

“Symptoms” of Chinese Women’s Appearance Anxiety

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Abstract:

The pervasive issue of “appearance anxiety” among young females has emerged as a significant psychosocial concern in contemporary society. This study employs qualitative research methods to investigate the social mechanisms underlying the development of “appearance anxiety” among young women, adopting a sociological standpoint on body-related matters. The findings of this study reveal that social factors contribute to the development of “appearance anxiety” in young women, as they strive to establish intimate relationships and attain societal validation. Consequently, young women are compelled to conform to societal gender norms, subjecting themselves to the scrutiny of aesthetic standards, while simultaneously resisting the detrimental effects of “appearance anxiety” through various forms of body consumption practices. Although the proliferation of information network media has provided women with expanded platforms for self-presentation, it has concurrently reinforced both societal aesthetic ideals and consumerist culture. Moreover, the media’s perpetuation of rigid body image standards, coupled with the propagation of misconceptions about body consumption, further entangles young women in a cyclic social framework characterized by “societal aesthetics - appearance anxiety - body consumption.”

Keywords: Young Women; Body Sociology; Appearance Anxiety; Social Aesthetics; Body Consumption

1. Introduction

“Contemporary young women are increasingly passionate about shaping a better body image, leading to the widespread phenomenon of ‘appearance anxiety,’ which troubles countless female individuals’ mental well-being and daily lives. According to a statistical report on the global medical aesthetics market, China has experienced significant growth and emerged as the world’s second-largest market for medical beauty since 2017. Following closely behind the United States, China has demonstrated a remarkable momentum of development in recent years within this industry. Examining the age demographics of consumers choosing medical aesthetics, the proportion of consumers under 30 reached nearly 80% in 2021, with those born in the 1990s and later becoming the main force in consumption. From a gender perspective, nearly 90% of consumers are women (Airuinet, 2021).

The boom in the medical aesthetics market reveals the anxious state of contemporary women, especially young women, about their body image perception, resulting in consumption practices of body ‘modification’ or ‘reconstruction.’ As a result, the escalation of economic disputes and social contradictions has become more pronounced. Data retrieved from the official website of the China Consumers Association indicates a rising trend in the number of complaints related to medical aesthetics in recent years.

These complaints have consistently ranked among the top ten categories of grievances in the field of consumer complaints (Xiaofei net, 2021).

In response to the pervasive media propaganda creating ‘appearance anxiety,’ the State Administration for Market Regulation published a draft solicitation for the ‘Medical Beauty Advertising Law Enforcement Guide’ in August 2021, explicitly stating that it would focus on cracking down on practices that violate societal good customs, create ‘appearance anxiety,’ and improperly associate poor appearance with negative evaluations or outstanding appearance with positive evaluations .

Since ‘appearance anxiety’ has strong societal problem characteristics, it is necessary to explore its formation. Certain media articles addressing the question of “Who is responsible for fostering appearance anxiety?” highlight the dual influence exerted by cosmetics companies, medical aesthetic establishments, and the reinforcement of societal ideals through mass media channels. However, it should be noted that when ‘appearance anxiety’ becomes a group issue among young women and a pervasive societal mentality, it is difficult to explain merely from an individual psychological perspective or an external media perspective. It becomes more meaningful to explore the social factors and mechanisms causing ‘appearance anxiety.’ Consequently, this article adopts a body sociology perspective as a starting point to delve into the social

mechanisms underlying the phenomenon of “appearance anxiety” among young women, which is recognized as a significant social issue.

This research will comprehensively use the method of literature and materials to conduct research on to “women’s appearance anxiety”, by comprehensively literature review the “categorized today’s women’s appearance anxiety”, “gender awareness”, “body image”, from the perspective of social gender. Study the reasons for the existence of gender differences, analyze the current status of women’s social gender cognition, and the multiple ways these cognitions are generated when participating in women’s appearance anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Appearance Anxiety

The term “appearance anxiety” pertains to adverse emotional states, including low self-confidence, discontentment, and a disconnect with one’s own physical appearance and body form. These sentiments are primarily shaped by societal beauty norms and media portrayals. This leads to a state of anxiety. While the term “appearance anxiety” is commonly associated with the digital media and social networking era, earlier studies have already addressed this topic. The concept of body image was introduced into psychoanalysis by Austrian psychoanalyst Paul Schilder in 1935. Schilder proposed that individuals who hold negative assessments of their own body image, perceiving it as not conforming to societal standards, may experience “social body anxiety” (Hart et al., 1989), a comprehensive summary of “appearance anxiety” from a body perspective. Subsequent research has shifted its focus to women’s self-awareness of body image, investigating the relationship between their perception of body image within social contexts and their subjective cognition and objective behaviors (Michael, 2000). This line of inquiry suggests that lower levels of body image identification can result in social repercussions, manifesting as anxious behaviors. The main reason why research focuses on women is that empirical research shows that women’s anxiety levels about their body or appearance are significantly higher than those of men (Hagger & Stevenson, 2000).

