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The "defined" perfection: aesthetic homogenization triggered by self-media image performance and critical reflection

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Abstract. With the rapid development of the new media industry, social media has been widely adopted and has attracted considerable public attention. The presentation of personal images on social networking and short-video platforms has evolved into an important form of everyday expression and social interaction. Consequently, refined, idealized, and homogeneous aesthetic standards have emerged and spread extensively across online platforms, gradually solidifying into a standardized notion of the "perfect" persona that constrains public aesthetic perception and profoundly shapes individuals' aesthetic cognition and self-identity. Existing studies on aesthetics and appearance anxiety have primarily focused on macro-level social phenomena, yet few have adopted the development of self-media as a central perspective to examine the deeper negative impacts of its standardized aesthetic system on the public. This study investigates the aesthetics generated through self-media image presentation by analyzing the construction logic and dissemination pathways of "perfect" online images and exploring how they influence public mental health, contribute to the homogenization of aesthetic preferences, and subsequently encourage critical reflection. The findings reveal that the emergence and evolution of homogeneous aesthetic standards on short-video platforms follow a rigid and institutionalized logic that profoundly shapes individuals' self-perception. Reconstructing personal aesthetic frameworks and fostering a pluralistic aesthetic system are therefore identified as the key strategies for addressing this issue.

Keywords: self-media, image presentation, aesthetic involution, appearance anxiety, standardized aesthetics

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Internet and short-video platforms have experienced rapid expansion and development, making self-media platforms one of the primary spaces for public self-expression. Many self-media influencers construct a homogeneous image of "perfection" through makeup tutorials and carefully curated fashion content, while these standardized aesthetic templates are disseminated on a large scale through algorithmic recommendation systems and have become deeply embedded in everyday life. Current research in the Chinese academic community has mainly focused on this topic from the perspectives of communication

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studies, psychology, and related disciplines, with existing studies primarily examining the underlying causes of appearance anxiety and aesthetic involution through diverse theoretical lenses.

Psychological research has demonstrated, through mediation analyses, that perfectionistic traits and appearance-related rumination can trigger severe negative emotions, including appearance anxiety and depression. However, most existing empirical psychological studies are confined to offline social contexts and lack comparative analyses of short-video platform users [1]. Further research conducted by international psychologists has identified effective approaches to alleviating such anxiety, showing that self-acceptance and a stable level of body image satisfaction serve as key psychological buffering factors against the negative effects of homogeneous beauty standards promoted by social media [2]. When individuals establish a clear sense of self and an independent system of aesthetic evaluation while fully accepting and understanding their own physical characteristics, the prevailing external standards of "perfection" are less likely to undermine their sense of self-worth. This fundamentally reduces the negative emotions associated with appearance-based social comparison. This body of literature proposes two primary approaches to addressing the issue: fostering individuals' internal self-development and improving the governance and regulation of online platforms. Nevertheless, the existing research is primarily based on users of Western social media platforms and does not adequately account for the realities of Chinese platforms, resulting in a lack of localized strategies applicable to domestic audiences.

However, existing studies have yet to systematically clarify the causal pathway through which the idealized and artificially perfected images presented on self-media platforms influence the public. Moreover, most research has focused primarily on the antecedents of appearance anxiety, while paying comparatively little attention to the construction of individuals' internal aesthetic frameworks as a fundamental solution. Taking users of short-video platforms as the research subjects, this study investigates how the singular and standardized aesthetic norms promoted within the self-media environment compel individuals to actively conform to homogeneous beauty standards, and further examines the resulting loss of subjectivity and its adverse psychological and physical consequences. Grounded in Dramaturgical Theory, the Looking-Glass Self Theory, and theories of perfectionism, this study employs literature review and online textual analysis to examine content created by beauty and fashion influencers on short-video platforms, together with audience responses, as its primary research materials. By focusing on the current development of China's short-video platforms, this study addresses the limitation of existing research, which has predominantly concentrated on Western social media platforms, and provides practical insights to help individuals establish a healthy and independent aesthetic framework and strengthen their resilience against the influence of homogeneous beauty standards.

