

The Relationship Between Exposure to Social Media's Trends and Personal Beauty Preferences

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Abstract. The study explores the relationship between exposure to social media trends and personal beauty preference. While social media influences various aspects of people's lives, this paper will specifically focus on three aspects: gender differences, usage duration, and physical appearance. A total of 366 Chinese social media users participated in a questionnaire-based survey. The results indicate that females demonstrated a stronger internalization of body image ideals compared to males. Besides, no significant association between the duration of social media use and body image anxiety was found in the study. Moreover, females are more likely to experience body-related social pressure. Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the influence of social media on beauty standards and provides direction for future research and interventions.

Keywords: Social Media, Body Preference, Gender Difference, Beauty standard, Chinese Social Media Survey

1. Introduction

These days, social media has an influential role in shaping how people perceive beauty [1]. Douyin (Chinese TikTok), a platform hosting content spanning multiple domains, such as makeup, fitness, and fashion, has surpassed 900 million monthly users and saw a significant rise in daily usage [2]. As Douyin integrates and shows appearance and body-related content, it could play a significant role in shaping and distributing aesthetic norms and beauty ideals for the users. It is worth mentioning that this study also discussed gender differences.

The idea that "people's beauty preferences" (referring to an individual's preference for ideal appearance) stems from people's exposure to various body images on Douyin in the current era of advocating aesthetic diversity. This exposure gives users a clear direction for the body type they want to achieve. However, social media brings negative impacts. This study will mainly explore the negative influence of social media on people's self-deception.

When exposed to the social media trend (referring to the absorption of Douyin's trending beauty ideals), users will unconsciously engage in social comparisons [3]. Another study confirmed that

higher levels of social anxiety are associated with longer duration of social media use in general [4]. It can be implied that social media may be associated with users' rising anxiety levels. Besides, the anxiety level and pressure from social media may differ by gender.

This gender disparity in perceived social pressure, which is stronger among women, supports objectification theory [5]. Based on the theory, this study will separately discuss the connection between men's and women's body image internalization (the popular beauty on social media affects personal aesthetics) and whether the relationship between perceived body shape and the pressure associated with time spent browsing Douyin differs by gender.

This paper explores the relationship between exposure to social media trends and personal beauty preferences. It specifically centers around body-related videos, encompassing depictions of body ideals, representations of current figures, and expressions of anxiety about body shapes.

The study is designed through an online questionnaire. It will analyze three areas: the differences in attitudes between males and females towards the gap between their current and ideal body types, the degree to which different genders feel pressure regarding their body image in the context of social media trends' effect, and the correlation between the duration of using social media and the presence of body-related contexts.

2. Method

This study employed a self-developed structured questionnaire to examine the relationship between Douyin usage, body image perception, the internalization of societal beauty standards, and experiences of self-objectification. It comprised 22 questions organized into three major sections. Section 1 aimed to gather basic

demographic information (e.g., age, gender) and basic information, such as daily usage time (<30mins, 30mins - 1hour, 1-2hours, 2-4hours, >4hours), the interested areas of Douyin videos (makeup and skincare/sports and fitness/fashion and outfits).

It provided contextual information about the sample and established the basis for gender-based comparisons and correlation analyses. Section 2 is Body Image and Ideal-Type Assessment (1-8). This section examined respondents' ideal body, perceived most attractive, and current self-perceived body through body silhouette choices. Section 3 is Endorsement of Beauty Standards and Social Pressure (rating 1- 5). This section assessed respondents' endorsement of gendered beauty standards, perceptions of body ideals promoted on Douyin, and the resulting appearance pressure and behavioral responses.

Section 1 comprises questions addressing demographic information (age and gender), the average amount of time spent on Douyin per day (<30mins, 30mins - 1hr, 1-2hrs, 2-4hrs,>4hrs), and the degree of interest in Douyin-related video categories, including makeup and skincare, sports and fitness, as well as fashion and outfits. Within the questionnaire's branching logic, when respondents select "male" in the gender item, only subsequent questions specifically pertaining to male participants are displayed. Conversely, when "female" is selected, only questions relevant to female participants are presented, ensuring alignment between the question content and the respondent's gender background. Questions 9, 10, 11, 15, and 17 were presented exclusively to male respondents, whereas questions 12, 13, 14, 16, and 18 were shown exclusively to female respondents, ensuring that the content of the items corresponded to the participants' gender identity. In addition, "Average Daily Douyin Usage" was categorized into five levels: less than 30 minutes, 30–60 minutes, 1–2 hours, 2–4 hours, and more than 4 hours, serving as an indicator of the intensity of social media use.

