

The Relationship between Social Media Use and Ideal Beauty Internalization among Female College Students

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Abstract: Objective: To examine the relationship between social media use and ideal beauty internalization among female college students, with a further distinction between active and passive social media use. **Methods:** A questionnaire survey was conducted among 412 female college students. The Active Social Media Use Scale, Passive Social Media Use Scale, and the Internalization subscale for ideal beauty were used for measurement. Pearson correlation analysis and regression analysis were used to examine the relationships among variables. **Results:** Passive social media use was significantly positively correlated with ideal beauty internalization ($r = 0.542$, $p < 0.001$), and active social media use was also significantly positively correlated with ideal beauty internalization ($r = 0.510$, $p < 0.001$). Regression analyses showed that passive social media use significantly and positively predicted ideal beauty internalization among female college students ($\beta = 0.542$, $t = 13.046$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.293$), and active social media use also significantly and positively predicted ideal beauty internalization ($\beta = 0.510$, $t = 12.037$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.261$). **Conclusion:** The more frequently female college students use social media, the more likely they are to accept and identify with sociocultural standards of ideal appearance and body image. College mental health education and media literacy education should pay attention to aesthetic pressure in social media environments and guide female college students to develop more diverse and healthier body cognition.

Keywords: Social Media Use; Active Social Media Use; Passive Social Media Use; Ideal Beauty Internalization

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1. Introduction

With the rapid development of digital media, social media has become an important arena for female college students to obtain information, maintain relationships, and present themselves. Compared with traditional media, social media is characterized by content production, instant interaction, algorithmic recommendation, and quantifiable feedback. Users can browse photos, videos, and daily updates posted by others, and they can also participate in self-presentation through selfies, short videos, likes, and comments. A recent meta-analysis indicated that social media use should not be summarized only by usage duration; instead, different patterns such as active posting, interactive communication, and passive browsing should be distinguished^[1]. Therefore, when discussing the effects of social media, it is necessary to consider both active and passive use.

Appearance-related information on social media is highly visual and idealized. Large amounts of content about makeup, clothing, body management, weight loss, fitness, and cosmetic procedures are often processed through filters, beauty effects,

photo editing, and carefully designed angles, thereby presenting female images that are more refined and standardized than those in real life. Previous research has suggested that visual social platforms are more likely than text-based platforms to trigger body image problems, and that platform features such as selfie editing, photo investment, and appearance feedback may also influence individuals' evaluations of their bodies and appearance^[2]. A review further found that social media use is associated with body image concerns and eating problems among young people, with social comparison and thin-ideal internalization serving as important pathways^[3].

Ideal beauty internalization refers to the psychological process through which individuals transform sociocultural standards of ideal appearance into their own standards for self-evaluation. When individuals not only know what kind of appearance is popular in society but also begin to identify with that standard and require themselves to meet it, ideal beauty internalization occurs. Previous research has regarded appearance-ideal internalization as an important component of sociocultural influences on body image^[4]. Research has also shown that appearance-ideal internalization and appearance pressure are important factors for understanding body dissatisfaction and eating problems^[5]. Female college students are at a developmental stage in which self-identity, interpersonal relationships, and social roles are continuously evolving, making them relatively susceptible to peer evaluation and popular aesthetic norms. Therefore, aesthetic information on social media may further strengthen their ideal beauty internalization.

Social media may influence ideal beauty internalization in two ways. First, passive social media use exposes individuals continuously to selected and edited appearance-related content posted by others, which may easily trigger upward appearance comparison. Research has shown that TikTok use may indirectly influence body dissatisfaction through upward appearance comparison and body surveillance^[6]. Second, active social media use emphasizes self-presentation. When posting photos and videos, female college students may consider what kind of image better conforms to platform aesthetics and what kind of content is more likely to receive likes and comments, thereby gradually accepting external aesthetic standards. Based on these considerations, the present study focuses on female college students and examines the relationships among active social media use, passive social media use, and ideal beauty internalization. It further analyzes the predictive effects of the two patterns of social media use on ideal beauty internalization.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

This study adopted a questionnaire survey method, and the participants were female college students. Questionnaires were distributed in university classrooms and posted online through social networking platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo. After participants understood the purpose of the study and voluntarily agreed to respond, the survey was completed anonymously. A total of 433 questionnaires were distributed. After excluding invalid questionnaires with excessively short response times, missing responses, repeated answers, failure to pass reverse-item checks, or obvious logical inconsistencies, 412 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective response rate of 95.150%. All participants were female. Among them, 40 were junior college students, accounting for 9.709%, and 372 were undergraduate students, accounting for 90.291%. In terms of grade distribution, 19 were first-year students, accounting for 4.612%; 116 were second-year students, accounting for 40.291%; 141 were third-year students, accounting for 34.223%; and 136 were fourth-year students, accounting for 33.010%. The sample covered female college students from different grades relatively well.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Social Media Use

