

Pathways and Impacts of Social Media on Adolescents' Exposure to Harmful Culture and esthetic Attitudes

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Abstract:

With the popularization of social media, adolescents are increasingly exposed to online information at an early age and become immersed in it, facing growing influences from negative cultural trends and narrow aesthetic standards. This paper systematically reviews over ten empirical studies conducted within the past five years, revealing that social platforms amplify the exposure frequency of “borderline culture” and the “white, young, and thin” body ideal image through their content recommendation mechanisms. This exposure triggers adolescents' comparisons of their appearance and increases body anxiety. Simultaneously, interactive behaviors such as posting selfies and reading comments amplify aesthetic internalization, gradually leading adolescents to adopt online standards as benchmarks for self-evaluation. The research further indicates that adolescents demonstrate active agency in imitating and reproducing content during the process of cultural assimilation, forming a “participatory exposure” mechanism. Based on these findings, this paper proposes specific intervention strategies across four domains—platform algorithms, media literacy education, family communication, and research pathways—to help adolescents develop diverse and healthy body perception systems.

Keywords: Adolescents, social media, borderline culture, aesthetic standards, participatory exposure

1. Introduction

In the contemporary adolescent development process, social media has progressively become an important channel for information acquisition, identity construction, and self-expression. Unlike traditional

media, social platforms exhibit high visibility, algorithmic drivers, and interactive engagement. This exposes adolescents to content dominated by appearance, body shape, and fashion styling during browsing, posting, and commenting [1,2]. Within this aesthetically saturated environment, adolescents are

prone to internalizing a value system centered on appearance-based evaluations, exhibiting intense psychological responses such as appearance anxiety, self-denial, and even body shame [3].

In recent years, short-video platforms have consistently dominated traffic with content featuring “fair, young, and slim” body types, “exquisitely filtered selfies,” and “borderline” material. These visually dominant symbols selected by algorithms not only reinforce adolescents’ identification with a singular body image but also lead them, lacking critical media literacy, to mistakenly equate online standards with real-world evaluation criteria [4]. According to the People’s Daily, some minors are becoming addicted to vulgar imitation content, such as making suggestive gestures or dressing provocatively. This existence of “borderline pornographic” aesthetic tastes warrants attention. Such trends not only distort adolescents’ values and identity formation but also fuel a culture of chasing superficial attention [5]. Existing research has largely focused on statistical correlations between social media use and adolescent mental health, such as decreased self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and heightened anxiety [3]. However, there remains insufficient in-depth analysis of the mechanistic pathways through which these effects occur. For instance, there is insufficient research on how platform algorithms influence content distribution, limited analysis of the mediating or moderating role of adolescent interaction behaviors in aesthetic communication, and a significant lack of theoretical studies adopting a participatory construction perspective that emphasizes youth agency.

Based on the above research background and gaps, this paper focuses on the influence and pathways of social media on adolescents’ exposure to harmful culture and body aesthetics attitudes. Employing a literature review approach, it organizes empirical studies published in core Chinese and English journals over the past five years, covering multiple dimensions including borderline culture, gender imagery, body anxiety, and interactive mechanisms. Research methodologies include quantitative questionnaires, interviews, and experimental designs, with samples primarily comprising adolescents aged 13–18 across diverse cultural contexts including mainland China, Europe, and the United States. This paper aims to: 1) delineate the primary mechanisms through which social media influences adolescents’ exposure to negative cultural influences and aesthetic construction; 2) analyze outcome variations across different research approaches and methodological implications; 3) propose actionable policy and educational recommendations; and 4) identify theoretical and practical avenues for future research expansion.

2. Definitions

2.1 Social Media: Algorithm and Visually Driven Digital Interactive Platform

Social media refers to internet-based digital platforms that rely on user-generated content and interactive features. Its core characteristics include content sharing, social interaction, and instant feedback [6]. In today’s media environment, social media serves not only as a primary channel for adolescents to access information and entertainment but also as a key place for constructing self-image and social relationships. Platforms typically rely on recommendation algorithms to push personalized content based on users’ historical behavior data, thereby subtly influencing their interests and values [3].