2. The formation and dissemination mechanisms of homogeneous "perfect" beauty standards on short-video platforms

2.1. Behind the facade: beauty filters, image enhancement, and professional makeup styling

According to Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, social interaction is divided into the front stage and the back stage. The front stage refers to the space where individuals perform and present themselves to the public, whereas the back stage is where they remove their social masks and reveal their authentic selves. Influencers on short-video platforms likewise engage in this form of online performance. To conform to the platform's traffic-driven aesthetic preferences, creators often deliberately conceal their natural physical imperfections and distinctive personal characteristics. They rely on elaborate makeup, photo editing, beauty enhancement tools,

and filters to construct a front-stage image that conforms to standardized ideals of "perfection." Existing studies based on Dramaturgical Theory have shown that beauty influencers on short-video platforms generally conceal aspects of their imperfect authentic selves, while their digitally enhanced and idealized appearance becomes the primary image presented to the public [3]. Meanwhile, platforms provide creators with various forms of commercial incentives, including financial rewards, brand partnerships, and complimentary products, and other benefits, all of which directly shape creators' aesthetic orientations. Research on influencer aesthetics indicates that content featuring conventionally "perfect" appearances that align with mainstream beauty preferences is more likely to receive algorithmic promotion and greater audience exposure. Over time, such incentive structures encourage creators to repeatedly reproduce successful aesthetic templates, resulting in a high degree of homogeneity in beauty-related visual content. At the same time, the mass production of standardized and idealized appearance models continuously supplies content that reinforces the formation of a homogeneous online aesthetic system [4]. Within such a highly homogeneous content production environment, diverse and authentic representations of natural appearance have gradually diminished. Meanwhile, standardized and refined beauty has become the dominant paradigm in beauty-related content creation. Beauty influencers increasingly abandon their distinctive physical characteristics in favor of conforming to prevailing platform aesthetics, thereby constructing standardized online personas. From the very source of content production, this practice accelerates the widespread diffusion of homogeneous beauty standards. It alsoconstitutes the fundamental mechanism through which the ideal of "perfect" beauty becomes institutionalized on short-video platforms.

2.2. Algorithmic distribution: recommendation mechanisms accelerating the homogenization of aesthetic standards

Short-video platforms allocate content traffic primarily based on user engagement metrics. Content that receives higher numbers of likes, comments, and favorites is identified by the algorithm as more appealing to audiences and is consequently granted greater exposure. Studies on social media recommendation algorithms have demonstrated that popularity-based recommendation mechanisms continuously narrow the range of users' aesthetic preferences by repeatedly amplifying standardized ideals of "perfect" appearance. This process gradually diminishes aesthetic diversity. The long-term algorithmic promotion of edited and homogeneous images continuously elevates public expectations of idealized beauty while further compressing the space available for diverse aesthetic expressions [5]. Taking the beauty category on the short-video platform Douyin as an example, once the "fair, youthful, and slim" beauty ideal along with Korean-style makeup receives substantial engagement, the platform's algorithm persistently recommends similar filters, visual effects, cosmetics capable of reproducing the same makeup style. It also recommends cosmetic surgery and aesthetic medicine content that reinforces this aesthetic framework. In contrast, beauty content featuring diverse makeup styles, unconventional facial characteristics, or filter-free and everyday visual presentations receives significantly less algorithmic exposure because it does not conform to mainstream aesthetic preferences. As a result, users are repeatedly exposed to highly similar appearance models, ultimately accelerating the homogenization of aesthetic standards.

