

Generative Mechanisms of Female Body Anxiety in the Social Media Context - A Web Ethnography Study Based on Xiaohongshu Groups

TingYu Meng, Faculty of Journalism and Communication, Sichuan International Studies University, ChongQing City, China, mengtingyu1026@gmail.com

Key Words: Social Media; Female Body Image Anxiety; Generative Mechanisms; Beauty Standards

Abstract:

The prevalence of social media, with its overly edited photos and videos, has intensified aesthetic interactions and comparisons for women, exacerbating body image anxiety and affecting their quality of life and mental and physical health. This study combines cyber ethnography and in-depth interviews, analyzing self-narratives of women's groups on Xiaohongshu to explore the mechanisms of body image anxiety from the perspectives of self-regulation and social construction, and to research beneficial ideas and strategies for alleviating women's body image anxiety.

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, social media has become an indispensable part of women's lives, serving not only as a tool for communication and socializing but also as a platform for showcasing and shaping personal image. However, its widespread use has led to an excessive focus on physical appearance, resulting in increasing anxiety among women. The prevalence of idealized body images online makes women prone to self-comparison, leading to dissatisfaction and anxiety about their bodies. This negative psychological impact significantly affects women's quality of life, and the aesthetic pressure in the digital social environment further exacerbates this anxiety, a problem that has been spreading.

Western academia has conducted in-depth research on this issue, proposing theories such as self-objectification, body image, and the male gaze. In contrast, studies on this topic in the field of journalism and communication in mainland China are relatively scarce. Therefore, this paper aims to introduce Western theories and, through a combination of cyber ethnography and in-depth interviews, explore the generative mechanisms and behavioral logic of body image anxiety among Chinese women in the context of social media. By focusing on the individual experiences and perspectives of contemporary women on social media, this study seeks to help women reduce negative comparisons and negative psychology, promote physical and mental health, effectively cope with the influence of social media, and explore localized

research innovations. Additionally, it advocates for the dissemination of diverse aesthetic values to reduce stereotypes and pressure regarding women's body image.

2. Literature review

The female body, as a social and cultural phenomenon, has garnered extensive attention in contemporary academia. This paper reviews relevant literature from both domestic and international sources, exploring the construction, understanding, and consumption of the female body within different cultural and social contexts, and their impact on contemporary women's body image and identity from the perspectives of sociology, consumer studies, and aesthetics.

From a sociological perspective, the female body is seen as a social product, reflecting social structures and cultural concepts. Social media has shaped new paradigms of the female body by showcasing women's bodies through life sharing, beauty, and fitness content, influenced by social aesthetics and cultural values. The theory of body discipline posits that the body is a field of power imposition, disciplined through social mechanisms and discourses, forming specific female body images and gender roles^[1].

From the consumer studies perspective, the female body has become a significant object and symbol of consumption. In consumer society, the body is commodified, serving as an essential means to express individuality and satisfy desires^[2]. Scholars analyze the status of women in the social structure and their role in identity construction from the angles of body capital and body consumption, while also highlighting the potential body anxiety and social discipline resulting from body consumption.

The aesthetic perspective reveals the evolution of female body aesthetic standards with historical and cultural changes, from traditional ideals of softness and slenderness to modern society's emphasis on healthy and natural bodies^[3]. The rise of social media and visual culture has accelerated the promotion of specific body types, leading to the homogenization and extremification of aesthetic standards, consequently affecting women's perceptions of their bodies and self-image.

While current research spans multiple disciplines, there remains a need for cross-cultural comparative studies and theoretical innovation. Future challenges in the study of the female body include a greater focus on the subjectivity and diversity of the body, and exploring the experiences and meanings of the female body within different cultural contexts. Therefore, this paper integrates perspectives from sociology, consumer studies, and aesthetics to comprehensively analyze the role of social media in shaping and disseminating female body images, providing new theoretical support and methodological guidance for gender equality and social

progress.

3. Research Design

3.1 Data and sample

This paper examines the applicability of conclusions drawn from traditional media's impact on women's body image satisfaction in the current new media environment. Past research has typically focused on traditional media such as television programs and commercial advertisements, exploring how they influence women's body image anxiety. However, with the proliferation of the internet and social media, these platforms have become the primary channels for obtaining social information and communication. Therefore, this paper primarily analyzes the impact of social media on women's body image.

