

Aesthetic Standards and Body Anxiety: Women's Self-perception in the Internet Age

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Abstract: With the rapid development of the Internet, people can acquire not only academic knowledge but also life skills such as makeup and photography. However, while providing rich resources, the Internet also has potential negative impacts on mental health. Particularly, in the context of the prevalence of a single aesthetic standard, such as "white, thin, and young." Adolescents, especially women, are easily influenced by unhealthy aesthetic concepts, which may lead to psychological problems like dieting behavior and body anxiety. This paper explores the causes of body anxiety from economic and sociocultural perspectives and analyzes the role of women's self-awareness awakening in shaping body cognition. By studying Internet aesthetic culture and its impact on adolescent groups, it is found that modern consumerism and the "perfect body" phenomenon promoted by online platforms have intensified the pursuit of ideal bodies, thus leading to body anxiety problems, which are particularly significant in female groups. However, as women's self-awareness gradually awakens, more and more women have begun to reflect on traditional body standards and advocate body diversity and self-identity. This study has important practical significance. Through an in-depth analysis of the causes of body anxiety, it aims to draw society's attention to the spread of bad aesthetic concepts, provide theoretical support for formulating relevant intervention policies and guiding measures, and promote the formation of a healthier aesthetic culture and social environment.

Keywords: Body Anxiety, Beauty Standards, Social Media, Mental Health

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of information technology, the Internet has penetrated into every aspect of people's lives. However, media communication methods in the Internet era have also brought profound impacts on individual psychology, especially in shaping women's aesthetics and body standards. Modern consumer culture and online platforms advocate single aesthetic standards like "white, thin, and young," causing many women to be anxious about their bodies and pursue unrealistic perfect bodies. The prevalence of this body anxiety not only affects the mental health of adolescents but may also lead to psychological problems such as eating disorders and depression.

At present, some studies have explored the impact of aesthetic standards on individuals in the Internet environment, especially on social media platforms where the display of idealized bodies has become the norm. However, there are still gaps in this research field, especially the lack of analysis of the formation mechanism of body anxiety from economic and socio-cultural perspectives. Thus, this

study aims to analyze the root causes of body anxiety, and focus on how the awakening of women's self-awareness reshapes the process of body cognition.

This paper adopts a qualitative analysis method, combines social and cultural theories with economic perspectives, and deeply explores how online platforms promote the formation of body anxiety. Meanwhile, it analyzes how women can gradually break free from the constraints of a single aesthetic standard and reconstruct the value of their bodies through the improvement of self-awareness. This study has important practical significance. By analyzing the social roots of body anxiety, this paper provides an effective theoretical basis for all sectors of society to help formulate relevant intervention policies and educational measures, thereby promoting the formation of healthier aesthetic concepts and social environments. In addition, the research results are also instructive for future research and practice on women's mental health.

2. The Economics of “Ideal Body” and “Vanity Size”

The rapid development of the Internet and social media has provided a powerful platform for the spread of the "ideal body." When this ideal body standard becomes the value identification of young people, especially women, the hints in media communication provide them with a reference system of "ideal" body, which drives them to blindly follow the diet trend [1]. This phenomenon is not just a change in aesthetics but also reflects profound economic motivations. As Mike Featherstone said, the development of the body industry in consumer culture is to discipline the body by stimulating people's desire for beauty and commercializing it [2].

2.1. Body Consumption Driven by Advertising and Branding

Advertising and brand image building play a vital role in promoting body consumption, especially in the fields of cosmetic surgery, fitness equipment, and weight loss products. Advertising not only influences consumers' purchasing decisions but also shapes their body cognition and aesthetic standards. For example, on social media platforms, many personal bloggers record their body changes through vlogs, which has led to the promotion of weight loss products and even provided direct links in the videos to facilitate viewers to purchase related products. This form of advertising with a strong sense of personalization and intimacy makes it easier for consumers to identify with it, which in turn affects their consumption decisions [3]. For example, on platforms such as Bilibili, some UP hosts show their personal body changes and the weight loss products they use and attach purchase links below their videos, through which viewers purchase related products. This advertising method, spread through social media platforms, makes the ideal body a goal that can be achieved through consumer behavior [3].

In addition, the role of brand image building in physical consumption cannot be ignored. For example, Lululemon's "Super Girls" marketing strategy accurately defines its target audience: women aged between 24 and 35, unmarried and childless, highly educated, with high annual incomes, and who like sports and travel. Through precise market positioning and brand culture building, Lululemon has successfully guided consumers to identify with its brand and view it as a symbol of identity rather than a simple sports brand [4]. This marketing strategy allows consumers to purchase Lululemon products not only for physical fitness, but also as a symbol of identity and lifestyle. For this reason, Lululemon's pricing is about three times higher than that of general sports brands, and its customer base's repurchase rate and average order value remain at a high level.

This consumer culture shaped by brands has led women to not only pursue changes in their external bodies when purchasing fitness products, shaping clothing, and even fitness classes but also seek social recognition and identity verification through these consumer behaviors [4]. This

phenomenon not only reflects the intensification of body anxiety in consumer culture but also reveals the close relationship between body shape and identity.