When examining the origins of “appearance anxiety,” foreign studies predominantly explore individual-level factors, including psychological elements and adverse social encounters during childhood or adolescence (Keelan et al., 1992). This highlights the interplay between an individual’s physical state, psychological well-being, and personal experiences, particularly the objectification of women’s attention to appearance and body evaluations becoming a

significant factor in depression or anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Kozee & Tylka, 2007; Szymanski & Henning, 2007). Evidence from college student samples shows that there is a positive correlation between young people’s body mass index (BMI) and evaluation results and the “appearance anxiety” in social interactions. The critical internal factor is the social difficulties and mental health problems caused by body shape and appearance (Titchener & Wong, 2015). Conversely, studies underscore the influence of external media factors, highlighting how the portrayal of women’s images in conventional media platforms like television and magazines, as well as advertising campaigns, significantly contribute to body dissatisfaction and the pursuit of appearance enhancement (Ogden & Munday, 1996; Posava et al., 2001; Slevic & Tiggemann, 2010). The ongoing advancement of information media techniques, particularly the role of social media in the realm of new media, exerts a substantial influence on the “appearance anxiety” experienced by young individuals, particularly young women. The greater their involvement in social media and their focus on self-presentation, the higher the likelihood of experiencing negative emotions associated with dissatisfaction towards their physical appearance. (Tiggemann, 2020).

Current domestic research also mainly explores the impact of women’s psychology or social media on body shame and body satisfaction from the perception of women’s consciousness or social media (Zheng & Lv, 2015; We et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2017), focusing on criticizing the results of the impact of cyber media and market promotions causing women’s “appearance anxiety”. Research points out that there are many marketing accounts on social media platforms that sell “appearance anxiety” as a flow cipher to make unscrupulous profits. The audience finds quasi-social interactions with the “flawless internet celebrities” who foster “appearance anxiety” (Ma, 2014), making the audience themselves effective promoters of the present deformed aesthetical culture. Other research points out that media propaganda and online comments are filled with many contents such as “makeup is the most simple politeness for women” and “women just need to be beautiful”, and these deformed concepts together weave a false landscape of “appearance supremacy” (Gan, 2021). Significantly, certain studies highlight the correlation between the societal promotion of the female image and the inheritance and construction of gender culture within social norms (Kelsky, 2001). This suggests the need for a more in-depth exploration of the social mechanisms underlying the cognitive aspects, aesthetic standards, and “appearance anxiety” associated with female image. In this regard, body sociology theory offers a valuable ana-

lytical perspective to delve deeper into these aspects.

2.2 Categorization of Women's Appearance Anxiety

In China, women's appearance anxiety is pervasive and all-encompassing, and its specific symptoms can be categorized into the following prominent characteristics.

2.2.1 Excessive preoccupation, judgement, dissatisfaction with physical appearance

In the novel *Snow White*, the vicious, jealous, and selfish stepmother, is obsessed with caring about her appearance, spending a lot of time watching the mirror and wondering who the most beautiful woman in the world is. Chinese women are also the same in this regard, excessively concerning themselves with their appearance. They would care about wrinkles around their eyes, the increase in weight, even if it's just one kilogram, and their uneven fingernails. Chinese women not only feel anxious about their own appearance, but also pay close attention to and judge the appearance of others, comparing the appearance of others with themselves'. Especially in social media, many women tend to comment and evaluate other women's pictures, using their subjective opinions to evaluate, suggest or even attack someone's appearance. For instance, under some posts of female account, there are always some comments saying: "you should lose your weight," "why don't you wear long pants to cover your thick thighs?" "I think this girl is not at all attractive." Also, many women will seek female celebrities with beautiful and slender figures, but they are also very harsh on some imperfect female celebrities, thinking that they are too fat or too short.

