

A Study on the Relationship Between Social Media Platform Features and Young Women's Appearance Satisfaction: A Multi-theoretical Perspective from Xiaohongshu

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Abstract. Between 2023 and 2024, Xiaohongshu became one of the top five social media platforms in China. Social media use has both positive and negative effects on appearance satisfaction. This study explores how Xiaohongshu's platform features—homepage visualization, gender-based content recommendation, and public engagement (likes and comments)—impact young Chinese women's appearance satisfaction through a multi-theoretical lens integrating use and gratification, gender schema, and objectification theories. A theoretical framework is applied to analyze each platform feature's psychological mechanisms, drawing on existing empirical evidence from comparable social media studies. The study synthesizes qualitative insights to hypothesize causal relationships between platform variables and appearance satisfaction. Findings suggest that Xiaohongshu's features may reinforce appearance anxiety through prolonged image exposure, gender-stereotypical content, and objectifying feedback mechanisms. The study highlights implications for platform design and policy interventions, recommending features like optional like-count visibility to mitigate negative effects. Future empirical research is proposed to validate these relationships.

Keywords: Xiaohongshu, appearance satisfaction, social media features, young women, multi-theoretical analysis

1. Introduction

Between 2023 and 2024, Xiaohongshu became one of China's top five social media platforms, with nearly half of its users under 40 and around 70% being women, particularly active in beauty-related content [1-3]. Research indicates that social media usage is associated with appearance satisfaction, with both positive and negative effects [4, 5]. Previous studies have used social comparison theories to examine how social media affects physical well-being [4, 6]. Others applied the Use and Gratification theory to show that psychological outcomes vary based on user motivations and image exposure [7]. Gender schema theory reveals that individuals with stronger gender identity are more likely to post sexualized content [8, 9], while objectification theory links social media features to appearance anxiety [10, 11].

Given Xiaohongshu's high female user ratio, this study explores how its platform features impact young Chinese women's appearance satisfaction through a multi-theoretical lens. It integrates Use and Gratification, gender schema, and objectification theories to analyze homepage visualization, content recommendation, and public engagement features. This research provides insights for policymakers and platform administrators to improve user experience and reduce appearance anxiety.

2. Multi-theoretical framework

2.1. The use and gratification theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, proposed by Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz, is based on the premise that people actively use media to fulfill diverse needs, and the explanatory process includes four primary elements: needs, expectations, exposure, and gratification. The authors stated that different psychosocial needs lead individuals to form various expectations about using media platforms; consequently, these platforms guide each person toward unique information exposure, resulting in different outcomes that fulfill their needs when using the same media [12].

Researchers have conducted various studies on how the use of Instagram and Facebook impacts college women users. Although these two platforms share some similarities, Instagram is shown to be more problematic because it offers more opportunities for interacting with images that lead to appearance comparison. Evidence indicates that this is because users of Instagram spend more time viewing images of others [7]. Thus, it is observed that the psychological outcomes of using social media platforms vary depending on how users engage and their purposes for use.

This theory is highly relevant to the aim of this study, which addresses why young women use the platform, particularly in terms of how Xiaohongshu visualizes its homepage to encourage users to spend time viewing images. The platform induces motivation among young women users, helping to explain the initial mechanisms through which it affects their appearance satisfaction.

2.2. Gender schema theory

Gender schema theory, developed by Sandra Bem [13], centers on the sex-typed individual, explaining how cultural and environmental factors lead people to seek information about their gender, adapt to it, and internalize it mentally. This schema helps people categorize what they observe and organize their beliefs, ultimately motivating them to behave in ways consistent with their gendered beliefs. Researchers studied how gender schema theory explains the impact of received information regarding stereotypical gender roles, in a binary standard, through self-presentation on social media.

Evidence suggests that people with stronger stereotypical self-perception in gender roles tends to post more gender-consistent sexy selfies and profiles online [8, 9]. Gender schema theory is examined after the Uses and Gratifications Theory, as understanding why young women use the platform allows this study to explore how Xiaohongshu's gender-based homepage recommendations reinforce young women's gendered beliefs by transforming their self-perceptions, and how these recommendations heighten appearance-related anxiety and negatively affect appearance satisfaction.

2.3. Objectification theory

Proposed by Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts [14], objectification theory suggests that women may experience both self-objectification and objectification by others, often within a male

gaze that frames women as valued objects, evaluates their bodies, and monitors their appearance.

Individuals who engage in self-objectification evaluate their worth from the perspective of an external observer. One study examined the textual information and photography on certain Instagram sites, with participants all from college students, and results demonstrate that female students were problematically pictured as sexual objects and photo poses were commonly in a submissive angle [10]. Authors also combined objectification with other theories through testing two activities of the social media site, the commenting and like counts function, of different media platforms, and evidence reveals that these activities can impact the body image and appearance satisfaction level of young women adversely [11].

Building on an understanding of the internalized influence of gender schema, objectification theory further explores the liking and commenting features of Xiaohongshu, and how these features may negatively affect the appearance satisfaction of young women users. Additionally, analyzing this feature through objectification theory allows the platform and policymakers to refine user motivation and content display formats, as well as to improve user experience.

2.4. Platform context

In the context of Xiaohongshu, despite a larger percentage of young women users compared to other groups, its platform features are generally comparable to those of Instagram and Facebook. For example, the functions of public commenting and like counts in every post, the induced motivation of life recording and self-expression, and automatic homepage recommendation.

However, some distinctions are also apparent. For instance, the post display format, the filtered homepage content recommendations based on the gender selected during registration, and the personalized post commenting and liking settings.

This study focuses on how each chosen theory explains one of these features based on existing evidence, how they impact the appearance satisfaction of young women users, and where improvements could be made.

