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Impact of Social Media on Female High School Students' Appearance Anxiety and Aesthetic Surgery Decisions

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Abstract. The widespread use of social media has intensified appearance anxiety among younger age groups, particularly female high school students. By promoting specific beauty standards and idealized images, modern platforms reinforce this anxiety and drive some adolescents to seek relief via cosmetic procedures. This paper explores how social media shapes female high school students' perceptions of appearance and their receptiveness to medical aesthetic information, analyzing the impact of aesthetic advertisements and social media platforms in constructing beauty ideals and shaping young people's attitudes toward cosmetic procedures. Based on social media data and existing literature, it examines how these platforms perpetuate beauty standards and intensify appearance anxiety. The results indicate that social media beauty standards and the marketing strategies of medical aesthetic advertisements greatly affect female high school students' appearance anxiety. To alleviate this anxiety and foster healthier body image perceptions, it is important to improve media literacy, enhance platform oversight, and provide adequate psychological support.

Keywords: Appearance Anxiety, Female High School Students, Medical Aesthetics, Social Platforms

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid growth of social media in China has heightened appearance anxiety among young people, especially female high school students. Platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo promote idealized beauty standards, thus shaping perceptions and raising appearance-related concerns. Influenced by societal beauty standards, media images, and peer expectations, appearance anxiety describes a state of dissatisfaction with one's looks that often causes psychological stress and diminished self-worth. However, this trend has sparked widespread discussions about mental health, aesthetic values, and the impact of social media. Most studies on appearance anxiety focus on adults, especially its mental health effects on young women, and there is now a substantial body of related literature. Yet, there is still limited research on appearance anxiety among female high school students and its link to medical aesthetic consumption. In particular, the influence of social media on this group remains underexplored. Accordingly, this study investigates how female high school students encounter medical aesthetic information through social media and how this shapes their appearance anxiety. It focuses on how platforms promote beauty standards, how students access related content, and how this affects their decisions about aesthetic procedures. Drawing on

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psychological and sociological theories, the paper analyzes the sociocultural factors that amplify appearance anxiety. Hence, it proposes improving media literacy, strengthening platform oversight, and providing psychological support to help students develop a healthier body image.

2. Overview of appearance anxiety

2.1. The origins and development of appearance anxiety

In modern societies, the gap between personal appearance and cultural beauty standards can result in appearance anxiety. Early research on body image laid the groundwork for this concept. It has been suggested that self-perception is shaped both by one's physical form and by imagined social judgments, underscoring the social and psychological dimensions of body image. This perspective later evolved into the concept of social physique anxiety, which explains the discomfort individuals feel when they believe their appearance falls short of societal standards [1-2]. Progressively, this concept has evolved into an important subject of inquiry in psychology and sociology, with various contributing factors such as media influence, peer comparison, and cultural beauty standards being extensively examined. At present, appearance anxiety is broadly regarded as a key factor affecting mental health, particularly among young people who are persistently exposed to dominant beauty ideals through mass and social media.

2.2. The psychological and social impact of appearance anxiety

Appearance anxiety exerts profound psychological and social influence, especially among female high school students during adolescence [3].

Psychologically, appearance anxiety often disrupts self-perception and emotional stability. When individuals feel dissatisfied with their appearance, they may develop self-denial, which in turn leads to low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. This sense of inadequacy further undermines self-worth and intensifies psychological distress. In the adolescent stage, awareness of body image reaches a heightened level. Female students, experiencing rapid physiological changes, tend to place greater emphasis on their appearance and body shape, and often develop feelings of inferiority when dissatisfied. In comparison with their male peers, they generally report poorer mental health and are more susceptible to fear, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. From early adolescence, the prevalence of depression among girls begins to exceed that of boys, reaching nearly twice as high by late adolescence. These disparities are attributed to cyclical hormonal fluctuations as well as to enduring social norms and behavioral expectations regarding young women's appearance and conduct.

From a social perspective, unrealistic beauty standards and media representations significantly intensify this anxiety. In particular, mass media and social media consistently disseminate idealized images via television, films, advertisements, and online content, hence shaping widespread societal expectations of beauty. In these environments, individuals often gauge their self-worth primarily through social approval and evaluations based on appearance, which strengthens the perception that physical looks determine one's social standing and relationship quality. Consequently, continuous comparison with such ideals reinforces feelings of inadequacy and intensifies anxiety related to appearance.