2.2. Media Shaping of the Ideal Body

Body anxiety is not only caused by economic factors but also has a deeper root in social and cultural discipline. The media has played a key role in this process. Through platforms such as film and television, advertising, and social media, the aesthetic value of "white, thin, and young" bodies has been continuously reinforced, making this standard gradually popular. For young people, especially women, this aesthetic standard has gradually become the core factor in measuring their own value [5].

The definition and transformation of the ideal body shape are deeply influenced by social culture and the media. Body shape anxiety is not only driven by economic factors, but its deeper roots lie in social and cultural discipline and the media plays a vital role in this process. Through platforms such as film and television, advertising, and social media, the media continues to reinforce the aesthetic value of the "white, thin, and young" body shape standard, making this standard gradually internalized as mainstream aesthetics and deeply rooted in the hearts of the public. For example, on the Xiaohongshu platform, the presentation of the ideal body shape is often linked to a slim body shape. This aesthetic concept is widely disseminated on the platform, especially through the life notes posted by female users, which further reinforces this standard. In her sample analysis of Xiaohongshu notes, Huang Qian pointed out that a slim body shape is the mainstream of the "ideal body shape" and occupies almost the center of all health and beauty life content [6]. Through these social platforms, a slim figure has not only become an aesthetic standard but also a core element for young people, especially women, to measure their own value.

For adolescents, the aesthetic standards shaped by the media have a profound impact on their psychological and physical cognition. Social media constantly uses the ideal body as a benchmark for social recognition, causing many young women to internalize this standard, which in turn affects their evaluation of their own bodies. As mentioned in the literature "An analysis of the body anxiety phenomenon among young people in the social media era," social media has increased adolescents', especially women's, dissatisfaction with their own bodies by constantly displaying ideal bodies [7]. This phenomenon was also confirmed in the study "A study on the negative impact of social media use on young women's body image." The study pointed out that after social media users internalize the ideal body image displayed on the platform, they often feel more dissatisfied with their own bodies and intensify their anxiety through comparison [8].

This influence of social media not only shapes the aesthetic standards of the "ideal body," but also exacerbates teenagers' body anxiety by frequently exposing these standards. This anxiety is particularly evident among adolescents, who constantly compare themselves with ideal body standards, causing unnecessary body dissatisfaction and even physical and mental health problems.

2.3. The Marketing Impact of "Vanity Sizing"

The marketing method of "vanity sizing" has not only changed the structure of women's clothing consumption but has also caused a series of psychological and physical health problems. Robert Frank mentioned in "Milk and Coke Economics" that by taking advantage of women's identification with their appearance, businesses have caused women's clothing sizes to gradually become smaller, while men's clothing sizes have hardly changed [9]. A significant consequence of this trend is that more and more women are choosing to buy smaller sizes of clothing, and in order to maintain this "ideal" figure, they often adopt extreme dieting methods, which may even cause health problems such as eating disorders.

In recent years, the "BM style" has become a popular trend, further exacerbating women's body anxiety. The "BM style" not only strengthens the aesthetic standard of a slender and skinny body, but also, with the widespread dissemination of social media, more and more women pursue a body that meets this standard through excessive dieting and exercise. According to relevant research, young women face tremendous psychological pressure and physical burden when pursuing this popular trend [7]. The popularity of social media platforms has further solidified these body standards, further affecting women's clothing choices and self-identity [8].

The social discipline of body image not only affects the physical and mental health of individuals but also further consolidates the social identity of the aesthetic of "white, thin, and young." In Discipline and Punish, Foucault believes that the gaze of others creates a sense of oppression on people. Everyone becomes humble under the gaze of supervision, thus imposing self-supervision [10]. This social discipline of the body makes women's self-judgment of appearance and body shape more strict, which in turn forms a persistent body anxiety.

When teenagers withdraw from the virtual world and return to real life, they will face the huge gap between their real self and the carefully modified virtual self, and they will develop a self-denial mentality [11]. This closed-loop phenomenon not only reflects the conformity to a single aesthetic standard but also becomes one of the important catalysts for body anxiety.

3. Diversity of Body Shapes and the Shaping of Correct Self-awareness

3.1. Economic Potential and Challenges of Aesthetic Diversification

With the questioning and reflection of the traditional aesthetic standards of "white, thin, and young," more products and brands that support diverse body images have begun to emerge in the market. For example, in recent years, some fashion brands that focus on shaping healthy, natural, and positive body images have gradually emerged, emphasizing that "everyone's beauty is unique." These brands are committed to challenging traditional aesthetic concepts and advocating more inclusive aesthetic standards through the selection of spokespersons, advertising, and product design. However, while this change has brought more choices to consumers, it has also brought unprecedented marketing challenges to companies [12].

In this context, companies not only have to face the needs of diverse groups with different body shapes, skin colors, gender identities, etc., but also have to overcome the difficulty of accurately expressing diverse aesthetics. For example, although many brands have launched clothing products suitable for different body shapes, they often fail to truly integrate deep cultural and social understanding, resulting in their marketing methods still being superficial [3]. Therefore, when developing and promoting products with diverse aesthetics, companies need to pay more attention to the deep connection between brands and consumers and understand the emotional needs behind them in order to establish long-term brand loyalty.

