

Concept of Beauty in the Age of the Internet: Impact of Social Media on Appearance Anxiety and Body Shame

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Abstract: With the widespread use of social media platforms, the singular aesthetic orientation of society has had varying degrees of impact on women at both the physical and psychological levels. An increasing number of women are exposed to over-idealized images thus triggering a series of problems. The purpose of this study is to investigate how social media affects women's mental health and, in turn, how it affects their eating behaviors. By compiling previous research studies and evaluating information gathered from surveys and interviews with women in various age groups, this study carried out a thorough evaluation of the literature. The results of the study show that a relatively homogenous aesthetic orientation has led a growing number of women to develop negative experiences of their own bodies, which leads to varying degrees of anxiety, and dissatisfaction with their appearance. The proliferation of media big data has resulted in women being exposed to a high frequency of information that generates messages inducing anxiety and gradually internalizing the notion of an ideal figure, thereby promoting abnormal weight reduction practices. The research concludes with suggestions for the female group that self-awareness awakening and conscious resistance to narrow aesthetic standards in society are effective ways to solve their psychological problems.

Keywords: social media, women, appearance anxiety, beauty standards, eating disorders

1. Introduction

Social media can be defined as an online platform that facilitates the creation and sharing of content among users, primarily driven by their interpersonal connections. Social media platforms serve as instruments for individuals to exchange their thoughts, insights, experiences, and personal narratives with one another. The utilization of online networking platforms facilitates the construction of individual identities in the presence of unfamiliar individuals through internet connections. Social media platforms, on the other hand, enable individuals with similar interests to engage in global interactions. The exponential expansion of the Internet has led to the recognition of social media as a formidable force, whose capacity to disseminate information has become integral to individuals' online browsing habits.

The negative repercussions of social media cannot be disregarded, owing to its extensive utilization. Social media has been identified as a significant contributor to the prevalence of anxiety disorders. In contrast to pathological anxiety, realistic anxiety is an emotional reaction to a possible threat or challenge to reality. It is the result of an individual being faced with situations or

circumstances over which they have no control. People are under additional pressure to “look perfect,” and studies have shown that anxiety levels are higher in women. Social media is partially responsible for the exacerbation of this concern. The two most commonly observed manifestations of anxiety in women are appearance anxiety and body image anxiety. In contemporary society, there are two distinct forms of anxiety that pertain to the discontent or unhappiness experienced in relation to one’s physical appearance or body image. Previous studies have looked into the relationship between female users of social media and their anxiety levels.

Due to internal psychological impacts and external influences, social media makes women anxious. Social anxiety often manifests as involuntary feelings of discomfort, worry, embarrassment, or a desire to withdraw in interpersonal situations. Many individuals have become accustomed to relying on social programs as a method of communicating with unfamiliar others, resulting in regular challenges when attempting to communicate directly and face-to-face. The public’s understanding of social media’s impact on female’s body appearance and beauty-related worries has grown in recent years.

2. Relationship Between Social Media and Appearance Anxiety

People’s life now revolves around social media, with selfies being a common appearance-centered message on social media. A selfie is a picture of oneself taken by an individual, usually captured on camera or with a smartphone, then posted on social media. Review-based studies with both proactive and reactive perspectives also analyzed the selfie-related habits’ implications on body image [1]. Studies have indicated that women are prone than males to have negative body image after seeing images of themselves shared on social media by other people in their own gender [2]. An experiment was conducted to compare Instagram users and non-users who viewed real Instagram profiles focusing on appearance over a one-week period, comparing 54 participants of the same age. Instagram is a social app that runs on mobile and shares images captured at any time with each other in a fast, and fun way. The number of monthly active users on Instagram is likely to reach 2 billion, and will continue to grow in the future. Meanwhile among the top four social networking apps in terms of popularity is Instagram. Research has found that individuals’ motivation to edit their selfies is also related to body image [1]. Instagram offers the ability to edit and beautify photos, therefore users will choose to edit and beautify their photos in order to present a more desirable version of themselves and to avoid bad reviews [3]. The questionnaire survey revealed that editing selfies can cause individuals to deceive themselves, which is likely to trigger more severe appearance anxiety when individuals realize the gap between their real image and their virtual image on the Internet [4]. Therefore, in order to reduce the impact of selfie behavior on individuals, it has been found that browsing humorous selfies taken by celebrities who flirt with having an ideal body image can increase body satisfaction [5].

