

# Body dissatisfaction among Chinese youth: gendered differences and social media influence

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**Abstract.** The current study examines the gendered differences among Chinese youth regarding their perceptions of body image. It also investigates the relationship between physical anxiety and social media influence. Through surveys and in-depth interviews, the following findings were uncovered: (1) young women are more anxious about their body images and appearances than young men; (2) Men are more likely to be anxious about their skin and height, and women are more likely to be anxious about their weight and facial appearance; (3) frequent social media users have shown a higher anxiety level than those who do not use social media regularly. In this study, we not only discuss the relationship between social media and appearance anxiety but also analyze the cause and effect in the context of contemporary Chinese society, adding a Chinese viewpoint to the current literature on beauty and body image. We find that beauty standards shaped by social media have greatly influenced men's and women's overall body image in contemporary China. This project also seeks to raise awareness of the omnipresent problems of body anxiety and the potential risk for mental health problems. Through the lens of appearance anxiety, this study will contribute to the analysis of urban gender roles, womanhood, and masculinity in contemporary China, as well as the ideologies of Chinese urban youth at the intersection of gender and aesthetics.

**Keywords:** Chinese urban youth, modern aesthetics, body image.

## 1. Introduction

Appearance anxiety has developed into a significant social issue that impacts teenagers' development and should be of great concern. In 2021, Xiaomei, a university media alliance in China, conducted a special survey on appearance anxiety among 2,063 college students nationwide, and 59.03% of college students were found to have some degree of appearance anxiety. Among them, 30.74% claimed they intended to get plastic surgery. Such concern has facilitated the growth of the burgeoning appearance-related industry. The Internet has been shaping our understanding of attractiveness nowadays. According to a study published by China's cosmetic surgery platform SoYoung, the pure medical aesthetics market size in China has reached 197.5 billion, accounting for 17% of the global proportion, and China is expected to become one of the world's top medical aesthetics countries.

In the early 2000s, China officially entered the digital era. Cindy Chiu, the consultant in McKinsey's Shanghai office, mentioned that "China's online users spend more than 40 percent of their time online on social media, a figure that continues to rise rapidly." As a result, Chinese media users have access to a richness of media information from a range of sources owing to the extensive use of social media. China has built its own independent social media platforms, including Weibo, Red Book, etc. Although the Chinese government limits domestic internet users' access to other western networks (such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.), Chinese internet users can resort to VPN (Virtual Private Network) to cross the Great Firewall.

A Chinese student at USC mentioned, "We scroll through images, ads and article daily, intaking a saturated pool of visual stimulations," Since then, the concept of beauty has been thrust onto individuals on a daily basis through beauty advertisements, fitness content, and celebrity posters.

In this context, I pursue several lines of inquiry in this project: Do men and women have the same perception of ideal body image and appearance? What are men and women anxious about regarding their body image and appearance? How has social media affected the understanding of men's and women's perceptions of their body image and appearance? I combined the methods of survey and

interviews to explore the prevalence of physical anxiety among Chinese youths. My research demonstrates that men and women have indicated different anxiety levels about their bodies/appearance. Frequent social media users are more anxious about their appearance, and visual-based social media have a more significant impact on Chinese teens regards physical anxiety.

This research does not exclusively focus on women; it also collects and compares the data from interviews with male participants. It contributes to revealing that body anxiety is a common phenomenon among both men and women, but it is more significant in women. This project also aims to enhance awareness of traditional beauty and ideal images on Chinese social media.

## 2. Literature Review

Appearance anxiety is an internationally prevalent phenomenon. In today's society, physical anxiety has become a popular topic of discussion among the youth, since physical appearance is considered a significant part of feminine and masculine identity; according to research by Tomas F. Cash and Patricia E. Henry in 1995, half of the surveyed women indicated negative perceptions of their appearance, and one-third of the women have shown dissatisfaction with all eight discrete physical areas, including height, weight, hair, face, upper torso, mid torso, lower torso, and muscle tone.

