The Effects of Social Media on Chinese Undergraduate Students'Appearance Anxiety

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Abstract: In China, appearance anxiety has become a hot topic influencing different groups of people. Social media is one of main channels where appearance anxiety is produced and spread. As the main user group of social media, how undergraduate students are impacted by appearance anxiety needs further study.

1. Introduction

In recent years, topics related with appearance anxiety have hit the headlines in China for more than 10 times, and the total reading reached 1 trillion times. In February, 2021, China Youth published a survey on undergraduate students' appearance anxiety, which demonstrates 59.03% of undergraduate students have appearance anxiety at different degrees. It is obvious that appearance anxiety has become a social issue greatly affecting undergraduate students, which needs furthermore study.

2. Ease of Use Appearance Anxiety

Appearance anxiety(Social Appearance Anxiety,SAA) is a feeling of distress associated with the perceived evaluation of one's physical-self(Serdar Alemdag, Ceyhun Alemdag and Abdullah Bora Özkara,2016). Undergraduate students have different levels of performance of appearance anxiety.

The causes of appearance anxiety of undergraduate students in China can be divided into four main parts:value-added on appearance, amplification of social media and Internet , capital intervene and simplex social aesthetics.

2.1 Value-Added on Appearance

Economically, previous studies have confirmed the existence of beauty premium due to differences in social ability, human capital, and other individual characteristics(Gu Tianzhu, 2018). As for undergraduate students, good appearance can provide them with added value in the job market. Psychologically, good appearance will create a Halo Effect. People have the tendency to connect good appearance with good qualities and it can be hardly changed in a short time. Culturally, undergraduate students are influenced and cultivated in a cultural environment where people put great significance on appearance. It forms a subconscious belief in them that Good appearance will bring oneself dignity and satisfaction.

2.2 Amplification of Social Media and Internet

In contemporary society, with the fast development of techniques and internet, social media use has become a widespread daily activities, especially among undergraduate students, who are engaged in visual content sharing. Generally, good appearance attracts more flow online and are exposed to more people. This encourages more visual videos on appearance performance which costs less energy and time compared with other kinds of videos. Also, personal recommendation algorithm creates a Survivor-ship Bias for users, which leads to more facial comparisons and appearance anxiety reinforcement. Additionally, the negative comments to the video might also affect the blogger and audience.

2.3 Capital Intervene

As economical development has brought the improvement of living standards in China, Engel coefficient index decreased, people are more willing to consume for self-improvement. According to surveys, the cosmetic medicine industry in China, the biggest market in the world, has been increasing rapidly and which is predicted to reach 300 million yuan in 2023. In order to expand market share and make more profits, companies adopt a promotion strategy which is to create new topics or standards on appearance and body shape to arouse consumers' appearance comparison and anxiety. Undergraduate students, who are easily affected by online advertisement and have certain economic capacity, are potential market for the cosmetic medicine industry.

2.4 Simplex Social Aesthetics

Chinese people, living in a country where it puts great significance on public relations and others' opinions, culturally take appearance seriously and have a widely-recognized standard of aesthetics. Though its standards will change with the economics developed, it produces a strong restrain force to people. If one aims to attain a feeling of belonging and cognition from one group, they are under the pressure to follow the standard principles of social aesthetics. However, because of the rooted traditional views, the social aesthetics remain simplex. For example, in Tang dynasty, people believe being plump is beautiful while nowadays people hold that being light-skinned, slim and young-looking is beautiful, which obviously imposes impact and restrains to diversified beauties.

3. Social Media

Definition of social media have various versions in academia. Though in different descriptions, their connotations are in common. Social media refers to community based on internet, especially web 2.0, which typically features user-generated content and personalized profiles. The biggest characteristic is that social media gives every individual the possibility to create and spread content. It can mix and match pictures, videos, text, and other traditional content to establish connection and create meaning. More importantly, it meets users' psychological demand to be discovered and worshiped, and also meets users' demand to establish relationships and make a difference(Cao Fulin,2011).