The degree to which people are unhappy with their appearance determines whether or not there could be issues with using social media. According to certain research, selfie expectations are different between males and females and that there may be gender differences [6]. Through a survey study, data was collected from 578 adolescents (mean age 16.1 years) and a contrast analysis was conducted. The results showed that girls shared selfies on social media more frequently compared to boys. Although it was assumed that boys’ selfies would boost their confidence, girls’ selfies instead made them more anxious. Even though such concern did not alter their utilization of social media.

Popular social media applications might also be the biggest driver of anxiety creation. TikTok, a widely used application for the creation, modification, and dissemination of segmented films and photographs, serves as the first focal point of discussion. TikTok provides users with the ability to generate a wide range of topics, the majority of which are not subject to limitations or restrictions.

An investigation was conducted into the impact of videos from TikTok on the appearance anxiety of young women and shame related to their faces by randomly assigning three different types of videos: travel places, self-compassion techniques, and beauty advice, to 115 undergraduate female college students aged 17-25 [7]. The proliferation of popular hashtags on TikTok, such as #beauty, reflects the public's pursuit of an ideal facial appearance. These hashtags have gained significant traction and are associated with content that aims to assist women in enhancing their facial features through the utilization of diverse beauty products. Up to March 2023, the number of views has exceeded 162B. The findings suggest that women who have been exposed to beauty-related videos are more likely to have negative feelings about their appearance [7].

In the Chinese context, the TikTok platform witnessed a significant surge in engagement with the trending hashtag #ReconcileWithTheMakeup-Free, generating substantial attention and discussion. The original purpose of the topic was to encourage women who were dissatisfied with their appearance to accept their imperfections, but as the topic grew in popularity, netizens realized that some of the bloggers posting videos of their seemingly perfect "faces" had meticulously curated their appearance to convey a deceptive impression [8]. This behavior has undoubtedly increased the viewers' anxiety about their faces.

In the Chinese market, there exists a platform known as Little Red Book, which serves as a prominent lifestyle-sharing community frequently utilized by individuals. However, a substantial disparity is observed between male and female users, with women constituting over 70% of the network's user base. Little Red Book's user profile is significantly different from TikTok, which effectively and successfully matches vast volumes of data and people using machine learning, and also pushes personalized content that matches users' interests through broad data. Research shows that people are used to commenting on posts on Little Red Book, both positively and negatively, especially about women's appearance. Comparing their individual image to the perfect image is also a common phenomenon [9]. Results from a survey of high school and college students in China and overseas indicate that two factors—the amount of time spent on social media and one's degree of satisfaction with one's appearance—have an impact on body shame. Typically, women who encounter such issues tend to allocate a significant portion of their time on the Little Red Book platform, engaging in activities such as browsing clothing options, selecting cosmetics, acquiring knowledge of beauty techniques, and similar pursuits.

3. Relationship Between Social Media and Body Shame

The interconnection between body shaming and social media has been previously highlighted. Body anxiety refers to an individual's discontentment with their physical appearance, perceiving themselves as falling short of societal ideals of attractiveness. This subjective evaluation of one's body image gives rise to psychological distress and a sense of unease. The etiology of body image anxiety is multifaceted, wherein psychological variables emerge as a prominent contributor to the development of body image anxiety. Certain individuals may possess an inherent predisposition towards heightened sensitivity, rendering them more susceptible to the impact of personal and societal notions of beauty. Consequently, this susceptibility may contribute to the development of a self-assessment characterized by negative perceptions. Additionally, body image concern can be attributed to social circumstances as a significant contributing component. The progression of society has resulted in the widespread dissemination and technological advancements of media, which in turn have contributed to the establishment of elevated beauty standards. Consequently, women are increasingly exposed to inaccurate portrayals of the ideal body image. It is undeniable that women are impacted by social media, with a significant portion of discontent around body image originating from limited aesthetic norms [10].

