

# *A Study of Youth Appearance Anxiety in Pseudo-environment*

Jie Chen<sup>1,a,\*</sup>, and Ziyan Cheng<sup>2,b</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Meishi Film Academy, Chongqing University, Chongqing, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Journalism and Communication, Hubei University, Wuhan, China

a. 20201305@stu.cqu.edu.cn, b. 1259934994@qq.com

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** Social media provide technical support for people to create a perfect self-image, creating a “high value” pseudo-environment. The discrepancy between reality and the pseudo-environment creates appearance anxiety. In order to explore the media perception of young people on the pseudo-environment of “anxiety” about “appearance”, questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews were conducted, which were both designed based on the framework of cognitive schema, revealed that young people continuously form new aesthetic standards under the influence of the pseudo-environment, and are deeply involved in the consumption of their bodies without realizing it. Various media are utilizing the audience’s psychology to continuously intensify the anxiety of appearance in pseudo-environment. At the same time, however, combining the online scene of virtual ethnography, it is found that youths who are susceptible to pseudo-environment have similar problems with their sense of identity. Therefore, measures can be proposed to alleviate appearance anxiety from the perspective of improving youth’s sense of self-identity and social identity.

**Keywords:** appearance anxiety, pseudo-environment, cognitive schema, social media, aesthetics

## 1. Introduction

In the current era of media socialization, all kinds of social media provide people with an open and free space for self-expression, where people can create a perfect self-image. Meanwhile, more outstanding appearance will bring higher attention. However, at the same time, it also gives rise to the “Internet Celebrity Economy” and “Face Value Economy”, in which the media are driven by profit to disseminate more valuable and high-value portraits, resulting in the cyberspace being populated by beautifully screened and retouched images. In other words, the development of Internet technology and software platforms has built a “beautiful world” pseudo-environment for people. However, real life is not the illusion of “everyone has high face value” shaped by the pseudo-environment, and people use the pseudo-environment’s requirement and standard for face value to examine their real-life self-appearance, which creates a discrepancy and appearance anxiety.

In 2021, China Youth School Media conducted a special survey on 2063 college and university students nationwide on the issue of appearance anxiety, which showed that 59.03% of college students had a certain degree of appearance anxiety regarding their looks and body shape [1].

When appearance anxiety is not just an occasional psychological problem of a few young people but has become a social phenomenon of a certain scale, there must be some kind of social ecology or mechanism behind it.

At present, there are fewer studies on appearance anxiety in the academia, and the existing studies mainly focus on appearance anxiety to explore the simple relationship between the factors that play a role in it and propose targeted measures to solve the problem. The target of the study is mostly female youth. Li and Li suggested that the social factors of young women's "appearance anxiety" are related to the dual dimensions of constructing intimate relationships and seeking social identity [2]. Liu suggested that young women are more constrained by modern aesthetic ideals than men [3]. In the literature research, it was found that in the past, domestic and international scholars focused their research on real-life appearance anxiety. With the rise of social media, the focus of research gradually shifted to online. Zhang and Chen suggested in their paper that the pseudo-environment created by various social media, in which people talk about "appearance" and "anxiety", is continuously deepening the audience's appearance anxiety [4].

Through the combing of related literature, it is found that there are relatively few studies that use pseudo society to analyze appearance anxiety, especially the exploration of the deep logic of the mutual promotion of pseudo society and appearance anxiety. In addition, the current research focuses more on the impact of appearance anxiety on women, but in the current pseudo society, the media's demand for men's appearance has been increasing, while women who suffer from the oppression of appearance anxiety are also urgently demanding to achieve "equal rights for men and women" in this phenomenon. Based on this, this paper examines male and female youth's appearance anxiety in the context of pseudo-environments.

Based on the above background, in order to understand how the pseudo-environment formed by social media affects the process of youth's appearance anxiety, this paper adopts a web-based questionnaire survey to explore youth's media perception of appearance anxiety and analyzes it on the basis of Robert Axelrod's model of information processing process. On the background of the questionnaire survey, this paper further selects twenty representative questionnaire respondents to conduct in-depth interviews to understand the youth's perception of appearance, behavioral changes under the pseudo-environment, and the reasons for the formation of the pseudo-environment as perceived by the youth. In order to explore the characteristics of groups prone to appearance anxiety (i.e., groups susceptible to the influence of the pseudo-environment), this paper combines the observation of online media scenes and network virtual ethnography to compare and categorize the groups in fifteen days, and further explores measures to alleviate appearance anxiety.

