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A Double-Edged Sword: Understanding Vanity Across Cultures

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Abstract

Purpose

Based on their size, disposable income, and purchasing power, generation Y (Gen Y) consumers are viewed as the Holy Grail for marketers. Conversely, some of this group's behavior disturbs public policy officials, particularly when dealing with issues such as poor financial planning, bulimia and anorexia nervosa. The key question for both marketers and policy makers is what is the best way to understand the Gen Y segment? The vanity concept is used in this study as a way to understand the Gen Y consumer segment. The purpose of this paper is to examine vanity perceptions (cross-nationally and by gender) as well as social and business implications with vanity.

Design/methodology/approach

Key research expectations are proposed that are related to cross-cultural and gender differences on vanity perceptions. A sample of approximately 125 Gen Y consumers in two eastern and two western cultures was used to find support for the research expectations. Statistical results are reported.

Findings

The results clearly show that both gender and country have an impact on vanity perceptions. Concern for both physical appearance and professional achievement are higher in eastern cultures as compared to western cultures. Both males and females are highly concerned about physical appearance and professional achievements. However, self-assessment of physical appearance and professional achievement are significantly lower among females as compared to males.

Research limitations/implications

In future studies it would be interesting to study differences among other countries and consumer groups.

Practical implications

The results of this study provide evidence to marketers that vanity appeals can resonate well with Gen Y especially those in China and India. For consumer protection advocates, results offer insights about the extent to which importance of vanity is likely to increase, especially in countries that embrace globalization.

Originality/value

So far, no study has applied the vanity scale to understand the Gen Y segment, despite the financial power of this group in purchasing both desirable and undesirable products; nor has any study examined whether vanity perceptions vary cross-nationally, especially between economically developed western cultures and developing economies with large populations representing eastern cultures.

Keywords

Consumer behaviour, National cultures, Cross-cultural studies, Age groups, Marketing intelligence

Introduction

One hallmark of modern marketing is the emergence of global segments sharing more commonalities than differences despite cultural backgrounds. The confluence of many factors is driving the increasing similarity in purchasing patterns and consumer habits within these segments. For example, with the adoption of free market principles by governments that once controlled their economies such as China and India, a new global economic system has developed. Under the rubric “globalization”, rapid economic expansion of world trade has meant that consumers in developing countries are now exposed to global media and the concomitant lifestyles featured in these media. Consumers are titillated by ads that feature products and brands unavailable in the past. Indeed, these consumers have gone from local to global in an unimaginable way especially given their enormous growth in purchasing power.

One generational group born after 1978 called generation Y (or Gen Y), in particular, is now in the limelight as a marketing segment. Because of its population size, disposable income, and purchasing power, Gen Y has become the Holy Grail for marketers. Of special importance is how to market to Gen Y in the two countries emerging as leading economic powers, namely China and India. In fact, it is widely expected that the consumption behavior of Gen Y consumers in China and India will have a major impact on the national economies of those two countries for years to come (Stanat, 2005).

Gen Y has already been discussed in some detail for developed countries such as the US and New Zealand where they account for roughly 20 percent of those countries' population. Statistics reveal that subgroups of this population exhibit noteworthy consumption patterns. For example, in the US, even those in the 4 to 12 year age group directly or indirectly influence purchases to the tune of \$565 billion (Rice, 2001) while teenage consumers' spending is expected to exceed \$190 billion by 2007. Gen Y young adults in the 19 to 25 year age group have a purchasing power of \$200 billion (Gardyn, 2002), which is double what it was for Gen X consumers. The population size of Gen Y is close to 200 million for China (Stanat, 2005) and about 210 million for India.

Growing up in the information age and enjoying rising incomes and global media exposure, Chinese and Indian Gen Y consumers also are increasingly displaying the same behavior and purchasing habits as western youth (Stanat, 2005). Hence, what sets Gen Y consumers apart from young consumers in previous generations (especially in India and China) is their higher purchasing power, greater media exposure, and ostensible participation in wider internet based social networks (e.g. MySpace.Com).

Studies have shown that Gen Y consumers in general consume a wide variety products and services including branded merchandise, designer clothes, cosmetics, orthodontic treatments, cosmetic surgery, gym membership, exercise equipment, diet products, breast implants, facial and body therapies and massages. While Gen Y consumers represent attractive marketing opportunities for business, some of their behavior is also raising serious concern for psychologists and consumer protection officials, particularly when dealing with issues such as credit card debt, bulimia, and anorexia nervosa (Landro, 2004). It is for these reasons that both marketers and consumer protection advocates wish to know the underlying psychological forces explaining and propelling Gen Y consumption patterns except for opposite reasons: selling vs protection (consumer welfare). Clearly, such an understanding can serve as a double-edged sword in how such information is applied.

Because commercialization is at the heart of globalization, it is likely that Gen Y consumers in both developed and developing economies are being tempted to consume in ways that encourage expression through materialism. Indeed, some even charge that modern media are fostering hedonism and excessive preoccupation with the self (Solomon, 2006). In some countries, experts are blaming skyrocketing anorexia on advertising, celebrity magazines, and obsession with thinness (Weekes, 2006). Evidence is now available suggesting that anorexia and bulimia are on the rise worldwide (Landro, 2004). Other factors leading to a crisis in the incidence of anorexia deal with peer group pressure, the rise of the internet, and fashion marketing aimed at teen (Weekes, 2006). In light of such changes, one important psychological trait that may explain young consumers' behavior and product choice is vanity. Vanity is defined as excessive pride in one's appearance (physical vanity) or accomplishments (achievement vanity).

Physical vanity focuses on the extent to which a person regards physical appearance as important. Techniques to achieve perfection in one's physical appearance are readily found in articles discussing dieting, cosmetic surgery, use of steroids, clothing, and cosmetics (Burton *et al.*, 1995). Excessive concern for physical attractiveness, however, can result in harmful consequences to the individual not only physically (e.g. eating disorders, anabolic steroids) but psychologically (e.g. distorted self concept leading to aberrant behavior) as well. Because of greater media exposure and social networking, concern for physical appearance is likely to be greater for the current generation of young adults.

Achievement vanity can be observed when consumers use conspicuous consumption as a means of conveying success or social status (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1995). Material possessions then become a way of "showing off" personal achievement. For example, some Gen Y consumers spend as much as \$450 for a pair of Gucci pants (Mui, 2004).

Given the importance of understanding the vanity construct, Netemeyer *et al.* (1995) developed and validated a scale to measure its dimensions using US subjects. While this vanity measure has exhibited considerable merit, it has found only a limited application. So far, no study has applied the vanity scale to understand the young adult segment; nor has any study examined whether vanity perceptions vary cross-nationally for Gen Y.