3. Platform features and their impact on young women's appearance satisfaction: a multi-theoretical analysis

The discussion focuses on how individual features of the target social media platform affect the appearance satisfaction of young Chinese women, and each feature is explained from a theoretical lens to explore the mechanisms of impact.

3.1. Motivation and homepage visualization: a lens of use and gratification theory

The use and gratification theory suggests that social media users reach media actively for diverse needs fulfillment, with four elements: needs, expectations, exposure, and gratification; evidence demonstrates that motivation difference and image viewing time led to different outcome regarding appearance satisfaction [7].

In its earlier promotions, Xiaohongshu used the slogan 'Find the life you desire', encouraging users to share inspiring content in images and videos. Most of the time, the visual presentation of pictures is attractive, as more polished images are more visually appealing and receive greater algorithmic pushes. This, in turn, encourages users to click and leave comments, ultimately driving more purchases [15]. This kind of platform induced motivation, the one that encouraging users to share images and videos for reviews, enables the platform and target users, which many are the

young women, to identify each other so that users who choose to use this platform have their needs align with the platform value. After young women align themselves with the platform's values, they can anticipate experiences that fulfill their needs while engaging with the content. More expectation of certain results or activities makes more attention paid towards related contents [12]. Thus, the expectations of young women users may lead them to pay more attention to content related to compelling human images and videos. Increased engagement with such content allows the platform's algorithm to recommend more similar content, aligning with its slogan 'Find the life you desire'. Occasionally, when certain exposures fulfill users' expectations, the satisfying outcome can reinforce their behavior, motivating them to seek similar experiences.

With increasing exposure to specific contents, users could reflect the information in other behaviors, like purchasing and dressing choices [12]. Besides the slogan, its homepage visualization allows users to view up to 4 images at one time, implying more time could be spent viewing images of people than either Instagram or Facebook, which further reinforce the exposure. Incorporating with current findings, young women users engaging such activities in Xiaohongshu could be associated with lower appearance satisfaction and in risk of negative psychological outcomes.

Therefore, the underlying mechanism of impact can be summarized as follows: young women users may be attracted by the platform's slogan and its induced motivation to consume compelling images and videos. They then develop expectations that draw their attention to content matching their needs, leading to increased exposure. When at least one exposure satisfies their needs, it reinforces their commitment to the platform, resulting in a rising trend of consuming human images and videos. Thus, though Xiaohongshu using may temporarily satisfy the needs of young women users, the cumulative consumption of human images and videos are consistent and tends to have adverse impacts on psychological outcomes and appearance satisfaction of young women users.

3.2. Gender-based homepage recommendation: insights from gender schema theory

Gender schema theory explains how gender-related information is organized and interpreted by people, and how environmental influences can reinforce the recognition of stereotypical gender norms [13]. People act based on their perceived gender identity and follow unwritten norms consistent with that identity. Social media serves as a platform to spread and reinforce these cultural norms, with impacts reflected in online self-presentation [8, 9].

Before users configure other settings on Xiaohongshu, gender selection is one of the primary steps in the registration process. This allows the platform to recommend homepage content based on prevalent trends and user gender before deeper algorithmic engagement occurs. Existing reports indicate that young women constitute the majority of active users. For example, the beauty section is one of the hashtags frequently recommended towards and searched by the young women users [3]. Additionally, as discussed in the previous section, young women users are motivated by the platform to view compelling images and videos to fulfill their needs, with more visually appealing posts receiving greater promotion.

Thus, it is expected that partially gender-based homepage content, interacting with the demographic preferences of young women users, leads to more recommendations of refined images and beauty-related content, reinforcing stereotypical gender norms related to beauty and appearance satisfaction early in their platform experience. Then, this process could incorporate with the previous mechanism of gratification contributes to a negative mental impact on young women.

3.3. Like count and public comment function: an objectifying perspective

Objectification theory describes how women in societies are often viewed as valued objects, and how this leads to anxiety and mental health risks [14]. Research shows that the objectification of women on social media can manifest through like counts and public commenting, which are associated with harmful psychological outcomes and lower appearance satisfaction due to upward comparison [11].

On Xiaohongshu, unlike Instagram and Facebook, users cannot directly hide like counts from the public in the settings page. With the trend recommending images of people on homepage, young women users could face evaluating others as well as evaluating themselves based on appearance and body image, where the scores could be measured through number of likes the post received. The fix setting of measurable liking counts, along with potential public feedback from strangers, allows an even concrete presentation of objectifying young women.

Furthermore, young women users engaging with the platform can have the expectation of unavoidable liking counts and possible public comments, which tends to associate with investing more attention on the liking amount and public comments of the posts according to the use and gratification theory. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that, through the process of measurement, evaluation, and expectation of posts, the feature setting of liking counts and commenting in Xiaohongshu could enhance the objectification problem in young women users, which finally associated with a lower appearance satisfaction and higher anxiety among young women users.

4. Conclusion

The appearance anxiety in young women is at least partially influenced by the information people received through social media. With existing evidence demonstrated and theories applied by studies on Instagram and Facebook, this study aims to explore how the platform features on a comparable Chinese social media platform impact the satisfaction level of its young women users.

By integrating theories of use and gratification, gender schema, and objectification, this study offers insights into how psychological theories interact with platform features to explain appearance satisfaction among young women users. This study is important in reminding users to be aware of problematic social media using and to have self-intervention while using the platform, and it can also inspire policymakers and platform administrators to implement actions to reduce appearance anxiety. For example, updating the setting page to make hiding like counts easier may help reduce the probability of users facing evaluation.

Future studies should collect numerical and textual data from Xiaohongshu and conduct empirical tests to explore causal relationships between the appearance satisfaction levels of women users and platform variables.

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