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The Impact of the Male Gaze on Women's Mental Health in Contemporary Society

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the in-depth impact of the male gaze on women's mental health in contemporary society. Centering on the "male gaze" theory and integrating related theories such as "self-objectification" and "self-surveillance", it systematically analyzes the mechanism of the male gaze in diverse scenarios. In the context of social media, women often fall into constant self-scrutiny due to appearance evaluations and body comparisons; in the consumer market, the shaping of "idealized female images" drives appearance anxiety-driven marketing, intensifying self-objectification; in the workplace, appearance bias may also affect women's career development and psychological state. Through the analysis of typical cases in the above scenarios, the study finds that the male gaze not only directly triggers issues such as appearance anxiety and eating disorders among women, but also gradually erodes their sense of subjectivity, alienating their self-perception into "objects to be watched". Addressing the limitations of existing strategies, this paper proposes countermeasures from multiple dimensions: social media platforms should strengthen supervision over harmful content, enterprises need to improve anti-lookism systems, the government should issue policies to guide equal cultural values, and women's groups should enhance self-identity through mutual support. This initiative aims to provide theoretical and practical references for alleviating the negative impacts of the male gaze and promoting gender equality.

Keywords: Male Gaze, Feminism, Social Media, Women's Mental Health.

1. Introduction

In contemporary society driven by data technology, the popularization of social media and the expansion of the consumer market have reshaped the logic of information dissemination and value construction. As a crucial manifestation of patriarchal culture, the "male gaze" is intervening in women's daily lives in more concealed and pervasive ways. From the aesthetic content of "white, young and thin" tilted by algorithms on social media, to the materialized labels of "cutting men" and "dating artifacts" in consumer advertisements, to the implicit evaluation of appearance and ability in the workplace, women are constantly placed in the position of "being watched" and "being judged". Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" theory, Fredrickson and Roberts' "self-materialization theory" and Snyder's "self-monitoring theory" provide the core framework for analyzing the psychological impact of this phenomenon. The existing research has initially touched on the relationship between

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male gaze and women's psychological problems, but the systematic analysis of its role path and the targeted discussion of coping strategies still need to be deepened. In view of this, this paper combs the communication background of male gaze, analyzes its dual impact on women's mental health with specific cases, and puts forward multi-dimensional coping strategies, in order to deepen the understanding of this issue, and provide ideas for improving women's living environment and promoting gender equality.

2. Background

2.1. The communication background of contemporary male gaze

In today's society, with the continuous development of data technology, social media has become popular in people's lives. According to a report released by the China Internet Network Information Center, there are 1.123 billion Internet users in China, of which 49.6% are women [1]. The popularity of social media has driven the way of information dissemination, and also provided a new carrier for male gaze - platforms such as Xiaohongshu and TikTok often use tags that conform to traditional male aesthetics. According to the data of "good-looking" female bloggers on TikTok, 33% of the titles of their works contain body preference words, such as "slimming" and "whitening", while 24% of the titles contain body desire words, such as "pure desire" and "juvenile". The algorithm's recommendation mechanism turns women's bodies into consumer goods from a male perspective, placing women in an objectified position [2].

Meanwhile, the consumer market further reinforces the male gaze. In the fashion and beauty industry, advertisements often tie the value of women's bodies to male aesthetics, and many women's products frequently feature male-oriented keywords such as "capturing men's hearts" and "dating must-haves". According to the research data by Zhan Jingxi, many women regard physical beauty as a form of capital. In the marriage and dating market as well as the workplace, women whose appearance is more recognized by men are more likely to attain wealth and success [3]. This mindset is a manifestation of gender dividends in a patriarchal society, reflecting women's unconscious submission from being gazed at to self-discipline.

2.2. Core theoretical foundation

Laura Mulvey first proposed the concept of "male gaze" in Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. From the perspective of film media, she argued that female images are constructed as visual objects to be "gazed at," thereby satisfying the voyeuristic desires of male audiences. Under the male gaze, women are often treated as consumer goods to satisfy men's desires, rather than as equal individuals. As those in positions of power, men project their fantasies onto women through their gaze, which further reinforces the patriarchal structure [4].

The "self-objectification theory" proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts in 1997 provides a key framework for analyzing the psychological mechanism of the gaze. The theory holds that when women are in an environment of being gazed at for a long time, they will gradually internalize the external evaluations of their bodies into self-perception, and view themselves as "objects to be watched" rather than "individuals with independent subjectivity." This kind of perception can further trigger psychological issues such as body shame and self-doubt, and even inhibit the development of personal subjectivity—for instance, the shame that women feel due to anxiety about appearance evaluations is essentially self-objectification under long-term gaze [5].

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The "self-monitoring theory" proposed by Snyder in 1979 supplemented the formation path of self-objectification. The theory points out that individuals actively adjust their behaviors in social environments to adapt to external situations, among which people with high self-monitoring are more likely to be influenced by the environment and change. Self-monitors often view themselves from an onlooker's perspective and adjust their behavior to adapt to and meet external demands. Therefore, women are more likely to think from an "observer's" perspective and change their behavior in a gazing environment [6].