Given that young adults in diverse countries are exposed to global media, entertainment programs, and consumer products, is it likely that the perceptions towards vanity are held similarly? If there are no cross-national differences, marketers could use standardized messages with identical vanity themes to encourage consumption across international markets. Similarly, consumer protectionist advocates could formulate the same strategy cross-nationally to minimize the consequences of undesirable behaviors (e.g. eating disorder, credit card debt) emanating from vanity. Lastly, we do not know if vanity varies by gender particularly because extant research on gender differences is inconclusive.

The objective of this study is to obtain a better understanding of the Gen Y consumer segment. Specifically, we seek to determine whether the vanity perceptions of Gen Y consumers vary cross-nationally and whether gender has any effect on such perceptions. Data obtained from two western cultures (US and New Zealand) and two eastern cultures (China and India) serve as the basis for cross-national comparisons.

Background literature on vanity

Netemeyer *et al.* (1995) define consumer vanity as a four dimension construct consisting of: a concern for physical appearance, a positive (and perhaps inflated) view of physical concern, a concern for achievement, and a positive (and perhaps inflated) view of achievement. Dimensions one and two focus on physical vanity, while the other two dimensions deal with achievement vanity. Also rooted in these dimensions is the materialism construct (Richins and Dawson, 1992) which focuses on the concern for appearance and achievement and the self concept construct which focus on one's personal views towards the importance of appearance and achievement to their identity.

Physical vanity

Concern for physical appearance has been well substantiated in academic research and literature (e.g. Cash *et al.*, 1986; Rodin *et al.*, 1985). Purchase behavior, indeed, may be guided totally or in part by appearance-related parameters. Concern for one's desired appearance is a key driving force in decisions regarding personal grooming, dieting, exercise, tanning, cosmetics, fashion, and body adornment, among others. The impact of one's socio-cultural environment is likely to play a major role in the importance an individual assigns to their concern and perceptions of their appearance particularly according to gender.

Critics have charged that the advertising industry, in particular, may be promoting impossible physical ideals for women and even men (Solomon, 2006). Such ideals may give rise to attitudes and behaviors that have deleterious effects for the individual. Content analyses have given proof to the ubiquity of such ideals; more than 25 percent of commercials were found to present a preoccupation with physical attractiveness (Downs and Harrison, 1985; Martin and Gentry, 1994).

Miller (1994) and Stevens *et al.* (1994) contend that some ads aimed at women provide an ideal of "beauty" that is obsessed with acute thinness or an emaciated body, producing insecurity about one's body. In fact, a global debate is now ensuing about the impact of excessively thin models in fashion shows and glossy magazines on eating disorders for young adults (Passariello and Tan, 2006). Evidence also suggests that the ideal appearance standard is targeted more at girls than at boys (Ogletree *et al.*, 1990). The end result of those trying to emulate these portrayals can result in harmful consequences such as unhealthy dieting (e.g. Armstrong and Mallory,

1992), eating disorders (e.g. Rodin *et al.*, 1985; Ogletree *et al.*, 1990), and cosmetic surgery (e.g. Fauldi, 1991). Criticism, in fact, has been so strident that groups have coalesced to oppose such false portrayals.

Concern and perceptions of appearance can be found in earlier writings by Plato who conjectured the connections between beauty and goodness. In contemporary society, socialization in childhood also connects attractiveness with more positive attributes. Vaughn and Langlois (1983), for example, found that preschool children viewed attractive peers as smarter and friendlier than less attractive peers. Moreover, Rodin *et al.* (1985) documented that overweight children were viewed in negative terms such as lazy, sloppy, and stupid. These perceptions also continue to adulthood where people who are physically attractive, when compared to those who are less attractive, are considered to be more sociable, dominant, mentally healthy, sexually warm, and socially skilled (Feingold, 1992).

Gender-based differences in physical vanity

Although physical attractiveness is clearly desirable, its desirability may in fact be much higher for women than men. Theorists have conjectured two main reasons why women are more concerned about physical attractiveness than men (Jackson, 1992; Rodin *et al.*, 1985). The first reason deals with the “value” of attractiveness. Attractiveness can be used to secure social influence or power, particularly in cultures where women are placed in a more subservient role. Hence, women select husbands as a means of attaining social position unlike men who select wives for their attractive appearance (Buss and Barnes, 1986). This tendency was found in examining personal advertisements in a study by Willis and Carlson (1983) where men disproportionately offered financial security for an attractive female in contrast to women who offer their beauty for financial security.

The idea of value also relates to how a woman's status (much less so for a male) is derived in part by her beauty (e.g. Jackson, 1992). Research by Vaughn and Langlois (1983) found that the connection between attractiveness and social status was more pronounced for females than males. In contrast, men's income and material wealth were more associated with his status and desirability. Hence, attractiveness affords a certain value that gives a woman more social power and more status socially to a far greater extent than applies to males (Jackson, 1992).

The second reason deals with tradition. Social roles have been ascribed historically such that males are given roles as worker and financial provider in contrast to the female whose role is not centered in the workforce. According to Bar-Tal and Saxe (1975) women use physical attractiveness as their way of demonstrating being “successful” given their historical low levels of participation in “objective” roles in the workforce. Therefore, women's greater concern for physical attractiveness is due to their role perceptions and the corresponding stereotypes of being male or female (Brownmiller, 1984). Although women's roles in society have clearly changed in the last few decades, stereotypes continue to persist especially because women often must drop out of the workforce due to child rearing. Concern for appearance also has been reported as more pronounced among women who have achieved occupational success and discarded traditional stereotypes (Lakoff and Scherr, 1984).

Women's consciousness about their physical appearance has undergone some metamorphosis in the last few decades resulting in a lower perceived positive view of their own physical attractiveness. The beauty ideal that has emerged for women dictates an association between thinness and beauty (Hsu, 1989; Striegel-Moore *et al.*, 1986; Passariello and Tan, 2006). This connection between thinness and the beauty ideal is given credence in empirical findings. Striegel-Moore *et al.* (1986) report that Playboy centerfolds from 1959 to 1978 had significant decreases in measurements and body weight. Similarly, these same researchers found decreases in the ratio of body weight to height for Miss America pageant contestants. Yet, female weight statistics over this period show increases in the weight to height ratio (Rodin *et al.*, 1985). As a result, women may be dissatisfied with their

appearance given that the beauty “ideal” features women as increasingly thinner despite statistics showing that women are becoming somewhat heavier.