Visual shocks created by contents like pictures and videos of good-looking appearance, body shape or personal life will have an impact on its users. As one of the main user group of social media, undergraduate students are under great pressure to display a picture-perfect life on their social media platforms(Julia Haigley, Grace Timko, Justin Gabbard and Sean O'Ferrall ,2019). Comments and topics of social media also plays a significant role. Users who posts pictures or selfies online aim to obtain identification and compliments. When the comments cannot meet their expectations or cannot

get enough attention and likes, under intangible and unconscious competition, a strong feeling of appearance anxiety occurs. However, comments and topics are of great subjectivity since it compares things with personal aesthetics which is certainly prejudiced and changeable.

4. Effects of Social Media on Appearance Anxiety

Apparently with the increasing development of social media, it exerts deep influence on appearance anxiety of undergraduate students both psychologically and behaviorally. To figure out the effects mechanism can be practical tools for us to ease or solve the appearance anxiety.

4.1 Psychological Effects

4.1.1 Anxiety Reinforcement

At the formational process of one's own aesthetics and values, undergraduate students' psychological statuses are unable and easily affected by external information and implications. . When viewing other contents which is of higher cognition and identification(which may manifest as having high level of likes or readings), undergraduate students tend to compare their contents with others'. The created gap between two sides will produce and spread a sense of less self-confidence and more depression and anxiety. With the amplification of social media, the illusion created by personal recommendation algorithm that person with good-looking will earn high level of likes and recognition reinforce their psychological depression and anxiety. It is certainly a vicious circle when undergraduate students commit themselves into social comparison.

4.1.2 Self-Objectification

Self-objectification occurs when individuals treat themselves as objects to be viewed and evaluated based upon appearance.Literature has largely elucidated links between self-objectification and damaging outcomes in both men and women.(Chiara Rollero,Norma De Piccoli,2017) It negatively impacts body image, mental health, cognitive performance outcomes and has been correlated with poorer physical performance. Undergraduate students are sensitive to the changes in surroundings. Diversified social media contents have delivered an implication that good-looking can physically be transformed into flows and capital and psychologically meet their demand for dignity and cognition. As a consequence, undergraduate students cannot recognize themselves in a correct way and under others' comments, they treat themselves as a object to evaluate and change it in order to cater to social aesthetics. Their performance and decisions will be affected mainly by external factors rather than their own thoughts.

4.2 Physical Effects

4.2.1 Compulsive Behavior

Under the social comparison and appearance anxiety created by social media, undergraduate students cannot control to come up with repetitive but unnecessary thoughts. For example, they usually look into mirror and are particular with details of appearance or body shape. They often complain excessively about their appearance flaws and seek for recognition from others. Those compulsive behavior makes undergraduate students suffer from high-intensitive self-reflection which let them be anxious and nervous. However, under this psychological status, they will be exposed to more sources and more sensitive about negative feedbacks. Besides, compulsive behaviors have

sexual difference in body parts men and women care excessively. Women pay more attention to face, body shape and weights while men pay more attention to height, body shape and genital organs.

4.2.2 Secure Behavior

Self-objectification created by appearance anxiety puts undergraduate students under the stare of other social group. The urgency of seeking for a sense of belonging and the anxiety of less of recognition make them eager to improve the situation. However, throughout change in a short time are hardly to achieve which impels undergraduate students choose another method----cover themselves. At most of time, undergraduate students choose to wear hats, glasses or make-up to cover their true appearance to prevent suffering emotions and uncomfortable things to happen such as being embarrassed or insulted. More seriously, they turn to disordered diet, cosmetic surgery or other comparatively extreme methods.

4.2.3 Evasive Behavior

Appearance anxiety made undergraduate students care more about external feedback and are too sensitive and afraid of negative comments. Under this circumstance, undergraduate students usually choose to avoid social occasions or appearance-related topics. And when there's something wrong with their life, they are more likely to ascribe to appearance. For example, if someone cannot find a boyfriend or who do not have pursuers, he or she has a great chance to ascribe to the reason that their appearance are not good. In fact, for a long run, evasive behavior which helps undergraduate students avoid interactions with outside cannot reduce the anxiety but even make it worse.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, appearance anxiety has a non-negligible impacts on undergraduate students physically and psychologically. The degree of appearance anxiety undergraduate students have is under control but still need more attention and study.

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