3. Case analysis

3.1. Male gaze and female self-objectification in social media

The "traffic-first" logic of social media, combined with the male gaze, has constructed a set of values centered on "male aesthetics," which directly drives women's self-objectification. On the Xiaohongshu platform, 87.2% of all female-oriented videos use women's bodies as their covers, and among these, less than 20% feature women with no makeup on, while the rest are retouched. Meanwhile, many female bloggers' videos carry hashtags such as "pure desire", "sexy" and "slimming", accounting for approximately 24%. These hashtags imply distorted aesthetic standards from a male perspective, namely "pale, young, and thin," and also reflect the prevalent phenomenon of women being symbolized as objects of desire on social media [2]. The algorithm's traffic bias towards content that caters to male aesthetics has led female users to gradually accept these distorted male-centric aesthetic standards in a gazing environment. In Calogero's study on female college students, participants who anticipated the male gaze exhibited higher levels of appearance anxiety and body shame. Even though there were no actual male gazers present in the experiment, the female participants still showed increased negative emotions—this is a typical manifestation of the self-monitoring theory [7].

Women's self-objectification further leads to serious psychological problems, including mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders. Among these, eating disorders have the highest correlation with women's self-objectification. In Noll and Fredrickson's study on the association between self-objectification and eating disorders, self-objectification was verified to have a direct impact on women's eating disorders. The data showed that self-objectification was negatively correlated with binge-eating disorder and positively correlated with anorexia nervosa. Under the influence of self-objectification, the rate of binge-eating disorder decreased from 18% to 2%. Meanwhile, after incorporating body shame as a mediator, the rate of anorexia nervosa increased by 27%. It can be inferred that, due to the direct relationship between eating and appearance, the self-objectification and body shame experienced by women in a gazing environment drive them to pursue the "beauty" defined by distorted aesthetics pathologically, which directly affects their daily lives [8].

3.2. The gaze pressure and behavioral inhibition in workplace scenarios

The male gaze in the workplace affects women's psychology mainly through two forms: "linking appearance with ability" and "objectifying scrutiny," and it exhibits the characteristics of "strong concealment and far-reaching influence." For example, in the case of Yanowitz v. L'Oreal, a male executive asked a manager to fire a female employee because her appearance was not "good-looking" or "sexy" enough. This was ruled illegal gender discrimination, as women should not be subject to stricter and more onerous appearance requirements than men [9]. This evaluation system

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directly leads women to pay excessive attention to their own appearance, which consumes their psychological energy and makes it difficult for them to give full play to their subjective initiative. In the report, these women stated that even if they were highly competent, they still had to feel anxious about their appearance and behavior every day and cater to others' preferences—because only by doing so could they more easily attain wealth and success.

What's more serious is that the objectifying perception under workplace gaze will significantly increase the risk of sexual harassment. According to the data released by the All-China Women's Federation, 97% to 98% of sexual harassment victims worldwide are women. Among the survey participants, 32.7% of women have experienced sexual harassment, of which 30% occurred in the workplace [3]. Women who have experienced sexual harassment suffer severe damage to their sense of self-worth and subjectivity. Data from the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector shows that only 17% of respondents filed a formal complaint about the sexual harassment they had experienced. Most victims either feared being seen as overreacting or attributed the harassment to themselves, thus accepting and concealing the fact of having been sexually harassed [10].

4. Discussion

4.1. The dual influence pathways of male gaze on women's psychology

4.1.1. Emotional distress and risk of mental illness

The most direct impact of the male gaze is manifested in a surge in emotional problems and the risk of mental illness. When women are in an environment of constant scrutiny for a long time, they will adopt male aesthetics as the standard to judge themselves. Once their own appearance does not meet this standard, they will experience negative emotions such as body shame, appearance anxiety, and self-doubt. This kind of emotion has the characteristic of "accumulation" — the illusion created by social media that "everyone is beautiful except me" reinforces self-negation, while appearance-based evaluations in the workplace exacerbate anxiety. The superposition of the two will significantly increase the incidence of mental illness. As shown in the previous cases, the surge in the incidence of eating disorders among female college students and the depressive symptoms caused by workplace sexual harassment are both specific manifestations of superficial impacts. While such impacts are directly observable, they are often dismissed as "personal mindset issues," ignoring the fundamental harm caused by the male gaze behind them.

4.1.2. The dissolution of subjectivity and the solidification of self-objectification

If any, should be placed before the references section without numbering. More fundamental than emotional problems is the dissolution of women's subjectivity caused by the male gaze. In the closed loop of "gaze - discipline - obedience", women gradually lose the ability to make independent judgments about their self-worth, take "meeting male expectations" as their core behavioral goal, and thus ignore their own abilities, interests and needs. For example, social media users blindly lose weight or undergo plastic surgery to pursue the "traffic-driven aesthetics," and professional women suppress their work abilities to avoid appearance-based evaluations. Essentially, these are all manifestations of subjectivity giving way to the male gaze. This dissolution of subjectivity will further solidify the perception of self-objectification — women shift from "being objectified by others" to "actively objectifying themselves," forming a vicious cycle of "the more gazed at, the more they cater to the gaze." In the long run, this perception will distort women's self-identity,

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making it difficult for them to establish a value system independent of male evaluation, and even affecting the complete development of their personality [11].