Beauty is seen as a symbol of virtue. Along the same line, Mike Featherstone discovered that people associate beauty with moral goodness, believing that a person's inner character or personality is shown through their outer look. For example, obesity is seen as a sign of laziness by many people. As a result, individuals spend money on their appearance, such as through plastic surgery, to have a "seems good character."

While the feminist movement is in its fourth wave, women's appearance anxiety is getting worse. According to Tomas F. Cash's survey, women in 1993 had a more negative opinion of their appearance than women in 1985. These studies show that body anxiety is prevalent in western countries.

In an extension of previous studies, this project is interested in Chinese youth's perceptions of their body image and the gendered differences. Current Chinese media is a primary conduit for disseminating ideal beauty standards. The rapid development of media technology in the 20th century has driven China into the digital era. According to Jaehee Jung, China's beauty industries have experienced significant expansion, owing to the country's mass media and consumer culture. Current Chinese media is a primary conduit for disseminating ideal beauty standards through product and service marketing, heavily influencing women's internalized views of body image and feminine beauty. Celebrities and models in the media "exemplify" the good life since they are considered good-looking. People, particularly women, tend to re-examine their own appearances and seek surgeries to cater to the dominant aesthetics due to this kind of consumer culture.

Moreover, Korean culture has sparked a media frenzy across Asian countries. Jaehee Jung mentioned that the "K-Wave" phenomenon is named after Korean television dramas, pop music, and entertainment popularity. Korean youth culture has tremendously affected Chinese fashion and beauty trends. According to Jing Daily, a leading digital publication on luxury consumer trends in China, Korean cosmetics exports to China accounted for nearly a quarter of all cosmetics imported into China in 2016. An interviewee from Jung's study said that seeing the "perfect woman" on social media made her aspire to be like her. However, she was upset that she couldn't. People are fascinated by the models' delicate appearances in the advertisements, and this fascination drives them to buy the cosmetics the models used and even travel to South Korea to receive plastic surgery. The importance of physical beauty and the urgency to maintain feminine identities among Chinese women is reflected in the burgeoning beauty industries in China, which include products and services inspired by the Korean entertainment industries.

What factors have contributed to Chinese youths' physical anxiety? More scholars have begun to pay attention to the uses of social media, which are platforms that the younger generation relies on

today, including Douyin, Redbook, WeChat, and Instagram. The relationship between social media use and appearance anxiety remains underexplored. Moreover, fewer studies have examined whether men also experience some degree of concern about their appearances or compared the substance and extent of appearance anxiety between the male and female groups in China. This study investigates the relationship between social media and appearance anxiety in post-2000s Chinese youths and examines gender differences in individual experiences of appearance anxiety.

### 3. Methods

In this study, I used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to examine the influence of Chinese teenagers on their concern with physical beauty. The first part of the project includes a survey on Wenjuanxing, a Chinese online crowdsourcing platform. Questionnaires are created through this platform and distributed through WeChat. We collected a total of 422 questionnaires with Chinese students; high school students make up 75.83% of the respondents, and college students make up the remaining 24.17%. 73.7% of students reside in mainland China, while 26.3% are Chinese students studying overseas, and all of our respondents are between the ages of 15 and 25. This method and platform allow the researchers to acquire data from a large audience, giving the audience a wide range of information. The reader can use the information from the questionnaire to comprehend the overall pattern of appearance anxiety and the ways in which Chinese youth are affected.

I then interviewed several high school students and college students at the end of 2021. Participants included three male and two female students, ages ranging from 18 to 19. Some interviewees were recruited through friends, while others were chosen from the questionnaires by responding to the last questions that invite further contact. This method enables the readers to gain depth from the interviews and better understand the specific causes of appearance anxiety. It also helps us comprehend how social media and people in their immediate environment have impacted the aesthetics of modern Chinese youth.