Some studies have shown that it is women that are usually portrayed as objects of sexual desire (Lambiase *et al.*, 1999). Young females in western societies are often exposed to advertisements that show women who are attractive, thin, and young. These advertisements largely set the standard for the image an individual should aspire to and, as a result, there is an increasing number of young women that not only participate in dieting programs (Stephens *et al.*, 1994) but also suffer from eating disorders. For example, a 1990 survey of high school students in the US found that 11 percent of the students suffered from eating disorders (Dunn, 1992). Of this group of affected students, at least nine out of ten eating disorder sufferers are female. In Australia, a children's hospital reported a tenfold increase in anorexia cases among teenagers in 2006 as compared to 2003 (Weekes, 2006). Not surprisingly, many primary school children consider the “stick-thin” socialite Paris Hilton as their role model (Weekes, 2006). Research in the popular press suggests that when it comes to clothes, designers employ the concept of vanity sizing to women's clothes only. Women's clothes are often cut bigger, but sized smaller so as to fool female consumers into thinking that they remain slim (Helser, 2004).

Men are less subject to such a beauty ideal as they seem to have a less narrow definition of acceptable or ideal physical appearance for their gender (Fallon and Rozin, 1985). Cultural dictates regarding beauty, therefore, seem more restrictive for females than males resulting in an obsession for thinness for females. Interestingly, a women's physiology gives her a greater likelihood of more body fat and a lower metabolism than males. Such differences imply that many women are not likely to ever measure up to the contemporary beauty ideal resulting in a gap between what is preferred (as featured in the media) and what is possible.

Men's roles are changing, however. Studies show that increasingly, men are being diagnosed with eating disorders. The so called “Adonis complex” accounts for the vastly increased number of male eating and exercise disorders, which suggest that dissatisfaction with the body has crossed genders. A total of 40 percent of US eating disorders are now reported by men; it is estimated that 6 percent of female patients and 7 percent of male patients suffer from body dysmorphism (Harrison *et al.*, 2000). Male consumers are also showing greater interest in products such as cosmetics, hair care products, gym membership, designer fashion, and cosmetic surgery (Miller, 2005). Given these contrasting findings, a key question is whether there are differences in vanity perceptions among male and female consumers in the Gen Y segment among the four countries under investigation? We propose the following research expectations:

R1. Women's concern about physical appearance will be greater than men's concern about physical appearance (regardless of the country).

R2. Women's perception of their physical appearance will be less positive than men's perception of their physical appearance (regardless of the country).

Country differences in physical vanity

The USA and New Zealand can be classified as western countries despite their geographic distances. All the research reported above were drawn mostly from respondents or references associated with the USA. Since New Zealand is very much connected to the western world through media, travel and cultural heritage, we would expect the two countries to be very similar in the various levels of vanity among the four different dimensions. However, for India and China, we expect there to be some differences.

China and India have only recently emerged as industrial powers. In both countries, the middle class has grown significantly in the last 15 years resulting in unprecedented purchasing power. At the same time, more and more workers have migrated from the rural areas to urban centers in search of jobs and prosperity. In being thrust into thriving commercial centers, these workers are subjected to “modern” norms and social expectations more

congruent with developed societies. Purchasing power gives a worker the ability to buy items that can satisfy vanity needs.

Indians and Chinese are also being exposed to more western media resulting in greater consciousness of what it means to be attractiveness even though the models may be Caucasian westerners. Recent reports have discussed the surging popularity of cosmetic surgery for younger women in China resulting in a \$24 billion dollar industry (*The Economist*, 2004). Other reports have discussed how younger women in India are no longer conforming to the traditional roles that were expected of them (Agrawal, 2006). Hence, it appears that women in these countries may not be as satisfied with their present physical appearance and seek to alter it. Based on our understanding of country differences among Gen Y consumers on physical vanity, we propose the following research expectations:

R3. Indians and Chinese will have a greater concern about physical appearance than those in the USA and NZ.

R4. Indians and Chinese will have a lower perception of their physical appearance than those in USA and NZ.

Achievement vanity

The themes of achievement and success have been at the core of most cultures. Spenner and Featherman (1978) define achievement as an accomplishment when compared against performance standards. Achievement, for example, refers to worldly success in terms of academic grades, accumulation of academic credentials, attainment of social status, and financial success through jobs. From marketers' perspective, an understanding of achievement vanity is useful because of the link between personal achievements and product consumption. People, who attach high importance to personal achievement, consume products and services that advertise their success (Netemeyer *et al.* 1995). Such products and services are either easily seen by others (e.g. clothing, luxury car), or easily talked about in social conversations (e.g. vacations). Studies by Richins and Dawson (1992) also support a link between achievement concern and materialism.

Gender differences in achievement vanity

Extant research shows that the importance placed on achievement varies by gender. People are socialized to gender roles at a very young age. In boys' social culture, popular boys are those who display multi-faceted achievements in academics and athletics while being "cool" deals with self presentation skills, owning expressive goods or having the "in" things as shown in contemporary advertisements (Adler *et al.*, 1992). In contrast, popular girls are those who have an attractive physical appearance, wear the prettiest clothes and makeup, and come from relatively affluent families (Adler *et al.*, 1992). Books and media aimed at children, furthermore, depict girls as passive, dependent, protected by parents, and altogether absent in achievement activities (Chafetz, 1974; Spenner and Featherman, 1978).

Studies have shown that achievement drive is an important determinant of success in professional careers (Kiker and Condon, 1981). Daymont and Andrisani (1984) found that both males and females who believed that achievement and leadership are very important received higher wages than similar workers without such characteristics. Importance assigned to achievement drive and financial well being are significant determinants of future income. People who have below average achievement drive earn significantly lower wages (Long, 1995). Set in this background, men have rated achievement drive as higher in importance for becoming a successful leader as compared to women for whom relationship building is more important (Richmonds *et al.*, 2004). Also, men consider themselves as significantly more achievement driven in terms of competition/dominance than women (Rotheiler *et al.*, 1998). We can conclude from the available body of

knowledge that men are more likely than women to be achievement driven and have greater concern for their personal achievements.

On the basis of what we know about achievement vanity and gender differences, we propose the following research expectations:

R5. Males will have a greater concern for their achievement (self) than females.

R6. Males will have a greater perception of their achievement (self) than females.

Country differences in achievement vanity

Theoretical and empirical connections between personal achievements and consumption have been documented in the literature. Achievement vanity can easily be seen when consumers use consumption as a way of demonstrating status, success or conspicuous consumption. Through the possession of products, consumers can display their successes reflecting their personal achievement. Mitchell (1983) found that 31 percent of Americans could be classified as either achievers or those wishing to become an achiever using the VALS typology. Kahle (1983) found that 16 percent of Americans indicated that “a sense of accomplishment” was the most important value to them. Belk (1985) and Solomon (2006) suggest that these groups display their success or status by consuming products or services in a conspicuous manner. Other theorists, such as Hirschman (1990), argues that one dominant theme in US culture is using consumption as a means of showing others their personal achievement. Similarly, Richins and Dawson (1992) provide evidence that consumers' materialism is used as a symbol of achievement. It is important to point out that the studies referenced above are based on American culture.