Social media use in this study included two aspects: active social media use and passive social media use. Active social media use was measured using the Active Social Media Use Scale developed by Frison and Eggermont (2016)^[7]. The scale contains 5 items and uses a 5-point scoring method from 1 (never) to 5 (always). It assesses individuals' active participation behaviors on social media platforms, such as updating personal profiles, posting photos, commenting, and actively interacting with others. Higher scores indicate a greater tendency to actively participate in social media interactions. In the present study, Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale was 0.874.

Passive social media use was measured using the Passive Social Media Use Scale revised by Liu et al. (2017)^[8]. The scale

contains 4 items and uses a 7-point scoring method from 1 (never) to 7 (several times a day). It assesses passive use behaviors such as browsing others' updates, viewing posts, and reading comments. Higher scores indicate more frequent use of social media through browsing and information reception. In the present study, Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale was 0.885.

2.2.2 Ideal Beauty Internalization Scale

Ideal beauty internalization among female college students was measured using the Internalization subscale of the revised Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4), which was originally developed by Schaefer et al. (2015) and has been validated among Chinese adolescents by Huang et al. (2023)^[4,5]. This subscale contains 8 items and mainly assesses individuals' identification with mainstream social appearance standards and ideal body images. The scale uses a 5-point scoring method from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with some items reverse scored. Higher scores indicate greater identification with and internalization of sociocultural ideals of appearance. In the present study, Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale was 0.965.

2.3 Data Processing

SPSS 27.0 was used for data processing in this study. First, questionnaire data were screened. Pearson correlation analysis was then used to examine the correlations among active social media use, passive social media use, and ideal beauty internalization. Finally, regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictive effects of the two patterns of social media use on ideal beauty internalization among female college students.

3. Results

3.1 Correlation Analysis of Social Media Use and Ideal Beauty Internalization

Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant positive correlation between social media use and ideal beauty internalization among female college students. Specifically, the correlation coefficient between passive social media use and ideal beauty internalization was 0.542, reaching significance at the 0.001 level; the correlation coefficient between active social media use and ideal beauty internalization was 0.510, also reaching significance at the 0.001 level. This indicates that both passive use, mainly involving browsing others' content, and active use, mainly involving posting and interaction, are associated with higher levels of ideal beauty internalization among female college students.

In terms of the magnitude of the correlations, the association between passive social media use and ideal beauty internalization was slightly stronger than that between active social media use and ideal beauty internalization. This result suggests that passive browsing may expose female college students more frequently to selected and edited appearance-related content, making them more likely to accept the mainstream aesthetic standards repeatedly presented on social media.

Table 1: Correlations between social media use and ideal beauty internalization

Variables	1	2	3
1 Passive social media use	1		
2 Active social media use	0.525***	1	
3 Ideal beauty internalization	0.542***	0.510***	1

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

3.2 Predictive Effects of Social Media Use on Ideal Beauty Internalization

To further examine the predictive effects of social media use on ideal beauty internalization among female college students, passive social media use and active social media use were separately entered as predictors, and ideal beauty internalization was entered as the outcome variable in regression analyses. The results showed that passive social media use significantly and positively predicted ideal beauty internalization, with a standardized regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.542$, $t = 13.046$, $p < 0.001$, and a model explanatory rate of $R^2 = 0.293$. This indicates that the higher the level of passive social media use, the higher the degree of ideal beauty internalization among female college students.

Active social media use also significantly and positively predicted ideal beauty internalization, with a standardized regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.510$, $t = 12.038$, $p < 0.001$, and a model explanatory rate of $R^2 = 0.261$. This suggests that the more frequently female college students actively post content, upload photos, and participate in interactions, the more likely they

are to accept and identify with ideal appearance standards presented on social media.

