

The constraints of stereotypical beauty standards on women

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Abstract. The allure of idealized body images portrayed in social short videos serves as a poignant reflection of the media's relentless scrutiny of individual appearance and body standards, further exacerbating the pervasive anxieties surrounding personal physicality. Within the pervasive wave of consumerism, bodies become imbued with symbolic consumerist attributes, prompting individuals to meticulously craft their own image in pursuit of societal validation. This pursuit, however, fosters a troubling homogenization of aesthetic ideals, where conformity to prevailing trends often results in physical harm and a distortion of core values. Simultaneously, this relentless pursuit of an idealized image erodes the sense of authentic connection with others, creating a pervasive sense of isolation within individuals. Those ensnared within the confines of new media algorithms find themselves ensnared within an echo chamber, where diverse perspectives and authentic connections are increasingly scarce commodities. To rectify this troubling trend, the media must cultivate a more diverse and inclusive expression environment, one that fosters self-awareness and celebrates individual authenticity. By championing diverse representations and promoting genuine connection over superficial validation, the media can help safeguard the presence of others and resist the pervasive erosion of societal values by consumerist agendas masquerading as entertainment.

1 Introduction

The importance of exploring "how social media influences contemporary women's body anxiety" cannot be overstated. An increasing number of women are suffering irreversible physical and mental trauma due to such anxiety. This phenomenon is not only a remnant of the patriarchal society's long history of distorted aesthetic standards, but it is also exacerbated by the pervasive role of social media in our lives. Love of beauty is a natural human trait, and the pursuit of high attractiveness and a beautiful physique is a tangible expression of one's passion for life [1]. The patriarchal society's regulation and harm towards women in various aspects have led mainstream aesthetics to align with male physiological needs, reflecting the dominance of male perspectives in body norms. Consumer culture, aiming to cater to these mainstream aesthetic standards, deliberately crafts an idealized notion of beauty, continuously triggering women's sensitive nerves and causing countless women to feel anxious about their bodies.

Current research indicates that social media uses big data to push information tailored to individual browsing histories and preferences. This formation of information bubbles forces women to conform to prevailing opinions under the gaze of dominant discourse, leading to the erosion of their self-

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judgment. Women feel compelled to persuade themselves to follow the trend and blend into the crowd to avoid scrutiny.

However, in response to the recognition of these issues, a new wave of "anti-appearance anxiety" has emerged among contemporary women. The trending topic on Sina Weibo: 'Do you have appearance anxiety?'—has garnered 156,000 discussions and 760 million views [2]. On social media platforms such as TikTok, trending topics like "embracing natural beauty" and "self-acceptance" are reshaping and emphasizing women's autonomy over their bodies. These movements articulate women's independence and assert their agency, highlighting a desire to break free from societal objectification and the alienation of their bodies. This shift is not only a reflection of individual empowerment but also a significant contribution to the development of modern feminism, as it challenges and seeks to dismantle the oppressive beauty standards imposed by society. Through these platforms, women are collectively redefining beauty and asserting their right to be valued for their authentic selves, fostering a more inclusive and supportive community.

Therefore, this paper focuses on sociology of the body, media studies, and psychology. It will analyze the causes, manifestations, and social impacts of women's body anxiety, starting from the influence of social media on this phenomenon. The study will incorporate patriarchal society and historical factors for deeper reflection and conclude with an exploration of the internal logic of this influence.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Body image anxiety

Body image anxiety is a prevalent phenomenon, particularly pronounced among Asian women. This anxiety often stems from the harsh societal scrutiny of female appearances, coupled with inner feelings of inadequacy and a lack of acceptance. Under the pressure of authoritarian parenting in Asia, women earnestly seek affirmation, yet they may face ridicule for perceived excess weight, insufficiently full breasts, or overly muscular thighs, among other traits. These insecurities can profoundly impact marriage, romantic relationships, and even career choices. This issue not only holds immediate significance but also has deep-rooted historical origins, directly affecting the level of respect women receive in society.

Conforming to the current Asian aesthetic, characterized by the "fair, slim, and youthful" beauty standards, implies that only women with fair skin, slender figures, and youthful appearances are considered beautiful. However, true beauty should not be defined or blindly followed, as the mentality of blindly following trends is highly undesirable. Many women feel constrained by these beauty standards, believing their bodies do not meet societal norms of beauty, thus resorting to extreme measures to achieve what the masses perceive as "beautiful" appearances.