## 2. Questionnaire Design and Data Analysis

### 2.1. Questionnaire Design

How do people perceive, judge, and establish attitudes or behavioral patterns in a timely manner when they first encounter "appearance anxiety" as an emerging Internet buzzword? In order to obtain contemporary youth's perceptions of appearance anxiety, this study developed questions of questionnaire (Table 1) based on the information processing process model of the base model theory proposed by Robert Axelrod.

The so-called base model refers to the basic model of human cognitive behavior, which is the "bundle of knowledge" used by people in processing new information or cognitively judging new things: Robert Axelrod believes that when receiving new information, according to whether there is an established cognitive base model of the event, it is roughly divided into two processing paths: if there is one, it will be supplemented, modified, and strengthened when it matches with the original base model, and if it doesn't, it will be modified by comparing the degree of trust between the two,

or directly adopting the original base model or moderately modifying it. If there is none, it will be synthesized into a new one by organizing and integrating new information with previous similar information or instances [5-6].

In short, when something new appears, the base model, as a preexisting cognitive structure, participates in the whole process of personal information processing.

Table 1: Coding design of youth appearance anxiety questionnaire.

Cognitive Base Model Handling Process	Coded indicators	Description of the question	Answer Settings
Original cognitive base	Self-appearance cognition	On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your appearance?	Input Score
		On a scale of 1-10, how much do you think your peers would rate your appearance?	Input Score
		On a scale of 1-10, how much do think your elders would rate your appearance?	Input Score
	Social appearance cognition	On a scale of 1-10, what do you think is the average value of appearance in today's society?	Input Score
		Do you agree that society is friendlier to average looking people? (From 1-10, the higher the value the more you agree, 5 being neither agreed nor disagreed)	Input Score
		Do you agree that people with superior appearance are more likely to be awaited by society? (From 1-10, the higher the value the more you agree, 5 being neither agreed nor disagreed)	Input Score
Receive new information	Access to sources of information on appearance anxiety	Where did you get the term "appearance anxiety"?	Option A: Real life (family, friends) Option B: social media Option C: Don't know
	Cognition of appearance anxiety	How well do you think you know about "appearance anxiety"? (On a scale of 1-10, the higher the number the more knowledgeable, 5 being neither familiar nor unfamiliar)	Input Score
	Perceived level of anxiety about appearance	What is the level of appearance anxiety you feel from your peers? (From 1-10, with higher values representing higher levels of anxiety)	Input Score
		What is the level of appearance anxiety you feel from your elders? (On a scale of 1-10, with higher values representing higher levels of anxiety)	Input Score

Table 1: (continued).

		What is the level of appearance anxiety you feel from social media? (On a scale of 1-10, with higher values representing higher levels of anxiety)	Input Score
		Do you wish you had superior looks? (On a scale of 1-10, with higher values indicating a stronger desire, and 5 being neither desired nor resisted)	Input Score
		Do you agree that having superior looks is good for you? (On a scale of 1-10, the higher the value the more you agree, 5 being neither agreed nor disagreed)	Input Score
Integration of the original base model with new information	coincidence	Did your cognition of your self-perception of your appearance increase after obtaining information about appearance anxiety? (from 1-10, with higher values representing higher increases)	Input Score
	inconsistency	After obtaining information about appearance anxiety, do you modify your cognition of yourself in terms of appearance?	Yes/No
	Cognitive base model after information integration	Do you have appearance anxiety? (on a scale of 1-10, with higher values representing higher levels of anxiety, 1 being not at all and 10 being very severe)	Input Score
		What do you think is the level of appearance anxiety of the people around you? (On a scale of 1-10, with higher values representing higher levels of anxiety, 1 being not at all and 10 being very high)	Input Score
Participation of the new base model in the process of processing personal information	Impact on individual cognition	Does the attention that you paid to bloggers with superior appearance on social media increased? (1-10, higher values represent more frequent increases, 1 is no increase)	Input Score
		Does information related to make-up, dressing, aesthetic medicine, cosmetic surgery, etc. to enhance your appearance have an impact on you? (1-10, higher value means more influence, 1 is no influence)	Input Score
		(Continuing from the previous question) Do you think that information related to make-up, dressing, aesthetic medicine, cosmetic surgery, etc. to enhance your appearance affects you in a positive or negative way?	Option A: Positive Option B: Negative
		What causes you to have appearance anxiety?	Input

Table 1: (continued).