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3. The impact of social media on appearance anxiety among female high school students

3.1. The mechanisms by which social media amplifies appearance anxiety

The intensification of appearance anxiety on social media results from the interplay of algorithmic filtering and user-generated content that persistently emphasize appearance-based comparisons and uphold dominant beauty standards [4]. Notably, users are repeatedly exposed to appearance-focused content as algorithmic curation leverages their browsing history and interaction data to maintain a continuous delivery loop. For example, topics such as the No-Makeup Challenge on Douyin and the "Extreme Makeover" on Xiaohongshu are circulated intensively within targeted user groups, thus ensuring continuous exposure to appearance-related material. Moreover, these algorithms promote engagement by highlighting content that triggers social comparison and self-scrutiny. The frequent circulation of idealized or transformation-focused content motivates users to measure themselves against such standards, amplifying their anxiety about appearance. Besides, platform interaction features such as likes, comments, and shares further embed aesthetic evaluation into users' social experiences, converting abstract judgments into embodied anxieties tied to self-worth. While social comparison theory and objectification theory provide useful frameworks for understanding these dynamics, a detailed discussion of their psychological implications is reserved for subsequent sections to maintain focus on the underlying dissemination mechanisms. Through this multi-layered process, social media transforms appearance anxiety from an individual concern into a broader social phenomenon, sustained and intensified by digital content ecosystems.

3.2. Key characteristics and needs of female high school students in the digital era

Female high school students, situated in the sensitive developmental period of adolescence, exhibit a pronounced focus on self-identity formation and appearance perception [5]. This stage is marked by heightened self-consciousness and an emerging desire for social acceptance, thus making them particularly vulnerable to external influences. Their self-image concerns are deeply intertwined with prevailing cultural norms, especially those perpetuated by social media's beauty standards. These adolescents actively use popular platforms such as Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, engaging in content consumption as well as creation and sharing. Their dual participation heightens exposure to beauty narratives, enabling them to monitor and absorb the aesthetic transformations of influencers and celebrities. Such continuous involvement plays a crucial role in forming their perceptions of beauty and social value. Furthermore, social media serves as a vital arena for self-expression and peer interaction, which significantly impacts their aesthetic expectations. The beauty standards prioritized by female high school students typically revolve around flawless skin, harmonious body shape, and symmetrical facial features, aligning with dominant cultural notions of beauty. Moreover, their aesthetic needs are not purely superficial but also reflect deeper psychological drives for validation, belonging, and identity consolidation. The alignment with social media-driven beauty norms becomes a means through which they negotiate their social standing and self-worth within peer groups and the broader cultural context.

3.3. The manifestations of appearance anxiety under social media influence

Through curated content and prevailing visual styles, social media platforms actively influence and disseminate dominant aesthetic ideals, fostering their broad acceptance and internalization among young people [5]. For example, trends such as the "Collarbone Chain Challenge," flawless facial

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makeup, and “cartoon legs” have gained significant traction, thereby fostering a shared aesthetic identity. As a result, female high school students often experience intense pressure to conform, believing that acceptance and social recognition rely on meeting these ideals. This internalization leads to frequent self-scrutiny and increased concern about appearance. Interactions on social media, like posting photos and receiving likes and comments, further reinforce the notion that appearance is a crucial measure of social status and self-worth. Consequently, these pressures drive a relentless pursuit of idealized beauty, often at the expense of valuing diversity and natural looks. The impact of social media extends beyond appearance anxiety to affect self-esteem and emotional well-being. Failure to meet these externally imposed standards can lead to feelings of inferiority, rejection, and emotional distress, increasing risks of anxiety and depression. The dominance of beauty standards propagated by social media as the key measure of social acceptance can erode female high school students’ self-esteem and affect their social conduct, hence contributing to prolonged psychological distress and feelings of insecurity [6].

3.4. The rise of medical aesthetics as a coping strategy for appearance anxiety

Female high school students often engage in appearance comparisons on social media, with likes and comments serving as key indicators of their perceived appearance value. Thus, observing peers’ highly liked and curated images can foster feelings of envy and self-doubt. For instance, among 193 female college students surveyed, only 33% reported no anxiety about their body shape, while 67% experienced varying degrees of anxiety, highlighting the significant influence of social media’s comparison and evaluation dynamics on appearance anxiety [7].

In response to escalating appearance anxiety, many female high school students turn to medical aesthetic procedures as a means to alleviate their distress. Their motivations include the pursuit of “perfection” in line with prevailing beauty standards, the desire to boost self-confidence and social status, and the aim to gain greater peer recognition. The influence of social media amplifies these motivations, as adolescents are exposed to frequent transformations by influencers and celebrities, often viewing medical aesthetics as a quick path to ideal appearance. Besides, promotional content from medical aesthetic providers and online influencers reinforces the belief that such procedures can rapidly resolve appearance-related insecurities. Although medical aesthetics can temporarily alleviate appearance anxiety, their sustained effectiveness depends on accompanying psychological support and proper aesthetic education. In the absence of these, the initial improvements may be short-lived and could potentially exacerbate anxiety and associated mental health problems over time.

