The Influence of Social Media Use on Peer Relationships and Appearance Anxiety among Teenagers

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Abstract:

The influence of social media on teenagers is one of the key research topics today. Researchers have found that social media can impact on teenagers' peer relationships and appearance anxiety, but a unified explanation is still lacking. Therefore, the research topic is the impact of social media on adolescent peer relationships and appearance anxiety. This review collects many summaries of papers and research results related to the topic, and finally summarize and generalize the conclusion. Social media has multi-dimensional influences on the peer relationships of teenagers. At the level of friendship, increasing the frequency of interaction can promote the establishment of friendship, but the virtuality of online interaction may weaken the depth and stability of friendship. Secondly, loneliness may be exacerbated by fear of missing out (FOMO) and online rejection, or it may be alleviated by expanding one's social circle. Finally, participation in online communities can enhance a sense of group belonging, but it may also weaken it due to group exclusion or the label of "niche". In terms of appearance anxiety, there is a two-way correlation between social media exposure and appearance anxiety. The use of social media may exacerbate appearance anxiety, while those with high appearance anxiety may use social media more frequently. The study suggested teenagers should balance online and offline interactions, avoid neglecting the establishment and maintenance of real offline relationships due to excessive reliance on online social interaction (such as short videos and social media), and enhance their ability to distinguish online information.

Keywords: Social media use, peer relationships, appearance anxiety, loneliness.

1. Introduction

In the digital age where the pace of technological iteration is constantly accelerating, there are smart phones, game consoles, tablet computers, etc. These electronic devices have been deeply integrated into the daily lives of teenagers, giving rise to a variety of social scenarios such as short-video socializing on smartphones, online playmate interaction on game console platforms, and collaborative discussions on learning tablets. It not only provides a broader space for the construction of social relationships and self-development of teenagers, but also reshapes their social patterns and psychological states. As a group at a critical stage of socialization, teenagers' psychological development, social adaptation and peer relationships are closely bound, and they are highly sensitive to the online social environment. At the same time, they have a strong need for self-identity and peer identity. Against this backdrop, the impact of digital devices and social media on the peer relationships and mental health of teenagers has become one of the core issues in the fields of education, psychology and media studies.

2. Literature Review

Existing research has carried out multi-dimensional exploration around this topic and achieved phased results. In terms of the differentiated impact of digital device types, research on long-term boarding middle school students shows that learning-oriented digital devices (such as tablets equipped with learning software) can indirectly improve mental health levels by assisting academic studies and promoting peer collaboration (such as discussing problems together and forming teams to complete learning tasks). The excessive use of game-oriented devices is significantly associated with increased psychological stress and frequent emotional problems. In addition, the use of social and video devices may have a negative impact on mental health by reducing the frequency of offline interactions and triggering unrealistic social comparisons, thereby increasing social stress. This study clarified the mediating mechanism of peer relationships between device use and mental health through mediating model analysis (regression analysis, mediating effect test), providing empirical support for understanding the "double-edged sword" effect of digital tools. However, the research has obvious limitations - it did not include individual difference variables such as personality traits, self-control ability, and academic pressure. It also neglects environmental factors such as school management models, resulting in insufficient explanatory power for complex influencing mechanisms and making it difficult to comprehensively cover the differentiated experiences of teenagers with different characteristics. Teenagers can gain self-identity and peer recognition through short video interaction, but they also face multiple risks: emotional dependence may lead to the loss of autonomy, the "false satisfaction" created by a vast amount of information will reduce the motivation for real offline interaction, and the phenomenon of group polarization is more likely to cause substantive harm such as cyber violence and value deviations. However, the sample of this study was insufficiently representative and failed to cover the characteristics of adolescents from different regions and at different school stages. The measurement of "peer relationship" only stays at the surface dimensions such as emotional connection, without delving into core indicators such as trust establishment and conflict resolution. Moreover, there is a lack of detailed demonstration for the localization adaptability of the interactive ritual chain theory, and the influence differences among different short-video platforms (such as content orientation and algorithm mechanism differences) are also ignored, which limits the universality and depth of the research conclusions. In the research on the multi-dimensional impact of social media on adolescent peer relationships, Newman (2014) constructed a framework of association between social media and adolescent friendship, loneliness, and sense of belonging through literature analysis and theoretical exploration. Research indicates that social media can promote friendship building by increasing the frequency of interaction, but the virtuality of online interaction may weaken the depth and stability of friendship. At the level of loneliness, social media has a two-way effect - it can either intensify loneliness due to fear of missing out (FOMO) and online rejection (such as social comparison caused by excessive attention to others' activities), or alleviate loneliness by expanding one's social circle. At the level of sense of belonging, teenagers can enhance their group identity by participating in interest communities, but the label of "niche" or group exclusion may also weaken their sense of belonging. However, this study lacks empirical data support, and its explanation of the influencing mechanism is rather vague. Moreover, it regards adolescents aged 12 to 18 as a homogeneous group and fails to take into account the differences in social media usage habits and peer relationship needs among different age groups (such as junior high school and senior high school students), resulting in insufficiently targeted conclusions and making it difficult to guide phased intervention practices. In addition, existing research has also focused on the mediating role of peer relationships and the association between social media and appearance anxiety among adolescents. In terms of the mediating effect of

