

Aesthetic Dilemma: A Phenomenon Analysis of Chinese Young Women's Appearance Anxiety

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Abstract: Appearance anxiety is a psychological disorder commonly experienced by young contemporary Chinese women. This issue is mainly caused by the individual's dissatisfaction with their current and ideal body image, resulting in low self-esteem. This paper aims to analyze the phenomenon of young Chinese women's appearance anxiety and to study the main objective and external factors that cause this problem and its influence. This study is significant for understanding the causes and social results of appearance anxiety in young Chinese women. Based on the literature review method, this paper explores and finds that China's socialized aesthetic is a conjunct product of the social system, cultural concept, mass media publicity, family of origin and other factors. Appearance anxiety not only harms individual psychology but also may lead to physical consumption behavior, and then form a cycle of promoting the development of the medical beauty industry - solidifying social aesthetics - spreading appearance anxiety.

Keywords: appearance anxiety, social aesthetics, Chinese young women, physical consumption practice

1. Introduction

With the rise of social media and the Internet, contemporary Chinese women are increasingly concerned about their appearance and body image, and the phenomenon of "appearance anxiety" is spreading. The questionnaire survey on appearance anxiety in colleges and universities shows that 59.03% of college students have some appearance anxiety. Among them, the proportion of female students (59.67%) who are anxious is higher than that of male students (37.14%) [1]. According to the statistics on the gender distribution of Chinese medical beauty consumers by China Business Information Network, female customers (87.4%) are much larger than men (12.6%). From the perspective of the age group of medical beauty consumers, young consumers aged 20-25 are the core group of medical beauty consumption, accounting for 38.2%. Overall, young women in the new era are more nervous about appearance than men and are the leading group troubled by "appearance anxiety".

"Appearance anxiety" has developed from a psychological problem that troubles individuals to a mental problem affecting society. It is worth arousing social attention to establish a positive social atmosphere. The core issue of this paper is to explore the realistic factors that cause the appearance anxiety of young Chinese women and pay attention to the social results of this phenomenon.

2. Analysis of Objective Orientation Factors of Appearance Anxiety

"Appearance anxiety" refers to the negative, insecure psychological emotions produced by an individual's excessive review of their appearance defects. This phenomenon results from the subject's active choice and is closely related to individual psychological factors, social comparison psychology and physical self-esteem [2]. Meanwhile, the influence of social structure, culture, family and other factors should not be ignored.

2.1. Implicit Restraint of the Social System

There are apparent manifestations of the patriarchal system in Chinese society. Tracing back to history, ancient Chinese society had a pathological aesthetic bondage to women: women must be beautiful with tiny feet. Foot binding, a habit of destroying women's bodies and controlling women's minds, has constrained ancient Chinese women since the Song Dynasty. The contemporary mainstream aesthetic of "white, young and thin" also strengthens the physical differences between men and women, which magnifies the social gender characteristics that women need to be protected, dependent and vulnerable [3]. As an implicit restraint means, aesthetics imperceptibly brainwashes women so that they pay attention to their appearance and are forced to become the object of gaze.

The unfair distribution of resources under patriarchy forces women to become socially competitive only through the appearance of a superior class. Nowadays, from the perspective of job hunting, mate selection, income level and other aspects, beauty can improve women's social competitiveness and bring women more social resources. According to the 2021 China Workplace Women's Insight Report, more than 50% of workplace women have facial anxiety. Among them, "when interviewing for a job, people who are beautiful are relatively easier to find a job" and "beautiful colleagues in the department are more likely to be appreciated by leaders and colleagues" are rated as two of the top three causes of appearance anxiety [4]. The restraint of the social system makes women objectified, while the explicit structural injustice forces women to actively pursue beauty and gradually objectify themselves.

2.2. Strengthening of Traditional Social Concepts

Social aesthetic value is influenced by social and cultural background, so cultural factors are the antecedents to the study of appearance anxiety. Chinese women have long been taught to judge success by their appearances. "Women must be decent when they go out," "makeup is the most basic etiquette for girls," "there are no ugly women, only lazy women." [1] These traditional concepts associate women's poor appearance with negative evaluation factors such as "laziness", "impropriety", and "discourtesy", implicitly instructing women to pay attention to appearance.

2.3. Solidification of Mass Media Aesthetics

With the large-scale development of the medical beauty industry, promoting plastic surgery and light medical beauty for plastic surgery standards emphasizes the same set of social, aesthetic standards [5]. This makes women re-evaluate and look at their appearance and bodies. If there is a difference between their bodies and the standards advertised by medical beauty advertisements, women will have the idea that they still have room to improve their figures. At the same time, specific female images are widely circulated in advertisements, publications, film and television works, guiding women to pursue the "beauty" aesthetic recognition of society.

