

Exploring the Complexities of Adolescent Appearance Anxiety: A Comprehensive Analysis

Xiaohan Yu

Abstract

People's concern for appearance is almost instinct, and pursuing beauty is a universal human behavior. However, the pervasive emphasis on appearance and the singularity of beauty standards has become the prevailing cultural trend, impacting everyone. Teenagers exposed to this cultural trend are more likely to develop appearance anxiety. Current research has progressively shifted its focus toward the concern of appearance anxiety, categorizing it within the realms of anxiety disorders and depression. This classification places the appearance of anxiety within the broader discussion surrounding psychological disorders. In this article, we will discuss the formation and impact of adolescent appearance anxiety from different perspectives. Personal, familial, and societal factors will all be explored in our analysis, as prior studies have not extensively investigated this dimension of adolescents' sensitivity to appearance.

Given that adolescent appearance anxiety can exert far-reaching effects on personal development, we will examine its consequences both in the short term and over the long term. In terms of the prevention and treatment of adolescent appearance anxiety, we will analyze traditional methods, such as psychological counseling and the regulation of social media use. Additionally, we will explore innovative approaches like art-based therapy, which may yield more favorable outcomes. In contrast to prior research, we have identified that teenagers' sensitivity can diminish the efficacy of conventional treatment approaches, underscoring the distinct advantages of art-based therapies.

Keywords: Adolescents, Appearance Anxiety, Art Therapy

Introduction

Today, the prevalence of teenage depression is steadily on the rise. This concerning phenomenon can be attributed not only to the heavy academic pressure that adolescents face but also to often overlooked factors, one of which is appearance anxiety. When I was taking a sketch class, our teacher asked us to draw a portrait of ourselves. An intriguing observation came to light: the self-portraits of my classmates were usually more idealized than their actual appearances. Therefore, I started to think about this apparent distortion in self-perception. Is the pursuit of image perfection concealing underlying appearance anxiety among adolescents? People suffering from appearance anxiety tend to internalize external beauty standards, which can, in turn, result in diminished self-esteem and even mental health issues like anxiety and depression.

Recent research conducted by the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor, MI, proposed that 64% of parents acknowledged their children's self-consciousness about some aspects of their appearance, such as weight, skin condition, or breast size. Alarming, this sentiment was echoed by 73% of adolescent girls and 69% of adolescent boys (Schimelpfening). The origins of anxiety are tangled, stemming from a complicated interplay of social, personal,

and familial factors. A skewed perception of self-worth can include peer pressure, personal experiences, social media, cultural beauty ideals, etc. Therefore, I will analyze the issue of adolescent appearance anxiety from different perspectives and explore how it exerts its influence on the physical and mental well-being of teenagers. The consequences of adolescent appearance anxiety are non-negligible and far more severe than we expected, often manifesting as both mental and physical problems like depression and Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). I will examine both the short-term and long-term influences of appearance anxiety on teenagers. Although grappling with adolescent appearance anxiety is an intricate and subjective experience, we are expected to seek and develop solutions that can prevent or alleviate the negative effects of appearance anxiety on teenagers. Conventional approaches such as counseling and cognitive-behavioral therapy will be discussed. In addition, we will introduce the concept of art-based therapy as an innovative means of addressing appearance anxiety in teenagers. With the hope of implementing art-based therapy as a supplement or alternative, this paper is devoted to providing parents and educators with more creative ways to help adolescents overcome their struggles and steer them toward a brighter future.

Thesis

Adolescent appearance anxiety derives from various sources, encompassing social media's influence on young minds, the rapid evolution of cultural trends, and adolescents' escalating sensitivity to their physical appearance and changes. In the short term, appearance anxiety can manifest as distraction and disruption to the learning process, gradually impacting the mental and physical well-being of adolescents potentially leading to severe conditions like Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). In the long run, there will be gender differences in terms of the profound influence of appearance anxiety. Appearance anxiety can also negatively affect adolescents' intimate relationships when they grow up, along with a lack of leadership. It is an urgent need for both parents and schools to acknowledge and address this issue while guiding adolescents on responsible social media usage. In addition to direct intervention, employing non-aggressive art-based methods can be efficient in the prevention and reduction of adolescent appearance anxiety.