The rise of diverse aesthetics not only reflects society's reflection on traditional aesthetic standards but also brings new economic opportunities to companies. More and more companies are innovating in product design, promotional strategies, and brand image building, aiming to attract consumers who no longer follow traditional standards and desire individuality and diversity. As mentioned in the book "Stereotyped Aesthetic Construction and Breaking Body Anxiety in Short Video Platforms," the popularity of short video platforms has promoted more personalized aesthetic expressions, and this trend has further stimulated the development of related industries [3].

3.2. The Awakening of Women's Self-awareness and the Transformation of Body Cognition

As society's attention to and discussion of women's self-awareness continues to deepen, more and more women have begun to question and reflect on mainstream aesthetic standards, especially the

blind pursuit of a “thin” body. American fashion historian James Laffer once pointed out: “The history of clothing development is a history of women’s progress.” As women’s self-awareness awakens, they no longer rely solely on external aesthetic standards but begin to pay attention to the uniqueness and healthy beauty of their own bodies and gradually free themselves from the anxiety of an “ideal body” [12]. This change is not only reflected in the acceptance of the body but also has a profound impact on clothing, makeup, and daily lifestyle.

The awakening of modern women's self-awareness has led them to place more emphasis on individuality and diversity in their clothing choices, rather than simply using body shape standards as a criterion [12]. In this process, women's body cognition has shifted from external standards to self-acceptance. They pay more attention to physical health, comfort, and self-confidence, rather than blindly pursuing an "idealized" body shape. This change has made it possible to eliminate body anxiety and has also prompted society's cognition of women's bodies to gradually become more diversified.

3.3. The Positive Role of Social Media

Social media has played a key role in this transformation. Many women share their body stories through social platforms, conveying a positive body image and encouraging more people to accept their imperfections [13]. For example, many women with different body shapes share their outfits, health management methods, and life attitudes through platforms, showing that people of different body shapes can also have confidence and charm. This positive impact of online communication not only helps individuals break the shackles of traditional aesthetic standards but also promotes society's understanding and tolerance of body diversity.

In addition, the body positivity movement on social media has also prompted women to redefine the standard of beauty. Many content creators on social platforms have shown their own body stories, calling on people to abandon their obsession with a "perfect" body and emphasizing that physical health, comfort, and confidence are the real goals to pursue. This trend has significantly affected brand marketing and product design. More and more brands have begun to focus on the display of diverse body shapes, promoting a gradual change in social aesthetic concepts [3].

4. Facing Challenges and Opportunities

Although the rise of diverse aesthetics has provided women with more space for self-identification, they still face many challenges in the process of pursuing self-awareness. While fighting against body anxiety and traditional aesthetic standards, how to maintain self-identity in diverse aesthetics is still a question that many women need to think about [5]. For example, although the promotion of diverse aesthetics has gradually increased, there are still some potential aesthetic pressures in society, especially in certain social circles and workplace environments, where traditional aesthetic standards still dominate. Therefore, how to accept diversity while not losing oneself is an important issue facing women in this era.

In the future, women's body perception will no longer be limited to the single standard of "thinness," but will develop in a more diversified and personalized direction. Society will accept and recognize different body shapes more widely, and women will pay more attention to the balance between self-expression and physical health in the process of pursuing self-identity. This will not only help individuals' mental health but also promote further progress in social culture.

5. Conclusion

This article explores female body anxiety’s multidimensional system and causes. It analyzes how economic interests and media discipline jointly shape modern women’s body standards. Female body

anxiety is intertwined with economic operations and consumer culture. Businesses intensify women's pursuit of an ideal body through marketing strategies such as "vanity sizing," and social media aesthetic communication disciplines body image. This makes body anxiety more complicated and body standards more uniform. The root of body anxiety lies in society's expectations and individuals' self-perception. Breaking this single aesthetic standard is crucial for women's mental health and social and progress. Despite the increasing advocacy of body diversity, many still promote traditional standards. This shows that although women's questioning and reflection on mainstream aesthetic standards are increasing, achieving fundamental changes still requires greater social support and cultural reform.

To address this problem, policy guidance, cultural construction and market supervision are particularly important. The government should formulate relevant policies that encourage media to promote diverse and inclusive aesthetics and regulate business advertising to foster a healthier environment for women. Society must collaborate to reform the education system, media, and commercial markets, advocating for healthy, authentic, and diverse body images while reinforcing positive health messages. Looking to the future, women's body image will shift from weight loss anxiety to a more diverse and personalized perspective. As women's consciousness and self-identity evolve, research can focus on: firstly understanding body anxiety from psychological and sociological angles; secondly, using AI and big data to analyze and predict shifts in societal body standards; thirdly, promoting body diversity and inclusivity globally.

In summary, reducing body anxiety is essential for women's well-being and social diversity. Only through the joint efforts and the promotion of diverse aesthetic standards can people truly change perceptions of women's bodies and create a more inclusive and supportive society.

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