	Impact on individual behavior	Has there been an increase in the frequency of talking about appearance-related topics? (1-10, with higher values representing more frequent increases and 1 being no increase)	Input Score
		Do you subconsciously imitate the behaviors of people with superior appearance? (1-10, higher values indicate more frequent imitation, 1 is no imitation)	Input Score

## 2.2. Data Analysis

### 2.2.1. Questionnaire Recovery and Reliability

This questionnaire was distributed in multiple university platforms in China, and 202 copies were collected, with 62 men and 140 women filling out the questionnaire, with a male to female ratio of 3:7, which is in line with the social reality that women are more concerned about their appearance and also takes men's increasingly prominent appearance anxiety into account. The age range of those who filled the questionnaire covered from 16 to 35 years old, which includes different stages of growth of the young people. The age range of 18-25 years old accounted for 91.58%, and the sample is relatively representative.

Reliability analysis is to examine the consistency of all the question items inside the scale, in the reliability test, the higher the value of Cronbach $\alpha$  coefficient, the better. Generally speaking, when Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient is higher than 0.8, the ability of the scale is very good. The reliability data of this questionnaire is as follows (Table 2):

Table 2: Sample Reliability table.

sample size	Number of projects	Cronbach $\alpha$ coefficient
202	23	0.821

### 2.2.2. Base Model Handling Process

The analysis of the questionnaire found that the participants' cognition of their own appearance is relatively clear, in the question "On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your appearance?", 95.04% of the respondents thought that their own appearance was medium or a little on the high side (10 out of 10, average score M=6.67). When filling in the scores of others on their own appearance, the scores of their peers were concentrated in 6-8 (10 out of 10, M=6.54), and the scores of their elders were also concentrated in 6-8 (10 out of 10, M=7.24). At the same time, respondents believed that the average value of appearance in society was centered on a score of 5-7 (M=6.23) and generally agreed that there was a phenomenon of "preferential treatment in terms of appearance" in society (See Table 3).

Table 3: Self-cognition of appearance score scale.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your appearance?	0.5%	0%	0.99%	3.47%	16.83%	30.69%	22.28%	11.39%	4.46%	9.41%
On a scale of 1-10, how much do think your peers would rate your appearance?	0.5%	0%	1.49%	3.96%	19.31%	31.19%	16.83%	16.34%	2.97%	7.43%
On a scale of 1-10, how much do think your elders would rate your appearance?	0.5%	0.5%	0.99%	1.98%	10.4%	19.8%	20.79%	22.77%	9.41%	12.87%

The results showed that 86.14% of the respondents knew about the term “appearance anxiety” through social media, having a moderate to high level of knowledge about “appearance anxiety” (M=6.6 out of 10), and a high level of desire for a superior appearance (M=7.63 out of 10). In terms of perceived appearance anxiety, the respondents perceived a higher level of appearance anxiety from social media (out of 10, M = 7.2) and a much higher level of appearance anxiety from peers (out of 10, M = 7.11) than from elders (out of 10, M = 4.16). Since this questionnaire was distributed through the social media, all the questionnaire respondents were social media users, and the average age was 21 years old. Thus, it can be analyzed that their peers also grew up in the period of rapid development and popularization of social media and had a high degree of using social media; whereas their elders mostly grew up in the era of paper media in the last century, and their acceptance of social media on the Internet was lower than that of the youth. They were less affected by social media and were affected by the pseudo-environment. In this case, their appearance anxiety is also relatively small (See Table 4 and Table 5).

Table 4: Perceived score for sources of information on appearance anxiety.

Percentage of points Questions	Real life (family, friends)	social media	I don't know.
Where did you learn the term appearance anxiety?	9.41%	86.14%	4.46%

Table 5: Perceived level of appearance anxiety degree.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
On a scale of 1-10, how well do you know about your appearance anxiety?	2.48%	0%	0.99%	2.97%	20.3%	20.3%	24.26%	16.34%	4.95%	7.43%
On a scale of 1-10, what is your level of desire to have superior looks?	0.99%	0.5%	0.5%	1.98%	12.87%	14.36%	14.36%	16.34%	11.39%	26.73%
On a scale of 1-10, what is the level of appearance anxiety you feel from social media?	3.96%	1.49%	1.98%	1.98%	10.4%	12.87%	18.32%	15.35%	17.33%	16.34%
On a scale of 1-10, what is the level of appearance anxiety you feel from your elders?	19.8%	9.41%	10.4%	12.87%	19.8%	13.37%	6.44%	3.47%	1.49%	2.97%