2.3. Group diffusion: social comparison reinforces public aesthetic perceptions

Through the long-term algorithmic recommendation of homogeneous and aesthetically enhanced appearance-related content, audiences are continuously exposed to standardized images of "perfect" beauty during their daily use of short-video platforms. This exposure prompts them to unconsciously engage in upward social comparison based on physical appearance. Over time, users become accustomed to treating these digitally

modified and idealized appearances as the benchmark for evaluating beauty, gradually overlooking the diversity of real-world appearances and becoming less accepting of their own natural physical characteristics. Persistent online appearance-based comparison further reinforces a unified standard of aesthetic evaluation. Within this standard, flawless and highly refined appearances come to be regarded as the socially accepted ideal, whereas distinctive and naturally occurring physical features are increasingly marginalized. As large numbers of users continue to adopt the same criteria for evaluating appearance, a rigid and homogeneous social consensus regarding beauty gradually emerges and ultimately consolidates the "perfect" aesthetic system constructed by short-video platforms [6].

3. The impacts of the homogeneous aesthetic system on short-video platforms on audiences

3.1. Cognitive dimension: the loss of individual subjectivity from the perspective of the Looking-Glass Self Theory

Short-video platforms have created a digital environment that is highly conducive to appearance-based social comparison [2]. These platforms continuously recommend heavily filtered, retouched, and digitally enhanced images of idealized "perfect" appearances. In doing so, they provide users with a media environment that encourages constant comparison. Users unconsciously adopt these idealized online images as reference standards and repeatedly compare their own appearance with digitally manipulated beauty ideals. This persistent process of social comparison directly influences individuals' self-evaluation, reduces self-satisfaction, and negatively affects overall psychological well-being. Furthermore, quantifiable social indicators such as likes, comments, and follower counts intensify comparison behaviors. These metrics have gradually become visible symbols of social approval and appearance-related recognition, further reinforcing individuals' concern with physical attractiveness. In the digital era, mainstream media continually constructs and reinforces standardized beauty ideals. This process raises public expectations of the "ideal appearance" and fosters unrealistic expectations regarding physical appearance and body image, particularly among adolescents. Cross-sectional studies have confirmed that prolonged exposure to idealized appearance-related content on social media platforms continuously elevates individuals' psychological expectations of their own appearance, thereby contributing to body dissatisfaction and unrealistic appearance-related obsessions [7]. Research in clinical psychology further suggests that repeated exposure to standardized images of "perfect" beauty induces cognitive bias. This bias leads individuals to develop distorted and one-sided standards for evaluating physical appearance [8]. This phenomenon can be further interpreted through the perspective of the Looking-Glass Self Theory, whereby the idealized appearances presented on short-video platforms gradually become internalized as the appearance standards that individuals believe others expect of them [9]. Studies on media use have shown that frequent exposure to digitally enhanced appearance-related content weakens individuals' stable sense of intrinsic self-worth, making them more susceptible to homogeneous beauty standards [10]. Research on body cognition further indicates that continuous exposure to mass-produced images of "perfect" appearances reinforces appearance perfectionism and gradually undermines individuals' ability to evaluate themselves objectively [11, 12]. As audiences remain immersed in this environment of external expectations and social comparison, they become increasingly dependent on external validation to establish their sense of self-worth. When their natural appearance fails to meet these standardized ideals of beauty, they are more likely to reject their own unique physical characteristics, ultimately resulting in blurred self-identity and a fundamentally distorted aesthetic value system.