The exposure of social media users to idealized body stereotypes contributes to an escalation in women's negative emotional experiences associated with body dissatisfaction. Additional associated risks for eating disorders could include perfectionism and negative body image. Research has indicated that individuals who harbor negative emotions towards their body appearance are tend to be prone to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors, hence increasing their risk of adverse health outcomes. According to [11], the study employed quantitative analysis to ascertain that there exists a positive association between using social media or being exposed to information with images and heightened degrees of body dissatisfaction. Unhealthy eating behaviors triggered by body dissatisfaction include dieting and bulimia. Eating disorders mostly impact female teenagers, with adolescence representing a period of elevated prevalence. Adolescence is a critical period during which anorexia nervosa can have severe and perhaps fatal consequences, including an increased susceptibility to suicidal ideation [12]. The study notes that the Internet is widely used to promote anorexia as a lifestyle choice, so content related to supporting anorexia can be harmful to people with or at risk of anorexia.

Not only do adolescent females exhibit this relationship, but recent study has shown that social media usage is also associated with the development of eating problems in women. Middle-aged women encounter similar challenges. The present study conducted a survey on a sample of 347 women aged 40 to 63, analyzing the connection between eating disorders, social comparisons, and the use of social media [13]. According to recent data, a significant proportion of middle-aged women, specifically 89%, actively engage with social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. The research revealed significant correlation between the utilization of social media and the occurrence of various forms of eating problems.

The contentment of women with their body image can also be influenced by attractive celebrities and peers. In order to empirically examine the impact of pertinent visuals on female body image, two groups of 138 female undergraduate college students were selected at random. Photos of famous people were shown to one group, and pictures of unknown friends with similar degrees of attractiveness were shown to the other [14]. All photographs used in the experiment were sourced from the social media platform Instagram. The ability for Instagram users to modify and enhance the visual quality of their posted photographs results in the perception of an excessively idealized representation, hence potentially fostering significant levels of body dissatisfaction among other users.

In addition to this, in China, there are many businesses that seek business opportunities to cater to the social media phenomenon of the ideal body, which has triggered even more serious body anxiety among women. Bloggers on Tiktok have pointed out that the absence of standardized women's clothing sizes, emphasizing the subjective nature of sizing practices in this domain. Therefore, producers are making their clothing smaller and thinner with less fabric in order to satisfy the dominant ideal of "white, young, and thin." [15]. The public is accustomed to judging women's appearance, and deformed aesthetics undoubtedly bring pressure to women in all aspects. In expecting to have the perfect body and appearance, the smaller sizes of women's clothing can make this pressure even more pronounced. That's why so many women develop feelings of inferiority and anxiety. The experience of anxiety associated with smaller sizes can also engender profound self-doubt and body-related distress in women, leading them to internalize a belief that their inability to fit into their clothing is a personal failing, prompting thoughts such as, "Could it be due to my insufficient thinness?". This sense of self-doubt can also contribute to the adoption of dieting behaviors and the development of unhealthy eating patterns.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, social media's effects on women's mental health and body image can be attributed to various contributing variables. Social media platforms serve as public spaces that enable communication, although they frequently contribute to the heightened regulation of women's bodies. Under the pressure of the public gaze, social media users' consumption of women's attractiveness turns it into a perpetual source of anxiety. Social media exacerbates women's look and body anxiety, which can further lead to the objectification of the female self. It can even lead to women losing their ability to love themselves, no longer acting from a self-interested perspective, and in severe cases, self-exploitation, both on a physical and mental level. Women's efforts to maintain the 'ideal self' can create more severe body control anxiety and exacerbate eating disorder symptoms. Therefore, women need to have a self-awareness awakening and rebel against the narrow aesthetic on social media. People should accept their imperfections and ignore the demands imposed on them by others. Appearance is not the only criterion of beauty, but health is the most important thing, and it is crucial to stay healthy and lose weight instead of choosing unhealthy diets to fit the public's aesthetics. Individuals need to work together to create a peaceful and friendly online environment that promotes everyone's mental and physical well-being.

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