Visual-driven content is a major feature of mainstream social media, particularly on short-video and image-sharing platforms, where images and videos often possess greater communicability and emotional impact than textual information. While this format satisfies adolescents’ entertainment and aesthetic needs, it also increases their exposure to harmful cultural content. For instance, some short-video platforms use algorithmic recommendations to repeatedly push sexualized, ostentatious displays of wealth, or extreme consumption narratives. Frequent exposure gradually leads adolescents to accept or even emulate these cultural norms [7]. Such content easily fosters excessive materialistic and appearance-obsessed values among youth, potentially triggering anxiety.

Simultaneously, social media’s interactive nature increases intense social comparison and peer pressure among adolescents. Feedback mechanisms such as likes, comments, and shares not only measure content popularity but also serve as critical references for adolescents’ self-worth, reinforcing their reliance on external validation as a primary basis for self-value [8]. This mechanism enables platforms to optimize content around visual impact and emotional stimulation, thereby shaping adolescents’ aesthetics and behaviors.

2.2 Aesthetic Attitudes: Adolescents’ Body Image Perception and Internalization of Mainstream Aesthetics

Aesthetic attitudes refer to the stable psychological inclinations and value orientations individuals exhibit in perceiving, evaluating, and pursuing beauty. Their content encompasses preferences regarding appearance, physique, clothing styles, and other related factors [2]. During adolescence, the formation of aesthetic attitudes is influenced not only by real-world social factors such as family and friends but also profoundly shaped by the digital media

environment.

Popular aesthetic standards on social media exhibit a high degree of homogeneity, such as uniform skin tone requirements, body types, and makeup styles, particularly the singular ideal of a “white, young, and thin” physique. These standards are widely replicated and amplified through influencer imagery, filters, and photo editing [9]. This extreme aesthetic pattern often conflicts with the diversity of real-world bodies, leading adolescents to experience feelings of inferiority or anxiety when comparing their appearance [3].

Research indicates that frequent exposure to idealized body images significantly increases adolescents’ body dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction may be expressed as psychological experiences like shame over appearance, self-deprecation, and concern over others’ judgments, or externalize into unhealthy behaviors such as dieting, excessive exercise, and overuse of beauty filters [1].

Moreover, adolescents not only passively absorb mainstream aesthetic norms on social media but also actively participate in reproducing these values through interactive actions, thereby reinforcing such standards within peer cultures [4].

3. Encouragement of Teenagers’ Engagement with Inappropriate Content by Social Media Platforms

Social media has become deeply embedded in the daily lives of adolescents. Its powerful information aggregation and distribution capabilities enable young people to access entertainment and build interpersonal connections while inevitably exposing them to a wide range of harmful cultural content. Within the context of this study, harmful content primarily includes excessive sexualization, extreme consumerism, vulgar parodies, and the promotion of narrow, one-dimensional values. These contents often influence adolescents’ cognition, attitudes, and behaviors in subtle and persistent ways through platform recommendation algorithms, visual presentation styles, and social interactions. Drawing on existing empirical research, this section analyzes the relationship between social media and adolescents’ exposure pathways to harmful culture, examining it from diverse research methodologies and cultural contexts.

Gao Xinyi conducted a study focusing on internet celebrity culture to analyze how different types of such contents shape adolescents’ values. The study sample comprised 542 adolescents from five high schools and two vocational schools, with an average age of 16.2 years and a nearly equal male-to-female ratio. To ensure sample diversity,

schools were selected from both central urban districts and urban-rural fringe zones so that they represented different educational environments. This study employed a cross-sectional survey method, utilizing a self-designed questionnaire to measure social media usage duration, types of influencers followed, content preferences, and value orientations. The questionnaire included closed-ended items and five-point Likert scale questions, with pre-testing conducted prior to formal administration to enhance item reliability and validity. Data analysis methods comprised descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and paired t-tests to compare differences in value scales among groups with varying viewing preferences.