3.2. Emotional dimension: standardized beauty standards induce appearance anxiety and appearance perfectionism

Prolonged exposure to the homogeneous "perfect" appearance environment created by short-video platforms gradually leads audiences to develop increasingly stringent standards for evaluating their own appearance. This process fosters appearance perfectionism. Taking the topic "appearance anxiety" on the Xiaohongshu platform as an example, the topic has accumulated more than 3.76 billion views and over 17.896 million discussions. A large number of young users have reported that prolonged exposure to idealized and digitally enhanced influencer images has prompted them to engage in constant appearance-based comparisons, resulting in self-doubt, appearance anxiety, and other negative emotions. Many have even chosen cosmetic procedures, such as double-eyelid surgery and facial slimming injections, in an attempt to conform to the standardized beauty ideals promoted online. This phenomenon illustrates how homogeneous beauty standards contribute to the development of appearance perfectionism. Previous research has confirmed that repeatedly using digitally enhanced and idealized appearances as self-reference standards makes it increasingly difficult for individuals to accept their own physical imperfections. This leads them to impose unrealistically high expectations on their appearance and reinforces perfectionistic tendencies [11]. Moreover, frequent appearance-based social comparisons on social media intensify negative body-related cognitions and trigger emotions associated with body image disturbance. Individuals become increasingly preoccupied with perceived flaws in their appearance, develop persistent dissatisfaction with their facial features and body shape, experience chronic appearance anxiety, and exhibit lower levels of self-acceptance and overall psychological well-being [7]. Reviews in the field of mental and physical health further indicate that persistent appearance anxiety continuously depletes psychological resources, reduces self-esteem, and exerts long-term negative effects on everyday social interaction, self-identity, and overall mental health [6]. Furthermore, short-video platforms amplify the importance of physical appearance in self-evaluation, making attractiveness an increasingly significant criterion by which individuals judge their own self-worth. This cognitive distortion further increases psychological burden, normalizes appearance anxiety, and persistently disrupts individuals' emotional stability [5].

3.3. Value dimension: homogeneous beauty standards undermine the diversity and inclusiveness of aesthetic values

Short-video platforms continuously promote refined and idealized appearance templates. This process progressively reduces the visibility of diverse forms of physical appearance and subtly reshapes public aesthetic preferences. Across major platforms, commercial collaborations and beauty-related advertising are predominantly directed toward influencers whose appearances and makeup styles conform to standardized beauty ideals. This unequal distribution of commercial resources further encourages creators to align with homogeneous aesthetic standards. Consequently, many influencers abandon their original and distinctive creative styles, objectively narrowing the space available for diverse aesthetic expression. Prolonged exposure to the same carefully curated and digitally perfected appearance templates gradually diminishes audiences' ability to appreciate physical diversity and weakens their willingness to express their own individuality. As flawless and highly refined appearances become the dominant social standard of beauty, natural appearances characterized by unique personal features are increasingly marginalized, leading the public to adopt a narrow and uniform framework for evaluating physical appearance. Ultimately, this institutionalized aesthetic culture undermines the inherent value of appearance diversity and hinders the development of a more inclusive and pluralistic aesthetic culture.

4. Practical approaches to addressing the homogenization of beauty standards

This chapter offers practical strategies to address the homogenization of beauty standards along three dimensions: individuals, content creators, and platform governance. It first examines strategies at the individual level.

4.1. Individual level: strengthening self-awareness, building an independent aesthetic framework, and resisting conformist beauty standards

The "perfect" beauty standards constructed by social media can trigger a range of psychological and social problems, such as emotional distress and a diminished sense of self-identity. Figure 1 illustrates the underlying mechanisms of these effects, along with the multidimensional intervention and mitigation strategies proposed in the existing literature.