peer relationships, some studies have confirmed that the quality of parent-child communication can indirectly reduce the externalization of problem behaviors in adolescents by improving peer relationships (increasing peer acceptance and reducing conflicts) (mediating effect value =-0.017, 95% confidence interval [-0.045,0.007]), and peer relationship alienation can positively predict pathological Internet use. Fear of missing out plays a mediating role in this - the lack of social needs caused by poor peer relationships increases the risk of addiction and depression, which in turn triggers fear of missing out and ultimately exacerbates pathological Internet use. In terms of the association between social media and appearance anxiety, the research has formed a logical chain of "social media exposure → social comparison → appearance anxiety", confirming that there is a bidirectional association between the two (social media use intensifies anxiety, and people with high anxiety use social media more frequently), social comparison is the key mediating variable, and media health literacy is an effective alleviation path. Another study, based on the questionnaire data of 490 college students, found that teenagers with low extroversion and high neuroticism have more significant appearance anxiety. The attention paid to appearance-related content on social media affects anxiety through a chain mediator, and there is no direct correlation between the duration and frequency of use and anxiety. However, the sample of this study was limited to college students and did not cover younger teenagers. Moreover, the completeness of variable measurement and the verification of causal relationships are insufficient, and no practical intervention strategies have been proposed. Overall, existing research has initially revealed the connection between digital devices, social media and adolescent peer relationships and mental health. However, there are still obvious research gaps: First, the coverage of variables is incomplete. Most studies ignore moderating variables such as personality traits, self-control, and media literacy, making it difficult to explain the influencing mechanisms behind individual differences. Secondly, there are limitations in the research methods, such as a lack of empirical data, insufficient sample representativeness, or inadequate measurement depth of core concepts (such as peer relationships). Thirdly, there is a lack of intervention orientation. Existing research mostly focuses on "what the impact is", while there is insufficient exploration of "how to intervene", and the differentiated characteristics of different age groups and platforms have not been fully considered. These gaps make it difficult for the existing achievements to fully respond to the practical needs of teenagers' development in the digital age, and further in-depth research is urgently needed. The significance of this study lies in providing precise guidance for family and school intervention. Based on the differentiated impacts of various digital devices, this study can offer targeted suggestions to parents and schools - such as guiding teenagers to prioritize the use of learning-oriented devices and limiting the usage time of gaming devices; Improve the quality of parent-child communication to enhance peer relationships and thereby reduce externalized problem behaviors. Design differentiated psychological counseling programs for teenagers with different personality traits (such as high neuroticism) to help them relieve appearance anxiety. Secondly, it provides a reference for the governance of social media platforms. The research conclusion can promote the platform to optimize the content ecosystem and algorithmic mechanism, such as reducing the dissemination of overly beautified appearance content, curbing the phenomenon of group polarization, and lowering the risk of cyber violence. Meanwhile, the platform can design age-specific social functions based on the needs of teenagers of different ages (such as strengthening interest communities and downplaying social comparation-oriented content in the youth mode), to build a more friendly digital environment for teenagers. Finally, it provides a basis for policy formulation and the implementation of intervention strategies. This study will propose an operational plan for cultivating media health literacy (such as offering media cognition courses in schools), providing empirical support for the education department to formulate policies on digital literacy education for teenagers. Meanwhile, for problems such as pathological Internet use and appearance anxiety, a collaborative intervention path of "family - school - platform" is designed to help improve the mental health level of teenagers and promote their healthy social development. This study focuses on the context of the digital age The multi-dimensional influence mechanisms of different types of electronic devices (learning-oriented, game-oriented, social/video-oriented) and social media (short videos, comprehensive social platforms) on the peer relationships (friendship, loneliness, sense of belonging), mental health (psychological stress, emotional state), appearance anxiety and pathological Internet use of adolescents (aged 12-18) The focus is on exploring the mediating roles of peer relationships, social comparisons, and fear of missing out, as well as the moderating roles of personality traits, media health literacy, and age groups, and proposing targeted intervention strategies. This study employed the literature review method, systematically sorting out relevant domestic and foreign literature on digital devices, social media and adolescent development, summarizing existing research achievements and gaps, and

