The Effect of Social Media on Female's Appearance Anxiety

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Abstract: As social media has become a platform for females to obtain information, communicate online and show themselves, its influence on females' body image is also increasing, affecting females' appearance anxiety. In this case, this article concerned female appearance anxiety on social media. The main purpose of this paper is to explore the underlying logic of females' appearance anxiety on social media and give suggestions for rectification. Based on 176 questionnaires, this paper found that the appearance anxiety of Chinese females who use social media is not that serious. At the same time, females' appearance anxiety on social media has a closely positive impact on three independent variables: social media use, social comparison on social media, and socio-cultural factors. But there was no significant association with four control variables: personality, BMI, age and education. This proves that female, regardless of their appearance or education, experience appearance anxiety and dissatisfaction with their body or appearance. This phenomenon is common and may gradually develop into a social problem. Social media should put in place appropriate controls to manage speech and establish health platforms to help females ease their appearance anxiety.

1. Introduction

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, tell me who is the most beautiful female in the world?" Famous fairy tales dating back more than 200 years show that females care about how they look. Females' natural love of beauty has not changed since ancient time. Females put the same high value and concentration on their hair and looks, whether they are of high birth or of low birth. It's not just in fairy tales, but in reality too. Even the royal family struggles with their looks. For example, Elizabeth I, the Queen of England, was haunted by her fading looks. In order to keep her youth, she did not care to wear a heavy wig day and night, on the face with a thick layer of lead powder, so that the face became flawless and white. Hundreds of years have passed, females love beauty, compare their own beauty to that of others, anxiety about beauty, never changed. In 2021, Chinese youth college media conducted a special survey on the face anxiety of 2063 college students across the country. The survey showed that 59.03% of college students have a certain degree of face anxiety about their appearance and body shape, and the proportion of female students (59.67%) with moderate anxiety is higher than that of male students (37.14%) [1]. In other words, females were more likely than men to suffer from appearance anxiety, with only a small proportion of men feeling overly anxious about their

appearance.

The prominent phenomenon of female facial anxiety has also attracted the attention of scholars. Explain from a scientific point of view, body image first appeared in medicine, which is defined as the picture of one's own body formed in one's mind. That is, how does an individual evaluate his or her body. It is also associated with body dissatisfaction, which refers to an individual's negative attitude towards appearance and spirituality. Facial anxiety is part of body dissatfaction. Since then, psychologists and sociologists have come up with a number of theories to explain what's behind facial anxiety. The social comparison theory was derived, which was proposed by the American social psychologist Festinger in 1954. Festinger believed that people have the need of self-evaluation, which can be accomplished by comparing with others, namely social comparison. Females compare their looks with those around them, celebrities, or other users on social media. Therefore, this paper will use social comparison theory and social culture theory to explain females' social contrast behavior on social media and the influence of social culture on females' appearance anxiety caused by social media.

Social comparison motivation includes self-evaluation, self-improvement and self-enhancement. However, this kind of comparison can easily become an upward comparison, and the females find themselves inferior to the comparison objects and thus form a sense of body dissatisfaction. Media exposure can make more the comparison, resulting in anxiety. The sociocultural theory, proposed by Vygotsky, a psychologist in the former Soviet Union, holds that cultural values are of great significance to how individuals view themselves. In explaining the negative impact of "ideal thinness" on females' body intention created by mass media, sociocultural theory has strong theoretical support. Socio-cultural theory and social comparison theory are the theoretical pillars of female appearance anxiety, which are helpful for readers to understand and will be introduced in detail and explained in this paper.

With the rapid development of technology, social media has become a part of human life. Social media is an important channel for people to get information, entertainment and communication. Females also use social media a lot, mainly for learning skills, watching others share their lives, making friends and so on. This article will introduce three common social media that many females use in China.

Females' anxiety about their appearance will even affect their study or work, and even their daily life. They will also have low self-esteem, which will affect their life. Females with light anxiety will only feel anxious inside, while females with slightly more serious anxiety will be embarrassed when talking to others and dare not look at each other. Some may even suffer from low mood, sleep disturbances and depression. Among the factors that influence females' anxiety about their appearance are pointed chins and A4-sized waists that circulate on social media, and the fact that it is difficult to spot an unattractive person online. The mainstream aesthetic on social media forces females to constantly compare looks from a progressive perspective.