2.2.2 Social Anxiety, Makeup, and Beauty Enhancement App

The excessive focus, evaluation, or dissatisfaction with one's appearance brings about social anxiety, and its most evident manifestation is the prevalence of beauty products and beauty enhancement apps. Beauty products are extremely popular among Chinese women. There is ample evidence to testify this statement. According to the Euromonitor statistical data, the market scale of makeups in China has shown a tendency of increasing year by year from 2011 to 2020. The market scale of China has enlarged from \$33.18 billion in 2011 to \$73.20 billion in 2020. Specifically, for the Z generation, who have born in 1995 to 2009, in the year 2020, women accounted for 77% and held a dominant position in beauty product consumption (Zhu, 2023) . The majority of Chinese women believe that makeup can enhance their influence in the eyes of others and boost their self-confidence.

Beside the makeup, beauty enhancement apps, applica-

tions or software designed to modify and enhance the appearance of photos and videos, is a common and accessible method for Chinese women to increase their social charm. These apps typically offer a range of features such as filters, retouching tools, makeup effects, skin smoothing, face slimming, and other adjustments to enhance the overall aesthetic appeal of the subject in the image or video. In China, it is rare to find women who don't use the beauty enhancement apps to retouch their photos and achieve a perceived perfect image before uploading them to social networks. The vast majority of Chinese women use beauty enhancement apps to make their image appear whiter, thinner, younger, and more beautiful. Some women even go to the extent of meticulously editing each frame of the videos they upload. Due to the significant difference between the uploaded photos or videos and their actual selves, the Chinese image processing technology is also jokingly referred to as one of the "Four Evil Arts of Asia."

Correspondingly, there is a wide array of beauty enhancement apps for both photos and videos, and even smartphones that are specifically designed to emphasize beauty camera effects. For example, there is an application called Meitu, allowing users to instantly touch up their photos, use filters and stickers on selfies, and edit the videos. As of June 2021, Meitu's applications have been installed on over 2.34 billion distinct mobile devices worldwide, with approximately 246 million users engaging with the app each month. Moreover, an estimated 7 billion images are generated on a monthly basis. Notably, the data reveals that 89% of Meitu's user base comprises females. Meitu is just one of the many photos editing software available in China, but its vast user base and high volume of photo production attest to the Chinese women's dependence on beauty cameras (Meitu, 2022). And each woman's phone is not limited to just one beauty enhancement app; many women even pay for VIP memberships on multiple apps every month to access additional features.

2.2.3 The Popularity of Plastic Surgery and Medical Treatment

The pursuit of beauty has also led to the popularity of plastic surgery and the widespread misuse of medications. As reported by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, China ranks as the third-largest country globally in terms of the number of plastic surgery procedures, accounting for approximately 13% of such procedures conducted worldwide. In 2020 alone, around 1.05 million individuals underwent plastic surgeries in China (Liang et al., 2022). In addition, many sales online selling medicine to help women lose weight, remove acne, and

become fair. Recently, a number of domestic and foreign pharmaceutical companies, including Novo Nordisk, Eli Lilly, and Sino Biopharmaceutical, have successively announced their progress in developing drugs for weight loss indications, leading to a sustained increase in the market demand for weight loss medications. Taking GLP-1 as a convincing example, GLP-1 receptor agonists achieve the goal of controlling blood sugar and losing weight by stimulating insulin release, suppressing appetite, and other means. With products continuously entering the market, GLP-1 receptor agonists are presented with a developmental opportunity (Fick & Satijia, 2023). Estimations indicate that by the year 2030, the market size for GLP-1 receptor agonists used for weight loss in China is projected to reach 38.3 billion yuan. (Fick & Satijia, 2023). As we can see the large demand for this kind of medicine to lose weight and control the body shape in Chinese market, it also shows Chinese people's drastic desire to use easier and more strict way to become pretty.