providing support for the construction of research models and theoretical frameworks. At the same time, cross-age comparative analysis was also employed, dividing teenagers aged 12 to 18 into two groups: junior high school (12 to 15 years old) and senior high school (16 to 18 years old). The differences in digital device usage habits, peer relationship needs, and psychological problem manifestations among different age groups were compared and analyzed to enhance the pertinence of the research conclusions. The objective of this study is to clarify the specific influence paths of different types of digital devices and social media on adolescent peer relationships, mental health, appearance anxiety and pathological Internet use, and to verify the mediating effects of peer relationships, social comparisons and fear of missing out. Meanwhile, it reveals the moderating effects of personality traits (extraversion, neuroticism), media health literacy, and age group on the above-mentioned influence paths, and explains the mechanisms behind individual differences among adolescents. Finally, a collaborative intervention strategy of "family - school - platform - individual" is proposed to provide practical guidance for reducing the negative impact of the digital environment on teenagers and promoting their healthy development.

3. Definition

3.1 Peer Relation

Peer relationships are interpersonal relationships established by people of similar age or psychological age and development status to oneself [1]. Generally, such relationships can be formed in various situations or different social circumstances (such as schools, companies, people with similar interests and hobbies, etc.). Peer relationships are characterized by equality, interactivity and dynamics. They serve as significant predictors in mental health assessments and contribute greatly to individual development. Peer relationships not only fulfill social needs but also transmit cultural norms, helping teenagers adapt within different social contexts, enhance communication skills and conflict resolution abilities [2]. They have a profound impact on personality development, mental health, academic performance, and the cultivation of social adaptability.

3.2 Appearance Anxiety

"Appearance anxiety" refers to the psychological burden and fear of being maliciously commented on by others after uploading one's own photos online [3]. Appearance anxiety is a negative emotional experience that can have

a negative impact on the physical and mental health of teenagers and has become a a prevalent psychological issue that negatively affects adolescents. Appearance anxiety encompasses physical characteristics (height, weight, body type, skin condition, facial features, hair) and additional image elements (such as clothing coordination, makeup effects, accessory selection, etc.). On social media, appearance evaluation often magnifies such worries, as adolescents may fear not meeting prevailing aesthetic standards and experience emotions such as tension and anxiety. This is known as appearance anxiety [4].