Since New Zealand is a western culture with a developed economy, we posit that the level of achievement vanity in New Zealand and the US will be similar. However, in the case of India and China, the situation is far more complex. Until recent times, the display of wealth in China was neither possible nor allowed, given the Communist ideals. Now that free enterprise is encouraged by the government, consumers are likely to become more materialistic and achievement driven as a way to show their success in the “new order” (Stanat, 2005). An excellent example of the new conspicuous consumption in China is the new models of Cadillac being introduced priced from \$64,000 to \$95,000. GM said Chinese demand for high-end cars is expected to strengthen in the coming years. Other luxury car makers, including Britain's Bentley, a unit of Volkswagen AG, have seen sales surge in China as racing economic growth creates wealthy elite (*China Daily*, 2006).

Similarly, in India, high paying jobs and access to expensive foreign made goods allows Indians to “show off” their achievement in a way that only the “maharaja” could do in the past. Traditionally, Indians were wary of flaunting their money, but presently more are displaying their prosperity as wealth surges among some segments (Lakshman, 2006). Self-achievement, however, is likely to be perceived as low in China and India, given that the race to the top has just started in these economies, and there is a likely gap between what one has achieved and what one would like to achieve. Based on our understanding of country differences in achievement vanity perceptions, we propose the following research expectations:

R7. Indians and Chinese will have a greater concern about achievement than those in the USA and NZ.

R8. Indians and Chinese will have a lower perception of their achievement (self) than those in USA and NZ.

Method

About the sample

To examine the cross cultural differences in vanity perceptions among Gen Y consumers, data were collected from four countries, of which two represent western culture (US and New Zealand) and two Eastern culture (China, and India). The basic cultural differences and physical distances among these countries allows for an insightful examination of differences in vanity perceptions both by gender and by country. US and New Zealand have highly developed economies that can be described as post-industrial with a large middle class possessing considerable purchasing power. In contrast, China and India represent developing economies that have made significant strides in opening up their economies to foreign investment. A middle class is now emerging in these two countries. Consumers in these countries have access to global media (e.g. CNN, MTV, STAR TV of Rupert Murdoch) and, therefore, exposure to western culture/practices. Given these globalizing influences, consumers are likely to develop desires similar to those in consumer-oriented cultures such as the US.

The samples were specifically chosen based on their comparable socio-demographic characteristics since this is a prerequisite when examining cross-cultural differences in consumer behavior measures. Otherwise, it is difficult to determine whether those measures are truly invariant; problems related to scale applicability are confounded with differences in sample characteristics (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1998). Sample comparability can be achieved by matching the samples on certain characteristics of interest (Douglas and Craig, 2000; Irvine and Carroll, 1980; Sekaran, 1983).

In an effort to enhance the homogeneity or comparability of respondents, Gen Y consumers who were university students were sampled across the four countries. These young consumers are most likely to be in touch with modern media and with contemporary consumer trends; they are reflective of the vanguard of change. Hence, they are most likely to have been influenced by Western consumer culture and, therefore, be participants in the global consumer culture. The sample consisted roughly of half men and half women. The sample sizes in eastern cultures (China and India) averaged 125 and those in the western cultures (USA and New Zealand) averaged 130.

About the measures and questionnaire administration

Although the vanity construct can be considered a psychological construct, it does have four specific sub-dimensions according to Netemeyer *et al.* (1995), which were measured as follows:

- physical-concern (five items);
- physical-view (six items);
- achievement-concern (five items); and
- achievement-view (five items).

The following list describes the items measuring the two physical vanity subscales and the two achievement vanity subscales:

1. Physical-concern items:
 - The way I look is extremely important to me.
 - I am very concerned about my appearance.
 - I would feel embarrassed if I was around people and did not look my best.
 - Looking my best is worth the effort.
 - It is important that I always look good.
2. Physical-view items:
 - People notice how attractive I am.
 - My looks are very appealing to others.

- People are envious of my good looks.
 - I am a very good-looking individual.
 - My body is sexually appealing.
 - I have the type of body that people want to look at.
3. Achievement-concern items:
- Professional achievements are an obsession with me.
 - I want others to look up to me because of my accomplishments.
 - I am more concerned with professional success than most people I know.
 - Achieving greater success than my peers is important to me.
 - I want my achievements to be recognized by others.
4. Achievement-view items:
- In a professional sense, I am a very successful person.
 - My achievements are highly regarded by others.
 - I am an accomplished person.
 - I am a good example of professional success.
 - Others wish they were as successful as me.

Note: all vanity items are scored on seven-point “strongly disagree” – “strongly agree” scales.

The questionnaire was administered in English to those in the USA, New Zealand and India (since the Indian group was also fluent in English). Since the Chinese sample was fluent in Mandarin, the questionnaire was translated by a bilingual expert into that language. Bilingual experts employed the standard procedure for survey translation and back translation to make sure that the Chinese version and the English version of the surveys were similar in meaning (see Triandis, 1982). This version of the questionnaire was then administered to the Chinese subjects. None of the respondents in any of the countries expressed any difficulty in responding to the survey instrument when it was administered.

Results

At the outset we performed confirmatory factor analysis to assess dimensionality, reliability, and discriminant validity of the vanity measure. This procedure is consistent with the suggested data analytic procedures for assessing the cross-national applicability of consumer behavior scales (see Durvasula *et al.*, 1993). Results revealed that the four vanity dimensions were correlated but distinct. All the factor loadings were significant and high. Across the four samples, the composite reliability for the four vanity scales was found to be above 0.6 and acceptable (Malhotra, 2007) (see Table I). Those results support the cross-national psychometric properties of the vanity measure. As such, items representing each vanity scale were averaged to determine the overall score for that scale. These scores were then grouped by country and gender of the subjects.

Next, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) followed by univariate ANOVAs were performed to determine whether the vanity scale means differed across the four cross-national samples and for the male and female groups. This analysis is appropriate because the four vanity measures, which served as the dependent variables, are theoretically correlated. As shown in Table II, results indicate no gender \times country interaction effect. Hence, we proceeded to examine country and gender main effects.

Country differences

Tables III and IV show that country has a significant impact on vanity scale dimensions. Further, with the exception of the physical view dimension, all the other vanity dimension have significantly different mean scores across the four countries.