Section 2 is body image and ideal-type assessment, providing a body image to participants. This section contains a total of 8 questions. Q7-8 respectively measured the participants' level of concern

with body shape and satisfaction with current physique, providing insight into the mental gap between personal ideals and perceived reality. The next six questions, male and female participants were respectively presented with images of male and female body shapes arranged in order of increasing body fat percentage and were asked to respond to three related questions based on these references. Q9 and Q12 were designed to separately identify the body types that male and female participants consider to be the most attractive in society.

Q10 and Q13 were intended to measure the ideal body shapes of male and female participants and to reveal the degree of internalization of external aesthetic standards. Q11 and Q14 were aimed at assessing the perception of one's own body shape by male and female participants. The images were obtained from publicly available online sources [6].

According to the website, the minimum typical body fat percentage for women (excluding competitive bodybuilders) is around 12%, while for men it is approximately 8%. Suggest that the scales for men and women are different.

Therefore, the range of body fat percentages depicted in the male and female reference images differed in order to reflect these biological distinctions.

Section 3 is an endorsement of beauty standards and social pressure, which includes some word questions to measure people's stress towards body shape in Douyin. This section contains a total of 8 questions. Q19 directly assesses the psychological pressure stemming from exposure to beauty trends on social media, in line with Objectification Theory's emphasis on self-monitoring and self-objectification. In addition, the remaining questions in Section 3 were designed to examine respondents' endorsement of gender-specific beauty standards and their perceptions of body ideals promoted on Douyin. Collectively, these items aimed to capture how participants recognize, accept, or challenge socially constructed norms regarding male and female appearances. By addressing gendered expectations—such as muscularity for men or slenderness for women—and perceptions of how these standards are conveyed through Douyin content, this section sought to evaluate the degree to which individuals internalize or resist such norms. The findings provide insight into the role of social media in reinforcing gendered aesthetic expectations and shaping body-related attitudes.

3. Sample

This research was conducted in mainland China, so the data only included Chinese social media users.

3.1. Procedure

The distribution of the questionnaire was carried out through a combination of online and offline methods. For the online phase, the research team shared questionnaire links in Douyin and WeChat groups and encouraged participants to forward them to others. This snowball method helped expand the sample source. In the offline part, the research team participated in various public activities and obtained the social media accounts of passers-by through small talks, and then sent the questionnaire links to them for filling out. All responses were collected anonymously to ensure the privacy of the participants.

3.2. Results

The result collects 366 respondents' data, which includes 106 men and 260 women. 71.04% of the participants are females, while 28.96% are males. The majority of participants reported using

Douyin for less than 30 minutes, representing the largest group. The second-largest group consisted of users who engaged with the platform for 1–2 hours, followed by those using it for more than 4 hours, 30–60 minutes, and 2–4 hours. (Figure1)

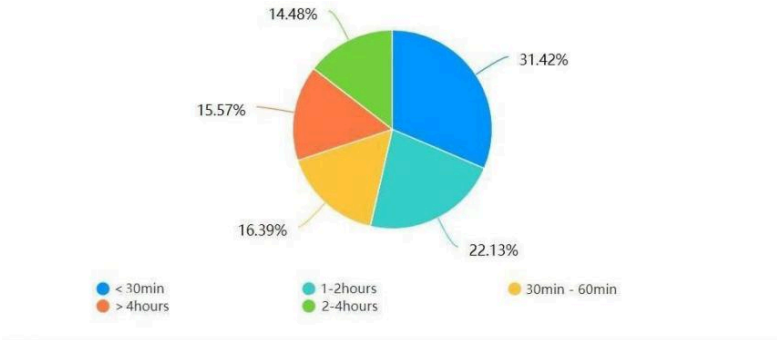


Figure 1. 366 respondents' data

3.3. Gender differences in body image internalization

The male participants (n=106) present a paradox: while they demonstrate cognitive awareness of the unrealistic body shape standards on social media, they are still shaped by these standards.

In terms of the paired-samples t-test, a statistically significant difference was found between male participants’ ratings of socially attractive body types and their personal body image goals (p = .033) (Table 1). This indicates that men recognized a discrepancy between societal ideals and their own aspirations.