2.2 The role of social media

Body image anxiety arises from the contemporary dilemma faced by women, known as the "beauty servitude" phenomenon, wherein they feel compelled to alter themselves to fit societal beauty standards. In 2020, the Chinese News Weekly reported on a case where a 26-year-old woman resorted to inserting a plastic tube into her stomach, vomiting to lose weight, which garnered widespread attention. Long-term use of such extreme measures resulted in electrolyte imbalances, numbness, tremors, facial swelling, and fainting. Similar incidents, such as A girl accidentally swallowing a 30cm vomit-inducing tube, were reported on June 6, 2022 [3].

The impact of social media on female body image anxiety cannot be underestimated. Nowadays, numerous internet celebrities on social media platforms, supported by filters and beauty tools, present seemingly "perfect" appearances, causing significant anxiety among ordinary women. Deceptive beauty standards created through Photoshop techniques may lead women to mistakenly believe that their real bodies should resemble edited photos, thus increasing dissatisfaction and feelings of

inadequacy. The images and lifestyles of these celebrities and internet personalities are often carefully crafted and polished, not necessarily representing the true state of ordinary women. However, when more content creators realize that showcasing a slim waist and long legs garners high likes, a conformity effect emerges, and these body types gradually become objects of admiration and imitation among women. Moreover, social media is inundated with advertisements promoting weight loss, slimming, and plastic surgery. The trend towards a younger aesthetic reflects society's emphasis on youthful vitality [4]. With the amplification from media and social platforms, the fair, slim, and youthful aesthetic is increasingly accepted as a mainstream beauty standard. The operation of the big data on the internet conveys the wrong message that only possessing a certain body type can lead to happiness and success, thereby exacerbating women's body image anxiety.

3 Sociological development of body image anxiety

"Light skin color, thin, and youthful" has become a uniform beauty standard for contemporary Asian women. Even though many people understand that beauty cannot be definitively defined, this deeply ingrained aesthetic standard remains unshaken. Historically, countless restrictive norms have been imposed on women, with appearance standards being just one aspect. Consequently, the phenomenon of women engaging in "performing the duty of beauty" is widespread.

In many countries, men of suitable age are required to serve in the military, while globally, women of nearly all ages face the pressure of "performing the duty of beauty." As the term implies, this involves women maintaining their appearance and grooming to meet societal expectations of beauty and decorum, particularly within traditional roles and responsibilities.

For many years, under patriarchal societies, men have imposed stringent standards on women to satisfy their desires. Many women, having been indoctrinated with patriarchal ideologies, have endured these standards, often resorting to extreme measures to conform to them. Even in modern times, when some women have become aware of and attempt to break free from these long-standing constraints, they still unconsciously engage in "performing the duty of beauty."

The pressure to pursue beauty stems not only from personal introspection but also from societal scrutiny. Compared to the beauty standards promoted by television and media, people often perceive themselves as ugly and overweight. When there is a disconnect between one's real appearance and their perceived image, many feel pressured and develop an inferiority complex about their looks [5]. This can lead to a reluctance to try different types of clothing, avoidance of social activities, loss of confidence, and a diminished sense of self-identity. Contemporary women's "performing the duty of beauty" has evolved from media discipline to self-discipline. In the process of women's self-presentation, even if a woman does not consider herself a body influencer and is merely documenting her daily life, there are always observers who judge her appearance, compelling her to pay attention to her body management [2].

For many years, beauty standards such as "light skin color, thin, and youthful" have been widely accepted. Beyond the notion of catering to male desires, the herd mentality, or "following the crowd," remains an inescapable behavior for most people. The highly developed network media and social platforms have made the pressure to pursue beauty pervasive in people's lives, especially impacting the younger generation, whose values are still being shaped [5]. The formation of "body image anxiety" arises because many women, despite their efforts, seem unable to achieve their ideal standards, leading to feelings of anxiety. This anxiety can manifest as psychological stress or, in more severe cases, drive women to extreme measures, even to the point of harming their own bodies to meet these standards.

4 Factors leading to body anxiety

4.1 Social identity and sense of belonging

Henri Tajfel defined "social identity" as the recognition by an individual that they belong to a particular social group, along with the emotional and value significance of being a group member. To some extent, clothing can be considered a marker of entry into a social circle. In a society dominated by appearances, people judge others' group affiliations not only by their appearance but also by their clothing and accessories [6]. Therefore, in line with the aforementioned conformity, people fear isolation and eagerly seek to belong to a group. In today's internet era, diverse niche communities within the fashion world emerge constantly, such as Lolita style, gothic fashion, and anime cosplay. People strive to fit into these circles in order to seek a sense of identity and belonging. Consequently, examples of individuals resorting to drastic measures to alter their bodies to better conform to the standards of these clothing styles are abundant.