Figure 1 shows mean scores by country. Figure 2 shows contrast means where means of India and China are compared to the means of USA and New Zealand. All means are reported on a seven-point scale where a “7” implies “more” of a dimension. We find that Gen Y consumers have high concern for both physical appearance and professional achievement. Irrespective of whether these consumers are from the Eastern cultures of India and China or the western cultures of New Zealand and the USA, their concern is notably high. However, as shown in Figure 2, for physical concern and achievement concern, India and China have significantly higher mean scores ($p < 0.05$) than those for US and New Zealand. These results confirm our research expectations *R3* and *R7*.

Figure 1 also shows that self-assessments of physical appearance and professional achievement (i.e. physical view and achievement view) are relatively low across all four countries. As shown in Figure 2, the mean score for physical view is higher for India and China, but not significantly different from the mean for USA and New Zealand. As such, research expectation *R4* is not supported. However, achievement view is significantly lower for India and China than for USA and New Zealand ($p < 0.05$), thus supporting *R8*.

Gender differences

As shown in Tables V and VI, the multivariate test establishes that gender has a significant impact on vanity perceptions. But, this impact is only on physical view and achievement view (see Tables V to VI and Figure 3). As for physical concern and achievement concern, there are no gender differences. Thus, the results do not support *R1* and *R5*. Physical view is significantly higher for males than females. This is contrary to research expectation *R2*. However, as expected, achievement view mean score is significantly higher for males than for females. This result supports research expectation *R6*.

To obtain additional insights on vanity perceptions, we compared gender differences within each country. These results are presented in Figures 4-7. As per Figures 4 and 5, Gen Y consumers' concern for own looks and professional achievements are high (i.e. above scale midpoint of 4) for both males and females. Based on Figures 6 and 7, self-assessments of physical appearance and professional achievements appear to be higher for males than for females.

Discussion

Country differences

Our results show that concern for physical appearance and professional achievement are high across the four countries. Such universally high concern could be attributed to the globalization and exposure to global media. Physical appearance and professional achievement concerns are stronger in China and India which may be due to rising living standards as well as greater exposure to western media and its cultural influence.

Results also indicate relatively low mean scores for physical view and achievement view. For consumer protection advocates, higher concerns for appearance and achievement coupled with lower self-assessment on the same two aspects of vanity may be a cause for alarm. For example, a relatively high concern for physical appearance means that Gen Y consumers consider it important to look good and always be at their best. But, their lower self-assessment of physical appearance implies that Gen Y consumers do not feel that “they are there yet” in term of looking good and being attractive.

When perception of physical appearance is below concern for the same, Gen Y consumers are more likely to be obsessed or preoccupied with enhancing their physical appearance. This situation could lead to harmful behaviors such as cosmetic surgeries or unhealthy eating habits. Problems with eating disorders among younger consumers have been well documented in countries such as the USA, but have not been as prevalent historically in China and India. China and India are now more likely to see similar disorders given that Gen Y consumers in

these two countries register a relatively higher concern for physical appearance but a low perception of having the desired physical appearance.

For marketers, our findings offer other implications and apply to the double-edged sword metaphor used earlier. Emphasizing how products or services can help a Gen Y consumer attain the proper physical appearance is likely to be a hot button in the appeal made in an advertisement. Motivating young consumers to make purchase decisions according to how a product will satisfy inner needs is a common approach in advertising. The use of a vanity appeal using appearance as the theme, therefore, is likely to catch the attention of these consumers. Critics of advertising maintain that themes used in some ads are designed to create or amplify insecurities that then can be assuaged by buying the advertised products. Featuring messages that suggest that one does not have the “right look” until a certain product is used exemplifies this idea.

For professional achievement, the gap between their self-assessment rating and their expressed concern also has implications for consumer protection advocates. In all four countries, Gen Y consumers indicate that professional achievements are important to them. But, again, “they are not there yet”. In their self-assessment, they have rated themselves relatively lower on scale items such as “being successful” and “whether they are regarded highly by others.” Gen Y consumers may become motivated to work harder to achieve success or try to acquire material possessions to be noticed by others to close this gap. If Gen Y consumers were to take the later step by incurring debt to acquire material goods and by poorly managing their financial resources, there are definite social and personal implications.

Gen Y consumers in India have a relatively higher concern for professional achievement than those in other countries. As such, Indian policy makers have to monitor the Gen Y consumers' spending habits more closely than those in countries such as the USA, where the gap in achievement concern and self-assessment of achievement is relatively narrow.

Gender differences

Physical concern

Gen Y consumers' concern for their appearance is high for both males and females in all the countries studied. Such concern may explain the high demand for cosmetic surgery and diet products seen in western cultures. Interestingly, Indians have a relatively higher concern for physical appearance as compared to those in the other three countries. This outcome may be due to their increased exposure in recent times to western media and the impact of Bollywood in India which is equivalent to America's Hollywood. Bollywood features young, thin and attractive models in movies and advertisements that reinforce perceptions that important rewards accrue from physical attractiveness. Memberships in health clubs and gym are also increasing in India that may reflect this concern.

The increasing exposure to western media that feature attractive western models may explain the greater concern expressed by Indians and Chinese (compared to those in the USA and New Zealand) for physical appearance. This concern may be driving the obsession for cosmetics products among women in these two countries. The demand for cosmetics in China is so great that most factories cannot satisfy demand even when they operate at full capacity (Fletcher, 1988). Excessive focus on physical appearance was once considered bourgeois and bad during the Cultural Revolution in China (Stanat, 2005). Clearly the times have changed. Other studies indicate that younger men and women in Eastern cultures are increasingly turning to plastic surgery, gyms, swimming pools, diets, and beauty salons (Pomfret, 1999).

Achievement concern

In the countries sampled representing eastern and western cultures, concern for professional accomplishments is also high among Gen Y consumers. Our results show that both Chinese and Indians have higher concern for

professional achievements than those in New Zealand and USA. The preoccupation of Chinese with professional achievements can be gauged from an interesting example provided by Rosen (2004). This example illustrates the preoccupation of Chinese in preparing their children for academic achievements. While books that prescribed a road map to get admitted in top universities (e.g. *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting*) were regarded as “must read”, others which articulated the importance of contentment and happiness over obsession with achievements (e.g. *I am Mediocre, I'm Happy*) were received very poorly. This finding confirms other studies that show that Eastern cultures place greater emphasis on higher educational achievement (Hau, 2001).

