

# Impact of the Rise of Social Media on the Female Fitness Industry

**Xinyi Wang**

Soochow University High School-  
Sino-Canada Program, Suzhou  
215000, China

## Abstract:

In recent years, with national policy support, the promotion of a fitness trend, and a shift in concepts, an increasing number of women have joined the ranks of fitness enthusiasts. The rise of social media has provided women with more rights to express themselves, and it has had an impact on the development of the female fitness industry. So, how does the rise of social media affect the development of the female fitness industry? This paper will explore the mechanism by which the rise of social media affects the development of the female fitness industry both positively and negatively, based on economic theories such as the theory of externalities and market demand theory. The results show that the rise of social media will boost the demand for female fitness, force innovation in the fitness industry, reduce information asymmetry, and create a positive and uplifting fitness atmosphere, thus promoting the development of the female fitness industry. At the same time, due to the lack of platform regulation, there may be a reverse selection problem of “bad money driving out good money,” causing some women to fall into body anxiety, which in turn suppresses the development of the female fitness industry. Based on this, this paper proposes policy recommendations such as strengthening the review and supervision of social platforms, the use of a point system in the female fitness community section of social media, and increasing the connection between online and offline activities.

**Keywords:** Social Media;Female Fitness Industry;Ex-ternalities.

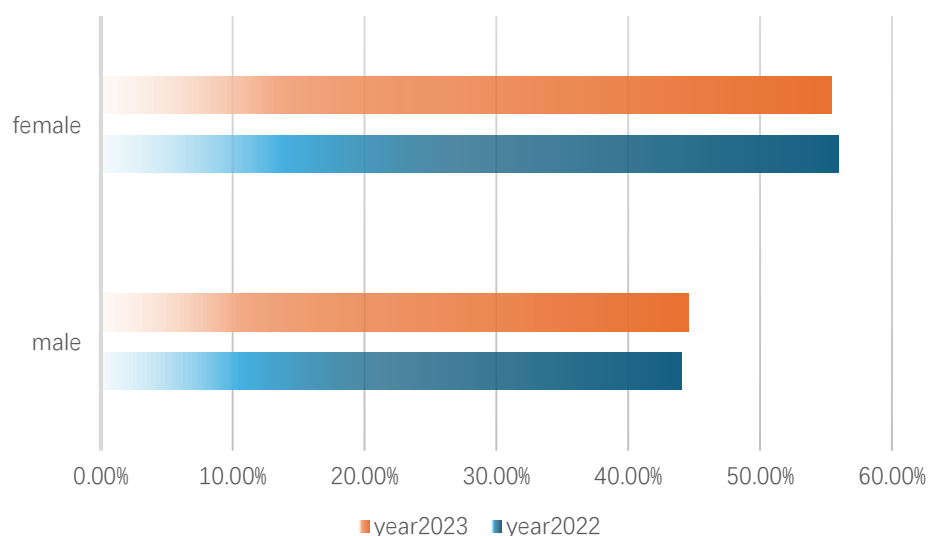
## 1. Introduction

In 2022, the General Office of the State Council issued the “Opinions on Building a Higher Level of Public Fitness Service System,” which mentioned

that by 2035, a comprehensive public fitness service system adapted to a socialist modernized country will be fully established, with the proportion of people regularly participating in physical exercise reaching over 45%. Fitness and sports will become an every-

day lifestyle, and people's physical fitness and health levels will be among the top in the world. The "2023 China Fitness Industry Data Report" shows that the proportion of female fitness consumers reached 55.41%, a decrease of 0.5% from 2022. The gap between male and female fitness consumers in the national fitness market in 2023 has narrowed, indicating that while the proportion of male fitness consumers has increased, females remain the leading force in the fitness consumer market. On the one hand,

with the support of national policies, the promotion of a fitness trend, and the rise of the concept of self-expression in modern society, more and more women focus on shaping their ideal figure; on the other hand, as women's sense of subjectivity continues to awaken, and body aesthetics change, more and more women pursue a more diversified body shape through fitness (Gao Xin, 2022; Ma Xinyuan, 2024).