After obtaining information of appearance anxiety, more than half of the respondents (55.94%) changed their cognition of their own appearance, with 97.03% of the respondents believing that appearance anxiety had an enhancing effect on their self-perception of their own appearance, and that the enhancement was pronounced (10 out of 10, M=6.33). Under the new baseline model, youth were more concerned about information on social media related to enhancing their appearance (10 out of 10, M=5.81). However, 85.47% of the respondents felt that this information had a positive impact on them. That is to say, the behavioral changes that occurred as a result of their anxiety about their appearance contributed to them.

Regarding the causes of appearance anxiety, men's appearance anxiety has a single cause, which focuses on the negative appearance comments by their girlfriends and the negative impact of poor appearance on their choice of spouse and relationship. The causes of women's appearance anxiety are more diversified, mainly due to the appearance comments from people around them, their own poor make-up skills, the aesthetic output of social media such as Xiaohongshu (also known as RED,

is a social media and e-commerce platform), the perceived social favoritism towards those with better appearance, and their unconscious comparison of their own appearance with that of others.

In this analysis, young people are affected by the pseudo-environment created by social media, and there are changes in their behavior and cognition. They are more concerned about their appearance. Most of the affected people believe that this is a beneficial effect on themselves and agree that appearance anxiety can lead to obtain a more excellent appearance. To a certain extent, it has brought about a change in the social style and led to the development of the face value economy. But on the other hand, this has also led young people to fall into the trap of body consumption, and the pseudo-environment created by the social media has prompted young people to continuously increase the attention to information related to appearance anxiety, and the new base model formed by young people in their ignorance and unconsciousness has continuously shifted to a new aesthetic standard (See Table 6 and Table 7).

Table 6: Perceived impact of appearance anxiety on behavior scale.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
On a scale of 1-10, did your cognition of your self-perception of your appearance increase after obtaining information about appearance anxiety?	2.97 %	0.99 %	2.97 %	5.45 %	20.97 %	21.7 8%	19.8 %	10.89 %	6.93 %	7.43 %
On a scale of 1-10, to what extent do you follow information on social media related to enhancing your looks (makeup, dress-ing, aesthetic medicine, etc.)?	11.3 9%	3.47 %	4.95 %	5.45 %	13.86 %	13.3 7%	21.7 8%	14.36 %	4.46 %	6.93 %

Table 7: Perceived impact of appearance anxiety on mood scale.

	Yes	No
After obtaining information on appearance anxiety, do you modify your perception of yourself in terms of appearance?	55.94%	44.06%
Do you think that information related to make-up, dressing, aesthetic medicine, cosmetic surgery, etc. to enhance your appearance affects you in a positive or negative way?	85.47%	14.53%



### 3. In-depth Interviews

#### 3.1. Design of In-depth Interview

After gaining a general understanding of the youth's media perceptions of appearance anxiety based on the above questionnaire results, 20 respondents with the highest degree of overlap with the mean of the questionnaire codes were selected for in-depth interviews in order to further understand the specific changes in the youth at the cognitive and behavioral levels and to analyze the reasons for the formation of the pseudo-environment as perceived by the youth as a result of these changes. To protect the privacy of the interviewees, they are referred to by pronouns.

The in-depth interviews of eight total questions, mainly focusing on the deeper digging of the questionnaire questions, are presented below:

Can you quickly name the strengths and weaknesses of your own appearance? Is this your self-definition or does it come from other people's evaluations?

Where did you learn specifically about the term "appearance anxiety"?

How has the perception of self in terms of appearance changed after being informed about appearance anxiety?

What kinds of situations trigger or deepen your appearance anxiety?

Do you express your appearance anxiety to those around you or on social media? In what form do you express it?

What efforts have you made to enhance your appearance? Do these behaviors ease your look anxiety?

Are there other behaviors that can alleviate your appearance anxiety other than boosting your face?