Causes of Adolescent Appearance Anxiety

As technology advances and evolves, the Internet has been perfectly integrated into our lives. This integration has, however, raised concerns about teenagers being increasingly exposed to misleading information on social media, subsequently leading to the development of appearance-related anxiety. The pursuit of internet celebrities, often called 'star chasing,' has become a common trend and popular entertainment for teenagers. Although star chasing is an effective way for adolescents to relieve stress and gain emotional support to a certain extent, excessive attention to these glamorous internet celebrities can trigger appearance-related anxiety among young individuals. Many inaccurate and toxic information is circulating on the Internet, including images, videos, and sounds that have been carefully designed and artificially altered to attract other people's attention. Much of the content encountered online is artificially curated rather than an accurate representation of reality. For example, platforms like Instagram, frequently used by adolescents, provide a variety of photo filters that can alter one's appearance—lightening skin, enhancing eyes, and even reshaping facial features. These filters are all fake disguises used by people who want to make themselves conform to conventional standards of beauty and allure. However, these technologies have gradually made everyone hypocritical, leading to a gradual erosion of authenticity. Therefore, young people are likelier to lose their sense of discernment and then struggle to differentiate between reality and the idealized

imagery circulated online. Consequently, exposure to this misleading information misleads teenagers to compare their appearance with perfectly retouched online photos, resulting in feelings of inferiority and ultimately culminating in appearance-related anxiety.

The impact of social media on teenagers mirrors the impact of prevailing cultural trends.

Misusing social media platforms reflects how these trends can become distorted, particularly regarding aesthetic ideals, leading young individuals to form misguided notions and judgments about beauty. For instance, among the movies and TV shows that teenagers love to watch now, teenagers are more likely to prefer actors and characters whose physical attributes align with conventional standards of perfection. In popular franchises like the Marvel cinematic universe, many characters have perfect figures and looks that stand out in contrast to everyday life. This trend strongly impacted teenagers, particularly during the peak popularity of Marvel movies. It sparked a pervasive trend of emulating superheroes, a genuine desire shared by boys and girls to attain admirable appearances and body shapes. This pursuit of perfection gradually invades young minds, leading to a skewed perception of beauty. However, imperfection is not only normal in real life but should also be celebrated as a part of our life journey. The relentless pursuit of an unattainable aesthetic is both distorted and unrealistic. When teenagers internalize this idealized image, they imagine themselves as flawless individuals, magnifying their perceived appearance flaws and gradually eroding their self-confidence.

Although appearance anxiety is also common in adults, it manifests distinctly in teenagers. Adolescents, going through rapid changes in their appearances, find themselves particularly sensitive to changes in their bodies. The adolescent body undergoes a significant transformation, with hormones surging and emotions intensifying. Therefore, teenagers may feel anxious about what they have never encountered before. Approximately 18% declined to participate in photographs, 17% attempted to conceal their looks using clothing, and 8% resorted to restrictive eating (Schimelpfening). At this age, the external influence of the surrounding environment is significant. For example, peer evaluations can become a pressure on teenagers and even alter adolescents' self-perception. Within the family dynamic, adolescents are also acutely attuned to their parents' assessments of their appearance. Unintentional comments from parents can have a potent effect, causing teenagers to perceive themselves in a distorted way. Compared with peer evaluation, parents' comments may be more emotionally impactful and potentially destructive as adolescents

care more about the opinions of those closest to them. Adolescents' heightened sensitivity to appearance changes and concerns will expose them to a higher risk of developing appearance anxiety when compared to adults.