The results indicate that frequent viewing of videos centered on displays of wealth or sexualized imagery is significantly positively correlated with utilitarian values. Such content not only emphasizes material possessions and physical appearance but also implicitly promotes the notion that “traffic equals success.” Supplemental interview data revealed that students generally believed recommendation algorithms continuously push videos similar to or even more extreme than their previous viewing history. This creates a highly homogeneous information environment (i.e. an information bubble), reinforcing their acceptance of these values.

However, while the study ensured adequate sample size, the results struggle to establish causality between long-term exposure and value shifts. Furthermore, although the questionnaire underwent optimization in pre-testing, its predominantly closed-ended scale questions may have limited respondents’ ability to present detailed aspects of complex values. While the geographic sample covered urban-rural fringe areas, it lacked representation from purely rural regions and small towns, suggesting findings may be more representative of adolescents in urbanized contexts. Notably, the interview component had a small sample size and lacked objective verification of actual algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, making conclusions about algorithmic influence more reliant on subjective perceptions.

In contrast, Li Tao employed a longitudinal tracking design, focusing on the time-series relationship between exposure frequency to harmful content on social media and adolescents’ imitative behaviors, while examining the mediating role of media literacy. The study sample is 312 students from three high schools in Beijing, with an average age of 16.5 years and a nearly equal male-to-female ratio. The study spanned one year, divided into three measurement waves with data collection every four months. The questionnaire included four core scales: social media usage duration, exposure frequency to negative cultural content, imitation behavior frequency, and media literacy

level. To ensure scale stability, researchers maintained consistent item counts and scoring criteria between pre- and post-tests. Data analysis employed structural equation modeling. Results indicated that frequency of exposure to harmful cultural content significantly predicted subsequent imitative behavior ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$), with media health literacy partially mediating this relationship (mediation effect accounting for 27% of the total effect). Further findings revealed that among groups with higher media health literacy, the growth trend of imitative behavior was significantly slowed even when exposed to harmful content.

The strength of this study lies in its longitudinal design, which reveals temporal relationships. However, it also has limitations. For instance, some students dropped out of the three rounds of surveys due to reasons such as transferring schools or absences, leading to a gradual reduction in sample size. This loss may affect the robustness of the model. Furthermore, while longitudinal designs mitigate recall bias, external environmental factors over extended intervals may influence participants' behaviors and attitudes—aspects not systematically controlled in the analysis. Although measurement tools maintained consistent design, the definition of “imitative behavior” remained relatively broad, failing to distinguish between conscious imitation (deliberate learning) and unconscious imitation (subconscious assimilation).

Beyond this, Demaria, Torti, and Salvati conducted a cross-national comparative study in Italy, Spain, and France to examine the moderating effect of cultural background on the acceptance of harmful cultural content. The sample had 1,238 participants aged 13–17. The first phase collected data via an online questionnaire on social media usage frequency, exposure to sexualized and consumerist content, and attitude scores. The second phase involved semi-structured interviews with 40 randomly selected adolescents in each country to explore their subjective interpretations and cultural understandings of such content. Questionnaire analysis employed analysis of variance to compare mean differences in attitudes across the three countries, while thematic analysis was used for the interview data to summarize cultural characteristics.

The findings reveal that adolescents in Italy and Spain generally perceive sexualized content as a normalized part of popular culture and exhibit higher tolerance toward it; French youth, however, tend to adopt a more critical stance. Interviews revealed that these differences are highly correlated with the openness of gender role perceptions, the penetration rate of consumer culture, and the prevalence of media literacy education. For instance, in Italy and Spain, sexualized imagery is often packaged by the media as a fashion label, while France's education system

places greater emphasis on media criticism and value pluralism, thereby reducing the appeal of harmful cultural influences.