With the rapid development of social media, the Internet celebrity aesthetic has swept through the personal and private sphere of many users. Retouching apps such as Beauty Camera and Meitu Xiu Xiu allow users to see their "perfect" appearance [6]. When users return to the real world and see a

strong contrast between their authentic and fictional selves, they will feel disappointed and doubt their appearance. Mass media continue to strengthen the publicity of social aesthetics and affect the individual's judgment of beauty [1]. Individuals who do not conform to the mainstream aesthetic will continue to follow the social aesthetic to seek social identity.

2.4. The Monetization of Beauty

In the highly fragmented and rapidly social Internet relationships, the influence of appearance level is amplified and becomes the most direct way to gain attention. According to statistics, in popular social media apps such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu, beautiful photos and videos are more likely to receive more views and forwarding rates. Media and live streaming platforms provide more channels for the appearance level, including advertising cooperation, gift rewards, live streaming with goods, etc. [3]. When the monetization of appearance is amplified, the value of beauty can stimulate the public's pursuit of beauty and increase appearance anxiety.

2.5. The Educational Environment of the Family of the Origin

Home education environment also has an impact on women's appearance anxiety. This inferiority of appearance comes from the disapproval and uncertainty of the family of origin. Family education that comments on the children's appearance, such as criticizing or expressing negative comments on girls' appearance for a long time, will cause them negative emotions about their appearance.

"Many visitors who complain that they don't look good actually look good, but they still think they are paranoid that they are ugly, and even have anxiety because of the problem of appearance." In the process of communication, we will find that the root cause of anxiety of most visitors is not in appearance but in childhood or adolescence by the influence of the family or society of origin. This is a psychological problem, and appearance anxiety is just one way of expressing psychological problems. The behaviors and attitudes of parents and other social relationships are critical to the influence of children. Each child's cognition and behavior largely depend on parents' "words and deeds" and other social relations. "Children will incorporate the behaviors they see, the parts they approve of, into their self-knowledge to regulate their own behavior." (Interview data: Yu Lili, psychological counsellor of Siyuan Psychological Counseling Center)

3. The Result of Appearance Anxiety

Appearance anxiety usually leads to simultaneous attention and self-assessment of body image, resulting in young women falling into the practice of body consumption.

People's emphasis on body maintenance and appearance in consumer culture mainly includes two basic categories: the inner and outer bodies. The former is related to the body in the medical sense, which is related to the health factors such as maintenance and treatment when the physiological function of the body is degraded; The latter refers to the body in the social sense, including the appearance presented, daily actions, and the body in social space [7]. The body has become a consumer product for women in a consumer society. Therefore, once women of different ages have this awareness, they will consciously surrender to this concept and put it into action to save their bodies so that the disciplined body will take the initiative to enter the beauty, skincare, maintenance and other institutions related to women [8]. From the theoretical perspective of Jean Baudrillard, author of *The Consumer Society*, when the consumption of body and beauty has become a common ideology in the consumer society, the medical beauty industry has been spawned. In recent years, the scale of China's medical beauty market has continued to grow, from 99.3 billion yuan in 2017 to 226.8 billion yuan in 2022. It is estimated that in 2023, the scale of China's medical beauty market will reach 266.6 billion yuan, far higher than the global market.

4. Conclusion

Through in-depth research on the phenomena, guiding factors and social results of Chinese young women's appearance anxiety, it is found that the causes of appearance anxiety are affected by many factors.

Although the long-standing social system and cultural factors have deeply rooted social aesthetics in female groups' minds, the idea of pursuing diversified aesthetics has gradually awakened in the new era. Postmodernism believes that beauty is not evaluated by immutable objective criteria but by flexible or subjective criteria that fluctuate with environmental changes [9]. New media continue to strengthen women's recognition of social aesthetics and spread "appearance anxiety" but then prove that it is only a tool to promote ideas. In the new era, women have more opportunities to make reasonable use of new media to open a broader and diverse space for their presentation.

Appearance anxiety is closely related to body consumption behavior, further intensifying the individual's dissatisfaction with their appearance and the pursuit of perfection. In response to this issue, we recognize the need to mitigate appearance anxiety's negative impact on young women. First, the education and guidance of the media and society should be strengthened to convey the concept of positive and healthy body image and call for recognition and respect for diversity. Family education should also focus on cultivating women's self-esteem and self-confidence and help them establish a positive body image identity. Regarding body consumption behavior, we recommend strengthening relevant supervision and norms to ensure the safety and reliability of cosmetic surgery and other beauty industries. At the same time, psychological counselling and support services are provided to help young women cope with the psychological pressure caused by appearance anxiety and build positive self-awareness and self-worth. Through more in-depth research and the development of comprehensive interventions, we can provide a more positive and healthier psychological environment for young women and promote their self-esteem, self-confidence and overall development of physical and mental health.

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