

Research on Social Media-Induced Appearance Anxiety in Adolescents

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Abstract: Social media plays an increasingly important role in modern society, especially among adolescents, the popularity of social media has also brought about psychological problems such as appearance anxiety. This paper introduces the concepts of social media appearance anxiety, analyzes the causes of social media-induced appearance anxiety, and puts forward some suggestions for adolescents to cope with appearance anxiety in combination with real life. The study of social media-induced appearance anxiety among adolescents is intended to promote adolescents' mental health and overall development by raising mental health awareness, improving the education system, and promoting the change of social and cultural concepts, so as to effectively deal with the problem of adolescents' appearance anxiety.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Current social media technologies are developing rapidly and have a global impact. At the same time, due to the mature development of online technologies, the social media environment also faces key challenges of privacy protection, information authenticity and network health. Social media creates an environment centered on idealized images, displaying idealized and groomed appearances and bodies, causing adolescents to develop more egoistic and unrealistic standards of beauty, which can lead to appearance anxiety. The idealized images that have been carefully compiled through filter retouching are common on social media, and these images become the targets for adolescents to pursue. Meanwhile, adolescents are prone to compare themselves with the “perfect” images of others on social media, which leads to dissatisfaction with their own appearance. For example, apps such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu have created a substantial problem of adolescents appearance anxiety. The relevant survey shows that 59.03% of college students have a certain degree of appearance anxiety, in which the main reasons for appearance anxiety accounted for 53.51% of inferiority complex, 51.68% of the popular monotonous aesthetics, 49.39% of overly expecting recognition from other people, and 47.51% of the psychology of comparing with each other [1].

1.2. Research Significance

Appearance anxiety refers to people's excessive concern about their appearance, and it is crucial to explore the relationship between appearance anxiety and self-esteem, socialization, and the impact on daily life. From a socio-cultural perspective, studying the impact of social media on people's perceptions of appearance, and the differences in appearance anxiety across cultures and social groups can help to better understand the causes of adolescent appearance anxiety and provide assistance for prevention and treatment [2]. However, there is currently insufficient research on the issue of social media-induced adolescent appearance anxiety. This paper describes the concept of social media and adolescent appearance anxiety, explores the causes of social media-induced appearance anxiety from the three dimensions of social comparison, excessive beauty, and online comments, and encourages adolescents to establish a positive self-image, use social media appropriately, and advocate an inclusive and open social mentality. This study provides theoretical support for understanding adolescents' appearance anxiety and the mental health problems caused by appearance anxiety, and provides theoretical references for adolescents to establish self-esteem and self-identity; at the same time, the study of adolescents can help people to identify and solve adolescents' psychological disturbances due to appearance problems, and better guide adolescents to establish healthy self-image, enhance self-confidence, and improve the overall level of mental health and sense of happiness.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media

Social media is an Internet-based application platform that allows users to create, share and exchange information and ideas [3]. On these platforms, users can post content in the form of text, images, video and audio to express their opinions ideas and interact and communicate with others. Social media users are able to react to the content of others, such as giving feedback on others' sharing through likes, comments, repost or shares. Users can connect with others to form social networks, which can be real-life friends and family, as well as new friends or people with similar interests that they have met online. For example, Facebook is mainly used to share personal views, employment information, etc., while Instagram and YouTube are mainly used to share pictures, videos and other content daily life and so on. Social media have changed the way people communicate, influenced the construction of social relationships, and had a significant impact on public discussion, media distribution, and the advertising industry. In short, social media is an important component of modern communication and information sharing, and it has changed the way human beings interact and disseminate information in its own unique way.