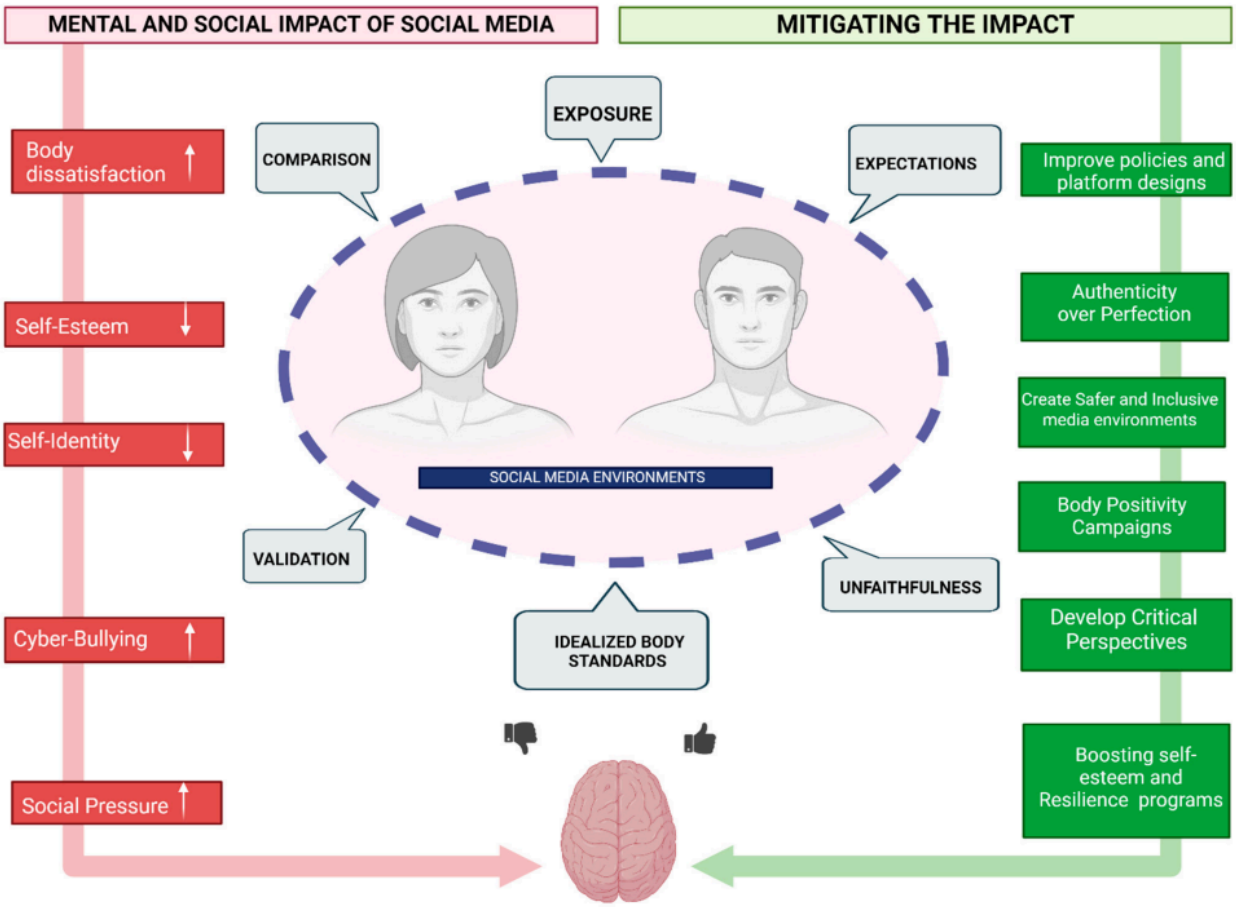

Figure 1. Mental health risks associated with social media use and promising strategies for mitigation [2]

Audiences should actively engage in self-exploration to develop a comprehensive and objective understanding of their personality traits, aesthetic preferences, and value orientations. By moving beyond socially constructed cognitive frameworks, individuals can establish a clear and stable sense of self. Questionnaire-based research has shown that short-video creators with lower levels of self-concept clarity are more likely to construct idealized online personas and are more susceptible to the influence of standardized beauty ideals. In contrast, a well-defined sense of self promotes authentic self-expression and enables

individuals to resist conformity to homogeneous aesthetic standards [13]. Therefore, audiences should continuously deepen their self-exploration, cultivate a comprehensive understanding of their personal characteristics, aesthetic preferences, and core values. By doing so, they can free themselves from socially imposed beauty norms and gradually develop an independent and stable framework of self-cognition.

4.2. Creator level: promoting diverse forms of expression and challenging homogeneous beauty standards

Content creators are key producers of online aesthetic values. The gradual consolidation of standardized beauty ideals on social media platforms largely stems from creators' pursuit of online traffic, which encourages the repeated production of homogeneous content. By deliberately adopting similar filters, beauty enhancement tools, and makeup styles to construct idealized appearances, creators reinforce a highly uniform aesthetic framework. This pattern of content production continuously strengthens homogeneous beauty standards, narrows the space for diverse forms of aesthetic expression, and intensifies audiences' dissatisfaction with their own appearance. Therefore, content creators should move beyond the excessive pursuit of "perfect" beauty standards and remain committed to their own distinctive creative vision. By grounding their work in a clear understanding of their own identities and expressing themselves authentically, creators can develop unique personal brands and contribute to a more diverse aesthetic ecosystem on short-video platforms, ultimately providing the public with a broader and more inclusive range of aesthetic references.