The study selects the Xiaohongshu app as the research subject to explore its influence on women's body image anxiety. The research methodology combines cyber ethnography and in-depth interviews. Cyber ethnography applies traditional ethnographic methods to the online environment. Researchers observe and participate in the Xiaohongshu community to gain an in-depth understanding of female users' body image anxiety on the platform. Researchers chose Xiaohongshu groups exhibiting characteristics of body image anxiety as their research field, participated in various thematic group chats, and conducted cyber ethnographic observations.

Theme	Content	Number of people
Anti body anxiety group	It is a chat group aimed at resisting and addressing the negative emotions and psychological stress caused by body image anxiety. Members support each other, share positive body image perspectives, discuss how to cultivate a healthy self-image, and explore various psychological and practical coping strategies to promote self-esteem and mental health.	490
Anti anxiety spicy mom group	It is a chat group created specifically for mothers, aimed at providing a supportive platform to help them cope with various anxieties and pressures in parenting and daily life. Members share parenting experiences, life tips, emotional support, and mental health knowledge, collectively exploring how to find balance in busy lives, enhance personal well-being, and promote family harmony.	272
Beauty Crazy Weight Loss	It is a chat group that gathers women who are passionate about weight loss. Members share various weight loss methods, diet plans, and exercise experiences. The group features not only successful weight loss	349

Group	stories and tips but also discussions on the challenges and uncertainties encountered during the weight loss journey. The aim is to help members achieve healthy weight loss goals through mutual encouragement and support.
-------	--

Table 1: Topic of online ethnographic observation group chat

3.2 Variables

By analyzing the interactions and statements of group members, the study reveals their descriptions and attitudes towards body image anxiety on social media. This paper uses variables such as age, location, occupation, average daily use of Xiaohongshu, and the degree of body image anxiety to randomly select group members for interviews. This aims to further understand how social media influences their body perception and self-image construction.

Variable	Definition
Age	Age of respondents
Location	Location of respondents
Occupation	Occupation of respondents
Average daily use of Xiaohongshu	Average daily usage time of Xiaohongshu by respondents
Degree of body image anxiety	The intensity of respondents' concerns and dissatisfaction with their body appearance, shape, or weight.

Table 2: Variable Definition

Age	Location In China	Occupation	Average daily use of Xiaohongshu	Degree of body image anxiety
20	Luoyang City	College student	1.5h	Moderate
32	Nanjing City	Accountant	1h	Mild
24	Xiamen City	Graduate student	3h	Severe
26	Chengdu City	Teacher	1.5h	Moderate
25	Shenzhen City	Professional	4h	Moderate
21	Chongqing City	College student	2h	Moderate
31	Changsha City	Salesperson	3h	Severe
39	Hefei City	Housewife	2.5h	Severe
28	Xi'an City	Nurse	2.5h	Mild
22	Liuzhou	College student	2h	Moderate

In contemporary society, beauty standards are defined as the idealization and

normalization of body image. Typically, BMI is used as a measure of the weight-to-height ratio. However, current social culture tends to emphasize features such as thinness, slimness, and curves as the main standards for an ideal female body image^[4]. These standards not only reflect society's general acceptance of beauty but also profoundly shape the expectations and norms for specific body types. Especially in today's highly developed social media environment, these beauty standards are widely disseminated through numerous images, videos, and texts, becoming the objects of pursuit and emulation for the general public, particularly among women.

From Table 2, it can be analyzed that terms such as "body," "standard," and "perfect" reflect women's pursuit and perception of ideal body standards. Ranked first is "body" (weighted percentage 4.62%), which, as the most frequent term, directly points to women's focus on body image, particularly related to beauty standards. The appearance of the term "standard" (weighted percentage 0.94%) indicates that when evaluating body image, women often refer to some idealized standards, which are typically disseminated through social media, advertisements, and other channels. The term "perfect" reflects women's ultimate pursuit of an ideal body, a pursuit closely tied to the beauty standards shaped by social culture and media. Further analysis of the co-occurrence of terms like "body," "standard," and "perfect" (count 50) with related terms such as "advertisement" and "media" reveals how beauty standards are propagated through media channels and how they influence women.