2.2. Appearance Anxiety

Appearance anxiety is a common psychological phenomenon that manifests itself as an individual's persistent concern and dissatisfaction with their own appearance, which usually involves excessive attention to their physical appearance defects, whether they are real or perceived by individuals [4]. With the development of technology and the prevalence of social media in the Internet era, the phenomenon of appearance comparison is quite serious, and the pursuit of ideal appearance has been intensified, which in turn exacerbates the anxiety caused by appearance. For example, there are many people who have serious psychological anxiety because they have seen the photos sent out by others on TikTok. Appearance anxiety can have significant psychological, social and physiological effects on individuals. On the psychological level, prolonged appearance anxiety can lead to adolescent anxiety and depression, etc., affecting mental health; On the social level, appearance

anxiety may affect adolescents' social activities with others, leading to tensions in interpersonal relationships; On the physiological level, excessive cosmetic surgeries or unhealthy weight-loss methods, etc., may occur in pursuit of the ideal appearance, causing harm to physical health. By cultivating healthy lifestyles, inner qualities and educational awareness among adolescents, we aim to motivate their understanding and acceptance of their personal uniqueness and beauty, alleviate appearance anxiety, and enhance their health and sense of well-being.

3. Factor Analysis of Appearance Anxiety Caused By Social Media

3.1. Social Comparison

Social comparison specifically means that on social media such as TikTok, Xiaohongshu, where people post their photos or videos, and people usually compare themselves with that person on social media. For example, a high school student often compares their academic performance with his classmates. Whenever they see their classmates' posting photos or activities on social media, they will feel that their social life seems to be less rich than others, which may lead to anxiety or low self-esteem, and may affect their social behaviors, such as participating in extracurricular activities or establishing close relationships with their classmates. Relevant studies have shown that in the context of information technology, mass media has promoted the trend of homogenization of aesthetic standards, and adolescents in the sub-social context will make "upward social" comparisons, i.e., negative appearance experiences of their own bodies in comparison to their physical appearance, which will aggravate adolescents' appearance anxiety and even affect adolescents' outlook on life [5]. Social comparison is an important psychological phenomenon, which has a profound impact on individual behavior and emotional state, and understanding and mastering social comparison can help us better understand human behavior and interpersonal relationships.

3.2. Excessive Beautification

Excessive beautification refers to the significant modification of one's appearance in photos through the use of digital tools or beauty apps, resulting in a present image that is markedly different from the actual appearance. Such alterations may include smoothing of skin texture, adjusting the proportions of features, and improving the lines of the body, and can even go as far as changing skin color, eye size, and shape to create an idealized image that does not reflect the true self, which in turn triggers appearance anxiety and a competitive mindset. According to the latest social media research, excessive use of beauty filters can lead to a disconnect between self-identity and reality, which can lead to a range of mental health issues[6]. Recently, on the foreign social media platform YouTube, a case went viral where a South Korean high school student jumped to his death after classmates compared each other's beauty and social account follower activity, leading to serious school bullying. Excessive beauty does not represent the truest self, many people rely on excessive beauty to live to attract attention, wave traffic to make money and so on. The negative consequences of excessive beautification are not limited to a single country, it is a global issue.

3.3. Online Comments

Online comments are a form of user-generated feedback on internet platforms such as blogs, news websites, and social media. They allow users to express their opinions, share experiences, or provide additional information related to the content they are engaging with [7]. Comments can be moderated or unmoderated, and vary greatly in tone and content—ranging from constructive and informative comments to aggressive or irrelevant ones. Online comments can have a profound impact on people.

For example, for teenagers, hate speech online—including hateful, racist, or sexist comments—is something they increasingly encounter and sometimes experience firsthand. These comments directly affect their self-esteem and sense of self-worth, and many report feeling highly anxious and depressed as a result. On social media, comments have a particularly significant impact on interpersonal relationships and political views. Positive communication can strengthen friendships, while arguments and misunderstandings may lead to strained relationships. Similarly, comments on political content may reinforce readers' political stances or even alter their views on certain issues. Diverse voices and vigorous debates play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and personal beliefs. Therefore, online comments serve both as tools for fostering social interaction and as platforms for influencing political attitudes.