Historically, men in India have had greater freedom to choose careers than women, but they were expected to be successful as well as be the income earner. Perhaps, that is why achievement concern in India registered more strongly in males than in females. Females, until recently, were predominantly homemakers. It was through material possessions (e.g. gold) that they expressed their achievement concern. The situation is gradually changing, as younger women in India are placing greater emphasis on professional achievements as they enjoy increasing career opportunities. As the results indicate, they too have relatively high achievement concern as compared to women in western cultures. Overall, we found that achievement concern was greater for females than for males in China, New Zealand and US. Perhaps this result can be attributed to the greater freedom enjoyed by females to work and choose professional careers as compared to the past.

Self-assessment of physical appearance and professional achievement

The results show that males have a higher self-assessment of physical appearance than females. Unfortunately, for both males and females, Gen Y consumers' self-assessment of physical appearance is lower when compared to their concern for physical appearance. This gap between concern and self-assessment implies that it is not just females, but even males feel “they are not there yet” in terms of physical appearance. Perhaps such a result is not altogether surprising, given that men are also reporting a significant increase in social pressure to attain body images that are as unrealistic as those portrayed for women (Philipott and Sheppard, 1999). More and more, men are exposed to idealized, muscular guys in the media and feel that their own bodies do not measure up (Dhaliwal, 2006). Men, indeed, are increasingly thinking of themselves as “sex objects”. Miller (2005) reports that in 1972, 15 percent of men expressed dissatisfaction with their appearance compared to 43 percent in 1997. This heightened perception of physical appearance by men may explain their increasing levels of cosmetic surgery operations and rising eating disorders. Additional analyses revealed that the gap between concern and self-assessment for physical appearance is significantly higher in China and India as compared to the USA ($p < 0.05$). That may be why increasingly, men in India are frequenting the gym like never before, obsessed with desire to have the body of Mr Daniel Craig, who acted as James Bond in the movie *Casino Royale* (Dhaliwal, 2006).

Self-assessment of personal achievement is relatively the same for men and women. At the same time, for both males and females, this self-assessment of personal achievement is lower than the concern for the same. Across the four countries, Americans have the highest perception of professional achievement. Such a result may reflect the achievement orientation that is a core cultural element in the USA.

Implications

The goal of this study is to determine the vanity levels of Gen Y across four different countries and the degree to which there were gender differences. The results are mixed, resulting in rejection of some of the research expectations. Specifically, men and women tended to be similar in their level of physical and achievement concern. What this may suggest is the transformation that may be occurring across all four countries as men adapt to a new set of expectations regarding their appearances and success through achievements. As for country differences, physical and achievement concern are higher in the eastern cultures.

Globalization is unleashing a set of changes that are likely to create more uniformity amongst consumers especially those that are still in their formative years as is the case with Gen Y. Prior to 1990, India was much more insulated from the west. Television was controlled by the state-owned Doordarshan and export controls regulated the types of goods that could be imported. With the arrival of CNN, BBC, Star TV and other media, young people are now exposed to Western consumerism that has shaped their mentality about their own selves. Older generations, that were acculturated during the days when India was fearful of the west's interventions, are more likely to be traditional in their Indian ways. For those older consumers, Hinduism also taught them to accept what they have in life. The situation is quite different for younger consumers, who are more likely to be in tune with their counterparts in the West. Hence, the so-called generation gap is likely to be more and more accentuated as Gen Y Indians adopt the values of modern western society. Vanity, therefore, is likely to become even more pronounced. There seems to be no countervailing force that can constrain the acceptance of vanity being imported from globalization.

Similarly, China is also undergoing tremendous change that is altering the mentality of its people. Prior to 1995, China was still in take-off stage as it established its primary industries. After that time, the earnings of consumers allowed them to increasingly indulge their fancies in goods that were unavailable when the Communists were more true to their cause. Now, consumerism seems to be galloping at a speed that is making China unrecognizable to those who studied it only a decade ago. In the wake of these dramatic changes, Gen Y of China is also exposed to western lifestyles and practices. Owning expensive goods and being successful in business have become the coveted ways of expression in modern day China (Stanat, 2005). Indeed, the entrepreneur in China is now the person with the status and the money to indulge his/her desires. Vanity can clearly be expected to become rampant as the Chinese mindset becomes more focused on achievement and attractiveness.

The results of this study provide evidence to marketers that vanity appeals can resonate well with Gen Y especially those in China and India. Furthermore, marketers can also take note that Gen Y men have a different set of perceptions about their own physical prowess and achievements relative to females. Standardized ads aimed at Gen Y that features vanity appeals are likely to work well across the four countries since Gen Y seems to have become a more unified segment regardless of the country.

Yet, at the same time those wishing to mitigate the negative influence of vanity on the well being of Gen Y can find guidance in these results. The idealized images that are used in promotions may be contributing to the harmful psychological and physical consequences for Gen Y. Issues germane to those wishing to protect Gen Y deal with the extent to which vanity will increase in the future. Moreover, they need to ask the extent to which vanity will be viewed positively and not negatively and instead be embraced as being modern. Will vanity become an acceptable attribute unlike its label as one of the seven deadly sins in countries rooted in Judeo-Christian values?

Consumer protectionists may want to bring the topic of vanity to the surface in these societies as a way of consciousness-raising. Sensitizing young people to the implications of vanity might help some see that there are other ways of thinking and living. Organizing groups to oppose vanity laden ads might also be effective. Miller (1994), for example, discusses the group "Boycott Anorexic Marketing" (BAM) aimed at opposing Coca-Cola's Diet Sprite ads that feature ultra-thin models. Similarly, another group called for the boycott of Calvin Klein ads because of the "waiif" models featured in their ads. In Italy, a group against too-thin models is planning to launch a "national manifesto" in January 2007 against the role that fashion plays in the spread of anorexia and the use of super-thin models in advertising (Passariello and Tan, 2006). All these movements are aimed at raising consumer awareness of the consequences of vanity so that the power of advertising can be thwarted.

Finally, one must ask if those in charge of public policy decisions such as government groups or consumer protection agencies should intervene. Should such groups serve to regulate the kind of advertising that makes vanity a desired way of living? Or should the marketplace be allowed to operate in an unfettered way, allowing the “invisible hand” à la Adam Smith to determine the outcomes. There is no definitive way of answering this question since it depends on the value systems of those making the judgments. Perhaps, it is better to conclude that the findings of this study remain as a double-edged sword.