Social media platforms play a key role in disseminating beauty standards by continually reinforcing and amplifying discussions about slimming and body shaping, thus shaping the public's ingrained perceptions of the ideal body. However, this excessive emphasis inevitably exacerbates body anxiety among women. Using social comparison theory to explain: the ideal body images widely disseminated on social media become benchmarks for women's self-evaluation, leading them to frequently compare themselves to these standards^[5]. The high-frequency words in the table, such as "body" (count 617) and "standard" (count 126), support this theory, indicating that women often engage in such comparisons. These comparisons typically intensify their anxiety and dissatisfaction, subsequently affecting their body perception and self-image construction.

In Table 2, the key term related to body image is mainly "anxiety." This term ranks second, directly reflecting the negative emotions women experience when their body image does not align with ideal standards. The high frequency of the word "anxiety" directly indicates the anxious feelings women have about their body issues, which often stem from comparisons with ideal standards. From an emotional perspective, the

word "anxiety" carries a clear negative emotional connotation, reflecting women's negative psychological state regarding body image. Further analysis of sentences

containing the word "anxiety" can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sources and impacts of this negative emotion.

This phenomenon can be explained by cultivation theory, which posits that the "symbolic reality" presented by mass media significantly influences people's understanding and perception of the real world^[6]. The count (78) and weighted percentage (0.58%) of the term "media" in the table indicate that media plays a crucial role in shaping women's perceptions of body image. Due to the biases inherent in media representations, the divergence between the "subjective reality" constructed in people's minds and the actual objective reality becomes increasingly pronounced.

Therefore, the exacerbation of body anxiety among women in modern society is partly rooted in the discrepancy between the idealized body images they frequently encounter in the digital social environment and their actual body shapes. This is in line with social comparison theory, which describes the tendency to evaluate oneself by comparing to ideal standards. This situation affects their experience of their own internal true feelings, making them more focused on external evaluations while neglecting the importance of their own physical health and psychological well-being.

Ranking	Keyword	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
1	Body shape	2	617	4.62
2	Anxiety	2	272	2.04
3	Standard	2	126	0.94
4	Media	2	78	0.58
5	Social contact	2	76	0.57
6	Mentality	2	61	0.46
7	Body	2	57	0.43
8	Advertisement	2	54	0.40
9	Perfect	2	50	0.37

Table 4: Interview high-frequency word citation table

The results show that, under the dual influence of patriarchal society and social media, women commonly experience body anxiety. With social and economic development and political system improvements, women are beginning to awaken, challenge traditional body standards, and emphasize body autonomy and acceptance of diversity.

They are gradually rejecting the blind pursuit of the "perfect body" as defined by society and media, shifting their focus toward body health and psychological

well-being. This awakening is significant for women's self-affirmation and the enhancement of their social status.

Therefore, in the digital and information-based social environment, women frequently encounter idealized body images, leading to complex psychological states, including dissatisfaction with their current status, a desire for change, and anxiety about the future. This condition is particularly pronounced among young women, deeply affecting their daily lives and self-perception. It reflects the complex challenges between societal expectations of physical beauty and women's pursuit of self-identity.

6 Conclusion

Women on social media pursue ideal body shapes mainly for personal aesthetics and self-satisfaction rather than simply seeking others' approval. However, this pursuit often involves appearance comparisons and self-judgment, leading them to excessively focus on body image, resulting in dissatisfaction and anxiety. The influence of social media on women's body image is primarily reflected in the pursuit of social recognition. These platforms create a social comparison space, making it easier for women to compare their bodies with others. British scholar Giddens points out that women might reject adult body characteristics to maintain self-identity, reflecting the complex psychology of seeking identity in modern society^[7]. Women often link body standards to social acceptance, feeling anxious and uneasy when they do not meet these ideal standards, sometimes sacrificing personal health to achieve social recognition^[8].