While this study's cross-cultural perspective offers valuable insights into cultural differences, its limitations are distinct. The sample size distribution across the three countries is significantly skewed, with Italian participants are more than those from Spain and France. This imbalance may cause the overall findings to disproportionately reflect the attitudes of Italian adolescents. Furthermore, the research team acknowledges that focusing on cross-sectional cultural differences within a single time frame makes it challenging to track the dynamic evolution of adolescents' values across nations. Consequently, future studies incorporating longitudinal designs could further explore how cultural values influence adolescents' acceptance of harmful content and psychological responses over time.

Although the above studies have examined the relationship between social media and adolescents' exposure to harmful content from various perspectives, most have focused on quantitative analyses of exposure frequency and changes in values. In fact, numerous in-depth interviews and behavioral observations reveal that adolescents do not merely passively consume harmful content on social media. Instead, they actively engage with and even recreate such content under specific circumstances. For instance, through peer interactions, they may transform originally singular harmful cultural elements into products with entertainment or social functions by imitating video creation or repurposing images. Therefore, future research should move beyond examining the linear relationship between exposure and imitation, shifting greater attention to adolescents' agency in the dissemination of negative culture. This covers not only their motivations and psychological mechanisms during content reproduction such as some teens using imitated content as social currency to enhance peer recognition, but also how platform algorithms amplify the spread of these derivative works.

4. Shaping of Distorted Aesthetics in Adolescents by Visual Platforms

As social media becomes the primary platform for adolescents to access visual content, the construction of body image is continually influenced by the platform's visual orientation, aesthetic standards, and interactive mechanisms. The prevalence of filter culture, the idealized aesthetic of white, young, and thin figures, and the display of daily life through refined selfies on short-video platforms expose adolescents to overly beautified body images over

a long period. This exposure subsequently impacts their body cognition and appearance evaluations. To gain a deeper understanding of this influence pathway, the following will explore how social media participates in the processes of internalizing body aesthetics, generating anxiety, and shaping self-worth among adolescents.

For example, Vuong, Campbell, and Harty conducted a systematic review of research on the relationship between social media and body dissatisfaction over the past decade, incorporating a total of 40 empirical studies. To ensure the scientific rigor and methodological consistency of the included studies, the research team performed a tiered screening of hundreds of relevant articles based on the PRISMA process. First, studies lack empirical methods, failing to meet age requirements, or involving non-social media platforms were excluded. Second, only empirical quantitative studies explicitly measuring relationships between body dissatisfaction, aesthetic influences, and social media use were retained. Finally, quality assessments evaluated scale usage, data integrity, and statistical methods. The total sample size exceeded 17,000 participants, primarily adolescents aged 13 to 18. To ensure data consistency, the authors standardized operational definitions of relevant concepts. For instance, “body dissatisfaction” refers to dissatisfaction with one’s appearance and body shape, primarily measured using standardized scales such as the Body Shape Questionnaire and Body Esteem Scale. These scales demonstrate high reliability and validity among adolescents and are widely applied in cross-cultural studies of body image and appearance attitudes.

Reviews indicate that passive social media browsing exhibits a moderate positive correlation with adolescents’ body dissatisfaction (mean $r = .30$, $p < .01$). Compared to active users, passive browsers are more prone to intensify self-comparisons through prolonged exposure to others’ idealized body images, thereby triggering appearance anxiety and low self-esteem. Additionally, significant gender differences emerged: female users were predominantly influenced by the “thinness ideal,” while males were more affected by the “muscular ideal,” exhibiting distinct directions of body anxiety.

Although this review helps consolidate existing research findings and strengthen theoretical consistency, it also has limitations. Most studies focus on Western cultural contexts, with limited data on adolescents in regions such as Asia and Africa, hindering interpretations within a global cultural framework. Furthermore, some studies define social media usage behavior too broadly, failing to distinguish key variables such as “content type” and “interaction frequency.”