2.2.4 Dieting and Excessive Weight Loss Frenzy

Chinese women face significant societal pressure to adhere to the ideal of being thin, while those who are labeled as “chubby” are considered as lacking attractiveness. Therefore, even most Chinese women are naturally quite slim, a little bit of ultra weight serves in a very negative issue by most. The pursuit of being thin has led to dieting and extreme weight loss becoming a major trend. In China, it seems that every woman is trying to lose weight, and even high school students are no exception. On social media platforms in China, many fitness and weight loss bloggers share their diets. For example, the “Seven-Day Weight Loss Plan” involves only eating two meals a day and consuming a limited amount of carbohydrates and fats. The diets of celebrities frequently become hot topics of discussion. For instance, one actress shared a tutorial on creating sandwiches without bread, while another posted about relying solely on grapefruit as her carbohydrate source and successfully losing 3 kg in just 10 days. A singer revealed in her vlog how to use oil-absorbing papers to suck fat floating in noodle soup. These exaggerated dietary restrictions not only harm people's basic metabolism, but also endanger the lives of young women who blindly follow the trend.

2.2.5 Extreme Pursuit of Skin Whitening

There is a Chinese term to call “Ms. Perfect” which is 白富美 (bai fu mei) which means white, wealthy, and beautiful (LTL, 2022). Also, in ancient China, fair skin symbolized delicacy and indicated that a person did not belong to the hardworking peasant class under the sun. Fair skin was not just about beauty, but also represented

the gentle, pure, and soft gender characteristics of women, implying their status and education level. Due to their love and pursuit of fair skin, Chinese women engage in various behaviors to obtain and maintain a light complexion. From an external perspective, they not only apply sunscreen, wear hats and sunglasses, and cover their skin with clothing when outdoors, especially in the presence of ultraviolet rays to ensure maximum protection. Many women spare no effort in sun protection, using various whitening creams, masks, and professional facial scrubs to brighten their complexion. There have even been the emergence of whitening injections and whitening medication (LTL, 2022). Recently, a Chinese celebrity recommended whitening injections, or officially known as whitening antioxidant injections, which can whiten the skin for one to two years after one or two courses, but it is not a permanent whitening solution. Moreover, whitening injections are prohibited in many countries, including China where it has not yet received official approval from regulatory authorities, making it a product that hovers on the edge of being illegal. It is important to note that although whitening injections can quickly show results, its side effects and risks are significant.

2.3 The theoretical view of body sociology

The theoretical view of body sociology see “appearance anxiety” as a state that is internally connected to psychology on a micro level and externally associated with society on a macro level. Viewed from this perspective, the body serves as more than just a biological vessel for individual actions; it is also a social construct that connects individuals with society through various practices.

Body sociology underscores the significance of the body's tangible manifestation in establishing a link between individuals and society. Functioning as a form of social practice, the body embodies the representation and knowledge system of experiential realities within society. Narratives pertaining to the body serve as expressions of social gender, social control, and social order (Wen, 2008; Zhao, 2012; Nicolas, 2003).

Erving Goffman, a prominent sociologist, provided a systematic explanation of the body as a form of social practice. He observed that people's focus on shared presence in everyday life naturally directs their attention towards the body. The current condition of the body can give rise to phenomena such as face, shame, and embarrassment, thereby influencing individuals to adopt behaviors that align with social norms (Foucault, 2003).

Within the framework of body sociology, one crucial process through which the body establishes a connection between individuals and society is referred to as “discipline.”

This mechanism serves as the central aspect of the body as a social practice. Foucault revealed in his study of the authority spectrum that traditional society uses strategies to discipline the body for power domination, thus naming the body as the “flesh of power”(Foucault, 2016). As a socially constructed entity, the body exhibits a significant degree of social plasticity and instability. Therefore, it becomes essential to direct attention towards the institutions or organizations that exert control over the body (Foucault, 2016). In his view, any procedure of power cannot be separated from the regulator and domination of body. Therefore, the difficulty of the alienation of female body consumption in purchaser society is prominent (Ji, 2009). The consumption practices of female aesthetics reveal the presence of hierarchical surveillance, normalized judgment, and review. These practices manifest as the body being subjected to the “gaze,” being positioned within a hierarchical framework, and being indexed. The body remains unable to evade the influence of social disciplinary power. Previous research indicates that young women often experience a profound sense of body shame and social anxiety, stemming from the anticipated male gaze (Calogero, 2004).

The mechanism of social discipline operates on the body through a combination of internal and external influences, exerting a subtle yet significant impact on various aspects of individual consciousness and behavior. An central outcome of this is that individuals manage or modify their bodies. Turner regards the body as a planned management, the internal and external of which can achieve full functioning through supervision, cultivation, and maintenance (Healing, 2010).