This article will use some theoretical and experimental data to help females relieve the anxiety caused by social media publicity and face up to their own beauty. This paper used questionnaire survey in the discussion part and cited some researches of scholars in the literature review part.

2. Literature review

2.1 Female appearance anxiety

2.1.1 The definition of appearance anxiety

Body dissatisfaction refers to the negative subjective evaluation of one's physical body, such as one's weight and shape [2]. It is common for people to have body dissatisfaction. In 1935, Austrian

psychoanalyst Paul Schilder proposed social form anxiety, which refers to the generalization of "appearance anxiety" from the perspective of the body. Social body anxiety occurs when people are not satisfied with their body image and think they do not conform to social expectations [3]. Later, the theory focuses on females' self-cognition of body image, and the reason why it focuses on female group is that there are more empirical studies showed that female had significantly higher levels of anxiety about their body or appearance men [4]. With the continuous development of The Times, new media have emerged, and social media in new media have an important impact on young people's "appearance anxiety". Especially, the more time young females spend on social media, the more likely they are to have anxiety about their appearance dissatisfaction [5]. The evolution of modern beauty standards is summed up by Tawayot as "three special periods in the construction of female beauty". From the middle of the 20th century, the social aesthetic culture pursued slim, to the early 1980s turned to health and beauty, and now the aesthetic focus on beauty itself, began to pursue cosmetics and medical beauty. Social media's promotion of the beauty of whiteness and thinness has made the public, consciously or unconsciously, hostage to the trend [1].

2.1.2 Affecting factors

The reasons for the anxiety of female appearance may be the following external factors: the influence of surrounding people [6], social and cultural atmosphere, media dissemination. Some are their own factors, not confident in their own figure or personality is more sensitive [7], or care about their own Body Mass Index (BMI), which is commonly used to measure the degree of body fat and thin and whether it is healthy [8, 9]. One common denominator in recent sociocultural studies of body image is a clear relationship between social media use and eating disorders, due to appearance-contrast anxiety caused by social media use. Weibo is the most widely used social media platform among young people in China. Based on the social media environment in China, a psychological study constructed a social media facial comparison scale based on Weibo, which included three questions.

2.1.3 The consequences

According to these studies, anxiety is linked to the frequency of social media use. Based on people's own character and social atmosphere, most scholars analyze the consequences of appearance anxiety from the perspective of social consumption theory. Products such as plastic surgery, cosmetics, clothing, and diet pills all benefit from anxiety about the females' appearance [10]. Female appearance anxiety will not only have negative effects on the mental level, but also on the physical level. Females will start to lose weight blindly, eating disorder and feel depressed [11]. In conclusion, females will want to lose weight or feel depressed and want to have plastic surgery.

2.2 Social comparison theory and sociocultural theory

In the study of female appearance anxiety, several theories are often mentioned. Among them, social comparison theory and social culture theory are used more.

Social comparison refers to comparing one's situation and status with others. Generally speaking, there are three kinds of comparison: parallel comparison, upward comparison and downward comparison [12]. Suls and Wheeler (2000) [13] proposed that upward comparison is to compare with those who are more capable than oneself, so as to make progress, which is conducive to the self-evaluation of individuals. If the gap between oneself and the upward comparison target is too large, there will be a contrast effect, and the individual will produce a negative self-evaluation. If the individual and the uplink comparison target state is the same, there will be assimilation effect, resulting in self-satisfaction [12, 14].

Hakmiller put forward the view of downward comparison in 1962. When individuals have low self-esteem, they tend to make downward comparison, that is, make social comparison with those who are worse than themselves [15]. When individuals encounter failure, they tend to make downward comparisons to maintain subjective well-being. When individuals want to have a true assessment of themselves, they tend to choose a person similar to themselves for comparison, which is called parallel comparison [16]. Goethals and Darley further developed the similarity hypothesis and proposed the correlation attribute hypothesis using the attribution theory. This hypothesis states that individuals are not compared to others with similar behavioral performance, but to others with similar specific attributes related to behavioral performance (gender, effort level, experience, etc.) [12].