4. The Influence OF Social Media on Peer Relationships among Teenagers

4.1 The Influence of Different Social Media

Different electronic devices have different social media platforms. For instance, smartphones have short-video apps for making friends, and game consoles have online gaming partners, etc. In this era of rapid technological development, a wide variety of digital devices are emerging one after another, and teenagers also have offer expanded opportunities to socialize and form relationships.The first paper by Feng and Le discussed the impact of different electronic devices on long-term on-campus boarding students [1]. They explored the relationship between digital device usage, peer relationships and mental health through mediating model analysis (such as regression analysis and mediating effect tests), and clarified the mediating mechanism [1]. It is concluded that the use of learning-oriented digital devices has a positive effect on mental health and may indirectly promote the improvement of mental state by assisting learning and enhancing abilities [1]. The use of game-based digital devices has a negative effect on mental health [1]. Excessive gaming may lead to increased psychological stress or emotional problems [1]. Learning-oriented use indirectly enhances mental health levels by promoting peer interaction, such as learning together and discussing problems. Social and video use may harm mental health by reducing offline interaction, fostering unrealistic comparisons, and increasing social pressure such as reducing offline interaction and triggering social comparisons [1]. The second paper by Qian Scholar mainly focuses on the specific manifestations of short videos as social platforms in the peer relationships of teenagers and their influence on the development of peer relationships [5]. This study focuses on the adolescent group. Currently, adolescents are in a critical period of socialization. Peer relationships are crucial for their psychological development and social adaptation [5]. At the same time, they are

easily influenced by the online social environment and have a strong need for self-identity and peer identity [5]. This research mainly takes the interactive ritual chain theory as its core, combines localization research results, analyzes how teenagers gain self-identity and peer identity through interaction in short-video socializing, and explores the influence mechanism of short videos on peer relationships [5]. This paper, in combination with a literature review, includes a questionnaire survey (" Questionnaire on Teenagers' Views on Short Videos ") and in-depth interviews (" Outline of In-depth Interviews "), and analyzes the problems through the integration of quantitative and qualitative data [5]. The research conclusion shows that short videos have a stimulating and reinforcing effect on peer relationships, but they also have limitations. Teenagers may lose their sense of autonomy due to emotional dependence. The abundance of short video information can create an illusion of satisfaction, which may reduce motivation for authentic offline interactions and the phenomenon of group polarization may lead to real harm (such as cyber violence and value deviation). The short video information carnival is prone to creating false satisfaction. The phenomenon of group polarization may lead to real harm (such as cyber violence and value deviation). The third literature focuses on adolescents aged 12 to 18. This study adopts literature analysis and theoretical exploration as its core method and combines the review of relevant research on teenagers' social media usage behavior and developmental psychology to construct an association framework between social media and various dimensions of teenagers' peer relationships (friendship, loneliness, and sense of belonging). The conclusion is drawn on the multi-dimensional influence of social media on the peer relationships of teenagers [6]. As a social medium, social media influences the establishment, maintenance and quality of friendships among teenagers. It may promote friendship connections by increasing the frequency of interaction, but it may also change the depth and stability of friendships due to the virtuality of online interaction [6]. The use of social media may intensify loneliness through mechanisms such as fear of missing out (FOMO) and online exclusion (such as social comparisons caused by excessive attention to others' updates), or increase the risk of being rejected by peers (such as online exclusion and negative evaluations), but it may also alleviate loneliness by expanding social circles, with a two-way effect [6]. Social media provides a platform for teenagers to identify with their groups. By participating in online communities and sharing interests, they can enhance their sense of belonging to the group [6]. However, this may also weaken their sense of belonging due to group exclusion or "niche"

labels [6]. All these studies have certain flaws. For instance, in the first article, there is a problem of missing moderating variables. They failed to account for individual differences such as personality traits, self-control, or academic pressure, and environmental factors (such as school management methods), and might have overlooked the complex influencing mechanisms. The second article also has limitation such as sample representativeness issues, a serious lack of causal relationships, and limited depth of variable measurement. The measurement of "peer relationships" may focus on surface dimensions such as emotional connections and does not delve deeply into core indicators such as conflict resolution and trust establishment. The localization adaptability of the "interactive ritual chain" lacks detailed demonstration, platform differences are ignored, and the intervention effects have not yet been verified. The shortcomings of the last article lie in the lack of empirical data, the ambiguity of the influence mechanism, insufficient age stratification (taking 12-18-year-old adolescents as a whole for research, without detailing the differences in social media usage and peer relationship needs among different age groups, and the conclusion is less targeted) and the failure to involve moderating variables.

