

Young Females' Appearance Anxiety in the Self-presentation of the Social Media Platform Xiaohongshu

Yingtong Li^{1,a,*}

*¹The University of Melbourne, Swanston St, Parkville, VIC, Australia
a. yingtongl2@student.unimelb.edu.au*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper aims to investigate how self-presentation on contemporary social media platforms propagates young females' appearance anxiety, and takes Xiaohongshu, a social media platform currently very popular among young Chinese females, as an example. This study conducted an open-ended questionnaire survey with 40 young women aged 18-30 years old through qualitative analytical research methods, and further conducted one-on-one structured in-depth interviews with representative KOLs and KOC users on the Xiaohongshu platform. Their responses focused on the strategies for presenting themselves on social media platforms, platform interventions, and social aesthetic convergence influences. The findings demonstrate that self-presentation in social media exacerbates contemporary young female appearance anxiety inextricably linked to individual, platform and social factors. This effect is intensified through the platforms' adverse value propaganda and influencer marketing interventions, the individual's reshaping of self-presentation based on socially comparative ideologies that conform to dominant aesthetic trends, and the relatively convergent and deeply ingrained aesthetic trends that prevail in contemporary societies.

Keywords: social media, self-presentation, social comparison, young females, appearance anxiety

1. Introduction

With the proliferation of social media platforms, the issue of young females' appearance anxiety has emerged. My research question will focus on how self-presentation on contemporary social media platforms propagates young female appearance anxiety, and I will use the example of Xiaohongshu, a social media platform that is currently very popular with young females in China. In order to precisely place the purpose of this research within the field of social media leading to appearance anxiety, the research first reviewed the literature in this field of study, which found that its main points and controversies focused on the intervention of platforms and influencers and the representation of individuals on social media based on social comparison theory. Through the use of qualitative analysis research methods, this study conducted open-ended questionnaires for 40 young females aged 18-30 and further one-to-one structured in-depth interviews with representative KOL and KOC users on the Xiaohongshu platform. They primarily responded to questions about strategies of self-presentation on social media platforms, platform interventions, and social aesthetic convergence influencing factors.

2. Literature Review

This research aims to explore how self-presentation on contemporary social media drives young females' appearance anxiety. The literature review therefore discusses relevant research literature that is effective for the objectives of the research project. The most recent published literature within its topic is referenced as well. Currently, the relationship between social media and appearance anxiety has been studied by a wide range of scholars, and the findings and controversies of these studies can be broadly divided between contributing factors that are controlled and interfered with by platforms and influencers, and the theme of body image disturbances based on social comparison theory. Nonetheless, the means by which self-presentation in social media enhances young females' appearance anxiety has yet to be thoroughly investigated.

2.1. Social Media as a Cause of Appearance Anxiety in Young Females

The current studies indicate that personal anxiety about appearance is to some extent stratified by age structure, with more studies tending to suggest that younger women are relatively more likely to have appearance anxiety. Many scholars are currently aware of the impact of social media use on young females' appearance anxiety and are committed to analysing its causes. Xu and Wang [1] suggest that Xiaohongshu, a user-generated content (UGC) platform that integrates commerce and social sharing, induces users to purchase relevant products to relieve their appearance anxiety through the layout of the content displayed on the platform's homepage. The results of a questionnaire survey of 97 university students at a university in Shanghai, China, which revealed that 76.32% of female students experienced above-average anxiety about their appearance after using Xiaohongshu. In the survey, 10.53% of the students were all female and were anxious about the contents posted on the platform, which led them to purchase the recommended products.

This study implicates social media platforms as one of the causes of young female appearance anxiety, in terms of the platform's perspective on whether it relies on its user loyalty to deliberately create appearance anxiety for the young female demographic in order to facilitate its platform revenue. Further, platform influencers who work with the platform are also responsible. Zhang et al. [2] suggest statistically that based on the feature of the user-generated content on the Xiaohongshu platform, popular platform influencers trigger a decline in attitudes towards appearance and body satisfaction among followers or young female users.

In addition, there is a dark side to influencer marketing for influencers who are not constrained by the platform, which is to create appearance anxiety for users.

Deng and Jiang [3] concluded from their data collection that 'white, young and thin' influencers, who generally conformed to socially desirable appearance standards, had a positive impact on their audience's appearance anxiety, leading to purchases of their relevant endorsed products.

2.2. Internalisation of "Ideal Beauty" in Social Media

In addition to the considerations of the platform and the influencers, the important factor in the generation of appearance anxiety that cannot be ignored is the personal aesthetic. Zhong [4] proposes an association between appearance anxiety through social media with body image disturbance. She conducted a questionnaire survey of 400 female university students in China, which revealed that the more internalised the 'ideal beauty' image is for young females, the more prone they are to form body image disturbance. The result of this study is highly informative, considering the suitability of its target population and the qualitative method of the study with my research. From this, it can therefore be derived that, the more perfect the ideal image in one's mind, the lower one's satisfaction with their actual image.