The mainstream aesthetic now leans towards excessive thinness, leading to a narrow beauty perception among women. Social media, the fashion market, and film promote this standardized aesthetic, neglecting the diversity of female body types and individual differences, causing anxiety and self-doubt in many women. Therefore, surpassing the aesthetic ideal of thinness is crucial for women to achieve a healthy balance between body and mind, as well as self-acceptance and respect. The prevalence of social media has spurred the use of filters and photo-editing software, exacerbating aesthetic homogenization. Edited photos on social platforms showcase nearly perfect beauty standards, causing body anxiety. Some individuals resort to extreme dieting to achieve these social media ideals, jeopardizing their health. To pursue the perfect body, some women buy cosmetics, shapewear, or even undergo cosmetic surgery, but the results are often unsatisfactory, wasting money and effort, and intensifying body anxiety.

The homogenized beauty standards promoted by social media not only influence the idealization of women's body images but also drive distorted consumer behaviors, exacerbating the commercialization and objectification of women's bodies.

Commercial advertisements featuring the perfect appearances of celebrities and models establish body standards, leading to self-dissatisfaction and anxiety among female consumers. Female roles and consumer symbols in films also influence female audiences, sparking their desire to pursue ideal body images through consumption^[9]. Under the influence of traditional patriarchal culture, women often face the scrutiny and pressure of male aesthetics, affecting their self-identity and social status^[10]. Women frequently compare their appearance to male aesthetic standards to gain social acceptance, but this reduces their bodies to commodities meant to satisfy male desires and aesthetic preferences, rather than vehicles for self-expression.

In the era of social media, women's body aesthetics often exhibit singular and even distorted characteristics, making them susceptible to external influences and resulting in body image doubts and anxiety. Social expectations drive women to continuously strive to conform to norms, viewing their bodies as crucial reflections of self-image and identity. Shaping their bodies through social media is also part of their process of self-awareness and empowerment.^[11] Despite the empowerment brought by technology, enhancing women's voices and social status, frequent trends of slimming and body display on social media reveal that women's body awareness is still at a nascent stage, constrained by aesthetic standards and gender stereotypes. To truly achieve women's autonomy, external support is needed, as well as a deepening of women's body awareness and self-perception, reducing society's excessive focus on their bodies. In a consumer society, the body is intertwined with consumerism, becoming an expression of economic and cultural phenomena. Although social media exacerbates women's body anxiety, some women are starting to resist, seeking equal dialogue and healthy communication, respecting cultural differences, and building a shared social connection^[12]. Pursuing slimness and beauty is not inherently wrong, but the erroneous standards on social media lead to excessive slimming, affecting health. To alleviate women's body anxiety, media should advocate for diverse beauty standards, society should promote healthy lifestyles, and women should cultivate confidence and self-love, accepting and appreciating their bodies. This paper aims to provide insights and suggestions to foster deeper societal attention and discussion on this issue.

References:

- [1]Chris Shilling (2010). *Body and Social Theory* Peking University Press
- [2]Baudrillard (2008). *Consumer Society*. 3rd Edition Nanjing University Press
- [3]Qu Kaiyin (2012). A cultural analysis of the changes in the aesthetic values of Chinese women over the past century *Journal of Shanxi Normal University: Social Sciences Edition*, 39 (2), 5
- [4]Wang Lili (2021). A study on the impact of Bmi index on the physical health test scores of college students *Journal of Yulin University*, 031 (002), 74-77
- [5]Zhang Weiyi (2020). Female body space regulation and self-image construction in social media communication *Media Forum*, 3 (10), 2
- [6]K, Harrison, J, & Cantor. (1997). The relationship between media consumption and eating disorders. *Journal of Communication*.
- [7]Anthony Giddens (2016). *Modernity and Self Identity: The Self and Society in Late Modernity* Renmin University of China Press
- [8]Ye Jingyi (2023). The Reconstruction of Emotional Space in Social Media: A Study of Online Ethnography Based on Douban Period Groups *New Media Research*, 9 (15), 99-102
- [9]Shen Yifei (2005). *Constructed Women: Contemporary Gender Theory in Society* Shanghai People's Publishing House
- [10]Wu Jiakai (2011). The paradox of modernity in body consumption *Frontier* (6), 4
- [11]Liu Yi (2021). Discipline and Struggle: Female Body Anxiety and Self Management in the Context of Social Media *Audiovisual* (11), 153-154
- [12]Yin Yanting (2022). A Study on the Phenomenon of Body Anxiety in Young Women under the Knowledge Belief Behavior Model - Taking Xiaohongshu as an Example *New Media Research*, 8 (5), 78-80