Effects of Adolescent Appearance Anxiety

The impact of appearance-related anxiety on teenagers is more profound and far-reaching than we expected, so we need to examine the harm it causes in both the short term and long term. The most direct impact is often manifested in the disruption of teenagers' daily lives, which usually leads to a gradual decline in academic performance. These consequences, in turn, can intensify the anxiety experienced by teenagers. Teenagers' physical health will also be affected. Many students resort to unscientific and irregular diets to achieve a perfect body shape. Long-term irregular eating can lead to eating disorders and even develop severe problems like BDD (Body Dysmorphic Disorder). According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, "Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is when a person has a preoccupation with a perceived flaw in their physical appearance. Although in reality there might be a slight flaw, the distress is excessive". During teenagers' crucial growth and development stage, the pursuit of drastic weight loss and body alterations can significantly raise the risk of malnutrition, hampering their normal developmental progress. Aside from the harm to physical health, there will also be an enduring impact of appearance anxiety on teenager's mental well-being. It often leads teenagers to experience lowered self-esteem, social withdrawal, and other serious problems. As appearance anxiety deepens, gender disparities become increasingly evident. Typically, girls are more susceptible to its effects due to the escalating beauty standards prevalent in contemporary society, exemplified by shrinking women's clothing sizes and the proliferation of skin-whitening products advertised on social media.

In the long run, appearance anxiety will also have a significant impact on intimacy because individuals burdened by such anxiety often have high expectations regarding their partner's appearance, which can hinder the emotional connections between individuals. The weighty burden of striving for a perfect appearance can often extend beyond an individual and onto their partners. This transfer of expectations places significant pressure on partners about their appearance and body shape. Moreover, as appearance anxiety persists, it tends to erode self-confidence. Persistent appearance anxiety doesn't just make people unhappy with their appearance; it also makes them overly critical of every little flaw they see. When

these individuals enter the professional world, they often struggle to develop leadership. Leadership entails making decisive decisions and possessing strong confidence, crucial for career advancement. However, individuals with long-term appearance anxiety can easily be trapped in a cage of self-denial and, therefore, less likely to possess leadership. Consequently, teenagers without appearance-related anxieties generally have better prospects for employment opportunities and career development than their counterparts dealing with appearance-related concerns.

How to Prevent and Alleviate Adolescent Appearance Anxiety

The issue of appearance anxiety among teenagers is a problem that needs attention in today's society. While conventional approaches like psychological counseling and social media regulation have shown efficacy, we should consider some innovative methods to deal with teenagers' appearance anxiety. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, my experience in identifying appearance anxiety during sketching classes has inspired me to recognize the role of art in addressing this issue. I not only observe how art helps us detect teenagers' appearance anxiety but also see its potential to offer us a way of prevention and treatment. Admittedly, traditional methods are effective in solving the problem of appearance anxiety among teenagers. For example, psychological counseling can help teenagers vent their stress and better understand their appearance. However, these approaches may be less suited for today's tech-savvy youth. This is due to two primary factors. First, the rapid integration of technology, particularly social media, into teenagers' lives exposes them to potentially misleading information. The impact may fall short of expectations even with attempts to regulate social media use. The large amount of content on these platforms and their easy accessibility make it difficult to fully protect teenagers from harmful messages about appearance.

Furthermore, anonymity online can lead to the promotion of damaging beauty ideals and cyberbullying, making appearance-related anxieties worse. Second, as discussed in the first part, teenagers navigating the sensitive period of adolescence may resist or reject traditional treatments like one-on-one psychological interviews. They may be hesitant to share their thoughts or feelings with people they have no close connection to. Teenagers can even show aggressive behavior against any intervention in their lives. Therefore, traditional methods of controlling adolescent appearance anxiety may be less effective and feasible than we expected before.