#### 3.2. Results of the In-depth Interviews

##### 3.2.1. Youth Cognition and Behavior

At the cognitive level, 90% of the interviewees were able to quickly and clearly summarize the strengths and weaknesses of their own appearance, such as "skin is not white enough" (interviewee HJQ), "eyes are not big enough" (interviewee XY), "high hairline" (interviewee CYQ), etc. However, when asked who pointed out these strengths and weaknesses, all the interviewees had a long or short hesitation, "It seems like I said it myself. Because the popular aesthetic standard in China in the past few years is white skin, I just don't think I'm white enough. Every time I post a friend circle, I have to whiten the photo" (Interviewee HJQ). When it comes to the source of appearance anxiety, 100% of the respondents mentioned social media, and all of them believe that social media is one of the important sources of anxiety. "Contemporary people are greatly influenced by those face-value anchors on TikTok, and they can't help but compare themselves to them" (interviewee WYX). 70% of the interviewees believe that social media have increased their demand for their own appearance. While social media is driven by profit to create new standards of appearance, the public's appearance anxiety is also contributing to the development of the media's appearance anxiety problem.

At the behavioral level, 100% of the respondents said that they have intentionally or unintentionally communicated their appearance anxiety on social media, such as liking and retweeting beauty-related content. 60% of the interviewees said that their appearance anxiety would be relieved for a short time after taking actions, but it would soon be replaced by new anxiety, "I had double eyelid surgery last year, and now I think a high nose bridge looks good, so I want to go for nose reshaping again" (Respondent LL). In addition to behaviors that can directly enhance appearance, 80% of the interviewees believed that reading and traveling, which can enrich the

spiritual world and improve the level of thinking, have become the way out of the anxiety about their looks. To a certain extent, these behaviors can reduce the influence of mixed information on social media on the respondents, and break their pursuit of solid aesthetics and mainstream aesthetics.

### **3.2.2. Catalyze Appearance Anxiety Develop**

In pseudo-environment, there are numerous high value netroots, and appearance and profit are almost equated. Having a better appearance makes it easier to accumulate followers on social media and transforms the illusion of beauty into real money. Appearance is imbued with multiple layers of logic and symbolism in pseudo-environment. The appearance of celebrities has become an aesthetic standard for youth. The media are constantly raising the aesthetic standards of the audience, and the audience is subconsciously moving towards the aesthetic framework set by capital. Under the coercion of consumerism, the media enhance the credibility of fashion communication content through opinion leaders and issue setting, and then create a kind of inevitability and reasonableness of the existence of fashion [7]. One aesthetic carnival after another sweeps through pseudo-environment, during which the audience gradually forms the inertia behavior of pursuing new aesthetic standards, and the pursuit of beauty dividend is engraved into the audience's cognitive schema of appearance. Led by the logic of signs and symbols, in front of the symbolic products co-constructed by capital, media, KOLs, consumer clusters, and consumers themselves, audiences have lost their independent self-knowledge and judgment. They have misjudged their own needs and fallen into the collectively constructed consumerism fervor. And with the support of media content, they have gained consumer-style self-satisfaction and self-realization [8].

Falling into consumerism without realizing it implies that the audience has fully accepted the aesthetic standard given by pseudo-environment and has adopted it as their own desirable aesthetic and attempted to live up to it. Indeed, this is the process of internalization of the ideal aesthetic. That is, by internalizing a third person's view of one's own body, one treats oneself as an object to be viewed and evaluated on the basis of one's appearance, and thus habitually monitors the body's outward appearance [9]. The objectification of the body is followed by the weakening of social and political values, and the individual is distorted into a commodity that caters to power.

Undeniably, beauty is a scarce resource. By possessing beauty, one can have some of the intangible social resources, such as higher attention, more display opportunities, and higher tolerance. Therefore, from the point of view of winning social capital, people manage their own bodies, which can be manipulated as one of the signifiers of social status indicators [10]. Driven by this view, audiences believe that it is reasonable to invest in appearance. So, they spontaneously move closer to the aesthetic standards in the medium and even attempt to create higher aesthetic standards, which undoubtedly catalyzes the problem of appearance anxiety in pseudo-environment.

## **4. Online Virtual Ethnography**

### **4.1. Characterization**

On the one hand, the appearance anxiety conveyed by pseudo-environment comes from the "perfect appearance" portrayed by the media. The audience is constantly impacted by the so-called correct aesthetic standards on social media and internalizes the high aesthetic standards. However, their own appearance cannot reach the standard of "perfect appearance", and the vertical gap brings anxiety. On the other hand, appearance anxiety comes from the impact of a large number of good-looking users in pseudo-environment. When individuals see that some people in the same media environment can achieve the standard of "perfect appearance" through make-up, dressing and

plastic surgery, they will unconsciously develop a tendency to converge with each other. It is the horizontal difference that brings anxiety.