Table 1. Males’ body image internalization paired sample t-test (n=106)

		t(105)	p
9. Which of the following images do people find most attractive	10. Which picture do you think is closer to the shape you are trying to attain	-2.16	0.033

Note: Investigate the difference between males' ideal body type and social media trends

In contrast, Spearman’s rank-order correlation revealed a moderate positive association ($\rho = .425$, $p < .001$) (Table 2). Since the ρ value ≥ 0.3 is conventionally considered to represent a medium effect size, this result suggests that despite their awareness of discrepancy, men’s personal body goals remain influenced by prevailing aesthetic norms.

Table 2. Males’ body image internalization spearman’s rank-order correlation (n=106)

		Spearman’s rho	p
9. Which of the following images do people find most attractive	10. Which picture do you think is closer to the shape you are trying to attain	0.425	<0.001

Note: Investigate the correlation between males' ideal body type and social media trends

In contrast, female participants showed no significant difference between their attractiveness ratings and personal goals in the paired-samples t-test (p = .731) (Table 3).

Table 3. Females' body image internalization paired sample t-test (n=260)

		t(259)	p
9. Which of the following images do people find most attractive	10. Which picture do you think is closer to the shape you are trying to attain	-0.345	0.731

Note: Investigate the difference between the female ideal body type and social media trends

In Spearman's rank-order correlation, a strong positive association was observed ($\rho = .581$, $p < .001$) (Table 4). Given that a ρ value ≥ 0.5 is conventionally regarded as a strong effect size, this indicates a near-perfect alignment between social media beauty standards and women's personal ideals. The result suggests a deeper internalization of societal expectations among female respondents. This active alignment also implies that females are not only accepting but actively pursuing the exact body type deemed socially attractive.

Table 4. Females' body image internalization Spearman's rank-order correlation (n=260)

		Spearman's rho	p
9. Which of the following images do people find most attractive	10. Which picture do you think is closer to the shape you are trying to attain	0.581	<0.001

Note: Investigate the correlation between females' ideal body type and social media trends

3.4. Social media usage and body image anxiety

The study measures the anxiety level by the absolute values between the body shape participants want to attain and their current body type. For male users, no significant correlation emerged between daily social media usage duration and body image anxiety ($\rho = -.164$, $p = .093$) (Table 5). This result indicates that the social media exposure did not lead to males' rising body image anxiety level.

Table 5. Males' social media usage and anxiety level spearman's rank-order correlation (n=106)

		Spearman's rho	p
Your average daily usage on Douyin	The gap between body shape you want to attain and your current body shape	-0.164	0.093

Note: Investigate the correlation between males' Douyin exposure and anxiety level

Female participants exhibited no significant correlation between usage time and body image concerns ($\rho = -.008$, $p = .897$) (Table 6). This suggests that, unlike internalization patterns, time spent on Douyin may not directly amplify anxiety in this cohort.

Table 6. Females' social media usage and anxiety level spearman's rank-order correlation (n=260)

		Spearman's rho	p
Your average daily usage on Douyin	The gap between the body shape you want to attain and your current body shape	0.008	0.897

Note: Investigate the correlation between female Douyin exposure and anxiety level

3.5. Perceived social pressure by gender

Across the full sample (n= 366) (Table 7), a weak but significant positive correlation was found between social media engagement and perceived pressure ($\rho = .176$, $p < .001$; $\rho < .3$ indicates small effect size) (Table 7). When stratified by gender, men showed no significant relationship ($\rho = .142$, $p = .146$) (Table 8), whereas women demonstrated a significant weak association ($\rho = .187$, $p = .002$) (Table 9), which means this association is mainly contributed by the female participants. This finding highlights a gender gap in susceptibility to social media-induced body image pressures.

Table 7. All samples' social media usage and pressure spearman's rank-order correlation (n=366)

		Spearman's rho	p
Your average daily usage on Douyin	The pressure to attain social trend	0.176	<0.001

Note: Investigate the correlation between all samples' Douyin exposure and pressure level

Table 8. Males' social media usage and pressure spearman's rank-order correlation (n=106)

		Spearman's rho	p
Your average daily usage on Douyin	The pressure to attain social trends	0.142	0.146

Note: Investigate the correlation between males' Douyin exposure and pressure level

Table 9. Females' social media usage and pressure spearman's rank-order correlation (n=260)

		Spearman's rho	p
Your average daily usage on Douyin	The pressure to attain social trends	0.187	0.002

Note: Investigate the correlation between female Douyin exposure and pressure level

4. Conclusion

This study examined whether social media exposure affects people's beauty preferences, with particular attention to gender differences in these relationships. The findings both confirm and complicate existing understandings of media influence on aesthetic values.