4. The strategies for social and platform responsibilities to reduce appearance anxiety

4.1. Platform responsibilities and content supervision

Through boosted algorithmic optimization and rigorous content moderation, social media platforms help mitigate appearance anxiety [8]. For instance, platforms such as Xiaohongshu tailor content pushes based on user interactions, including likes, comments, and shares, ensuring personalized yet balanced content delivery without forcing specific narratives on users. This strategy reduces users’ exposure to potentially harmful appearance-focused content. Moreover, platforms are increasingly reinforcing content review mechanisms to identify and limit the spread of harmful or misleading information. User feedback channels empower the community to report inappropriate or unwanted content, contributing to a healthier digital environment. Besides, industry self-regulation is essential

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for maintaining content authenticity and promoting positive beauty standards. Platforms can limit the prevalence of excessive beauty filters and encourage the sharing of unedited, genuine images, fostering acceptance of diverse appearances. Despite a temporary reduction in engagement metrics, such measures greatly improve long-term user satisfaction and platform reputation. For example, restrictions on beauty filters have been linked to a 20% increase in user satisfaction and a 30% decrease in negative feedback. External oversight by governments and regulatory bodies is equally important. Clearer regulations and stricter enforcement can standardize platform practices and hold operators accountable, ensuring the psychological well-being of users is prioritized. Additionally, the application of advanced technologies like machine learning enables platforms to automatically detect and filter content that may exacerbate appearance anxiety, including heavily edited images, while simultaneously promoting positive content focused on self-acceptance and diverse beauty ideals. And such intelligent systems can help guide users toward healthier aesthetic perspectives and minimize harmful social comparisons.

4.2. Educational initiatives and media literacy enhancement

The development of comprehensive educational strategies and the advancement of media literacy are vital steps in tackling the underlying drivers of appearance anxiety intensified by social media [9]. Formal education systems should integrate targeted media literacy programs that not only teach technical skills for evaluating online content but also cultivate the ability to recognize and challenge subtle persuasive techniques embedded in visual and narrative forms. Familiarity with the ways algorithms, influencer culture, and curated imagery construct beauty perceptions increases students' resilience to unrealistic ideals. In addition to technical literacy, emphasis on aesthetic education that promotes diverse representations of beauty and body positivity is essential. And exposure to critical discussions on how beauty norms evolve culturally and commercially enables young people to question dominant ideals rather than internalize them uncritically. For instance, classroom activities can encourage students to analyze advertising, influencer posts, and viral beauty trends, fostering the habit of active rather than passive consumption. Besides, the creation of supportive educational environments that foster self-acceptance and mutual respect among peers is essential. Programs that integrate psychological education, such as workshops on self-esteem and mental well-being, can provide students with practical strategies to manage appearance-related stress. This approach shifts the focus from merely "coping" with anxiety to proactively shaping healthier values and social norms. In the long term, enhanced media literacy and aesthetic education equip students to critically navigate online beauty discourses, resist social comparison traps, and cultivate self-worth that is independent of external validation. This preventive approach lowers the risk of maladaptive coping strategies, such as excessive cosmetic modification, in response to appearance pressures."

4.3. Marketing standards and industry management

The formulation of explicit marketing standards and the enforcement of robust industry regulations are vital steps to limit commercial practices that fuel appearance anxiety [10]. Besides, social media platforms should implement stringent self-regulatory measures to ensure that promotional content does not exploit users' insecurities about appearance.

For example, advertisements for medical aesthetic services must be vetted to prevent the implicit linking of physical :imperfections" with social or personal failure. In addition, effective internal review systems and user-friendly reporting channels can empower audiences to flag misleading or anxiety-inducing content, prompting timely removal and accountability. Meanwhile, government

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agencies also play a critical regulatory role by setting legal boundaries for the marketing of beauty and medical aesthetic services. Clear enforcement guidelines like the Medical Aesthetic Advertising Enforcement Guide issued by the State Administration for Market Regulation demonstrate this institutional commitment to combating advertisements that deliberately manufacture appearance anxiety. Furthermore, stricter licensing and compliance checks for aesthetic service providers can deter unethical marketing practices and protect consumers from deceptive claims or substandard procedures. Hence, the combined force of platform self-regulation and government intervention can substantially limit the spread of anxiety-inducing marketing, safeguarding users' rights and mental well-being. In the long run, such governance not only helps cultivate healthier consumer values but also fosters a more transparent and trustworthy beauty industry. By aligning commercial interests with ethical standards, the industry may transition from capitalizing on appearance-based anxieties to advocating for realistic and inclusive beauty standards.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex interplay between social media exposure, cultural beauty norms, and the emergence of appearance anxiety among female high school students. By investigating the mechanisms of algorithmic amplification, peer comparison, and influencer-driven trends, the paper exhibits how dominant beauty ideals are constructed and internalized, intensifying psychological distress and motivating coping strategies such as the pursuit of medical aesthetic procedures. In addition, the findings emphasize that platform governance, educational interventions, and stricter industry regulations are indispensable for mitigating the negative impacts of appearance anxiety and promoting more inclusive and realistic beauty representations. However, this study is limited by its reliance on existing literature and illustrative survey data, which may not fully capture the nuanced experiences of diverse student populations across different cultural and socio-economic contexts. Accordingly, future research could draw on large-scale empirical evidence to better capture the development of appearance anxiety over time and refine targeted interventions. Moving forward, closer collaboration across education, policy, platform governance, and mental health fields will be essential. Such collective efforts should balance regulation and literacy-building to strengthen young people's resilience. Ultimately, addressing appearance anxiety requires an integrated strategy combining individual empowerment with broader social and technological safeguards.

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