Sociocultural theory suggests that the reason females are unhappy with their looks is because society idealizes slender bodies. At the same time, emphasizing the rewards of an attractive slim body and the disadvantages of a fat body, a slim body is considered more representative of the ideal body for North American females. The researchers believe that the most likely source of these sociocultural transmissions is the mass media [11].

It also suggests that females internalize (which refers to taking control of the prevailing culture in society as part of themselves) the standards of "thin body culture" and become anxious and dissatisfied with their appearance. Females' internalization of thinness refers to their identification with the thin body promoted by the media, and they are prone to compare themselves with the images of models or stars in the media. If they fail to meet this standard, they will have feelings of inferiority [11].

2.3 Social media use and Female appearance anxiety

2.3.1 Status analysis

Social Media refers to the content production and exchange platform based on user relationship on the Internet. Its main function can share life and make friends on it. Females are mainly used for Posting photos and communicating with others.

Students from the School of Journalism of the Communication University of China issued a questionnaire on the subject of appearance anxiety to female college students. Among them, the female college students who were slightly anxious about their appearance accounted for 31%, and the anxiety condition was relatively common [17].

2.3.2 Influence path

In the age of social media, comparisons exist between people. Social media influencers' understanding and dissemination of beauty, the influx of capital into short videos to create appearance anxiety, and various digital beauty technologies have all played a big role in the appearance anxiety of contemporary females [1]. In the study of 284 children aged 10 to 12, the frequency with which they compared their appearance on social media and the amount of time they spent on social media were found to be associated with happiness. Other studies found that the frequency of social media use was not significantly associated with depression, but was associated with satisfaction with appearance and life satisfaction [18]. Stice et al. (1994) [11] found that the more body-ideal media females watch, the more likely they are to be anorexic. Sharing pictures on social media gives people an intuitive way to compare social status, looks, environment, etc. Therefore, social media provides a good platform for people to compare looks and appearances [19, 20].

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Variable selection and measurement

Social media use. Represents the time spent using social media. The questionnaire considers the frequency, the degree of engagement in social media, the importance of social media to individuals and other aspects. Questionnaire was set to use questions "How often do you use social media", "what do you like to browse on social media" and so on. There are four questions to measure the dimension of the social media use. Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree), and items were averaged to produce a total use score.

Appearance comparison on social media. This variable is used to measure females' comparative behavior on social media. The questionnaire focuses on the behavior of upward comparisons (e.g., "When I browse social media, I prefer to compare myself to people who are better off than me", "If the image I present is not as good looking as someone else's, I get frustrated"). There are two questions to measure the dimension of appearance comparison on social media.

The Influence of social culture on female anxiety. This variable focus on whether the general environment of society and the culture transmitted through social media have an impact on females' appearance anxiety. This questionnaire considers the influence factors of people around and the promotion of hot spots on social media, such as "Do you feel anxious because of the aesthetic culture spread on social media". There are four questions to measure the dimension of social culture on female anxiety.

Females' appearance anxiety on social media. This variable measures females' appearance anxiety on social media, measuring females' appearance anxiety during or as a result of social media use. Questions like: "I carefully select and embellish the photos or videos I post to make sure I look attractive. "There are four questions to measure the dimension of females' appearance anxiety on social media.

Besides, the control variables of this questionnaire are: age, education level, BMI index and personality. Among them, BMI is a medical indicator of a females' body shape, such as whether she is overweight or thin. A females' body shape can affect how anxious she is about her looks, with overweight females particularly likely to be more anxious. In addition, people with low self-esteem or weakness may have higher levels of anxiety themselves, so personality should be excluded as an influence on facial anxiety. There are five questions to measure the control variables.

3.2 Research framework

According to social comparison theory, upward comparison is comparing oneself with others who are better than oneself. In the process of comparison, females may have the idea that they are inferior to others, thus lowering their evaluation of themselves. What's more, females may have the wrong idea that people around them are better or more beautiful than themselves, so their anxiety level will increase with the social comparison.

When it come to the frequency of social media use, it's generally believed that more social media use leads to more anxiety. The things that are viewed on social media may cause females to see a lot of people who are more beautiful or capable than they are. And the more often females see it, the higher their anxiety. As a result, females unilaterally think that these "Internet celebrities" are the majority of people and females should have slim bodies and good looks. Each time they saw similar information, their anxiety increased.