4.2 Body discipline under the gaze of the other

In "Discipline and Punish," Foucault argues that the gaze of the other creates a sense of oppression in people. Under this scrutinizing gaze, individuals become humble and turn into their own overseers. What appears to be a bottom-up surveillance of everyone is, in reality, imposed by each individual on themselves [7]. "In research related to body anxiety by foreign scholars, Schlenker and Leary argue that the construct of body anxiety stems from the uncertainty of an individual's evaluation of their body by others in real and imagined social situations, and that its main responses include, but are not limited to, withdrawal, feelings of inferiority, and increased or decreased self-monitoring as a problem of self-expression [8, 9].

In today's digital age, the principle of freedom of speech upheld by the internet has greatly diminished the distance between individuals, yet it has also exacerbated women's body image anxieties. In the comment sections of many short videos, whether it's female fitness bloggers emphasizing body management or ordinary individuals documenting their daily lives, there are always those who scrutinize their appearance or physique. Furthermore, some even escalate to personal attacks. Consequently, women are forced to navigate their lives cautiously, employing various means to manage their bodies, all in an effort to minimize unwanted scrutiny from the outside world.

4.3 The objectification of the self through consumerism

The BM style, derived from the Italian women's clothing brand Brandy Melville, is characterized by a fashion sense that places high demands on the wearer's physique. Its popularity represents a successful case of commercial operation, where the collaboration between business capital and the fashion industry capitalizes on the purchasing trends of young women, resulting in a mutually beneficial partnership. Due to the petite sizes of BM-style clothing, it caters to the prevailing aesthetic of "white, thin, and young" in today's society. This design, which highlights female body contours and advantages, renders wearers cute and lively while retaining a sense of sexiness. Additionally, Brandy Melville often hires internet celebrities as sales associates, subjecting them to strict appearance screenings before employment. This action directly associates the BM style with good fashion taste. Consequently, more and more women are emulating these internet celebrities' fashion choices and trying out the BM style. However, due to the extremely small sizes of BM-style clothing, many girls find it challenging to fit into such garments. Motivated by vanity or a desire for their fashion sense to be acknowledged, they resort to extreme measures to lose weight. Chasing fashion trends is not inherently right or wrong, but when fashion is driven solely by consumption, clothing undoubtedly becomes a medium for selling female body image anxieties. In this scenario, the discourse surrounding women's bodies continues to be controlled by external forces [10].

5 Suggestions

5.1 Ceasing self-deprecation and embrace self-acceptance

The key to breaking free lies in women themselves. As the subjects bound by stereotypical beauty standards, women need to realize that they do not need to conform. Under the hashtag "opposing body anxiety," a common approach is to showcase the differences between their bodies and the stereotypical beauty norms, challenging the singular aesthetic constructed by short videos and shattering the myth of media-perpetuated bodily perfection [4]. Boldly displaying themselves, embracing their imperfections, and ceasing unnecessary self-deprecation for elusive aesthetic standards are crucial steps.

5.2 Disseminating health knowledge and guiding the public towards proper fitness practices

Another way to resist stereotypical beauty standards is by promoting healthy aesthetic ideals. With more women suffering from extreme dieting, influencers advocating for healthy eating and exercise have risen. These influencers, with their strong muscles and healthy, sun-kissed skin, challenge the "light skin, thin, and youthful" aesthetic. By sharing their experiences and guiding others towards healthier lifestyles, they help shift entrenched beliefs and encourage a balanced approach to beauty.

5.3 Monitoring public opinion and eliminating misogynistic ideologies

At the same time, the power of the media should not be underestimated. For example, Joseph Swetnam's "The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women" condemns women by citing various authoritative sources like the Bible, making it popular despite its biased view. This example illustrates that if the authoritative figures of the time had not blindly adhered to Protestantism and had instead promptly condemned such views upon the book's release, societal misogyny might have been reduced.

Therefore, today's influential media must courageously stand against misogynistic ideologies at the right moments. By doing so, they can help women break through societal constraints and shed stereotypical beauty standards.

6 Conclusion

Although women today have gradually broken free from societal shackles, the journey of feminism is still long and challenging. Breaking stereotypes and reclaiming control over their bodies requires the effort of the entire society. While internal awakening among women is crucial, breaking out of information cocoons and leveraging the power of the media to reshape correct and diverse beauty standards still require external support. This will not only broaden women's possibilities for development, but also help society to develop a healthier and more equal gender concept. Therefore, the journey of feminism requires the joint efforts of the whole society to provide solid support for women at all levels, from self-realization to cultural propaganda. Only in this way will women be able to break free and maximize their self-worth. In general, this paper deeply investigates the development, reasons, and possible solutions to women's body image anxiety and hopes to provide some reference for this research realm.

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