4. Develop a positive self-image

People can better cope with body image anxiety by building a positive self-image, enhancing self-confidence, and improving overall well-being to lead a positive and healthy life. First, recognize your strengths. Everyone has unique strengths, which may include personality traits, hobbies, and more. Reflecting on and acknowledging your strengths can help shift your mindset, thereby boosting self-confidence and self-esteem [8]. Second, accept your appearance. Everyone has different physical features, and each person's appearance is unique. Beauty is diverse, so accepting your appearance should not cause anxiety due to differences from societal standards. Finally, avoid comparing yourself to others. In the age of social media, people often only showcase the most glamorous aspects of their lives, which is not the complete reality. Everyone's appearance and experiences are unique. Focus on your own potential, goals, growth, and progress, engage in positive self-dialogue, and avoid overly comparing your physical features with others. In summary, everyone has unique strengths and talents that go beyond physical appearance. Developing interests and skills—whether in academics, arts, sports, or social skills—can help build a confident, positive self-image to address appearance anxiety.

4.1. Limiting Social Media Use

For teenagers struggling with body image anxiety, limiting social media use is a reliable option that can help avoid unnecessary anxiety. Since teenagers often see heavily edited, filtered photos on social media, this can lead to unnecessary comparisons with others and exacerbate their anxiety about their own appearance. First, understand the impact of social media on self-image. Second, cultivate other interests and hobbies. Teachers and parents should jointly encourage teenagers to focus their energy on meaningful activities, such as participating in offline activities like sports, reading clubs, or craft activities, to reduce their reliance on social media and increase opportunities for face-to-face interaction. Finally, communicate more with family and friends. Social media creates unrealistic beauty standards, leading to anxiety about appearance. Sharing with trusted family members or friends can help re-evaluate one's value and beauty, gradually reducing body image anxiety.

4.2. Promote an attitude of authenticity and inclusivity

Promoting an attitude of authenticity and inclusivity fosters positive social relationships and healthy personal development. First, create an inclusive social environment. Authentic inclusivity means accepting and respecting others' diversity, including different cultural backgrounds, ability levels, gender, and appearance, as well as accepting one's own strengths and weaknesses, understanding one's uniqueness, building confidence, and cultivating positive inner qualities to reduce appearance anxiety. Second, provide mental health support. School communities should offer counseling services and conduct mental health education activities to assist adolescents struggling

with appearance anxiety, helping them correctly recognize and manage their emotions, enhance psychological resilience, and establish a healthier self-image. Third, promote diverse beauty. Media should showcase positive images of diverse body types and skin tones, expose false images on social media, and use stories and reports to highlight different types of beauty and success, advocating authenticity, diversity, and inclusivity. Therefore, reducing adolescents' appearance anxiety and promoting an authentic and inclusive mindset requires the joint efforts of families, schools, media, and society. This helps adolescents reduce anxiety and self-doubt caused by appearance, enabling them to confidently face various challenges in an increasingly diverse society.

5. Conclusion

Body image anxiety is on the rise in modern society. Social media was originally intended to be a platform for sharing life experiences and connecting people from different regions. However, it has now become a significant contributor to body image anxiety. Social media encourages teenagers to compare themselves with others, and some individuals use beauty filters to excessively enhance their photos before posting them online. Comments on the internet can influence teenagers' values. This article analyzes the causes of appearance anxiety on social media from the perspectives of social comparison, excessive photo editing, and online comments. Posting photos or videos on social media and comparing them with others may affect an individual's behavior or emotional state; using photo editing tools to drastically alter photos to attract attention may lead to a disconnect between self-identity and reality; online comments on social media may influence teenagers' political views and sense of self-worth. Addressing the causes of appearance anxiety, the article offers recommendations for adolescents to cope with appearance anxiety based on their actual lives: first, establish a positive self-image to enhance self-confidence and happiness; second, limit social media usage to reduce excessive reliance on it; third, promote an authentic and inclusive mindset to build positive social relationships.

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