Social media culture mainly refers to some cultures brought to the public by social media, such as aesthetic culture. Under the spread of this culture, females may be influenced to feel that they are not perfect enough, and thus have anxiety about their own appearance and want to change. The paper

hypothesizes that socio-cultural factors have a positive impact on females' anxiety on social media. Figure 1 shows the research framework of this paper.
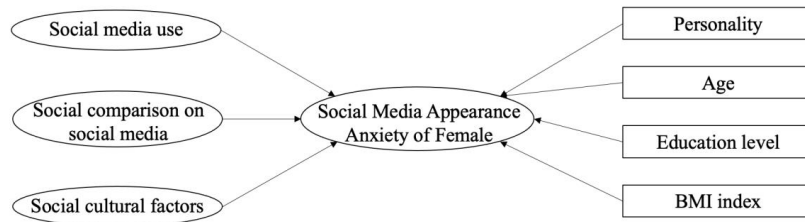

Figure 1: Several variables influencing females' appearance anxiety on social media

The dependent variable is social media appearance anxiety of female. There are three independent variables, which are social media use, social comparison on social media and social cultural factors respectively. There are four control variables, which are age, personality, education level and BMI index respectively. According to the theme of the investigation, the paper guess that these three independent variables have a positive impact on the topic of the paper.

3.3 Research methods and sample selection

This study adopts a questionnaire survey to study the appearance anxiety about female. The research leveraged online channels to distribute questionnaires, using China's largest online questionnaire distribution platform "WJX (Questionnaire Star)". The sampling method is mainly voluntary sampling. In this sample composition, the gender composition is all females, the age composition is from 12 to 35, the total number of samples is 176, and the questionnaire collection rate is 90%. There are 26 questions in total. SPSS 22.0 were used to calculate descriptive statistics and the correlations among the social media use on female appearance anxiety.

A pre-questionnaire was conducted before the formal survey, and the number of pre-questionnaire answers was 30. Three questions examining social media appearance anxiety were dropped due to low reliability and validity. Then, the reliability was 0.948, and the validity was 0.705.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Descriptive statistical analysis

Females on social media have an average appearance anxiety of 3.4 (1 = never, 2 = occasionally... 5 =always). The data showed that those surveyed had mild appearance anxiety. Two representative data are as follows:

Table 1: The aesthetic culture on social media makes me anxious (Question)

	Frequency	Percentage
1(never)	10	5.7
2(occasionally)	21	11.9
3(sometimes)	41	23.3
4(often)	35	19.9
5(always)	69	39.2

For the question that "I make sure I look good before I post images on social media", most respondents agreed that they often (19.9%) or always (39.2%) did that. According to the data, 1 (never) is the least popular choice, while 5 (always) is the most popular choice, which is more than a third (Table 1). This indicates that most of the females surveyed in the questionnaire are very concerned

about their appearance on social media, while a small number of females are not too concerned about their appearance on social media. Most of the females in the study had mild social media appearance anxiety.

When it comes to facial grooming and perfecting behavior on social media, most respondents acknowledged that they select photos carefully make sure its all looks attractive. The chart (Table 2) shows that 9.1% never do it and 30.1% always do it. Most females are conscious of how they appear on social media.

Table 2: Select photos carefully to make sure they all looks attractive (Question)

	Frequency	Percentage
1(never)	16	9.1
2(occasionally)	18	10.2
3(sometimes)	39	22.2
4(often)	50	28.4
5(always)	53	30.1