As society transitions from traditional forms to consumer-oriented societies, the mechanisms of social discipline concerning the body also undergo a shift towards new characteristics. With the gradual emergence of consumer culture as the dominant social consciousness, the body becomes increasingly subject to manipulation by consumer culture and becomes the primary vehicle for people’s consumption desires. (Boderia, 2014). In Baudrillard’s book “The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures,” he argues that within the comprehensive range of consumer goods, there exists an item that surpasses all others in terms of beauty, value, and impact. This item carries a weightier significance than even a car, which itself carries numerous connotations, and that item is the human body. (Foucault, 2016). In the realm of consumer society, it is plausible to assert that body culture dominates the cultural landscape, while the economic aspect revolves around the body, giving rise to what can be termed as the body economy. The body itself assumes the role of the “consumed entity,” em-

bodying the essence of consumption. Moreover, consumer society places a strong emphasis on body aesthetics, shaping the perception and appreciation of beauty within this context. (Tao, 2019).

Existing research in the discussion of fitness phenomena emphasizes that in the context of consumer society, social discipline will act in people’s actions for body management (Tang & Xie, 2019; Gao, 2019;), thereby strengthening society’s cognition of the attraction of the body. In the context of contemporary society, youth groups have emerged as significant participants in consumption practices, particularly characterized by their strong inclination towards online consumption. As a result, everyday life presentations closely intertwined with social networking media have become increasingly prevalent. Therefore, dissecting the social mechanism of the interaction between body practices and conscious behaviors of youth groups from the perspective of body sociology has become an important proposition for discussing “appearance anxiety”.

3. Discussion

3.1 Analysis of the social factors of “appearance anxiety” in young women

Through online platforms like Weibo, public accounts, and Zhihu, participatory observations were conducted on themes concerning “appearance anxiety” among young women. The collection of self-reports and reflections from young women was facilitated by perusing comments and responses to pertinent posts and articles. Examination of the amassed data elucidates that the societal aspects contributing to “appearance anxiety” in young women primarily pertain to the twin dimensions of fostering intimate connections and pursuing social acknowledgment.

3.1.1 “Defects” and “Frustrations” in Building Intimate Relationships

Intimate relationships constitute a significant dimension of social connections, profoundly impacting emotions, cognition, and behavior. Within the context of forming intimate bonds, individuals’ perceptions of their body image are shaped by both personal interactions and societal influences. Cooley’s concept of the “looking-glass self” suggests that one’s behavior is heavily influenced by their self-perception, which is predominantly shaped through social interactions. Others’ evaluations and attitudes serve as a reflective “mirror” through which individuals understand themselves (Coolie, 2015).

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Gender dynamics within intimate relationships wield a pronounced influence on women, with their experiences of "frustration" serving as a crucial factor in their diminished self-identification with their body image. Unlike general interpersonal interactions, intimate relationships entail more private realms, characterized by mutual reliance between genders. The disillusionment within these relationships can disrupt this interdependence, plunging individuals into self-doubt and anxiety. Facial and bodily imperfections can precipitate a cascade of tragedies, such as women grappling with inherent feelings of inferiority, apprehensions regarding partner infidelity, and the anguish of romantic rejection, all of which exacerbate women's appearance-related anxieties in gendered relationships (Huang, 2015).

Following unsuccessful or thwarted romantic experiences, young women are compelled to devise coping mechanisms to bolster their body image and self-conception, often manifesting in behaviors aimed at altering or preserving their physical appearance.

3.1.2 "Dressing up" and "Remodeling" in Seeking Social Recognition

If intimate relationships represent the micro-level dimension of social connection, then social recognition epitomizes a broader scale of social relationship formation, reflecting perceptions of similarities and differences within the social groups individuals belong to (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Throughout the process of social recognition, the choice of reference groups holds significant weight, with the media assuming a pivotal role as a reference point. Baudrillard argues that while the body image propagated by social media is essentially a virtual construct devoid of real referents, it nonetheless sets forth an externalized false ideal (Healing, 2010). Media-promoted body ideals serve as templates for women to emulate, strive for, mold, and create, leaving many feeling dissatisfied, perplexed, and anxious about their own appearance. In a consumer-driven society, social recognition is heavily influenced by consumer culture. Within contemporary consumer culture, specific female archetypes proliferate across advertisements, publications, and media productions. These presented body ideals dictate women's perceptions,

fostering a belief that every aspect of their bodies can be enhanced and must be improved to present a more marketable self-image (Wu, 2009).

