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Body and Appearance Perceptions of Latino Youth (22:04)

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In this study, we investigate the notions of “body” and “appearance” to better understand the amounts of money, time and consideration invested into one’s body and appearance. In the video, we used interviews with Latino UTPA students and images found in the marketplace in Rio Grande Valley, Texas. Based on the theoretical position that consumers’ perceptions are constructed socially, we examine what the external influences are in those consumers’ body and appearance perceptions and how these influences impact their perceptions and how they play with / alter their bodies and appearances.

[to cite]:

Samuel Doss and Ebru Ulusoy (2008) , "Body and Appearance Perceptions of Latino Youth (22:04)", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 35, eds. Angela Y. Lee and Dilip Soman, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 880-880.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13643/volumes/v35/NA-35>

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The “body” has been a focus of many philosophical and sociological debates. In modernism, “mind” was a more privileged attribute than “body.” With the emergence of postmodern consumption conditions, the concept of the body acquired new meanings and importance. Additionally, perceptions of body by people in the consumer culture are getting more complex as it becomes the focus of many marketing practices. Marketing practices use and shape the perceptions of the body through advertising. Additionally, for consumers, body’s relation with the concepts of self and pleasure makes it an important aspect of consumer culture. Studies examining the body and its perceptions are currently attracting scholars from different fields of social and behavioral sciences.

According to Gallagher (1986), body image is a complex phenomenon with at least three aspects: perceptual, cognitive, and emotional. In consumer society, it is this complex phenomenon that plays the determining role in the evaluation of the self. Turner (1994) argues that the surface of the body is the target of advertising and self-promotion, and body surfaces themselves are sites of stigmatization. According to Featherstone (1991), who states the notion of the body as a vehicle of pleasure and self-expression, “images of the body beautiful, openly sexual and associated with hedonism, leisure and display, emphasizes the importance of appearance and the “look”” (p.170).

In the complex cultural context of consumer society, subjects are subject to many sociocultural influences (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Today, extensive amounts of products and services related to the body are globally promoted by marketers. Joy and Venkatesh (1994: 337) propose:

“Looking around us, we see the full force of marketing linking the body to numerous products and services—perfumes, fashion, clothing, dining, all kinds of sensual and pleasurable objects, exercise machines, fitness centers, dietary products, cosmetic surgical procedures and the like.”

With the commodification of body, the body became something to be consumed through fashion, body modification, overall image and style. Thus, it became a part of production and reproduction of a desired identity by individuals (Velliquette and Bamossy 2001). In consumer culture, body and its parts have many symbolic meanings (Schouten 1991, Belk and Austin 1996). These symbolic meanings are the orientations for consumers to play with/alter their bodies and appearances. Regarding the symbolic perspective, “The term “body maintenance” indicates the popularity of the machine metaphor for the body. Like cars and other consumer goods, bodies require servicing, regular care and attention to preserve maximum efficiency.” (Featherstone 1991: 170).

With the emergence of postmodern consumption conditions, specifically fragmentation, the body became to be perceived more in terms of its parts rather than being perceived as a whole. Consumers’ fragmented perceptions are also substantiated by the fragmentation in the marketing activities that are promoting different products and services addressing different parts of the body. Firat and Dholakia (2000: 84) state this postmodern condition as:

“Each body part—the lips, the hips, the thighs, the abdomen, the chest— is considered separately, each as a means of enhancing a required or desired image. In the process of (re) shaping or (re)dressing each body part, with marketability in mind in each there is a decontextualization of body parts and their perception as distanced from the individual’s own being.”

Taking these theoretical perspectives into consideration, we in-depth interviewed nine Latino students from The University of Texas–Pan American concerning their thoughts and feelings about their bodies and appearances. We also questioned their views of external influences, their ideal appearance, and what and how they change their appearances in regards to positive and negative considerations. The results of the interviews showed that interviewees’ body and appearance perceptions are mostly influenced by their families and friends, their moods are closely related to how they feel about their bodies and appearances. The results also showed that bodies and appearances are considered fragmented, mostly in terms of clothing, weight and exercise, hair, and body ornaments.

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