4.3. Platform level: optimizing algorithmic distribution and fostering an inclusive and diverse creative environment

As the primary distributors of content and platform rule-makers, short-video platforms decisively shape creators' content production through their recommendation algorithms and traffic allocation mechanisms. At present, platform algorithms tend to repeatedly promote highly liked and widely viewed homogeneous content, particularly refined beauty tutorials and aesthetically curated fashion videos. Such recommendation patterns continuously reinforce standardized beauty ideals and gradually confine long-term users within a narrow and unrealistic aesthetic framework. Meanwhile, insufficient regulation of content that deliberately promotes appearance anxiety or body shaming, together with the algorithmic preference for idealized appearances, further restricts the visibility of diverse forms of creative expression. The homogenization of beauty standards not only contributes to psychological problems such as appearance anxiety and diminished self-identity among adolescents but also pushes content creation ecosystems toward excessive uniformity. This weakens creative innovation and ultimately undermines the diversity and sustainable development of platform content. To address this issue, platforms should first optimize their recommendation algorithms and traffic distribution mechanisms by reducing the recommendation weight assigned to highly repetitive, template-based content while increasing algorithmic support and exposure for diverse creative works. Such measures would help break the traffic monopoly enjoyed by homogeneous beauty content and provide equal opportunities for different aesthetic expressions to reach wider audiences. Furthermore, platforms should actively launch official campaigns promoting themes such as diverse beauty and anti-appearance anxiety, offering traffic incentives, editorial recommendations, and promotional support for creators representing a wide range of aesthetic styles. Through coordinated improvements in algorithmic governance and positive value guidance, platforms can foster a more inclusive and open digital environment, weaken the institutionalization of homogeneous beauty standards at the source of content dissemination, and create a healthier media ecosystem that encourages diverse forms of creative expression.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the phenomenon of aesthetic homogenization driven by self-media image performance. It systematically reviews the impacts of this phenomenon on audiences, analyzes the underlying mechanisms contributing to its formation, and proposes practical strategies for improvement from the perspectives of individuals, content creators, and platform governance. The findings indicate that the performance of "perfect" identities on social media readily induces appearance anxiety and appearance-based social comparison among audiences, leading individuals to develop distorted self-perceptions and unrealistic expectations of their own appearance. Consequently, users become inclined to pursue the idealized front-stage images presented by influencers. These images are constructed by deliberately concealing natural physical imperfections through makeup, digital editing, beauty filters, and other enhancement techniques. Meanwhile, platform algorithms and traffic allocation mechanisms encourage creators to replicate similar content templates and aesthetic styles in pursuit of greater visibility, further reinforcing homogeneous beauty standards. To address these challenges, individuals should strengthen their self-awareness and critical media literacy while developing an independent and well-defined aesthetic framework. Content creators should remain committed to authentic self-expression and contribute to a more diverse aesthetic environment through varied creative practices. At the platform level, recommendation algorithms, traffic allocation mechanisms, and creator support policies should be optimized to foster a more inclusive and pluralistic online aesthetic ecosystem. This study nevertheless has two notable limitations. First, the scope of the literature reviewed is relatively limited, and the synthesis of domestic and international studies is not sufficiently comprehensive, leaving relevant findings from multiple disciplines underrepresented. Second, the research relies primarily on literature analysis and lacks empirical evidence derived from user data or quantitative investigation. Future studies should broaden the scope of both Chinese and international literature reviews to strengthen the theoretical foundation and incorporate empirical methods, such as questionnaire surveys, interviews, and field studies, to collect richer datasets and enhance the scientific rigor and persuasiveness of the findings.

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