Simultaneously, the assembly-line aesthetics of internet celebrities, championed by social media, encroach upon individuals' private spheres, perpetuating a continuous state of "appearance anxiety." The promotion of cosmetic procedures, once embarked upon, becomes an inexorable journey, demanding women to strive for perfection through repeated "enhancements." The anxiety induced by aesthetic norms within the social sphere compels individuals to seek social recognition while continually conforming to these norms, albeit at the expense of their own aesthetic standards, culminating in a "socialized aesthetics." Public spaces serve as stages for self-presentation, characterized by observation, and media-guided transformations of these spaces exacerbate and broaden the scope of social scrutiny. When women don garments and accessories symbolizing beauty and fashion, they convey a psychological assertion of "I am beautiful, I manage my body image well, and I am growing more confident" (Xiao, 2017).

For young women aspiring to beauty and confidence, refined cosmetics, trendy attire, and cosmetic enhancements become avenues to cultivate a desirable body image and elevate cognitive perceptions. These pursuits also reflect their life aspirations and self-fulfillment. As Baudrillard posits, consumption behavior is not merely about acquiring material possessions but rather about the imagination of a form of recognition (Howels, 2007). Young women employ consumer behavior to realize the reconstruction and validation of their own body image. However, since individuals perceive the body as malleable material ripe for influence, it serves as a fundamental basis for constructing social recognition (Huang, 2020).

Consequently, the pressures exerted by consumer culture in daily life, coupled with anxieties surrounding risks and uncertainties in social relationships and environments, manifest in heightened attention to the body among women.

3.2 Social Discipline and Body Consumption Mechanism of "Appearance Anxiety"

3.2.1 Mechanism of Aesthetic Gaze that Disciplines Social Gender

Based on the preceding analysis, it becomes evident that the "appearance anxiety" experienced by young women stems from the dual construction of social relationships, namely intimate relationships and social recognition, under the pervasive gaze of social aesthetics. In this context, women are observed through the lens of social gender, conforming to prevailing aesthetic standards.

Under traditional social norms, the prevailing belief is that women exist for the gaze of men, with men taking action while women serve as objects of appearance (Howels, 2007). Anthropological research consistently highlights the marginalization of women as cultural subjects, often deprived of the agency they deserve (Ma, 2010).

Throughout history's evolution, from ancient beliefs like the "King of Chu's preference for slender waists" to modern ideals of "pale, slender, youthful" beauty standards, deliberate or inadvertent reinforcement of bodily differences between men and women perpetuates notions of femininity characterized by beauty, gentleness, dependency, maternity, and protection, rooted in biological determinism.

Consequently, women are positioned as aesthetic symbols within male-dominated societies, subjected to external gaze that subtly molds their perceptions, eventually leading women to internalize and reinforce such gaze upon their own bodies. Thus, social gaze not only reflects male scrutiny of females but also encompasses females' self-scrutiny.

The binary opposition inherent in social gender perpetuates the enduring influence of traditional norms on contemporary young women. Resultantly, women internalize societal norms, continuously assessing and adapting their body image perceptions to align with established aesthetic standards, while seeking social validation within intimate relationships.

As societal norms increasingly favor malleable female bodies, the significance of body image for women intensifies, deepening anxieties surrounding body modification in pursuit of perfection (Ye, 2014). This pursuit often leads to distorted body image perceptions, triggering intense anxiety regarding emotional expression, relationship building, and social recognition.

Faced with such anxieties, women evaluate themselves based on societal ideals of body image, exerting control over their bodies to conform to social norms. Consequently, they continually "reconstruct" their bodies within the confines of social discipline-induced anxiety, presenting these "reconstructed" bodies in their everyday lives (Jiang, 2003). Despite some women viewing changes in body image as a means to combat "appearance anxiety" and regain self-identity, the underlying consumerist logic cannot be overlooked.

3.2.2 Body Consumption Mechanism that Rejects "Appearance Anxiety"

When social aesthetic scrutiny permeates consumer society, the underlying consumer culture exerts a profound influence. Baudrillard's discourse on consumer society

highlights consumption as a systematic utilization of symbols and a crucial tool for social control (Gu & Liu, 2013). Within modern consumer culture, the discipline imposed on the female body enhances its commercial value as a cultural symbol, albeit at the expense of diminishing its subjective value from a female perspective.

