The Impact of Communication on Female Body Image Anxiety The Case Study of # WillLiu's Girl

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Abstract. As the influence of the media on the female body image has been of great interest to scholars, this article examines the influence of the media on the ideology of the female body image based on the national fitness boom in China driven by Will Liu. In the development of body image anxiety, scholars have previously attributed social comparison theory and psychological factors. However, research on the role of social media communication is lacking. Therefore, this study will be based on the influence of mass communication #WillLiu's Girls labels on body image ideology. As a result, it is evident that Chinese women place a much more emphasis on fitness, weight loss and slimming results than men. The media and corporate promotions cause Chinese women to get lost in the weight loss vortex. This study believes that the inequality between men and women in society itself has contributed to an increased anxiety about female body image, and that the media has exacerbated to this process.

Keywords: Media and communication; Women; Diet; Ideology.

1. Introduction

With the development of the internet, the concept of beauty is not being diverse, but increasingly tending towards similar standards. The media has been subliminally portraying the mass perception of the 'perfect body image'. The constant admiration of other bodies on the internet, while comparing with those of the upwardly mobile, has created anxiety for them. In terms of body image, the pursuit of 'thinness' for women and 'muscularity' for men is frequently a major component of body anxiety [1]. While undeniable psychological influences sometimes exist [1], such as social anxiety disorder (SAD), the influence of social media dominates the anxiety that influences body image. In addition to this, social media has an impact in shaping shared identities in society. It exploits intersectionality and provides the same identity for people with different characteristics. Therefore, based on these two points, this paper will further investigate the impact of social media on the anxiety of body image of users by combining visual communication theory and social semiotics.

In April this year, a new epidemic broke out in Shanghai. Faced with a daily increase of up to 20,000 people, the Shanghai government ordered a lockdown of the entire city and quarantined the homes of Shanghai residents for up to three months [2]. In contrast to the silent city, this period is filled with a frenzy of national fitness campaigns on major online platforms. In this article, as an example of the national fitness campaign led by Liu Will, to analyze the impact of the rise of the phrase #LiuWillGirl on the body anxiety of Chinese women from the perspective of visual communication. In the first part, literature on the impact of social media on body anxiety will be cited. In the second part, the focus will be on the portrayal and communication of images of women in traditional and modern media itself. In the third part, the impact of this activity on female body image anxiety will be theorized in the context of visual communication and social semiotics, particularly through the case of Will Liu. In general, this paper will argue that the medium itself is influential. Both algorithms and media promoting this seemingly universal fitness campaign have furthered the body image demands and anxieties of Chinese women.

2. Literature Review

When browsing social networking sites, a plethora of gorgeous, carefully retouched pictures appear on the pages. These are all thin, white, with smooth skin and silky hair, and are each labelled as 'perfect'. It is pointed out by Kennedy that algorithms filter out unattractive and ugly photos, to some extent controlling and shaping users' ideologies of 'beauty'[3]. Kim and Chock also argue that personal photos on social networks are a form of social grooming [4], creating an idealized state of life. Unlike mass media, the Web 2.0 era has turned the planet into a "global village" where everyone is connected through the Internet [5]. Users are creating a new image for themselves online, developing a perfect lifestyle to sharing in their online communities, while also embracing the 'idealized body and appearance' from others. They have more options than ever to judge, being influenced both by their immediate community and by celebrities.

The truth, however, is that the promotion of the 'perfect body' in the media is highly inappropriate for the majority of cases and endangers the health of ordinary people. According to the BBC, France would be subject to severe warnings and fines for employing thin models with a BMI below 18, and a culture of excessive thinness has affected 27,000-36,000 women suffering from anorexia [6]. It has been experimentally confirmed, based on social comparison theory that watching thin models causes participants to be less satisfied with their body image, in accordance with Silvia, Fatima, Gustavo and Antonio [7]. The social comparison theory proposed by Festinger was employed as a framework for exploring the impact of social media on body image anxiety in young people [8]. For instance, Powell, Wang-Hall, Bannister, Colera and Lopez combined social comparison theory and adult attachment anxiety (which is a social disorder) with a study based on the Pinterest website and concluded that these two bivariate variables were positively associated with the effect of anxiety scores on the exposure of women to body pictures on social networking sites [9]. The experimenters were tested by Fardouly, Dietrichs, Vartanian and Halliwell on whether there was a tendency for experimenters to compare their own appearance and body shape when viewing magazine photos of celebrities on the Facebook site [10]. They confirmed the hypothesis that the more 'Fitspiration' photos exposed, the higher the willingness to compare and the lower the satisfaction with one's body image. In a follow-up study, they noted that "the importance of Facebook to one's social life was associated with a sense of objectified body (i.e., appearance self-worth and body surveillance) and body shame among male and female undergraduate students"[11].