### 4. Findings

My findings demonstrate that boys and girls do not have the same perception of ideal body image and appearance. In the survey, women have shown more anxiety about their appearance than men. One of the questions asks the participant to rank their satisfaction with their face on a 1-10 scale. Women (6.02 on average) are less confident with their appearance compared to men (6.41 on average). When asked how pleased they were with their overall body shape (other than face), the average satisfaction rate for women (5.66) is lower compared to men (6.33). Moreover, in the survey, 86.28% of women are anxious about their appearance, whereas only 59.42% of men feel the same way. Therefore, the number of women who have had problems with appearance anxiety is much greater than that of men.

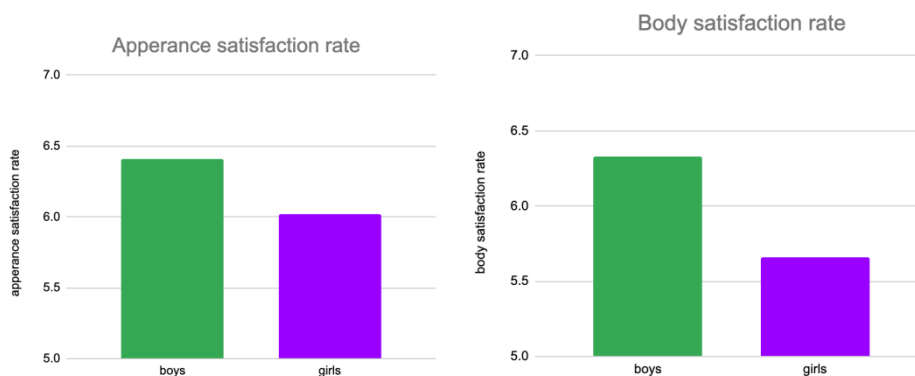


Fig. 1-satisfaction rates of appearance and body

To answer my research Q2: What are men and women anxious about regarding their body images? We discovered a similar pattern of anxiety among men and women - they are both dissatisfied with their skin and weight. First of all, girls demonstrate that weight is the feature they are most anxious about (44.77%). Since the Song Dynasty, slim shoulders, a flat chest, a willowy waist, and slender feet (削肩、平胸、柳腰、纤足) have come to symbolize beauty for women. Therefore, the historical tradition has influenced the aesthetic standards of women today in the pursuit of ultra-femininity.

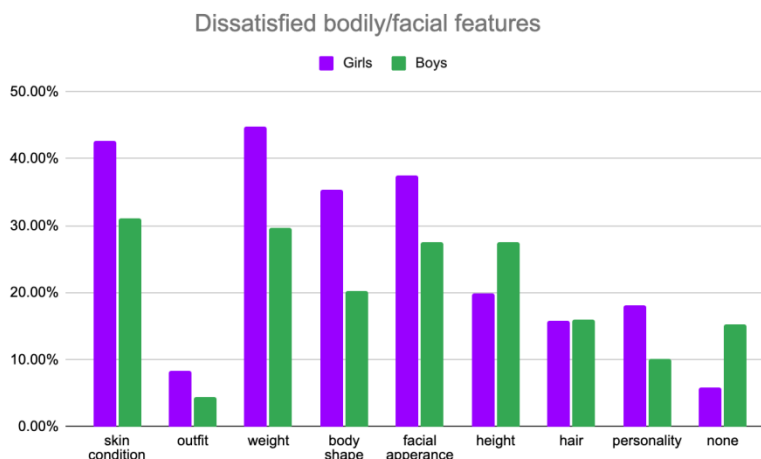


Fig. 2- Dissatisfied facial and bodily features

Secondly, we can see that skin is the top 1 & 2 choice for boys (39.13%) and girls (42.60%). According to Euromonitor 2011 data, 71% of China's skincare products have some whitening claims. The domestic market for whitening products is worth at least 100 billion yuan. Chinese mainstream aesthetic standards for women and men are narrow and monolithic. In an interview, writer Li Ao was asked what type of woman he liked, and he replied dryly, "thin, tall, white, clean, and youthful." His answer undoubtedly represents the contemporary definition of beauty for young women, as fair skin for women creates innocent, harmless, and naive character traits in Chinese culture.