Pseudo-environment is varied and complex, interwoven by numerous social media. From the questionnaire survey above, it is found that even in the same pseudo-environment, the degree of youth's perception of appearance anxiety is different. In this paper, Xiaohongshu (also known as RED), the most mentioned source of appearance anxiety in the questionnaire, as a scenario, is selected to adopt virtual ethnography to observe the online media scene. Through 15 days of browsing "appearance anxiety" related words, topics and reply comments, the characteristics of the group of people who are prone to appearance anxiety are summarized as follows:

#### **4.1.1. Low Self-esteem and Fear of Socializing**

It was found that the accounts that frequently expressed anxiety about their appearance mostly appeared in the anonymous form of "momo" and expressed the fear of communicating with others in real life and the fear of other people's gazes in their language, "When the other person looks at me, I cannot help but wonder if there's something wrong with my face!". When language fails to express the self, individuals will try to use a more intuitive medium of expression, appearance, to express themselves. At the same time, superior appearance will bring social confidence to the individual, because outstanding appearance will invariably increase the opportunity of expression for the speaker as well as the tolerance of the listener.

#### **4.1.2. Pursuing Perfection and Seeking Social Acceptance**

During the observation, it was found that a variety of appearance scoring games currently exist on social media, in which users send out photos and other users score the photos in the comment section. Those who are willing to send out photos are mostly high-appearance users, but they still ask the comment section to point out their own appearance flaws and seek advice on how to improve. This part of the group tries to derive the generally accepted social standard of appearance from the scoring of other users, and to narrow down the discrepancy between themselves and the standard.

Social Identity is a broader dimension of distance in the construction of social relations, which expresses the perception of social members of the similarities and differences in the categories of the social groups to which they belong [11]. When audiences open any social media and see superior-looking celebrities or even ordinary people, the media acts as a display board, providing audiences with a reference role for body image standards. The audience uses the body image standard provided by the media as a social standard of approval, forcing themselves to move closer to the standard.

#### **4.1.3. Low Self-identity and Lack of Positive Evaluations**

In his elaboration of the "looking-glass self", Charles Cooley mentions that a person's behavior depends to a large extent on his or her perception of the self, which is formed mainly through social interactions with others. The evaluation and attitude of others towards oneself is a "mirror" reflecting the self, through which the individual recognizes and grasps himself. During the observation, many users said that they had been evaluated by their family and friends as ordinary-looking since they were young. Even if they grew up to be recognized as "outstanding-looking" by people around them, they would still have doubts about themselves.

## 4.2. Measures

### 4.2.1. Mental Image Enhancement

It is true that the body is “the space and material carrier for the expression of individual life, the realization of self-worth, and the connection to the external world”, [12] but this is premised on individual self-expression and based on the individual’s self-knowledge and behavior, while spiritual expression is the main body of the individual’s self-expression.

In socialization, individuals try to cover up their expressive deficits with an appearance advantage or use it to gain the attention of the other party. These modalities can, to some extent, increase an individual’s expressive confidence in face-to-face situations, but in verbal-only socialization situations, the appearance advantage will be meaningless. Therefore, it is better to utilize the inner to drive the outer rather than seizing every opportunity. The benefits of improved mental image on self-expression are much greater than those brought about by improved body image.

In the above in-depth interviews, 80% of the respondents mentioned that reading, traveling, and other activities that enrich the spiritual world can alleviate appearance anxiety. In any era, knowledge and cultivation are intrinsic to personal self-development. The improvement of thinking level and cognitive ability provides more opportunities for youth to realize themselves. The modern young people take self-realization and self-development as a starting point, and as much as possible in all daily life, their lifestyle is related to the ideal of self-realization [13]. So, when appearance are no longer the only way to self-realization, anxiety dissolves.

### 4.2.2. Healthy Concept of Aesthetics

From ancient times to the present, people’s pursuit of beauty has never stopped, and each era has its own aesthetic standards. In this era of information explosion, aesthetic standards are co-written by many media, and the so-called “standard aesthetic” is changing rapidly. Changing one’s own appearance according to the change of aesthetic standards has been a regular pursuit of young people.

