

The Mechanism of Social Media's Impact on Women's Body Image Concern

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Abstract: With digital media promoting perfect persona and perfect body image, social media influencers have been causing anxiety and psychological stress among users. Existing studies have shown that the body image concern that social media cause may lead to various mental health issues for individuals, ranging from eating disorder to depression. This research aims to review the impact of social media on women's body image, and the mechanism behind. Through 3 different ways: self-objectification, social comparison, and unification of aesthetics, social media cause a negative impact on women's body image and cause physical and mental health issues eventually. Women would treat themselves as objects to be gazed at by others in the self-objectification situation. Also, social media reinforces the fallacy that only perfection reflects one's value through the feedback mechanism of likes, promoting single value and causing social comparison. The research also gave some suggestions based on each mechanism, to buffer the negative effect of social media.

1 INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an important part of the daily life of people all over the world. According to a survey conducted in 2024, there are over 5 billion social media users globally, and the number of such users is still increasing continuously, especially in developing countries. Take TikTok as an example, people start to record and share their daily life clips on short-video platforms, such as sharing daily outfits, makeup tutorials, travel log-style video blogs or self-discipline life and so on. In fact, when short-video apps were just emerging, people might have been sharing the content or life status they wanted to share very purely. But now, some bloggers create a perfect persona to attract traffic and make money, which may cause deep anxiety. Under the influence of popular culture and aesthetic standards, more and more women are facing the problem of body image anxiety, and even resulting in psychological and physiological problems such as eating disorders and plastic surgery anxiety. This study aims to explore the possibility that seeing others' glamorous lives and the image of bloggers with high appearance and good figure may lead to anxiety, inferiority complex and lack of confidence.

Perfect persona refers to the idealized image that individuals create through carefully selected content such as edited photos, success stories, displays of happy life and so on. This image usually conforms to the mainstream aesthetic and values of society. The popularity of this perfect persona stems from the performative nature of social media (Goffman 1959) and the algorithmic mechanisms of the platforms that people tend to showcase their most glamorous aspects in order to receive more likes and attention, and the platforms further reinforce this behavior through traffic rewards.

2 THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF CREATING PERFECT PERSONAS

The perfect persona on social media has many negative impacts. The typical impacts include individuals and social relationships. The negative impacts on individuals are divided into two perspectives: the audience and the blogger themselves. For viewers who watch videos, long-term exposure to the carefully designed personas and lifestyles of online bloggers will lead to a contrast, resulting in a decline in self-identity, self-devaluation

of personal value, and huge psychological pressure (Fardouly, J., & Vartanian 2015). Similarly, for bloggers, in order to maintain their personas, they may cause excessive performance and psychological over-tension because there is always the risk of persona collapse at any time, such as being unexpectedly encountered by fans in real life, but fans think that the blogger's real life is different from the edited pictures posted online. The large number of likes and praising comments from the audience may lead bloggers to overly rely on the online perfect image, thus causing inadaptability in real social interactions and even avoiding social interactions. The second point regarding the impact on social relationships is the crisis of trust and false social interaction (Fardouly, J., & Vartanian 2015). When people realize that the perfection on social media is mostly packaged, they may doubt the authenticity of others. When people think that only high likes and many comments can reflect personal value, the interaction between people becomes a simple like social interaction, lacking deep emotional connection.

Perfect persona refers to the impeccable image that an individual deliberately constructs in social media or in real life. Meanwhile, body dysmorphia pertains to the dissatisfaction and anxiety regarding one's own body shape. There exists a complex interaction between these two aspects. Many bloggers gain a lot of likes and attention through their good-looking photos and videos, leading to the reinforcement of the idea that appearance is value.

Anxiety about body image can lead some people to take extreme approaches to weight control. For example, extreme dieting and anorexia, which leads to malnutrition can be life-threatening in severe cases. There may also be bulimia after extreme hunger, for people who have lost weight, there will be a strong sense of guilt after overeating, they will be vomiting or unhealthy drugs; in order to control their weight, these behaviors are very unhealthy and dangerous for people's body. For appearance anxiety, perfect bodies and flawless skin on social media platforms are often retouched or beautified to create unrealistic aesthetic standards (Dijkslag et al. 2024). Users are constantly seeing high-caliber bloggers and fitness experts, which makes ordinary people feel inferior and leads to appearance anxiety.

3 MECHANISMS OF ANXIETY CAUSED BY SOCIAL MEDIA

3.1 Self-Objectification Mechanism

In the context of social media, the objectification of the self is becoming more and more serious. Objectification refers to individuals seeing themselves as objects to be gazed at by others, and treating the body as an external image to be evaluated and scrutinized, rather than as a subject experiencing life (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997). First, the other's perspective has become serious. Nowadays, after posting selfies, outfit photos, and fitness photos, many people tend to focus on whether the photos look good, whether they look thin, and whether there are people liking them, instead of focusing on how they feel about themselves, whether they had a good time today, and whether the photos they took have left good memories. These behaviors gradually reinforce the idea that I am seen by others and my body is part of my social value. Secondly, the feedback mechanism of social media is also a cause of anxiety. Since a beautifully retouched picture will get a lot of compliments and likes, more and more people are constantly checking themselves through the camera to see if they meet the aesthetic standards, and then posting their own retouched pictures, which further strengthens the concept that only the perfect picture can be posted. At this time, if the feedback from netizens is positive, it will be easy for people to think that appearance and body recognition is a reflection of self-worth. Serious self-objectification will constantly care about other people's comments about themselves, even if one is alone will often feel that they are being paid attention to (Cohen, 2018). Long-term self-denial and over-catering to public aesthetics can lead to serious depression, anxiety and other mental health problems.