The questionnaire 13th question asked females what caused their appearance anxiety, and the most popular choice was "being overly concerned about the opinions and evaluations of others" (63.7 %). According to the statistical results of question 13, most people choose the choice: appearance anxiety is determined by their own personality, too concerned about the opinions of others, but it is also due to the social aesthetic culture of the worse (Figure 2). The 14th question was about the focus of females' appearance, and the most popular choice was facial appearance anxiety (43.15 percent). Most female have anxiety about their face, only a few people don't have appearance anxiety.
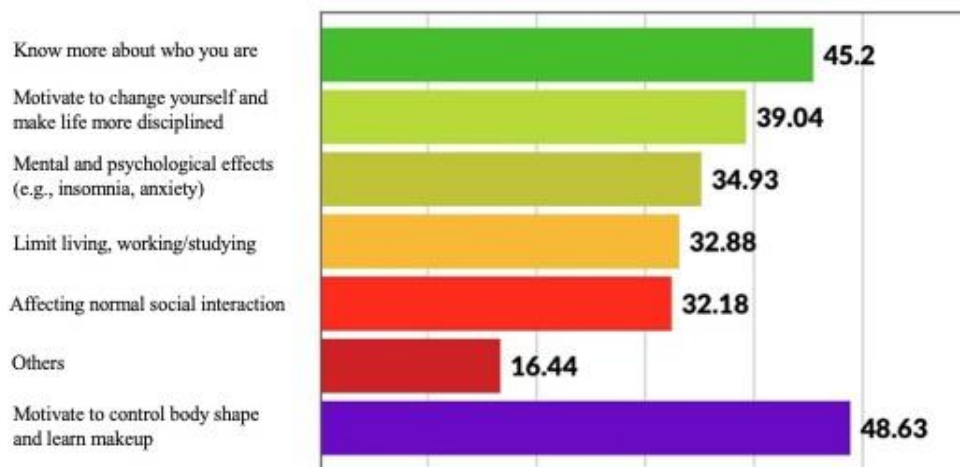

Figure 2: The impact of appearance anxiety on females (Question)

Data from the questionnaire showed that 57 percent of the females agreed that appearance anxiety can have positive effects, such as motivating themselves to look good and controlling their body shape. But 47 percent of the females also said that appearance anxiety has inevitable negative effects, such as limiting social interaction and anxiety. The majority of females think that the influence of appearance anxiety on themselves is more positive.

4.2 Correlation analysis

The graph (Table 3) shows that the frequency of media use, comparisons on social media, social culture, personality are all related to females' social media appearance anxiety. Among them, social media has the highest correlation index of comparative behavior, for about 0.794.

Table 3: Pearson-correlation analysis results

	Anxiety on social media	Social media use	Comparisons on social media	Social cultural pressure	Personality
Anxiety on social media	1	.794**	.731**	.710**	.281**
Social media use	.794**	1	.777**	.781**	.249**
Comparisons on social media	.731**	.777**	1	.797**	.236**
Social cultural pressure	.827**	.743**	.797**	1	.634**
Personality	.281**	.249**	.236**	.304**	1

Survey data showed that 45 percent of females make upward comparisons on social media. Social culture and social media use have a positive impact on female appearance anxiety on social media. Females can reduce their anxiety by comparing themselves less to those who are more competent than them, using social media less often or checking beauty sections less and being complimented by those around them.

4.3 Correlation analysis

In this paper, three independent variables, namely female appearance anxiety on social media as dependent variable, social media use, social culture and comparison on social media, were used to construct a regression model.

Regression analysis (Table 4) showed that the independent variable and control variable set in this paper could explain 64.4% of the variation of the dependent variable (R^2=.644), and the model had a high goodness of fit. The results of ANOVA analysis showed that the model was significant (F=43.433, Sig=.000) and the model was accepted.

Multiple regression analysis found that there is a moderately significant positive relationship between female anxiety on social media and social media use of the participants (β = .379, P < .001), also there is a significant positive relationship between female anxiety on social media and social media comparisons (β=.272, P<.001), furthermore there is a positive relationship between female anxiety on social media and social cultural pressure (β=.238, P<0.05).

Table 4: Regression analysis coefficient table

	unstandardized B	Sig
constant	.956	.003
social media use	.379	.000
social media comparison	.272	.000
personality	.000	.998
social cultural pressure	.238	.007

4.4 Implications

Most comparisons on social media are upward comparisons, which are comparisons with people who are better than you. Female focus on comparing themselves to others who are prettier than them, and over time they become anxious and dissatisfied with their looks.

Social culture drives the change of aesthetic culture through the communication of social media. Aesthetic culture is constantly changing, and females will be affected by the current social atmosphere and the words of people around them, leading to anxiety about their appearance.

Females in social media use frequency and browse on social media content also affects the appearance of self-evaluation, through social media, the longer the more likely it is to compare with others and by social media dissemination of aesthetic culture and influence, and browse the content in some beauty makeup to produce anxiety self looks more easily.