However, the aesthetic standards that are so popular nowadays may not be applicable to everyone, and if one completely abandons his or her original self in order to seek social acceptance, the subject of that acceptance has already changed in nature. The search for social acceptance should be about highlighting the unchangeable qualities of the self that should be preserved through the changeable parts of the self, rather than chasing after a “standard”. The body can be endlessly manipulated: reshaped, designed and modified, and flexibly transformed to conform to current trends and cultural values [14]. Young people can pursue the shape that best suits them in the context of the times, but there is no need to pursue the so-called right shape.

### 4.2.3. Strengthen Network Regulation and Market Supervision

Jean Baudrillard argued that even though the body image constructed by social media is only an avatar, which is itself a replica without an actual object of reference, but this socially aesthetically constructed standard of body image also becomes an outwardly false expectation. The high access and low threshold of social media make the users mixed. For profit, social media are filled with leading messages that lure users into investing monetary costs for beauty. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a correct social guidance mechanism to regulate online speech and reduce the directionality of anxiety messages on social media. At the same time, market regulation should be strengthened, a perfect industry supervision system should be established, and the media should be strictly prohibited from utilizing appearance anxiety to create product selling points.

## 5. Conclusion

The current media environment overemphasizes the importance of appearance, and people form new standards of “beauty” under the influence of subconsciousness and make subjective judgments of themselves based on these standards, which leads to the loss of self-judgment standards in the conflict between the anthropomorphic environment and the real society, and the appearance of behavioral and cognitive deviations.

The development of information network media has given young people a more open space to present themselves, but it has also strengthened the virtual nature of pseudo-environment. Coupled with the reinforcement of body image standards and misleading body consumption in media propaganda, the mimetic environment is constantly changing in response to social discourse, thus plunging young people into the cycle of “pseudo-environment, social aesthetics, anxiety about appearance, body consumption, standard upgrading”, and young people who are relatively weak in the spiritual world are more susceptible to the effects of this. Therefore, on the one hand, it is necessary to strengthen the mental health education of young people at the individual level, so that they can form a good mentality of self-esteem, self-confidence and rationality. On the other hand, it is more important to pay attention to the formation mechanism and results of youth’s “appearance anxiety” from the social level, which can be achieved by regulating the market, formulating policies and other governmental means, forming a healthier and more perfect pseudo-environment, and ultimately avoiding the erosion of social opinion by the consciousness of body commodification consumption in the consumer society.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

## References

- [1] China Youth Daily. <http://zqb.cyol.com>, accessed on 2023/7/10
- [2] Li, S., and Li, M. (2022) *Analysis of the social mechanism of contemporary young women’s “appearance anxiety”*. *China Youth Research*, 4, 78-85.
- [3] Liu, Y. (2022) *Aesthetics and self-presentation: the deep logic of young women’s appearance anxiety*. *China Youth Research*, 05, 85-92.
- [4] Zhang, S. H., and Chen, T. (2022) *A media perception survey of youth group’s appearance anxiety and its real-life influence - An analysis based on the base model of personal information processing*. *Journalism Lover*, 04, 15-19.
- [5] Guo, Q. L. (2011) *Tutorial of communication science*. Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 68.
- [6] Tasaki, A. (1992) *The unfolding of mass communication effects research*. Tokyo: Kitsuki Publishing House, 69.
- [7] Su, Z., and Chen, Z. H. (2014) *Experimental discussion on the media function in fashion communication--Taking the network fashion communication under the new media technology as an example*. *Journalism Lover*, 06, 36-41.
- [8] Wang, R. (2021) *Discussion on the new form and problems of advertising communication under new media communication paradigm--Taking marketing communication of KOL as an example*. *Journalism Lover*, 05, 93-96.
- [9] Fredrickson, B. L., and Roberts, T. A. (1997) *Objectification theory: Toward understanding women’s lived experiences and mental health risks*. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 173-206.
- [10] Baudrillard, J. (2014) *Consumer Society* (Liu, C.F. & Quan, Z.G., Trans.). Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 121-124.
- [11] Hogg, M. A., and Terry, D. J. (2000) *Social Identity and Self-categorization Processes in organizational Contexts*. *Academy of Management Review*, 25, 121-140.
- [12] Peng, X. Z. (2020) *“Sculpting the body”: physical practices and emotional experiences of youth fitness groups*. *China Youth Research*, 3, 78-84.
- [13] Lekowitz, A. (2019) *The society of singularity: the structural transformation of the modern age* (Gong, J., Trans.). Beijing: Social Science Literature Press, 213-216.
- [14] Shen, Y. F. (2005) *Constructed women: contemporary gender theory*. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 151.