Marengo et al. [5] assert that young females who are frequent long-term users of social media are

more concerned about their appearance than non-users and are committed to portraying their perfect image online. This reflects the fact that young females with idealised image-building needs share themselves through social media and receive new aesthetic requirements to reinforce their own appearance, which is then shared on social media, resulting in a cycle of progressively more extreme idealised aesthetics.

However, by using semi-structured one-on-one interviews, Evens et al. [6] demonstrated that while young females receive the image of so-called ‘ideal beauty’ through social media, most females have a protective filter on their self-image that prevents them from being threatened by potential appearance-related influences. Hence, they are not subconsciously affected by the ‘ideal beauty’ that shapes the aesthetics in their own minds. This is controversial with previous scholars, but given the limitations of their interviewers, their views need to be further examined.

2.3. Self-presentation in Social Comparison

There are currently many scholars who interpret the use of social media as leading to the disturbance of body image based on social comparison theory, however, their views are widely polarised. Social comparison theory is an influential psychological theory that refers to the subjective driving force of individuals to make comparisons with others to understand their own evaluation and position in society and to self-examine [7]. Taking Instagram as an example, Bue [8] inspected how 157 female social media users aged 18-35 years visually observed a selfie through a quantitative method of eye-tracking data collection, which compared their distribution of attention to high and low anxiety body regions. The results of the study illustrate that the high frequency of use of Instagram as a highly visualised platform by young female users is contributing to upward social comparisons and further leads to more attention to their high anxiety body regions. Hawes et al. [9] elaborate on a similar point that young females are more likely to make social comparisons after using social media, resulting in appearance reactions and anxiety, and even subsequent social anxiety. Although Instagram differs from Xiaohongshu in terms of functionality and use, both have the important social media platform reference factor of being highly visualised, so these study findings exist with reliability and reference value.

Nevertheless, some scholars take the opposite view. Through the use of big data collection methods, Lang [10] expressed that 79.84% of Xiaohongshu posts conveyed the thematic idea of rejecting appearance anxiety and facing self-presentation with healthy body imagery in a positive mindset. The posts alleviate the anxious mindset of the audience by alerting them to the difference between social media and real life. The analysis may be inaccurate, as it is collecting data over a short period of time. Chen [11] also states that social media, mainly Xiaohongshu, has played a catalytic role in combating stereotypes of female appearance and has fostered the formation of a diverse female aesthetic. Due to the limitations of its content analysis, its findings remain to be considered.

The findings of the literature demonstrate that the intervention of platforms and influencers, the internalisation of ideal beauty in social media, and the presentation of the self in social comparison are all important influences on young females’ appearance anxiety in social media. However, there is still a gap in this field in terms of the means of reinforcing young females’ appearance anxiety. Therefore, this research will aim to address this gap.

3. Methodology & Method

This research will focus on assessing how self-presentation in contemporary social media contributes to young females’ appearance anxiety and seeks to address gaps in the current research on the means by which young female demographics are driven to enhance appearance anxiety in the

field of social media-induced appearance anxiety. Through the findings of the previous study, it was determined that the causes of appearance anxiety in young females due to social media are primarily divided into platform and platform influencers, personal perception and social comparison factors. Therefore, after identifying the causal factors, the question of an intensive promotion approach in self-presentation is one that needs to be further investigated.

As this research will use Xiaohongshu as a representative example of a social media platform, the study will use a qualitative analysis method to conduct an open-ended questionnaire and further semi-structured one-on-one in-depth interviews with young females aged 18-30 years old who use Xiaohongshu and live in first and second-tier cities. For the questionnaire, the survey will be conducted using a self-generated open-ended response questionnaire distributed online. The focus will be on personal experiences, perceptions and interpretations of posts sharing on topics such as beauty and skincare, makeup and outfits, as well as personal considerations and influencing factors for posting. The sample size of the questionnaire was selected at forty people and the effective response rate was 97.5%. In regards to the one-on-one interview section, given the user-generated content features of the Xiaohongshu platform, the KOL and KOC users in its platform are better placed to assist the research objectives. As such, the representative users who qualified for the research will be selected for the interviews to evaluate. The interviews will be conducted face-to-face, each lasting approximately fifteen to twenty minutes, with three representative KOLs and KOC users as participants. Their responses will be recorded in the form of notes, and all three interviews will be recorded with the consent of the interviewees. Both the questionnaire and the interview study satisfied the requirements of the ethical guidelines.