There is research that indicates that social media has a more pronounced effect on physical or appearance anxiety in women than in men [1]. This paper would believe that it is caused by dissatisfaction within the female self and the spread of external media. Firstly, in John Berger's Ways of Seeing, he stated that the female body is treated as a spectacle and that women themselves are transformed into observers of their own bodies (usually men) [12]. This form of self-censorship is a disguised way of aggravating or alleviating dissatisfaction with the self-body, often with reference to past images of oneself. According to Xu and Tan, the media has the ability to 'playfully and strategically construct a certain representation of masculinity/femininity based on certain ideologies and interests'[13]. It is therefore clear that this is a yoke that society has been subliminally imposing on women. In film and television, female characters are portrayed as slender, white, gentle, family-oriented and dependent on men [14], which has been criticized by many scholars as reinforcing media stereotypes of women. Merchandise advertisements, such as 'hair removal creams' and 'anti-ageing skin care products', offered a variety of physical and figurative language to entice female users to use the products. These advertisements provide an idealized vision of the female consumer, combining beauty and slenderness with the product [13,15,16]. In other words, viewing media messages does not liberate women, but rather deepens their confinement in the framework of 'ideal qualities' that society constantly imposes on them.

Additionally, using the trait of intersectionality, the media has taken women of different ages, positions, regions, economies and education and assigned them a common designation. This group label has been used at different stages of the Chinese media. During the socialist revolution, Chinese women were given the right to work and education during the first liberation under Marxist influence

[17]. The media of the time hailed such women as the 'Iron lady'. In the last decades or so, women were derided as 'women drivers' for their poor driving skills; unmarried women over the age of 27 were portrayed as 'leftover women'; and women who excelled in their jobs were praised as 'strong women'. The words 'lady' and 'women' are found in almost all social group labels that depict female. The existence of such labels, in some way, reflects the problem of gender inequality in society. In old Chinese society, traditional Confucianism held that women should play the role of gentle and virtuous mothers and wives [18]. As a result, when women began to work, society assumed that they suddenly had a will of steel. Similarly, Chinese patriarchy saw the need for women to marry [18]. As a consequence, women who do not marry at marriageable age are seen by society as an 'outcast group', which is why the negative term 'leftover women' is used to describe them. It could be argued that the media reinforces the existence of gender inequality in society when they trumpet these labels against women.

Overall, current research findings have largely explored the impact of the content of social media software or the psychological factors of users on their appearance and body image, with a focus on the causes of anxiety. In contrast, the role of the medium in the dissemination of information has not been considered. the intrinsic nature of social media in the 21st century is the use of platforms to connect with society and satisfy the demand for connection [19]. The Internet has given rise to social media itself, which can reach further, faster and with more content than traditional media such as television and magazines. As a result, this has led to the dissemination of a vast number of images about body image on the internet compared to traditional media [20]. Social media provides a platform where users are able to share their views and lives, which Perloff claimed that the impact of media exposure on the body image of young women should also be considered [21].

In addition to this, the ideology of society towards women, as portrayed by the media, is also considered to be one of the factors that exert pressure on female body image anxiety. Some of the group labels that have been used for women throughout time indicate that abilities, marriages, etc. have been highly constrained. Therefore, this case study will consider the ideological impact of group labels on the perception of perfect bodies of women in the context of communication through social media.

3. Methodology

The initiator of the exercise for everybody is celebrity trainer Will Liu, who teaches netizens about fitness through daily live broadcasts on the TikTok. A family dance workout format for him and his wife has attracted many netizens to watch and follow the exercising. So far, official figures from TikTok show that Liu has 7,300w followers. A special page has been established for Liu and related topics have been promoted by TikTok, and netizens on all major platforms are sharing their daily videos of his workouts and comparisons of the effectiveness of his exercise. However, this is supposed to be a project to promote fitness for all, and the phrase #WillLiuGirl has become a Weibo hit, dominating on all social media platforms. This case will be explored in the context of social media communication.

The posts on the platform that grabbed the attention of netizens were basically comparison pictures of before and after workouts shared by users who worked out with Will Liu. For example, one blogger shared a post in May about how he has managed to lose 30 pounds from his original weight of 190 pounds by working out with Will Liu, which garnered 1,500 likes. Also in May, another blogger shared that she followed Will Liu for 15 days and she was able to sculpt her entire body and lose fat, which gained 10,000 likes. There are many other similar types of comparison images floating around the internet and the comments below are generally filled with admiration, praise and requests for specific fitness videos. It would be argued that these both are the most obvious marketing presentation techniques to attract more people, especially girls, to work out together by spreading the difference in body shape before and after working out on the platform. Ironically, the first blogger lost 30 pounds through three months, while the fitness livestream of Will Liu has only been on trend for just over a

month. There may be many factors that contributed to this blogger reaching her lean body, but she briefly credits them all to following the live stream and doing the exercises. Through her striking approach, she conveyed to the public the false message that if you follow the workouts of Liu, you will lose 30 pounds in 3 months.