**Fig. 1 The proportion of male and female fitness consumers**

In recent years, various social media platforms on the Internet and mobile phones have been playing an increasingly important role in social life, and the rapid development of the Internet has also given rise to live online broadcasting. The year 2022 was the "year of fitness live broadcasting," and the COVID-19 pandemic has spurred a boom in online fitness. Since then, social media platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Bilibili, and Keep have been leading the charge, with a large number of fitness bloggers led by female fitness influencers like Liu Liu Ye, Pa Mei, Han Xiaosi, and others, rapidly developing

the online fitness industry (Huang Fang, 2024), which is beneficial for the widespread dissemination of the concept of national fitness, enhancing fitness awareness, and thus promoting the development of the fitness industry (Wu Zhouli, Zhao Rui, 2017). The chart below shows four female fitness influencers with a large number of followers on Xiaohongshu, namely Jolie, Han Xiaosi, Liu Ye, and Pa Mei La, who regularly share their fitness videos on social media, attracting a large number of female fitness enthusiasts and also driving the development of the women's fitness industry.

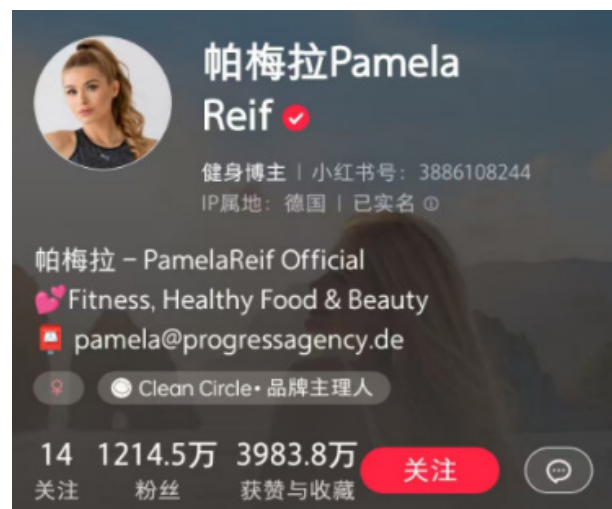
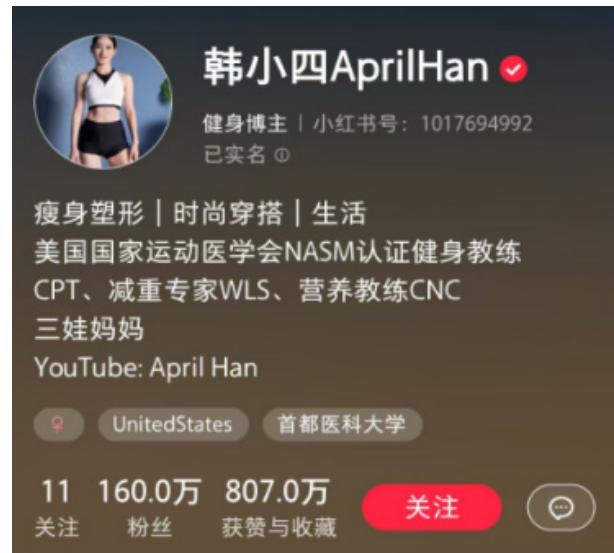


Fig. 2 Female fitness influencers

For women, the rise of social media serves as a form of technological empowerment, potentially granting them greater rights to express themselves through media channels (Lu Xinlei, Shan Peipei, 2022), which is conducive to the advancement of the women's fitness industry. How does the rise of social media promote the development of the women's fitness industry? Does the emergence of social media truly only benefit the development of the women's fitness industry? Could it also adversely affect the development of the women's fitness industry? Investigating the aforementioned issues is an essential path to promote the development of the women's fitness industry and is also a necessary measure to enhance the overall physical fitness of the population in the internet era. Existing research on social media and women's fitness mainly starts from the perspectives of journalism and

communication studies, focusing on two aspects: one is to explore the characteristics, influencing factors, and practical mechanisms of women's fitness in the era of social media (Ye Xin, Chen Shaojun, 2021; Zhou Ziyu, 2023), and the other is to discuss the impact of women's fitness on women's subjectivity (Wei Boya, 2021). There are few scholars who have addressed the issue from a macro perspective based on business and economic theories. Therefore, this paper will start with economic theory to discuss how the rise of social media affects the women's fitness industry positively and negatively.