In previous studies in this area, most researchers have chosen to take a qualitative method when assessing individual appearance anxiety, which is effective in expanding the predictive possibilities of the study by gaining a broader insight into the many aspects that contribute to it while preserving individual differences. Some scholars have also chosen to use a statistical approach, but in relation to the individual variations that exist for the purposes of this research, data collection cannot accurately summarise the thoughts of the sample. Thus, the qualitative method of research was adopted through a combination of references to previous scholars' research methods and an evaluation of the objectives of this research. In addition, in order to mitigate research bias, I will indicate in the survey and interviews that the research was established following a review of the academic literature and that the research represents a personal academic consideration of issues in the field and does not represent a particular consideration of the young female population as distinct from other groups.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Questionnaire Surveys

A questionnaire with open-ended questions was carried out with forty qualified participants to analyse how self-presentation on social media propagates young females' appearance anxiety. Participants' responses were analysed and then transcribed and categorised into similar themes to cater for the research questions. In their responses, participants provided answers on their individual interpretations and perceptions of the posts shared in Xiaohongshu on topics such as beauty and skincare, makeup and outfits, as well as the different strategies and factors influencing their personal posts.

The majority of participants clustered between the ages of 18 and 25, and they used Xiaohongshu relatively frequently and for a longer period of time, generally between one and two hours per day, or more than two hours. This result is due to the UGC feature of Xiaohongshu, which enables the most posts on the platform to be created, shared, or discussed by users, or participate in

discussions about posts shared by other users [12]. Their main purpose for using Xiaohongshu is to find cosmetics products, get inspiration for outfits, search for travel tips and so on. Almost all participants follow the beauty and skincare, makeup and outfits topics discussed and posts shared on Xiaohongshu, and most of them feel dissatisfied, anxious and inferior about their appearance as a result of their participation in these topics, or even just browsing. The responses to these overwhelming views can be interpreted to reveal that young females develop self-appearance anxiety, which is shaped by considerations of checking the appearance of others through social media, and generating concerns and discussions about the appearance of others.

Using the intervention of the platform as a factor contributing to appearance anxiety, the majority of participants indicated that they experience appearance anxiety because of the photos or videos in the shared posts, with hardly any participants expressing that they engage in anxiety because of the textual component. This is how intuitive a visual experience social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu or Instagram bring to audiences as highly visual platforms [13]. This feature can be regarded as a double-edged sword that can be more vividly and persuasively presented when disseminating positive values than a mere textual narrative, however, whether it is intentional on the part of the platform, the user or the communicator, once the trend of its communication turns to the promotion of potentially undesirable values, the effect will be difficult to resist.

The vast number of participants reported that they were either tempted to buy anti-anxiety products because of recommendations from bloggers and influencers on Xiaohongshu, or to purchase them directly through the platform. This result was outside of predictions, and thus reflected the uncontrollable degree of appearance anxiety among young females. The reason is that this marketing strategy of demonstrating the effects of a product to alleviate appearance anxiety may not actually correspond to the real effect to a certain extent, that is, the presenter may have improved her appearance through the use of the product, but she may have a relatively high quality and native appearance that tends to conform to the popular aesthetic ideal [14]. As a result, consumers are often unaware of the distinctions in their control variables when they refer to the effects displayed. This analysis also applies to the self-presentation of users in social comparisons.

Nearly half of the participant group stated that they preferred to follow the posts of their peers, close friends or classmates rather than influencers or celebrities. Further, they are prone to anxiety about their self-appearance in these posts. However, whether it is the people around them or celebrities, there is a high probability that their self-presentation on social media is to some extent edited to cater for individual needs and social evaluation in order to portray a perfect virtual image [5]. Users are also influenced by the people they follow to present their personal values through self-presentation, often artificially altered to achieve the desired objective, commonly known as “Photoshopping”. Hence, on the basis of social comparison theory, self-presentation through excessive photo editing can lead to severe appearance anxiety in young females.

4.2. Interviews

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were carried out with three Xiaohongshu KOLs and KOC representative users to explore further the means by which young females’ appearance anxiety is formed and facilitated on social media. The interviewees’ responses were transcribed and organised into comparable topics of discussion to facilitate the analysis of the research questions. They focus on further elaboration of the way used in relation to strategies of self-presentation, platform interventions, and the impact of social aesthetic convergence. Some of the contents of the interviews were quoted to support and exemplify the findings of the research.

4.2.1. Self-presentation Strategies in Accordance with Aesthetic Trends

When interviewees were asked how they catered to social aesthetic trends in posting on Xiaohongshu, their responses varied from individual to individual and with some relative variability. Interviewee 1, a typical social media KOL influencer, indicated that by putting a lot of effort into examining posts on the platform, her aesthetic gradually converges to cater to the mainstream aesthetics that are popular on the platform.

Pressed further on this issue, she stated that:

The dominant Wanghong (referring to influencers on social media) aesthetic in today's society is a juvenile sense of lower eyelid area, glassy lips and low cheekbones, and I learnt them this way to hold the secret to traffic exposure.