Meanwhile, men themselves also prefer to have fair skin. Regarding historical factors, white skin seems to be more opulent. Nobles in agricultural societies did not have to toil away in the scorching sun. The shade protected the nobleman's body, so his white skin represented his identity and status. This concept continues to this day in Chinese society, where we usually believe that fair skin symbolizes wealth.

However, women's third most concerning bodily feature is their facial appearance (37.55%). For men, it is their height (27.54%). Women make this decision because society encourages them to focus on beauty. The level of concern for physical beauty is influenced by the social environment in which this notion is learned. For example, the socially endorsed feminine image is perpetuated in cosmetics advertisements where the models have flawless features.

Similarly, men's anxiety when it comes to their height shows how essential masculinity is in contemporary culture. For instance, you must be 180 cm or taller to be regarded as desirable and eligible in the Chinese dating market. Another example is the generally very tall image of male celebrities on social media.

What factors have contributed to Chinese youths' physical anxiety? From our interviews, we discovered that social media strongly affects appearance anxiety. In the digital "pan-social era," also known as the media age, China has two distinct forms of social media: text-based, such as WeChat, and visual-based, including RedBook. Visual-based social media have a more substantial impact on Chinese youth. Being active on social media is now an essential part of networking and one of the most popular ways to create an impression on others. Some people share selfies on social media to find potential dates, while many influencers post beautiful photos as their full-time job to make money.

As a result of this circumstance, a lot of young internet users are struggling with the dilemma of appearance anxiety.

C, a female interviewee, is a 19-year-old college student who works part-time as a blogger. She stated: "I regularly monitor social media because I work as a blogger on Instagram and RedBook. I take fresh, beautiful photos every few days." Her work necessitates constant photography, but through the photos she took, she consistently discovers defects in both her body and her face. When she saw other beauty bloggers online, she claimed, "I found that I didn't appear as good as I imagined I would look in pictures, and I would get a sensation of anxiety and inferiority." She claimed that as she made more connections with beauty bloggers on social media, she began to be influenced by their aesthetics of "white, youthful, and skinny."

Another example is from Woman B, who is an 18-year-old freshman in university. She uses social media such as RedBook and Douyin in a highly active manner. She claims, "I feel that everyone on social media is perfect. I didn't see people being so judgmental about their weight when I lived overseas. But once I got home, I discovered that Chinese women on social media are very critical of their weight." Social media posts related to weight loss had an impact on her. To lose weight, she exercised and ate only two meals daily. She constantly receives recommendations from Douyin and RedBook to watch videos and pictures of stunning women, which has exposed her to the "白幼瘦" culture. She then utilized photoshop to give herself a slim waist and perfect skin.

However, youths who utilized social media less frequently did not appear to experience such anxiety much. W, a senior in high school, hardly used social media. "I don't use social media very much, and I don't have a lot of appearance worries," he claimed. "Social media periodically recommends pictures or videos of handsome men, but I only pay attention to body-related topics and wish I were more muscular and taller."

Therefore, we can also conclude that people who actively use social media can have more sources of appearance anxiety in different ways.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, I investigate men's and women's perceptions of body image in Chinese societies. I also explore how social media has contributed to the emergence of physical anxiety among Chinese youths. The current study has several limitations, including the small number of interviewees from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. By conducting this study, I intend to raise awareness of conventional beauty and ideal image on Chinese social media. The study also contributes to the global feminist perspective on gender, traditions, and beauty by comparing and examining how men and women perceive and understand ideal body image and how social media have imposed different levels of impact on these individuals by social media. For future research, scholars could include Chinese women from a broader range of ages and social backgrounds. With the rise of feminism in China, future research may further explore the feminist position and attitude toward body shaming concerns in China and explore solutions to the increasingly intensified body anxiety or body image dissatisfaction among Chinese women.

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