## 2. Characteristics of Women's Fitness Behavior

To conduct an in-depth analysis of the impact of the rise

of social media on the women's fitness industry, it is first necessary to dissect the characteristics of women's fitness behavior. Compared to male fitness enthusiasts, women often exhibit the following traits in terms of fitness.

In terms of fitness methods, women typically have a higher body fat percentage and relatively less muscle mass than men. Therefore, they tend to opt for fitness methods that focus on fat reduction, body shaping, and enhancing physical aesthetics, such as yoga, Pilates, and aerobic exercises. Additionally, women's fitness duration and methods are influenced by hormones; hence, they need to adjust their exercise methods and intensity according to their menstrual cycle.

Regarding fitness concepts, due to many influencers marketing an aesthetic image of "white, thin, and youthful," women are more susceptible to body image anxiety compared to men. They are more likely to pursue the widely recognized "perfect figure" through exercise, fitness, and plastic surgery. They are more easily swayed by fitness rhetoric from merchants and influencers on social media.

In terms of behavioral characteristics, men's fitness behavior tends to be more individualistic, while women prefer group fitness activities, such as yoga, dance, and spinning classes, as well as fitness exchanges with other women in group chats and social media. Social media's group chats and communities provide a platform for women fitness enthusiasts to help and support each other.

### 3. The Positive Impact of Social Media on the Women's Fitness Industry

In recent years, the rise of social media has had a positive effect on the women's fitness industry to some extent.

Firstly, from the perspective of market demand, the rise of social media has provided women with a platform to share fitness experiences and showcase fitness achievements, creating an uplifting fitness atmosphere online (Luo Wei, 2024). This helps to stimulate more women's interest and demand for fitness, and the surge in women's fitness demand forces businesses to offer more fitness products and services to meet this demand, thus promoting the expansion of the women's fitness market. From the supply side, the rise of social media has provided the fitness industry with diverse marketing and promotional channels. Many gyms and fitness coaches share fitness knowledge and showcase fitness achievements through social media platforms, especially platforms like Xiaohongshu, which are mainly for women, gathering a lot of fitness information. This reduces marketing costs, enhances brand visibility and influence, and attracts a large number of potential female consumers, which is beneficial for increasing wom-

en's fitness demand. Additionally, social media platforms make information transparent, and businesses, in order to capture women's fitness needs, on the one hand, are forced to innovate themselves, such as using social media platforms to launch online fitness courses, live fitness teaching, and other new types of fitness service models, and on the other hand, improve the quality of products and services, such as using big data and artificial intelligence technology to provide personalized services, further promoting the development of the women's fitness industry.

Secondly, the theory of information asymmetry indicates that in an economic market, due to differences in the degree of information known by different financial entities, those with more details often hold an advantageous position, while those with less information are at a disadvantage. In terms of the fitness industry, gyms, fitness products, and other industries are of varying quality. In the absence of social media as a medium, women mostly choose exercise methods and products based on a partial understanding of the fitness industry, and there is a lack of communication between women, consumers lack knowledge of the providers, and consumers often find it challenging to obtain comprehensive information about fitness products and services, leading to high decision-making costs for some women and difficulty in making correct decisions about fitness. On one hand, the rise of social media can reduce the information asymmetry between women consumers and fitness service providers. Social media not only gathers a large amount of information from fitness coaches, institutions, users, and other sources but also provides channels for consumer reviews and experience sharing, which helps women consumers to fully and truthfully understand the fitness industry. Women consumers can compare different gyms, fitness coaches, and fitness products in terms of price and quality through multiple dimensions and choose the best fitness products in the market. Gyms, fitness coaches, and others will continuously innovate and reform to meet the new demands of women consumers, thus promoting the development of the women's fitness industry. On the other hand, the rise of social media can reduce information asymmetry among women consumers. Fitness communities on social media provide women consumers with more opportunities to learn from each other and exchange experiences (Luo Wei, 2024). Consumers share real fitness experiences, experiences, and achievements through social media, creating a transparent information environment, and other consumers can judge the quality of service of different fitness industries based on feedback from other users on social media, reducing the possibility of being misled. Over time, low-quality, non-satisfying fitness gyms, fitness coaches, fitness products, etc., will gradually exit the market, there-