In contrast to traditional methods, art-based therapy offers a gentle and non-invasive approach that avoids triggering resistance in teenagers. Art therapy does not create a tense treatment environment but introduces adolescents to a relaxing atmosphere that can evoke their enthusiasm to evolve into the treatment procedure. The creative nature of art therapy encourages teenagers to gradually open their minds, making them more likely to express their thoughts and feelings. According to the American Art Therapy Association, “Art Therapy is used to improve cognitive and sensory-motor functions...” and “through integrative methods, art therapy engages the mind, body, and spirit in ways distinct from verbal articulation alone.” If teenagers do not want to discuss their feelings and thoughts about appearance, traditional approaches like psychological counseling will be useless because these methods largely depend on verbal communication. The distinctiveness of art-based therapy is that it does not depend on a single form of treatment since it is an integrative approach seamlessly combining visual, spiritual, and physical elements. It enables teenagers to express themselves and release emotions, ultimately reshaping their perceptions of appearance. For instance, self-portraits created in sketching classes can help teenagers identify their ideal self-image and recognize the discrepancies between this ideal and their realistic appearance. Through art therapy, teenagers can come to terms with these divisions, fostering a more accurate understanding of aesthetics and realizing that beauty should be diverse.

We can also integrate technology into art-based therapies besides traditional art therapies like painting, dancing, and singing. Given that technology has become an integral aspect of young people’s lives today, we can harness its potential to transform technology into a potent tool for addressing appearance anxiety. Virtual reality (VR) is a good example of how powerful it is to combine technology with art-based therapy. VR is an advanced technology that enables individuals to immerse themselves in alternate realities distinct from their everyday lives. It can craft tailored experiences, generating scenes and environments aligned with therapeutic goals and objectives. Researchers found that “VR can be a therapeutic alternative for clients who are afraid of making mistakes in their work because it allows for an experiential exploration without any physical or real-world implications” (Shamri Zeevi). In other words, VR allows individuals to explore themselves in ways they may not be able to achieve in the real world. For example, in traditional art therapy, such as drawing, teenagers may encounter challenges deciding what to draw and how to do artistic expressions. They might also fear drawing something they consider inappropriate, potentially leading to judgment or criticism from others. In

such scenarios, VR can prove particularly advantageous. It can present teenagers with creative prompts and themes, offering them a wide range of topics to explore and affording them creative freedom. Most importantly, VR excels in protecting privacy, alleviating teenagers’ anxiety about potential judgment or commentary from others. As technology advances, we can anticipate the emergence of increasingly sophisticated tools and technologies, similar to VR, that seamlessly integrate art therapy with the digital realm.

Conclusion

The issue of appearance anxiety among teenagers has become a problem worthy of attention from the entire society. The reasons for appearance anxiety in teenagers are varied, primarily stemming from the idolization of celebrities and the impact of social media, which eventually leads to a distortion of beauty standards. When beauty is defined as a one-size-fits-all standard, it becomes a prevailing cultural trend, causing teenagers to conform to this skewed norm. This toxic cultural trend will result in adolescents becoming hyper-sensitive to any changes in their bodies and extremely attuned to how others perceive and evaluate them, thereby leading to magnified appearance-related anxieties among teenagers. From a short-term perspective, appearance anxiety can lead to a distraction from teenagers’ normal life. They may encounter a series of issues like declined academic performance, reduced focus, and increased stress in school. Appearance anxiety can also lead to significant physical health issues, notably eating disorders, as teenagers may resort to strict dieting in pursuit of an ideal appearance. In the long run, it will profoundly impact career development and family relationships. Controlling and preventing appearance anxiety is a problem that requires long-term attention and intervention. Existing traditional methods, such as psychological counseling or reducing social media, are now widely used, but their effectiveness may be limited. Conventional methods like psychological counseling and regulating social media usage are commonly employed, but their effectiveness may have limitations. Therefore, we have to consider some creative methods like art-based therapy because they can alleviate the burden of appearance anxiety among teenagers in a gentler manner.

Nonetheless, this innovative approach’s widespread applicability and feasibility have yet to be substantiated. Even if it proves effective compared to traditional methods, it may still face challenges regarding large-scale conduction. My primary goal in composing this article is to raise awareness about the seriousness of appearance

anxiety, urging everyone to recognize the necessity of including appearance anxiety as a vital facet of adolescent mental health research.

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