While women's endeavors to enhance their bodies through consumption mechanisms may represent a form of liberation, the aesthetic constraints imposed by consumer culture paradoxically stifle women's emancipation, exacerbating self-objectification and fostering body perception anxieties. While body consumption can enhance the femininity and external allure of women immersed in consumer culture, every action aimed at enhancing body beauty ultimately represents individual compromises and responses to their social and cultural milieu.

For young women, the purpose of consumption is not merely acquiring goods but presenting their lifestyles, cultivating intimate relationships, and enhancing social recognition. Women's engagement in body consumption is internalized within consumer culture and validated within the fabric of social relations.

Women's outward rejection of "appearance anxiety" through body consumption manifests in self-enhancement through adornments such as cosmetics and accessories. In contemporary society, women's self-care practices through bodily enhancements have become emblematic of consumer culture (Yan, 2021). Symbols represented by cosmetics, attire, and accessories influence individual perceptions of body image cognition, often becoming synonymous with personal body image.

The production of goods and media portrayals in consumer society bestow numerous definitions of "beauty" upon contemporary young women's bodies, reinforcing social aesthetic norms rooted in social gender. Women select "beautiful" items to maintain their image, fostering anticipated intimate relationships and social recognition. Scholars suggest that the body as a mirror reflects implied meanings constructed by consumer society, forming a cyclical consumption temptation mechanism (William & Bendelow, 1998).

Women's inward rejection of "appearance anxiety" through body consumption is evident in body reconstruction procedures such as cosmetic surgery. For young women, the body possesses individual value as natural capital and social value as symbolic capital. The potential for societal "stigmatization" of the body prompts individuals to "reconstruct" it through consumption practices (Jiang, 2003). Women with perceived bodily "imperfections" strive to enhance their appearance confidence and augment the likelihood of forming intimate relationships

through medical procedures (Ye, 2014).

In the quest to enhance body image cognition, women perceive the body as a product for refinement, employing body consumption strategies to achieve self-gratification, thereby exercising control over and altering their bodies. Ultimately, the “reconstructed” body image is presented to society.

The combined effects of social aesthetic scrutiny and body consumption mechanisms engender a continual and reciprocal social process for contemporary young women, oscillating between anxiety production and rejection. The former can be viewed as an objective social mechanism, while the latter represents a subjective social mechanism. Within this process, women’s self-perception of body image and their social practices surrounding body image construction reflect social gender and contribute to the establishment of social order, particularly in terms of fostering intimate relationships and garnering social recognition.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that the proliferation of information media has bolstered the social practice mechanism of body image, extending women’s daily body images into broader spatial realms. If a negative body image takes hold, it can ensnare women in a cycle of battling “appearance anxiety,” thereby exacerbating tension within the social gender paradigm.

4. Conclusion

With the rapid development of information network media, the phenomenon of “appearance anxiety” among contemporary young women has transcended the realm of individual psychology to become a pervasive social mentality issue. Therefore, understanding its formation through a social mechanism is of paramount importance. This article, employing qualitative research methods from the perspective of body sociology, delves into the social factors and mechanisms underpinning young women’s “appearance anxiety.” It posits that such anxiety is intricately linked to the dual dimensions of forging intimate relationships and seeking social recognition. Consequently, young women navigate a delicate balance between accepting the aesthetic gaze that shapes social gender norms and rejecting “appearance anxiety” through body consumption practices.

The proliferation of information network media has undoubtedly afforded women greater avenues for self-presentation, yet it has concurrently bolstered social aesthetic and consumer culture. This, coupled with the media’s reinforcement of body image standards and the promotion of body consumption practices, ensnares young women in a cyclic pattern of “social aesthetics-appearance anxiety-body consumption.”

ety-body consumption.”

Modern societal advancements have enabled women to transcend traditional confines and participate more extensively in the public sphere, presenting both opportunities and challenges. While they enjoy increased visibility, they also face heightened scrutiny. Women construct self-awareness of their body image within the framework of social aesthetic norms dictated by social gender. Through strategic choices in body consumption, they manage and reshape their body image to align with social aesthetic standards, thereby combatting “appearance anxiety” with the aim of establishing intimate relationships and seeking social recognition in both public and private spheres.