The data reveal distinct gender patterns in how social media beauty standards are internalized. Female participants show stronger alignment between perceived socially attractive body types and their personal body goals. The study also indicates that contemporary social media, with its highly visual, algorithm-driven content delivery, may intensify these effects.

Male participants presented a more complex pattern. Though cognitively aware of unrealistic standards, they still correlated moderately with these ideals. The results show that while men may critically recognize unrealistic portrayals, they are not immune to their influence—a key nuance for understanding media effects across genders.

Contrary to a prior study [4], no significant relationship emerged between Douyin usage duration and body image anxiety for either gender, suggesting that mere exposure time may be less important than factors like content engagement patterns or individual susceptibility.

The gender difference in perceived social pressure (stronger among women) supports objectification theory [5] while highlighting platform-specific amplification of these effects. The visual nature and algorithmic curation of Douyin appear to particularly heighten appearance pressures for female users.

This study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the unbalanced gender ratio of the sample may limit the study's generalizability. Second, using snowball sampling for data collection might restrict sample diversity, confining respondents to specific social circles and potentially introducing selection bias.

In summary, this study indicates that social media usage influences individuals' perceptions of beauty. However, this influence operates through multiple mechanisms, which differ between genders and extend beyond mere duration of usage. The Findings enhance understanding of media effects in the contemporary digital context and identify key areas for further research and intervention.

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Appendix

Below is the questionnaire questions mentioned in the essay:

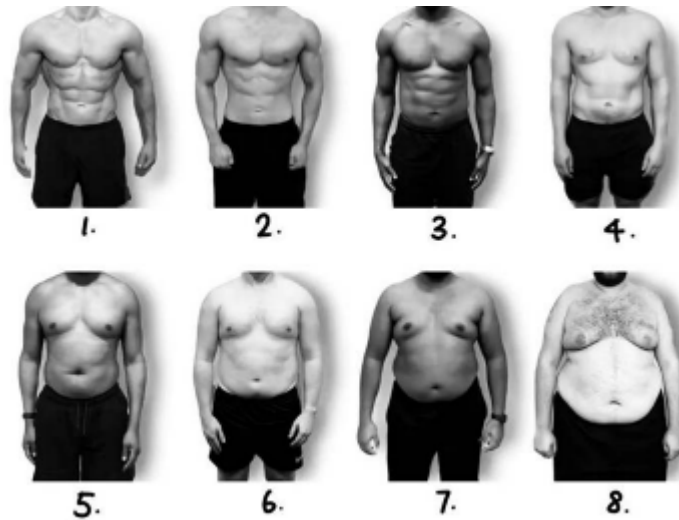
7. How would you rate your level of concern about your body shape? (1-5 scale: 1 = Indifferent, 5 = Very concerned)

8. How satisfied are you with your current body shape? (1-5 scale: 1 = Unsatisfied, 5 = Very satisfied)

9. Among the following 8 images, which one do people find most attractive? (○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 ○8)

10. Among the following 8 images, which one is closer to the body shape you are trying to attain? (○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 ○8)

11. Among the following 8 images, which one is closest to your current body shape? (☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 ☐6 ☐7 ☐8)



[5]

12. Among the following 8 images, which one do people find most attractive? (☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 ☐6 ☐7 ☐8)

13. Among the following 8 images, which one is closer to the body shape you are trying to attain? (☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 ☐6 ☐7 ☐8)

14. Among the following 8 images, which one is closest to your current body shape? (Single-choice: ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 ☐6 ☐7 ☐8)



[6]

15. To what extent do you agree with the statement "I believe men should be robust"? (Totally disagree ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 Totally agree)

16. To what extent do you agree with the statement "I believe women should be slender"? (Totally disagree ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 Totally agree)

17. To what extent do you agree with the statement "Douyin encourages men to have a robust physique"? (Totally disagree ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 Totally agree)

18. To what extent do you agree with the statement "Douyin encourages women to have a slender figure"? (Totally disagree ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 Totally agree)

19. To what extent do you agree with the statement "I feel pressured to make my appearance resemble the people I see on Douyin"? (Totally disagree ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 Totally agree)