(Interviewer 1, Age 20, University Student)

The rest of the interviewees said that they care what the aesthetic trend is, but do not follow it completely to make changes to their self-presentation, and that most of the posts they publish still incorporate some aesthetic trend to match their personal sharing needs as appropriate.

In the above-mentioned interviews, both KOLs and KOC users more or less cater to aesthetic trends in society and care about their position in social evaluation in terms of their self-presentation, and it was confirmed that this is often the way to get higher attention and traffic. Shao [15] claims that this behaviour is also evident among regular users, as this is what gives them the opportunity to get noticed by the public. As a result, once the ideology of self-presentation in social media is solidified, individuals with differences tend to conform to the general trend and gradually deepen the psychology of appearance anxiety as they repeatedly examine whether they are fitting the trend.

4.2.2. Platform Intervention

Regarding the question of platform involvement, the interviewees basically shared the same idea that platforms are not responsible for the vicious spread of appearance anxiety, but only for the availability of the medium. Interviewees expressed that they should not attribute the spread of appearance anxiety and the single aesthetic phenomenon of 'white, young and thin' on Xiaohongshu to the control of the platform, as the platform is an online sharing place where information intersects and conflicts and public opinion is oriented in a way that is beyond its full control. As interviewee 3 stated:

I believe that individuals are capable of distinguishing between posts on the platform that are supposedly "beauty tips" or "skincare" and those that are advertised under the guise of sharing. For me personally, once I understand that the core purpose of posting content is to make a profit, then the content itself becomes much less attractive and credible to me. For example, if a piece of content initially makes me feel anxious about my figure, but then I realise that the blogger is selling a related weight loss product, I don't feel any anxiety.

(Interviewer 3, Age 21, University Student)

Subsequently, when asked further about user judgement, she commented that:

We cannot expect absolute self-confidence and absolutely correct self-positioning and judgement from every person. ... But it is certain that if a user has a high degree of self-identification with herself, she will not become anxious, regardless of what she reads. Is it reasonable to blame the platform for transmitting anxiety? I think it is still the dominant ideology of society.

(Interviewer 3, Age 21, University Student)

Another interviewee gave her thoughts from a contrasting perspective of the times, arguing that when social media such as Xiaohongshu was not yet widespread, young females were relatively

confident in their self-presentation in real life or online. But not that this is the responsibility of the platform, merely that it is a medium like Xiaohongshu that affords contemporary young females the platform to present themselves and communicate their personal views. She cited the example of her cousin:

These teenagers like my cousin who grow up with a platform like Xiaohongshu can tend to be more demanding about their appearance. She always complains to me that she doesn't have a delicate jawline or a high skull, and that she struggles to be confident in photos.

(Interviewer 1, Age 20, University Student)

It is clear from the interviewees' responses that they are at odds with the views held in the literature, so it can be inferred that without the support of academic research studies, young female users prefer to attribute their appearance anxiety to their own and social causes.

4.2.3. Aesthetic Convergence in Society

As a digital public sphere for sharing information and life, the dominant mindset prevalent within the Xiaohongshu platform is a miniature reflection of social ideology [16]. The aesthetic trends such as "palm-sized face" and "A4 waist" are thereby also reflected in Xiaohongshu [4]. The answers were also polarised as to whether users on Xiaohongshu have truly accepted and embraced the diversity of young females' aesthetics, or whether they have converged on a similar standardised aesthetic. Interviewee 2 noted that the general platform context has improved remarkably in recent years:

Characteristics such as dark skin and slight chubbiness seem to be gradually accepted and loved, which signifies an awakening of female consciousness and people starting to accept what they really like.

(Interviewer 2, Age 21, University Student)

However, other interviewees countered that users do not truly embrace a diverse aesthetic, and that some bloggers with millions of traffic still exist in a consistent state of white and thin. This is largely in accordance with the results of the questionnaire, from which it can be concluded that the degree of anxiety about young females' appearance varies with social aesthetic trends and the adjustment of individual mindsets.

5. Limitations

To begin with, given the audience of the Xiaohongshu platform, the survey population for this study was only young Chinese females, whose factors in the demographics were limited. In future studies, consideration could be given to expanding the study population to the worldwide. Secondly, the in-depth interviews in this study involved a relatively small number of interviewees, which may be slightly lacking in the scientific and referential validity of the study.

6. Conclusion

This research used a qualitative method as the major analytical approach to the study, administering an open-ended questionnaire to the target audience and conducting further one-to-one semi-structured in-depth interviews with representative KOLs and KOCs. The findings demonstrate that self-presentation in social media serves to intensify young females' appearance anxiety primarily through the platform's undesirable value advocacy and influencer marketing interventions, individuals' reinvention of their self-presentation to conform to dominant aesthetic trends based on the ideology of social comparison, and converging and relatively entrenched aesthetic trends in society.

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