by improving the quality of the women's fitness industry. Furthermore, the theory of externalities indicates that in market activities, the actions of one economic entity may affect the rest of the economic entities in the market. With the rise of social media, more and more women share their fitness experiences and achievements on the media or establish women's fitness groups and communities, which will motivate other women to some extent, making everyone recognize the benefits of fitness, such as becoming stronger, healthier figures, stronger physical strength, etc., stimulating women's enthusiasm and motivation for fitness (Luo Wei, 2024), producing significant positive externalities, further expanding the scale of the women's fitness industry and promoting the development of women's fitness industry. At the same time, the knowledge spillover theory points out that in market economic activities, the knowledge and information of one economic entity may be obtained by other entities without compensation and benefit from it. Under the traditional fitness model, consumers have a high learning cost, and they cannot easily obtain fitness knowledge, making it difficult for many consumers to get positive feedback through self-study, thus making it hard to persist. Social media has various fitness bloggers, fitness coaches, and users regularly share fitness knowledge, training methods, and nutritional advice, which can be freely obtained by a large number of women, producing a positive externality of knowledge spillover. This will reduce the learning cost, increase fitness participation, and help women consumers master the correct fitness skills, get positive feedback, and be willing to persist in the long term, thus promoting the development of the women's fitness industry.

#### **4. The Negative Impact of Social Media on the Women's Fitness Industry**

However, the rise of social media has also had certain negative impacts on the women's fitness industry. Firstly, the emergence of social media may lead to market failure and adverse selection issues in the women's fitness market. Social media platforms gather a vast amount of information from fitness coaches, institutions, and users, as well as numerous consumer reviews and experience sharing. Although this provides consumers with a diverse and comprehensive range of choices, there is a problem of information overload and inconsistent quality. Some fitness bloggers on social media mainly provide practical fitness knowledge, but the content may be relatively dry and lack entertainment value; others, in order to gain more traffic, will create an image of a perfect figure and make promises of rapid weight loss, deliberately catering to women's

sensitive psychological anxiety about their figures. Compared to male consumers, female consumers have unique characteristics in fitness needs and behavior, such as a greater focus on emotional resonance and aesthetic pursuit, which can be easily exploited by the aforementioned low-quality fitness bloggers. Due to information asymmetry, consumers find it difficult to discern the scientific nature and authenticity of the content published by different fitness bloggers and tend to choose entertaining fitness bloggers who can bring emotional value to themselves rather than high-quality but lacking in entertainment value and perfect figure views, which cannot provide a variety of fitness options. In addition, social media platforms always push content that has been viewed or liked before, creating an "information cocoon" effect, which further intensifies the consumer's passive selection process. In other words, low-quality fitness content is more likely to gain traffic and attention due to its entertainment value, squeezing out high-quality fitness content's market space and marginalizing this content, thus triggering an adverse selection problem of "bad money driving out good money." At the same time, social media platforms tend to push content with high traffic and popularity, leading to an over-concentration of resources on entertainment-oriented but low-quality content, while high-quality fitness content may struggle to gain enough exposure and resources, reducing market diversity, which is not conducive to the development of the women's fitness industry.

Secondly, the rise of social media may also have negative externalities on the women's fitness industry. The healthy, strong, and beautiful bodies obtained by women through exercise are a breakthrough from the traditional social norms of "delicate and weak" female images, but some fitness bloggers, weight loss institutions, and plastic surgery organizations create and widely promote the image of "white, thin, and young" women and some self-media influencers display nearly perfect athletic bodies, constantly reshaping women's understanding of beauty, continuously stimulating and amplifying women's dissatisfaction with their own figures (Shi Zhengyuan, 2024), while also using consumerism to shape needs, inducing women to consume with the goal of "perfect bodies" (Wang Mengru, 2019). Many women feel pressured and inferior when browsing this content, leading to body anxiety, self-doubt, and even self-doubt, which psychological burden may suppress women's enthusiasm for fitness and have a significant negative externality, which is not conducive to the development of the women's fitness industry. At the same time, low-quality, entertaining, and body anxiety-inducing fitness content on social media platforms may form an unhealthy social atmosphere, such as an excessive pursuit of "slimness" and the beauty of thinness, which affects

the social group's perception of body image. Compared to men, women have stricter requirements for their own figures, so this kind of unhealthy social atmosphere is more likely to cause women, especially young women, to have unhealthy pursuits of body shape; distorted cognition may force them to adopt dieting, plastic surgery, and other methods to achieve results in the short term, rather than using healthy fitness methods, which is not conducive to the development of the women's fitness industry. Research shows that some young women, while achieving self-empowerment on social platforms, also deepen body anxiety, becoming trapped in the quagmire of social comparison (Zhang Yue et al., 2022).