4.2 The Current Situation of Peer Relationships among Teenagers

In the first article, it can be seen through data analysis that for teenagers, parent-child communication completely influences their externalized problem behaviors through peer relationships [7]. That is, the quality of parent-child communication does not directly affect externalized problem behaviors, but indirectly reduces externalized problem behaviors by improving peer relationships (such as enhancing peer acceptance and reducing conflicts) [7]. The mediating effect value was -0.017 (95% confidence interval [-0.045,0.007]) [7]. Ultimately, the complete mediating role of peer relationships is concluded. In the second article, by using the questionnaire survey method and comparing the experimental group with the control group, it was concluded that the estranging of peer relationships positively predicts pathological Internet use in adolescents [8]. That is, the lower the quality of peer relationships, the more likely adolescents are to have Internet use problems [8]. Meanwhile, fear of missing out plays a mediating role between peer relationships and pathological Internet use - poor peer relationships may result in unmet social needs, which in the long run increase vulnerability to addiction and depression, thereby generating fear of missing out and ultimately inducing or exacerbating pathological Internet use.

5. Influence of Social Media on Teenagers' Appearance Anxiety

5.1 Active Influence

The first article focuses on the teenage group, whose characteristics are: growing up in a digital environment, frequently exposed to social media, being the main user group of social media, and their social and entertainment methods highly dependent on digital media [3]. During adolescence, people pay more attention to self-awareness and external image, and are easily influenced by external aesthetic standards [3]. The problem of appearance anxiety in the social media environment is more prominent. Teenagers' ability to distinguish and criticize media information is still in the process of formation. The level of media health literacy is closely related to their ability to deal with appearance anxiety. This article conduct literature review, unfolds around the logical chain of "social media exposure → social comparison → social appearance anxiety", and introduces "media health literacy" as a potential intervention variable to construct a theoretical model for the formation and alleviation of appearance anxiety among adolescents [3]. Through research, scholars have concluded that there is a bidirectional association between social media exposure and social appearance anxiety (Social media exposure among teenagers can exacerbate appearance anxiety, while those with higher anxiety may use social media more frequently but teenagers with higher social appearance anxiety may use social media more frequently) [3]. The mediating role of social comparison is significant (the high aesthetic standards that are widespread on social media can trigger upward comparisons of teenagers' appearance, thereby intensifying anxiety) [3]. Media health literacy is an effective way to relieve anxiety [3]. However, this article also has certain flaws, such as the lack of empirical research, insufficient refinement of mechanism analysis, the need to verify the practicality of intervention strategies, and insufficient consideration of group differences. In the second article, Scholar Li adopted a questionnaire survey method to collect data through standardized scales. First, he examined the direct impact of social media usage on appearance anxiety and the moderating effect of personality traits [9]. Then, he focused on social media information attention and constructed a chain mediation model to explore the specific paths by which it affects appearance anxiety [9]. He selected 490 college students as samples and conducted reliability and validity tests (reliability analysis, validity analysis) to ensure the reliability of the data [9]. Ultimately, it is concluded that personality traits are related to appearance anxiety (the

lower the extroverted personality trait and the higher the neurotic personality trait, the higher the degree of appearance anxiety among college students) [9]. Meanwhile, social media information attention (such as attention to content related to appearance) is a key variable influencing appearance anxiety, and its effect is achieved through a chain mediating effect [9]. One more point is that the duration, frequency and intensity of social media usage do not significantly and directly affect appearance anxiety [9]. Extroversion and neurotic personality traits have a moderating effect on the relationship between social media usage and appearance anxiety [9]. The article also several notable limitations. Just like the previous one, it has sample limitations. Of course, this article still has limitations in variable measurement, insufficient verification of causal relationships, insufficient completeness in mechanism analysis, and the absence of intervention strategies.