Before the national campaign started, videos by various fitness bloggers were also becoming popular in China. One netizen posted a comic strip featuring the national fitness movement, which received 48,000 likes on the social networking site. In all three images, women are sweating their way through a fitness routine. Inside the content is captioned, "You work out with Liu, I work out with Zoey and she works out with Pamela Reif." These three are the most popular people to work out with the public in China. Currently, Zoey has over 4 million followers on Weibo, while the workout video of Pamela has received a maximum of 16 million views. The comics reflect the high level of anxiety that contemporary netizens feel about their bodies. People around them are probably more or less training with celebrity trainers to stay in shape or lose weight, especially the female population.

4. Discussion

When searching the internet for #WillLiu'sGirl, in addition to comparative pictures of fitness exercises posted by netizens, there will be posts related to sports merchants and the food bloggers. There are businesses selling exercise equipment, yoga clothes, etc., and individual bloggers selling weight loss recipes. They are not fitness videos, but they have capitalized on the #WillLiu'sGirl craze and used the body anxiety of contemporary women to sell their products. Posts flagging #WillLiu'sGirls will get higher traffic than regular weight loss posts. Anxiety about body image is not supposed to be exclusive to women, but pop culture subconsciously assumes that women will have more anxiety than men and that women prioritize body management more. As a result, businesses build their products on the idea that exercise and fitness could contribute to weight loss, prompting women to buy into the ideology of slimming and beauty and building brand influence [19]. Whether the food is nutritious and scientifically based, the exercise clothing is comfortable and the price is appropriate are no longer considerations for the audience. Once a post is labelled with keywords such as 'diet', 'slimming' and 'comparison', users are willing to experiment. As Taylor and Harris noted, contemporary media lacks real substance and is simply full of ideological interpellations [22].

In addition to this, the most popular fitness workouts on the internet often have "goddess workout" and "girl's wonderful legs" in their names. Firstly, many of Liu's fitness videos are named after songs that specifically feature a set of exercises suitable for women, which shows that women are the majority of users watching his fitness broadcasts. This reflects the fact that Chinese women are generally more ambitious than men in terms of their own body image requirements. Secondly, the workout is named "Goddess workout", which uses the popularly accepted word for "perfect" women to attract more women to exercise, which increasing the influence of anxiety of women about their bodies. There was no guarantee that perfect women would do this routine regularly, but the naming conveyed the illusion that by doing it, women would become perfect women. The exaggeratedly named workout increases anxiety among women about their body image, amplifying the conflict of gender inequality in society and bringing more women into this fitness frenzy. The 'Goddess Workout' videos are based on physical anxiety of women to attract more females who want to get the perfect body for their own traffic gains [23]. In this process of constant marketing, Chinese women continue to pay for this ideology of thinness and beauty.

Regardless of whether it be recipes and sportswear that attract women to dieting or fitness routines specifically created for women, the media is pushing behind the screen to boost the anxiety of women about their bodies. Beyond this, the influence of algorithms is enormous in contributing to this phenomenon. Text that is contrary to the dominant aesthetic of "white", "thin" and "tall" is rarely delivered, which further controls and shapes the ideology of "beauty" for the user. Constantly forced

to accept external messages, women have become numb to whether they really need to lose weight and passively join in this body anxiety.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this paper focuses on the extent to which the media has driven Chinese women's anxiety about body image, using the national fitness craze driven by Liu Keng-Hong. Using social comparison theory as a framework to explore the literature on social media influencing body image anxiety is presented in the first paragraph. In addition, some related literature is cited to further theorize the impact of media communication images on women's anxiety scores in relation to the influence of the media itself on users. Then, popular terms such as "Iron lady" and "leftover woman" are used to expose the media's portrayal of women's labels and society's ideological control over women. In the case of national sports, three sets of images posted by users on the Xiaohongshu social media app were used to analyze the media's propagation of women's body image anxiety. In addition to this, the naming of fitness videos aimed at women and the marketing of followers by businesses reflects the capitalist definition of thinness and health in the communication process, which compulsorily sells the ideology of weight loss to women. This has caused the masses to blindly believe and follow, losing their will to be themselves. Ultimately, the cause of this phenomenon is the inequality that currently exists in society between men and women. As this paper mentioned above, from the earliest days of the patriarchal system with Confucianism to the socialist revolution with Marxist influence, Chinese society has been changing and overlaying labels on women. Women have strived for perfection in their families, careers, bodies and so on. The media's propaganda has combined the old ideology of women's responsibilities with the new era's promotion of women's attributes as essential. This has resulted in society being increasingly demanding of women and the ideology of the 'perfect woman' has been a constant stumbling block for contemporary Chinese women.

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