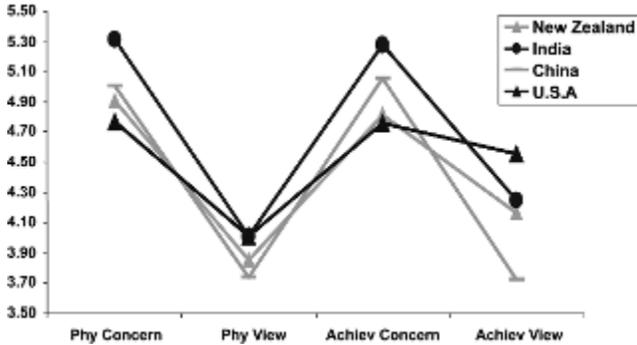
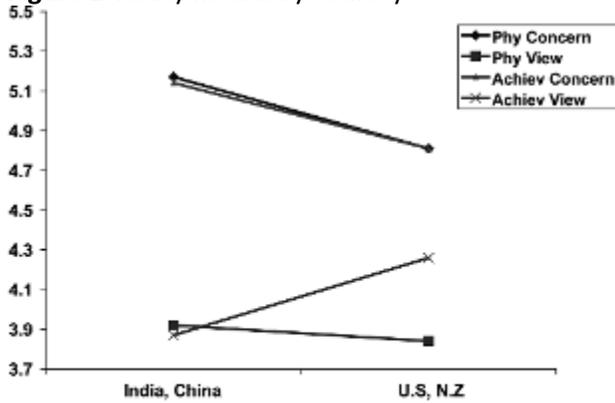
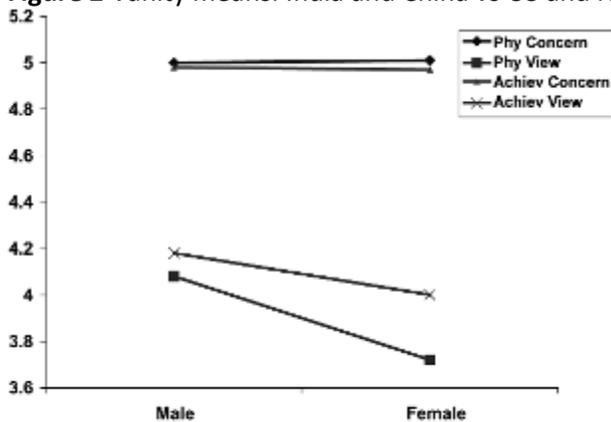


Figure 1 Vanity means by country



Note: Mean physical concern, achievement concern, and achievement view are significantly different ($p < 0.05$) for India and China as compared to the U.S. and New Zealand

Figure 2 Vanity means: India and China vs US and New Zealand



Note: 1. Mean physical view is significantly different for males and females ($p < 0.05$) 2. Mean achievement view is significantly different for males and females ($p < 0.10$)

Figure 3 Vanity contrast means: male vs female

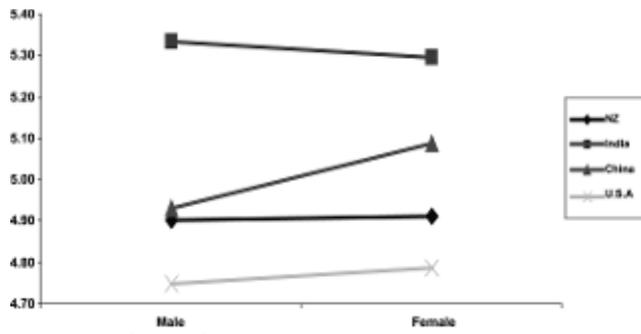


Figure 4 Physical concern

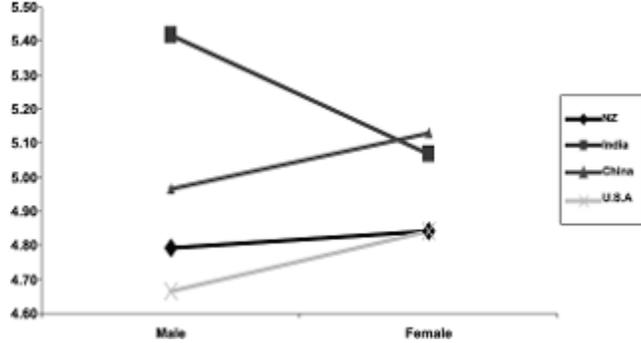


Figure 5 Achievement concern

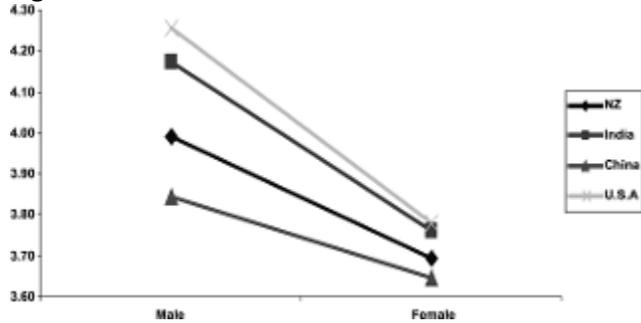


Figure 6 Physical view

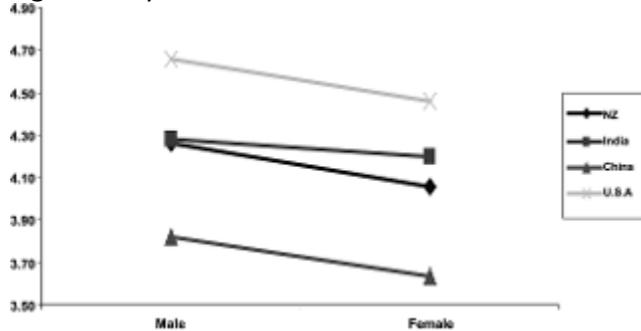


Figure 7 Achievement view

Table I Reliability estimates

	Physical concern	Physical view	Achievement concern	Achievement view
New Zealand	0.85	0.91	0.83	0.87
India	0.79	0.87	0.76	0.85
China	0.66	0.79	0.71	0.86
USA	0.80	0.86	0.76	0.90

Table II Multivariate analysis: country × gender interaction effect

Effect	Wilk's Λ	F-value	F-prob.
Country × gender			
Overall	0.98	0.55	0.89
Physical concern		0.12	0.95
Physical view		0.25	0.86
Achievement concern		1.16	0.33
Achievement view		0.08	0.97

Table III Multivariate analysis: country main effect

Effect	Wilk's Λ	F-value	F-prob.
Country			
Overall	0.85	5.51	0.00
Physical concern		4.76	0.00
Physical view		1.36	0.26
Achievement concern		4.13	0.01
Achievement view		9.58	0.00

Table IV Results of univariate analyses

Overall sample means	New Zealand	India	China	USA
Physical concern	4.91 ^b	5.32 ^{a,d}	4.99	4.77 ^b
Physical view	3.85	4.01	3.72	4.01
Achievement concern	4.81 ^b	5.28 ^{a,d}	5.05	4.76 ^b
Achievement view	4.16 ^c	4.25 ^c	3.7 ^{a,b,d}	4.55 ^c