4.2. The limitations of existing resistance strategies

Currently, most resistance against the Existing strategies include advocating "accepting diverse body types and rejecting appearance anxiety," which have garnered some attention on social media. However, data shows that such content accounts for less than 5% of the traffic on Xiaohongshu and TikTok, making it difficult to challenge the dominant position of content promoting the "pale, young, and thin" aesthetic. Forms such as "anti-male tags" and "women's mutual aid communities" can provide emotional support for women, but they can only offer psychological support and have no impact on external aesthetic evaluations or the gaze mechanism. Furthermore, existing resistance strategies rely heavily on women's individual "psychological adjustment," such as "enhancing self-identity" and "ignoring external evaluations." However, they fail to address the core of the male gaze —gender power inequality—resulting in resistance effects that are limited to alleviating symptoms rather than solving the problem at its root.

4.3. Suggestions for multi-dimensional response strategies

Social media platforms need to take on the responsibility of guidance and steer the aesthetic trend away from male-centric aesthetics towards one that embraces diverse body types and regards health as beauty. On the one hand, adjust the weight of the recommendation mechanism, reduce the traffic proportion of content featuring male-centric aesthetics such as "pale, young, and thin" and "boy-catching style," and add "aesthetic diversity" prompt labels to content related to "body anxiety" and "appearance comparison." On the other hand, proactively support content themed around "body diversity" and "showcase of women's abilities." For instance, TikTok could set up a dedicated "Women's Strength" section, and Xiaohongshu could provide traffic preference for "anti-anxiety" notes. At the same time, regulatory authorities need to issue regulations to restrict marketing rhetoric in consumer advertisements that "uses male approval as a selling point," thereby reducing the harm caused by the male gaze at the source of communication.

Enterprises need to establish a clear workplace anti-gaze system, completely separate "professional competence" from "appearance", incorporate this into employee codes of conduct, and prohibit managers from evaluating or restricting female employees on the basis of appearance. At the same time, improve the mechanism for preventing and combating sexual harassment, clarify the definition standards for harassment behaviors, reporting procedures and penalty measures, and regularly conduct gender equality training to reverse the objectifying mindset. Relevant government departments need to incorporate "appearance discrimination" into the scope of law and impose penalties on non-compliant enterprises; at the judicial level, sentencing standards for workplace sexual harassment can be refined to provide legal support for women's rights protection.

Women can share their experiences of resisting the gaze through offline mutual aid groups, online communities, and other forms, and form a "collective identity" to counter the pressure of a single aesthetic. Schools and communities need to incorporate "gender equality" and "self-worth awareness" into the education system, and cultivate women's ability to make value judgments independent of male evaluations from an early age. Psychological counseling institutions can launch specialized "gaze anxiety" intervention programs, and help affected women rebuild their self-identity through group counseling, individual counseling, and other methods. In addition, the participation of men is equally important — through gender equality advocacy, we should guide

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men to abandon the gaze mentality and form a social consensus of "respecting women's subject status".

5. Conclusion

Through a study on the relationship between male gaze and women's mental health in contemporary society, this paper draws the following conclusions: First, the spread of male gaze has permeated various scenarios such as social media, consumer markets, and the workplace. The traffic recommendation mechanism and the online environment that advocates male aesthetics have jointly strengthened its impact on women, while "self-objectification" and "self-surveillance" are the fundamental causes of harm to women's psychology. Second, the harm of male gaze to women's mental health manifests as a surge in the risk of emotional and psychological issues such as body image anxiety and eating disorders, as well as the dissolution of women's subjectivity — internalizing male aesthetics as personal standards and falling into a vicious cycle of "being gazed at - catering to the gaze". Thirdly, existing resistance strategies that rely on individual psychological adjustment are difficult to address the core contradiction of the male gaze (gender-based power inequality), and a systematic response system with multi-stakeholder collaboration needs to be constructed. From a practical perspective, mitigating the negative impacts of the male gaze requires social media platforms to take responsibility for content guidance, enterprises to improve workplace anti-gaze systems, and the government to strengthen legal and regulatory support. Meanwhile, it is necessary for women to form collective identity and promote men's participation in building a consensus on gender equality. Only by breaking the hegemony of a single aesthetic and reconstructing a value system centered on "respecting subjectivity" can we truly reduce the harm of the male gaze to women's psychology. This study still has certain limitations, such as insufficient discussion on the differences in the impacts on women of different ages and occupations. In the future, further research on sub-groups can be carried out to propose more targeted solutions.

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