Some control variables that are thought to influence females' appearance, such as BMI, do affect females' appearance anxiety and interact positively with social media appearance anxiety. This also argues that appearance anxiety is not entirely caused by external factors, but that individual personality and body image both have an impact. For women with a high BMI (overweight), they may be anxious due to aesthetic concerns, but this is also a reflection of the social aesthetic that promotes thinness as beauty.

Social media provides an open space for people to share their lives, and many females go to great lengths to retouch images in order to look their best on social media. Appear in social media appearance has become a new type of social means, but after modification of the photos and the reality of the self, inevitably there are some error females addicted to social platform "appearance", after the modification once eyes focused on the features of the real life, both compared to produce disappointed, is easy to produce psychological anxiety of "lookism".

The aesthetic culture on social media takes "white" and "thin" as beauty, which is promoted by the network platform. Females' aesthetic is restricted to a single channel, while natural beauty is excluded from the mainstream aesthetic. Females struggle back and forth between being limited by appearance anxiety and resisting it, between conceptual resistance and the idea of being liked. The reason why appearance anxiety on social platforms is lingering is the dissociation between self-will and interpersonal relationship.

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, social media has been integrated into people's daily life, becoming the main platform for people to get information, communicate with others and show themselves. However, social media use has also been linked to negative emotions, with the biggest impact on females being appearance anxiety. Based on this, this paper adopted the method of questionnaire survey and distributed 176 questionnaires to investigate the phenomenon of Chinese females' social media appearance anxiety and its influencing factors.

The results of this study demonstrate the effect of sociocultural factor and comparison on social media and social media use on female appearance anxiety on social media.

The results of the questionnaire released in this paper show that the degree of social media appearance anxiety of the surveyed Chinese females is only mild, but not serious. Social media appearance anxiety is influenced by the frequency of using social media and the content of browsing, as well as the aesthetics of the whole society and culture, and the evaluation and demeaning of people around females, which may cause anxiety. There are also upwards comparisons on social media and there are a lot of females with great bodies and beautiful looks on social media. Females are also susceptible to appearance anxiety when they see a lot of people who are better than them.

Nowadays, with the rapid development of science and technology and the presence of social media in people's lives, females' appearance anxiety on social media is no longer a minority, but has gradually become a socialization problem. Therefore, this paper wants to study this underlying logic and solution, which is of great significance. Although the diversity of social media provides a platform for females to share themselves, it also leads to some pathological social aesthetic culture and comparison with others. In addition, the emphasis and misdirection of body image standards on the social media platform have led to young females falling into appearance anxiety caused by the torture of aesthetic culture.

Females who want to reduce or avoid appearance anxiety can read less content about their appearance on social media and spend the time on improving themselves and becoming a better person, and stay away from people who judge females' appearance. They had better not compare themselves to others on social media too often. Besides, Social media should not promote an inappropriate aesthetic culture, such as that females must be thin, white and beautiful. They should encourage a diverse aesthetic. Mainstream media should establish correct aesthetic values, instead of spreading distorted and pathological aesthetic values that cause females' anxiety. New media should carefully consider whether the content released has negative effects, and make efforts to create a better media ecology through all aspects to help females out of the dilemma of appearance anxiety. Based on this paper's findings, the reason why females have appearance anxiety is that they care too much about the evaluation of others. Being judged seems almost inevitable on social media. Because once the photo is posted on social media, it always becomes publicly available. As a result, many females have been trolled or attacked. Hence, social media platforms should pay attention to regulate comment sections to prevent accidental injury to others, such as punishing accounts that comment maliciously on others.

Finally, it should be noted that although this paper presents the negative effects of social media on females' appearance anxiety, the results of this paper also show that many females believe that appearance anxiety on social media may also have positive effects on them, such as motivating themselves to look more attractive and become better. Social media can provide a community for females to help each other and share their beauty experiences to better improve females' appearance anxiety. Social media also provides emotional support for many females who suffer from appearance anxiety, helping them fight off malicious attacks together. Therefore, social media is a double-edged sword, which can help females become a better version of themselves and also make appearance anxiety become a socialization problem. Female should actively use the good side of social media to improve themselves.

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