The fervor among young women in shaping their body image and engaging in body beautification consumption practices, while influenced by external factors, also reflects their agency. Their active embrace of consumption and body presentation mechanisms signifies affirmation of their self-perceived body image and aspirations for social fulfillment. It also signals a growing demand for independence and subjectivity as they navigate away from traditional social gender norms.

The youth demographic plays a pivotal role in socio-economic development. Fostering a positive social mentality among youth, including mitigating anxiety, aligns with the strategic imperatives of national development. Therefore, it is imperative to not only bolster individual-level mental health education and services but also delve into the societal-level mechanisms and outcomes of young women’s “appearance anxiety.”

By guiding and enhancing social gender norms in a positive direction, we can cultivate a value system that embraces body diversity and fosters an open and inclusive aesthetic culture. Simultaneously, efforts to enrich the cultural milieu of youth, ensuring that media content contributes to their healthy development, are crucial. Preventing the commodification of the body in consumer society from pervading public discourse is vital for fostering an overall, holistic, and positive aesthetic culture in society.

It is noteworthy that as women continue to gain prominence in the social arena and feminist ideologies exert widespread influence, contemporary women are gradually emancipating themselves from traditional constraints and embracing broader horizons. The complexities inherent in young women’s efforts toward body image transformation encompass a blend of objectivity and subjectivity, passivity and agency. Understanding how these dynamics shape the trajectory of female development remains an important and ongoing area of exploration and discourse.

5. EPQ Performance

Generally speaking, through this research, I had the following experiences: First, I have successfully achieved all objectives, similarly this research makes me have a deeper understanding of the women's appearance anxiety, especially in the Chinese context. Secondly, the process of essay writing has enhanced my capacity for independent and critical thinking. Additionally, it has significantly improved my skills in essay reading and information gathering. My multitasking ability increased as well, and I read a lot of journals and academic essays to finish my paper which improve my knowledge too.

While writing this paper, I have to study for my mock exam and CIE exam simultaneously. In order to handle my work efficiently and perfectly, I learn how to adjust my time and modify my schedule to complete all the tasks within the deadline. This improve my skills of managing time well and how to balance my time, and I have formed the habits of making plans, set up deadlines for myself or making a to-do list every day. I learnt about how to make Gantt graph and keep recording logs to supervise me to finish things more efficiently. Indeed, through the writing process, I learned how to use English to express my views and theories clearly, which is helpful to my English writing and laid a good foundation for my college study.

Additionally, I think the significant achievement for me in this EPQ study is searching literature. During the two months of training sections, my reading speed has improved, and I can quickly estimate whether the empirical paper fits my topic or not. Through the process of evaluating resources which I cited using CRAAP model, I quite learned how to determine if resources are worth using and where to find some useful resources. I know more websites such as the phrase-bank which may help me with my grammar and how to accept resources from different places too. Indeed, under the guidance and assistance of my EPQ, I changed my previous style of searching for information and becoming more efficient, more reliable, and more academic. In my opinion, this is my biggest growth. Last but not least, I finish quite a lot of things during the whole process that I have never imagined. From choosing topics to finish the whole extend project, I solve a lot of trouble by myself which let me becoming more confident and independent, meanwhile I improve my willpower and the ability of self-control because sometimes I was tired and want to give up, but finally I always overcome all the difficulties. I will not be afraid of any trouble anymore because I know everything can be okay if I put effort into it. Moreover, through the presentation, I know how to express my works well and how to do a good presenta-

tion as well as my skills of making a PPT. I quite gain a huge progress in presentation like how to let the listeners understand my work well or some little tips during I was speaking.

If I have the opportunity to do the EPQ again, I will start earlier because the project does takes some time. Also, I will record my logs and finish some tasks on time so that I will balance my time well. Meanwhile I need to read more and search for more resources to improve my paper as well as my knowledge. At the same time, I will make my paper detailed as more as possible. I want to give others who also want to do the EPQ some advice. You have better prepare plenty of time to finish your project and choose your interested project, and you should finish tasks like proposal on time and balance your time well. Also, you should not be afraid of mistakes, just be brave and solve them by yourself. Then you will gain quite a lot from the project, the process will be a unforgettable and nice experiences of your life. At last, I think this skill can help me better adapt to the self-exploring study style in the university. At the end of the article, I want to thank all my mentors and tutor. Thanks to the two months of teaching and suggestions, I have grown rapidly and learned many skills that will be helpful in the future. Thanks for letting me meet the EPQ.

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