Notes: Superscripts ^a, ^b, ^c, and ^d refer to New Zealand, India, China, and the USA; the mean physical concern score for New Zealand is 3.09; the superscript ^b next to this value implies that this mean is significantly different from the mean physical concern score for India; all means are reported on a 1 (low) to 7 (high) scale

Table V Multivariate analysis: gender main effect

Effect	Wilk's Λ	F-value	F-prob.
Gender			
Overall	0.96	3.59	0.01
Physical concern		0.11	0.74
Physical view		10.59	0.00
Achievement concern		0.01	0.92
Achievement view		2.60	0.09

Table VI Results of univariate analyses

Overall sample means	Males	Females	P-val.
Physical concern	5.00	5.01	0.74
Physical view	4.08	3.72	0.00
Achievement concern	4.98	4.97	0.92
Achievement view	4.18	4.00	0.09

Note: All means are reported on a 1 (low) to 7 (high) scale

Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefits of the material present.

Globalization has served to blur some cultural distinctions and help create world markets characterized by a growing homogeneity in purchasing patterns and consumer behavior. This rapid increase in global trade has also exposed consumers in developing nations to lifestyles, products and brands previously inaccessible to them.

Marketers are interested in consumers born after 1978 because of the segment's size, disposable income and spending power. These Generation Y (Gen Y) consumers are predicted to be especially influential for many years within India and China, two economies emerging as major world players. Research has already revealed the impact of Gen Y consumers within other countries. In the US and New Zealand, for example, the segment amounts to around a fifth of each country's population and wields considerable purchasing power and influence. With Gen Y consumers totaling some 200 million and 210 million in China and India respectively, the scope for marketers is huge.

The purchasing behavior of Gen Y consumers in China and India is increasingly mirroring that of their counterparts in the west. Branded products, designer clothing, cosmetics, health products, exercise equipment and beauty products are just some of a considerable range of goods and services consumed by this segment. And while business welcomes the opportunities Gen Y consumption behavior offers, others are less impressed. Consumer protection bodies and psychologists believe that the emergence of global markets has increased commercialization and encouraged consumers to express themselves through materialism.

Vanity and consumerism

Vanity is offered as a possible explanation for the behavior of young consumers and has been divided into two different types.

Physical vanity

The premise here is that physical appearance is important. Those who subscribe to this view are likely to be concerned with dieting, health, exercise, cosmetics, fashion, cosmetic surgery and body enhancement. Socio-cultural environment is recognized as influencing the level of importance an individual attaches to physical appearance.

Physical attractiveness is usually more important to women than men and an attractive female can enjoy social status or influence in many countries. And although gender role perceptions have undergone some change, there is still a tendency to view physically attractive women as being more successful than their less attractive peers.

Experts argue that obsession with the self is fuelled by advertising and celebrity magazines where slimness sometimes bordering on emaciation is revered. Marketing is accused of conditioning consumers who become dissatisfied with their own bodies and aspire to emulate the rich and famous. Concerned agencies claim that pursuit of these often-unattainable ideals has led to spiraling credit card debt and a huge rise in illnesses like bulimia and anorexia nervosa. Eating disorders are now also becoming common among men and they too are increasing their consumption of products linked to physical enhancement.

Achievement vanity

Some individuals convey their accomplishment or social standing through the products they consume. Durvasula and Lysonski claim that such consumers use material possessions like clothing or luxury cars to flaunt their success.

Social grooming lays the foundation for gender differences in achievement vanity. While girls achieve popularity through their physical attractiveness and pretty clothes, boys must excel academically and at sport to gain recognition. In adulthood, male achievement is then invariably measured through their career success and income levels.

Study and findings

Against this background, the authors carry out a study to examine the vanity perceptions among Gen Y consumers in four different countries. New Zealand and the US were chosen because of their highly developed economies and embodiment of western culture. Data from Eastern culture is provided by the emerging nations India and China. The study aim is to examine any differences both by country and gender.

University students were sampled in the four countries in the expectation that such participants would be most likely to be familiar with modern media and current consumer trends. Men and women each formed around half of the total sample, with sizes in the western cultures averaging 130 and in the Eastern cultures 125.

Findings indicated that Gen Y consumers in both cultures are highly concerned about both physical appearance and professional achievement. However, there is also apparently a gap between where respondents wanted to be and where they felt they were at present.

The authors consider this a worrying sign. Gen Y consumers clearly want to “look good” but perhaps do not think they have yet realized their goals in terms of how they appear physically. An increase in the preoccupation with improving their physical appearance is likely and could lead to indulgence in cosmetic surgery or dangerous eating habits. Given that respondents in China and India also expressed these concerns, the countries are likely to see a rise in disorders already common in the west. In these nations, men are also becoming more pressurized into attaining an idealized physique portrayed by the media.

Gym and health club memberships are soaring in India, while companies are struggling to meet Chinese consumer demand for cosmetics. Exposure to western media featuring attractive models is responsible, as is the impact of Bollywood in India and China's changing political landscape.

Similar beliefs were indicated about self-achievement and there was little gender difference in this respect. It is feasible that Gen Y consumers with something to prove may strive to work harder. They could, however, regard the acquisition of material possessions as a means of demonstrating their success. The obvious danger is that any resulting debt from such action could have both personal and social implications. Females in China, New Zealand and the US were more concerned than males about achievement. Durvasula and Lysonski assume that this may reflect a freedom to work and choose professional careers that was not easily available in the past.

Implications for marketers

Results indicate growing cross-culture uniformity among Gen Y consumers. Marketers may therefore be able to exploit this development through using standardized advertisements and messages emphasizing how specific products or services can help Gen Y consumers realize their goals in relation to physical appearance and achievement.

The authors, however, believe that study findings may serve as a double-edged sword. Critics point out that the focus on vanity will intensify even further and only serve to heighten the obvious insecurities many young

consumers already feel. They argue that promoting “idealized images” can be harmful to Gen Y consumers both physically and psychologically.

As western-style consumerism becomes ever more rampant in India and China, the consumer protectionist voice is getting louder. This could result in moves to make young people more aware about “the implications of vanity” in the hope of making them consider “other ways of thinking and living”. Organizing boycotts of potentially harmful ads is another possibility. Durvasula and Lysonski also imply that marketers should be aware that excessive promotion through vanity-laden appeals might even lead to stricter advertising regulation.

(A précis of the article “A double edged sword: understanding vanity across cultures”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)

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