5.2 Passive Influence

This article takes 1,000 teenagers from secondary and higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province as the research subjects. The core characteristics include: mainly passive usage (such as browsing and watching others' content rather than actively creating and sharing) [10]. This usage mode is prone to cause excessive attention to others' appearance and life, and is closely related to appearance anxiety; The samples are concentrated in Guangdong Province, which can reflect the psychological characteristics of teenagers in secondary and higher vocational schools in a specific region [10]. However, they may also be influenced by regional culture and educational environment, and have certain limitations. During the secondary vocational and higher vocational education stage (which is also the adolescence stage), it is a critical period when physical appearance changes rapidly and psychological development is unbalanced. People pay high attention to their own image and have been less included in the core group of previous research on appearance anxiety. This research fills a critical gap by focusing on adolescents in vocational schools, a group often overlooked in previous studies. This study explores the impact of passive social media use on appearance anxiety among secondary and higher vocational school adolescents. To examine the chain mediating role of upward social comparison and rumination thinking in the relationship between the two (that is, whether the path of "passive social media use → upward social comparison → rumination thinking → appearance anxiety" holds true) [10]. This article adopts standardized scale measurement and questionnaire survey methods for investigation and analysis. The final conclusion is drawn: Passive use of social media (such as

frequently browsing content related to others' appearance) significantly positively predicts appearance anxiety among secondary and higher vocational school adolescents [10]. That is, the higher the frequency of passive use, the more severe the degree of appearance anxiety [10]. Passive use of social media tends to increase adolescents' upward social comparisons (such as comparing their appearance with the more ideal image on social media), and upward social comparisons will further trigger rumination (such as repeatedly dwelling on their own appearance "flaws"), and rumination will eventually intensify appearance anxiety [10]. Form a chain-like mediating path of "passive social media use → upward social comparison → rumination thinking → appearance anxiety"; There are certain differences among secondary and higher vocational school teenagers of different genders, grades and places of residence in terms of appearance anxiety, passive use of social media, upward social comparison and rumination thinking (specific differences need to be combined with the original data) [10]. Finally, the article demonstrates several methodological limitations. All the flaws have been mentioned before and are common among the general public. However, there is still one more obvious flaw, which is the potential impact of common method bias. Although a common method bias test was conducted, all data were derived from self-reported questionnaires, and there may still be response biases (such as the social expectation effect), which could affect the objectivity of the results.

5. Conclusion

This study's relationship are between the use of digital devices and the mental health and peer relationships of teenagers: The influence of short videos on peer relationships among teenagers; The multi-dimensional influence of social media on the peer relationships of teenagers; The mediating role of peer relationships and related behaviors; Social media and teenagers' appearance anxiety. Scholar have also provided relevant suggestions on these aspects, including those from the family and school levels, social media platforms and regulatory levels, as well as the teenagers themselves. Parents should focus on improving the quality of parent-child communication and indirectly reduce the externalized problem behaviors of teenagers by enhancing their peer relationships. Educators should enhance the cultivation of teenagers' media health literacy, help them view aesthetic information in social media rationally, and reduce appearance anxiety. The platform needs to optimize its content ecosystem, reduce the dissemination of overly beautified and false information related to appearance, and avoid the phenomenon of group polarization. Teenagers should balance online and offline interactions, avoid neglecting the establishment and maintenance of real offline relationships due to excessive reliance on online social interaction (such as short videos and social media), and enhance their ability to distinguish online information.

The significance of this study lies in revealing the complex mechanisms among digital devices, social media, and variables such as adolescent mental health, peer relationships, and appearance anxiety (such as mediating effects and bidirectional influences), providing empirical support for theoretical research in related fields (such as the application of the interactive ritual chain theory in short-video socializing). It has enriched the research achievements of disciplines such as adolescent development psychology and media psychology. The mediating role of peer relationships in parent-child communication and externalizing problem behaviors, as well as in peer relationship alienation and pathological Internet use, has been clarified, deepening the understanding of the behavioral influence paths of adolescents. It provides specific directions for families, schools and society to intervene in teenagers' digital behaviors, such as guiding the rational use of digital devices, improving peer relationships and alleviating appearance anxiety, which is conducive to promoting the physical and mental health development of teenagers. It provides a reference for the standardized operation and regulatory policy formulation of social media platforms, promotes the construction of a more suitable online environment for the growth of teenagers, and reduces the negative impact of adverse media environments on their social and psychological aspects.

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