Zhu examined the specific relationship between ideal body image content on social media and adolescents’

body image perceptions among youth in mainland China. The study sample comprised 547 regular high school students aged 15 to 17, representing both urban and rural areas across Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Sichuan provinces, ensuring strong representativeness. A structured questionnaire measured the following variables: social media usage frequency, exposure frequency to ideal body content, body satisfaction, self-worth, and emotional responses. The scales used in the study included the Chinese versions of the Body Shape Questionnaire, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and the Self-Rating Anxiety Scale. All three scales demonstrated good reliability and validity in adolescent samples.

Data were analyzed using path modeling in AMOS, yielding good model fit ($CFI = 0.93$, $RMSEA = 0.045$). Results revealed that frequency of exposure to idealized body content significantly and negatively predicted body satisfaction ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < .001$). Body satisfaction further negatively predicted self-esteem levels and positively predicted anxiety. Mediation analysis indicated that self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between body satisfaction and anxiety, explaining 32.6% of the total effect. This finding suggests that exposure to idealized body content indirectly increases adolescents’ anxiety levels by undermining their self-esteem, highlighting the profound impact of aesthetic internalization on mental health.

The study adequately controlled for variables such as gender, BMI, and baseline self-evaluation levels. However, the frequency of content exposure was self-reported, lacking evidence from actual platform browsing data and thus susceptible to subjective impressions. Furthermore, the study did not control for objective appearance evaluations, potentially leading to discrepancies between self-perception and actual conditions (e.g. third-party ratings). Consequently, it remains challenging to clarify the interactive mechanisms between actual physical attributes and self-perception.

Wang examined the mediating role of short video platforms’ interactive mechanisms in adolescent appearance anxiety. Using structured questionnaires, the study surveyed 456 high school students from Jiangsu, Hunan, and Gansu provinces, with a nearly equal male-to-female ratio and an urban-rural split in sample distribution. The study incorporated five variables: time spent on short video platforms, content type (appearance-focused vs. non-appearance-focused), frequency of selfies, tendency to compare appearance, and level of appearance anxiety. The revised Chinese version of the Appearance Anxiety Scale was employed, with Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.84$, demonstrating strong construct validity and reliable internal consistency.

Data analysis contains multilevel linear regression and mediation models, revealing the following findings: 1)

Short video usage duration significantly and positively predicted appearance anxiety ($\beta = .26, p < .001$); 2) Selfie posting frequency significantly enhances appearance comparison tendencies ($\beta = .34, p < .001$), which in turn serve as a key mediator of appearance anxiety; 3) Appearance evaluations in platform comments significantly moderate the path relationship between selfie frequency and appearance anxiety. Notably, this moderating effect is more pronounced among female participants, who are more sensitive to appearance feedback.

The study's innovation lies in incorporating interactive behaviors into the analytical framework rather than only examining content exposure. However, its limitations warrant attention: First, the classification criteria for appearance-related content are relatively subjective. Despite the researchers' coding guidelines, bias may still arise from differences in participants' subjective impressions. Second, the study was conducted during winter break, a period when some participants' usage behaviors may have exceeded typical levels, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings.

Kvardova, Machackova and Smahel conducted a data tracking survey to investigate the relationship between appearance-related activities on social media and body dissatisfaction among teenagers [10]. The research team collected data from over 1,100 Czech teenagers over three stages, examining the correlation between their selfie uploads and likes of appearance-related content on platforms such as Instagram and changes in their body image. The study found that teenagers who frequently participated in appearance-related activities were more likely to experience body dissatisfaction in the subsequent survey, especially among the female group. The study also pointed out that this effect was most significant between the ages of 13 and 15, indicating the deep involvement of platform participation behavior in the construction of aesthetic preferences during adolescence. This research method is rigorous, with a wide sample coverage, and is one of the most complete longitudinal tracking empirical studies to date. However, the study mainly relied on self-report questionnaires, which may have some deviations from social expectations. Additionally, the geographical scope is limited to Central Europe, which also limits the generalizability to global adolescent samples.

