphasized more than practicality.	187	3.28	.79
4. People derive great pleasure in trying out new fashionable products.	184	3.63	.78
5. It is worthwhile to spend money on something attractive even if it is very expensive.	185	3.12	.83
6. People are generally willing to do what it takes to fulfill their desires for material possessions regardless of how much they cost.	186	3.37	.81
7. Pleasure comes from what people enjoy doing.	186	4.06	.71
8. People have great expectations of what they can accomplish.	186	3.99	.62

9. These days, Western art and culture are emphasized more rather than local culture and art.	185	3.23	.87
10. Although expensive, Chinese people prefer Western-brand fashion products (i.e., garments, accessories, cosmetics) over domestic ones.	185	3.74	.74
11. People are more willing to work in foreign-owned enterprises than in domestically owned ones.	187	3.45	.78
12. Western products give people a lot more pleasure compared to products that are domestically produced.	186	3.40	.81
Consumerism index	171	3.48	.37

To determine whether there was a linear relationship between willingness to be actively engaged in a consumerist society and fashion magazine use, a simple regression test was conducted. The results indicated that eagerness to participate fully in a consumerist culture does not significantly predict fashion magazine use ($F_{1,17} = .03$, ns). H3 was not supported.

Discussion

The results suggest that psychological motives, such as enhancing current body image and preparing for future career roles, have a bearing on fashion magazine use. These findings reinforce the assumption that fashion magazines function as sources of external cues that help female college students determine appropriate physical appearance for current and future roles (Solomon, 1983). The social motive—to keep up with the consumerist culture—did not show a statistically significant influence on fashion magazine readership.

This finding lends support to the symbolic interactionist approach that scholars have applied to understanding media choice (i.e., Trevino et al., 1987). It found that students read fashion magazines because they are eager to obtain information about how to improve their current and future body image, for which such publications were considered useful resources. This finding is consistent with those of other scholars (e.g., Peterson & Peters, 1983), who have provided evidence supporting the idea that the mass media are sources of external cues that audiences use to improve their body image, particularly when audiences lack internal cues or actual experience of role behaviors (Solomon, 1983). Also, the study's finding agrees with other researchers' observations (i.e., Craig, 2000; Feng & Frith, 2008; Karan & Feng, 2009) that Japanese fashion magazines are more popular in China than Western-based ones perhaps because Chinese readers prefer Asian fashion styles.

Furthermore, the lack of influence demonstrated by the social motive suggests that the student respondents did not regard fashion magazines as the main source of information to assist them in navigating a highly consumerist society. It implies that fashion magazines might not be the major avenue by which female college students partake of the consumerist culture that pervades Shanghai. For this purpose, they might rely on other media such as TV and the Internet, and open-

ended comments bear this out. According to a respondent, "I love fashion and fashion magazines. However, all fashion magazines are about luxury items that many people could not afford." Another said, "Reading fashion magazines is a good way to relax, but I am not sure if people can afford their lifestyle recommendations." Also, a student volunteered the explanation that "the content of fashion magazines is not practical," referring to the often-unattainable ideals depicted in magazine pages.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The results of this study are not generalizable to different contexts because it made use of convenience sampling to recruit respondents. Generalizability is further limited by recruiting respondents from only one city, Shanghai, which is remotely representative of other cities in China. Employing more systematic probability sampling techniques will produce more valid insights into how young women use and derive gratification from fashion magazines. The results of such studies will certainly gain greater ground because of their potential applicability to other sociocultural contexts.

As with many studies following the uses and gratifications approach (e.g., McLeod & Becker, 1981; McQuail, 2005), this study had to face difficulties in the operationalization of motivations for media use. Few successful instructions are available to deal with subtle audience motives and the theoretical dimensions encompassed by fairly complex constructs tested and examined within the uses and gratifications tradition (McLeod & Becker, 1981). In this study three theoretically complicated concepts were selected, and measurements were developed following scale items used in previous studies. Further efforts are needed to create an index of media use that shows higher reliability.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer the overarching question, "Why do female college students in Shanghai read fashion magazines?" It hypothesized three specific motives that might drive college women to buy and read glitzy and glossy fashion magazines that often carry mastheads of foreign origin: psychological motives (in this case, to enhance current body image and prepare for future career roles) and a social motive (to actively engage the consumerist culture).

These findings have both theoretical and practical implications. First, they support the results of many uses and gratifications studies that proclaimed psychological motives as the main drivers of media use. Second, these publications are not seen as sources of information on how to be fully engaged in a consumerist culture, suggesting that respondents hold rational attitudes about fashion magazines and what they contain. That is, in general, the respondents do not regard fashion magazines as symbolizing the realities even of a highly commercialized society. Third, to be more successful in the Chinese urban market, international fashion publishers might consider producing content that approaches their readers' physical appearance. For example, the publishers could use more Asian models or celebrities to present fashion products. Also, the content should fit better with the social events their readers might attend occasionally.

Only three specific motivations were examined in this study, although there are other variables that might influence fashion magazine readers' choices and magazine consumption habits. For example, the synergy between the Confucian culture or other traditional Chinese values and the so-called modern or post-modern values need to be elucidated to offer a more comprehensive explanation of the factors that trigger media use. Future investigations might adopt critical cultural approaches to understanding magazine use within the larger social context.

Authors' Note

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