In addition, time is a scarce resource; the more time an economic entity spends on social media, the less time is actually used for fitness, which creates a "substitution effect." Social media platforms gather a large amount of information from fitness coaches, institutions, and users, as well as numerous consumer reviews and experience sharing if consumers spend a lot of time on social media browsing fitness content, such as watching fitness videos, reading fitness science, participating in fitness challenges, it will squeeze the actual time used for fitness. This is not only unfavorable to the development of women's fitness habits but also distracts their attention in the short term, making it difficult to focus on achieving their long-term fitness goals.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has constructed a theoretical framework for analyzing the impact of the rise of social media on the development of the women's fitness industry from economic theories such as market demand theory, information asymmetry theory, and externality theory. It has conducted an in-depth analysis of the impact from both positive and negative aspects. The conclusion shows that the rise of social media will promote the development of the women's fitness industry on one hand. The rise of social media is conducive to creating an uplifting and supportive fitness atmosphere among women, boosting the demand for women's fitness, and at the same time, forcing the fitness industry to innovate and improve the quality of products and services, thus promoting the development of the women's fitness industry. On the other hand, the rise of social media provides women consumers with more comprehensive and objective fitness content, reducing information asymmetry and thus aiding the development of the women's fitness industry. Thirdly, the rise of social media has established a bridge of interaction and mutual assistance among women's groups, helping to stimulate women's enthusiasm for fitness, generating positive externalities and

knowledge spillover effects. However, at the same time, the rise of social media will also have negative impacts on the development of the women's fitness industry. First, some low-quality but entertaining fitness bloggers are more likely to cater to women's consumers' demand for a "perfect figure," gaining more traffic and occupying the market space of high-quality but less entertaining fitness content, triggering a reverse selection problem of "bad money driving out good money," causing the women's fitness market to be filled with low-quality fitness products. Second, some self-media on social media has shaped a female image of "white, thin, and young," which affects social trends, causing some women to feel inferior and anxious and hope to become "beautiful" in the short term using unhealthy methods, rather than choosing healthy fitness methods. Third, browsing social media takes up time that would otherwise be spent on fitness in real life, creating a "substitution effect," which is not conducive to the development of fitness habits and the achievement of fitness goals, ultimately not beneficial to the development of the women's fitness industry.

To better promote the development of the women's fitness industry, this paper proposes the following recommendations. First, various social media platforms should strengthen review and supervision, increase the review of the content published by fitness bloggers in the fitness field, increase the push for high-quality but less popular fitness content, and be cautious about low-quality but highly entertaining fitness content. For accounts that deliberately create body anxiety, appearance anxiety or provide false, unscientific content for traffic, platforms should take some radical measures, such as account suspension. At the same time, when pushing fitness posts, try to push a diversified range of posts to every female fitness enthusiast to avoid the "information cocoon" effect. Second, it is recommended that social media increase the women's fitness community section and use a point system within the community section. In this community, women of all ages can share their fitness achievements and fitness insights or raise fitness-related questions and doubts. Each time a fitness insight is shared, or a question of others is answered, female consumers can earn a certain number of points, which can be used to exchange fitness products or gym experience vouchers. This point system helps to create an uplifting and supportive atmosphere within the women's fitness community, which is beneficial to the development of the women's fitness industry. It is suggested to equip the community with a certain number of psychological counselors and health consultants who regularly understand the psychological conditions of women within the community and provide timely guidance for body anxiety and appearance anxiety. Third, social media should

increase online and offline linkage. For example, encourage some self-media bloggers to visit gyms offline, invite famous fitness experts to the platform for live broadcasts, or, after watching a certain number of posts and live broadcasts, share a certain number of fitness insights; you can get offline fitness experience cards, this method can prevent some women from spending too much time on social media and neglecting fitness in real life, thus promoting the development of the women's fitness industry.

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