In summary, the pathway through which social media influences adolescents' body image construction has revealed a systematic mechanism: "content recommendation→visual stimulation→social feedback→self-internalization." Within this process, different platform types, user behaviors, and aesthetic cultures collectively shape adolescents' body awareness and self-evaluation. However, most studies remain confined to statistical correlations

with negative emotions such as body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety, failing to adequately examine adolescents' active construction behaviors in this process. For instance, studies reveal that some adolescents actively participate in aesthetic dissemination through beauty-filtered selfies, imitating makeup or fitness influencers, rather than passively consuming content. This pro-activity lacks adequate explanation within current theoretical frameworks. Future research should focus more on the participatory aesthetic construction process. Analyzing the interplay between algorithmic preferences, user strategies, and psychological mechanisms to comprehensively reveal how digital platforms shape the body cognition structures of the new generation of adolescents.

5. Discussion and Reflection

This study focuses on the mechanisms through which social media influences adolescents' exposure to harmful cultural content and the construction of body aesthetics, reviewing and analyzing multiple empirical studies conducted over the past five years. Overall, as a highly visual and interactive media platform, social media carries harmful cultural content and idealized body images that are influencing adolescents' socialization processes in multifaceted ways. Whether it involves borderline content, gender stereotypes, or aesthetic homogenization, these phenomena exhibit strong visual symbol characteristics [1,2]. Through platform recommendation algorithms, such content continuously amplifies exposure frequency. Without sufficient media literacy and value discernment skills, adolescent users become susceptible to cognitive biases and imitative behaviors [4]. Psychologically, extensive research indicates that passive browsing triggers behaviors and emotional responses such as appearance comparisons, body shame, and beauty anxiety among adolescents. These reactions further erode their self-identity and psychological resilience [3].

Furthermore, research reveals that interactive behaviors serve as crucial mediators of media influence. This finding suggests adolescents are not merely passive recipients but also function as disseminators and re-producers of content. This participatory engagement indicates that platform structures, individual psychological traits, and sociocultural environments are collectively shaping an increasingly closed and polarized aesthetic space. Therefore, intervention strategies must break the logic of platform content, guide adolescents to develop diverse and inclusive body perception systems, and simultaneously enhance their ability to identify and critically reflect on harmful cultural influences.

6. Conclusion

This study centers on the pathways through which social media influences adolescents' exposure to harmful content and the construction of body aesthetics. It aims to explore how digital platforms shape teenagers' cultural perceptions and body consciousness in the modern era. By analyzing multiple questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and experimental studies, the research reveals multiple influence mechanisms exhibited by social media. These include disseminating negative content, reinforcing singular aesthetic standards, and guiding adolescents toward internalizing these aesthetic norms.

Specifically, the study found that social platforms, through content distribution algorithms and interactive mechanisms, continuously push content characterized by gender stereotypes, appearance-oriented narratives, and visually over-processed imagery. Long-term exposure leads adolescents to gradually develop misjudgments about ideal body images, triggering psychological distress such as appearance comparisons, self-doubt, and body image anxiety. Simultaneously, adolescents are not entirely passive recipients. Through imitation, posting, and re-creation, they actively participate in disseminating these cultural norms, constituting a participatory dimension within the mechanism.

This paper proposes specific recommendations across three levels: platforms should optimize algorithmic recommendation logic to avoid reinforcing singular aesthetic standards; schools should provide media literacy and body awareness education to enhance adolescents' critical thinking; future research should focus more on the intertwined pathways of platform mechanisms, psychological processes, and sociocultural influences.

In summary, this study not only expands the boundaries of understanding social media influence mechanisms but also emphasizes adolescents' active role as participants in aesthetic culture. It provides both theoretical support and practical guidance for fostering the development of healthy aesthetic cognition. In a rapidly evolving media

landscape, sustained attention to adolescents' aesthetic growth and cultural choices will become an indispensable priority in social and educational research.

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