3.2 Social Comparison Mechanism

People have an intrinsic motivation and tend to compare themselves with others in order to assess their abilities, self-worth or social status (Festinger 1957). Social media reinforces the fallacy that only perfection reflects one's value through the feedback mechanism of likes, and then through the mechanism of social comparisons makes users constantly wonder if they are going perfect enough, which ultimately creates a sense of dissatisfaction and anxiety among women about their body image. Proposed by psychologist Leon.

Social media platforms present an abundance of photoshopped images of the perfect body, which users are repeatedly exposed to and subconsciously use as a reference point. At the same time, users often start comparing themselves to the perfect persona on the internet, rather than to real people with similar backgrounds. This upward comparison can easily lead to low self-esteem and self-denial (Festinger 1957). This series of operations is a vicious circle.

3.3 The Unification of Aesthetics and the Mechanism of Platforms

Algorithmic recommendation mechanisms are another central pathway to understanding how social media exacerbates women's body image anxieties. Based on the feedback mechanism of likes and social comparisons, recommendation algorithms act as amplifiers and filters that determine who, what, and how much you see. Media platforms will calculate each user's favorite type of video through the user's time spent on different types of videos, favorites and comments. Therefore, the platform will recommend the video content that the user is likely to be interested in more accurately.

Platforms may build a single aesthetic platform. If you click on a few videos or notes related to good body shape, high face value, and slimming, the algorithm will start pushing similar content over and over again. Resulting in the illusion that the only thing in your stream is the perfect and ideal body and beauty, mistakenly believing that is the mass standard.

4 IMPROVEMENT METHOD

With the widespread use of digital social media, more and more women are caught up in body image dissatisfaction and anxiety. In order to alleviate this problem at root, not only do we need to raise awareness at the user level, but we also need to actively intervene at the technical and ethical levels of the platforms.

Improving the mechanism of self-objectification requires efforts from both self-awareness education and platform content guidance. At the educational level, it is necessary to enhance the popularization of the concepts of body neutrality and body positivity, guiding women to shift their self-worth from beauty as perceived by others to function, health and true feelings of the body. At the platform level, it is necessary to encourage creators to present real, natural and imperfect body states, and provide

preferential recommendations for such content. For example, establish real beauty tag recommendations, launch anti-filter challenge activities, and gradually break the cultural narrative of beauty equals value (Simon, et al. 2022).

Comments, content dwell time, etc. make users' self-evaluation increasingly dependent on platform feedback, which in turn influences emotions and behavioral choices. To alleviate this external evaluation dependence, changes can be made in two directions. First, weaken the display weight of public data. Platforms can allow users to independently choose whether to display the number of likes or not, reducing the influence of the single evaluation criterion of likes equals value. Second, increase the multi-dimensional evaluation mechanism of content. The platform can introduce feedback mechanisms for dimensions such as interesting content, real life and independence of viewpoints, so that likes are no longer limited to appearance and aesthetic judgments, but focus more on value, thought and personality expression (Cohen 2018). The feedback mechanism makes the likes no longer limited to appearance and aesthetic judgment, but more focused on value, thought and personality expression.

In the social media environment, women are more likely to engage in up-comparisons, often comparing themselves to users on the platform who have better looks, better bodies, and richer lives, resulting in body dissatisfaction and negative self-perceptions. Intervening in this mechanism requires addressing two issues: the selectivity of information exposure and the unreality of comparison objects.

Platforms should strengthen the mechanism of pushing diversified content, and include people of different body sizes, ages, skin colors, and styles in the recommendation scope, so as to break the single aesthetic standard. At the same time, the platform should establish a mechanism for psychological adjustment and guidance, for example, when displaying content that may cause comparative anxiety, it should prompt pop-up tips such as These pictures may have been retouched and Everyone's beauty is unique (Choukas-Bradley 2022). Everyone's beauty has its uniqueness and other pop-up tips to help users feel more comfortable and healthier.

The algorithmic recommendation mechanism is the most insidious yet critical technical factor affecting body image on current social platforms. Improving this mechanism requires platforms to implement mental health protection algorithms, and once they recognize that users frequently view content related to body image, cosmetic surgery, and

beauty, they should appropriately insert positive psychological construction content, such as body acceptance education and psychological adjustment advice. More importantly, platforms should enhance the transparency of their algorithms, informing users of why you are seeing this content and allowing them to manually adjust their recommendation preferences.

5 CONCLUSION

There is a close relationship between an ideal character portrayal and personal psychological stress and anxiety. This research elaborates on the advantages and disadvantages of social media for people, as well as some related mechanisms of the platforms. To eliminate the influence of the false reality on people brought about by the network, it requires the joint efforts of the network platforms and users. Healthy beauty is the future trend. Women should face the perfect personas on the Internet calmly and enjoy a happy and healthy life in the present.

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