Table2: Regression results for social media use predicting ideal beauty internalization

Predictor variable	Outcome variable	β	t	R^2
Passive social media use	Ideal beauty internalization	0.542	13.046***	0.293
Active social media use	Ideal beauty internalization	0.510	12.038***	0.261

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Relationship between Social Media Use and Ideal Beauty Internalization

The results of this study showed that social media use was significantly positively correlated with ideal beauty internalization among female college students. In other words, the more frequently female college students use social media, the more likely they are to regard sociocultural standards of ideal appearance as goals worth pursuing. This result is consistent with the basic view of sociocultural theory, namely that body image is not formed in isolation but is gradually constructed under the combined influence of family, peers, media, and sociocultural standards. As one of the media environments most frequently encountered by young women in everyday life, social media continuously transmits standards and evaluation rules about “beauty.” The influence of social media on ideal beauty internalization is first reflected in the high-frequency presentation of appearance-related content. Female college students often encounter content related to clothing, makeup, beauty enhancement, weight loss, fitness, cosmetic procedures, and selfies on social media. Such content repeatedly reinforces the superiority of certain appearance characteristics. As this information appears continuously, female college students may gradually understand it as an appearance goal that “should” be achieved, rather than merely as occasional online content. Second, the algorithmic recommendation mechanism of social media may also deepen ideal beauty internalization. Compared with traditional media, social media platforms continuously recommend similar content according to users’ dwell time, likes, favorites, and search behaviors. Once female college students show interest in appearance, clothing, or body management content, platforms may continually reinforce similar information, leaving individuals in a relatively homogeneous aesthetic environment for a long time. Rodgers and Rousseau (2022) noted that the relationship between social media and body image may be influenced by user characteristics and social identities, suggesting that attention should be paid to the types of content individuals encounter and the platform environments in which they are embedded^[9].

4.2 Passive Social Media Use and Ideal Beauty Internalization

This study found that passive social media use was significantly positively correlated with ideal beauty internalization and could positively predict its level. Passive use mainly involves browsing others’ updates, watching photos and videos, and reading comments. During this process, individuals do not directly express themselves or interact with others, but they continuously receive appearance-related information from platforms. Because social media content is usually selected, edited, and packaged, what female college students see is often the most refined and idealized side of others, rather than a complete and authentic life state. Passive browsing can easily trigger upward appearance comparison. When female college students view others’ photos, body displays, beauty experiences, and curated lifestyle content, they may unconsciously compare their own appearance with others. When comparison targets present highly idealized images, individuals are more likely to perceive a gap between themselves and ideal standards and gradually accept the appearance goals emphasized by platforms. Dane and Bhatia (2023) showed in their review that important pathways through which social media affects body image include social comparison and internalization of body ideals, and the results of the present study are consistent with this view^[3]. In addition, the influence of passive use is relatively implicit. Female college students may simply scroll through updates, watch short videos, or browse comments habitually, without clearly realizing that their aesthetic standards are being shaped. However, repeated long-term exposure to similar content may gradually change individuals’ judgments of “normal bodies” and “ideal appearance,” thereby strengthening ideal beauty internalization.

4.3 Active Social Media Use and Ideal Beauty Internalization

Active social media use was also significantly positively correlated with ideal beauty internalization and significantly

predicted its level. Active use includes posting photos, updating personal profiles, commenting, liking, and actively communicating with others. Unlike passive browsing, active use places greater emphasis on self-presentation. When female college students post photos or videos, they often select and edit their images according to platform aesthetics and feedback from others, such as choosing angles that make the body appear thinner, using filters and beauty effects, adjusting photo tones, or deleting content that appears less ideal. This active process of presentation may reinforce ideal beauty standards. Before posting content, individuals need to judge what kind of image better meets social media expectations; after posting, they use likes, comments, and interactions to test whether their image is recognized. If certain appearance presentations more easily obtain positive feedback, individuals may further identify with these appearance standards and continue to imitate and pursue them in later self-presentation. Vandenbosch et al. (2022) noted that social media features such as selfie editing and appearance feedback are closely related to body image problems^[2]. From this perspective, active social media use is not merely a form of self-expression; it may also become a process through which appearance standards are learned and internalized. It should be noted that active use is not entirely negative. It may also bring positive outcomes such as social support, emotional connection, and self-expression. Godard and Holtzman (2024) found in a meta-analysis that active social media use is associated with perceived online social support^[1]. Therefore, whether active use promotes ideal beauty internalization depends largely on whether the content that individuals actively post and interact with centers on appearance evaluation.

4.4 Educational Implications

First, colleges and universities should strengthen aesthetic education and body image education. Through mental health courses, lectures, and group counseling, students can be guided to understand the selectivity and editability of online images and to recognize that ideal images on social media are not equivalent to real life and should not become the only standard for evaluating personal value. Second, media literacy among female college students should be improved. Aesthetic content on social media is often intertwined with traffic mechanisms, commercial marketing, and consumer culture. Female college students need to learn to identify platform algorithms, advertising promotion, cosmetic surgery marketing, weight-loss anxiety, and narratives that commodify appearance, thereby reducing passive acceptance of a single aesthetic discourse. Third, diverse aesthetics and a positive body image should be advocated. Colleges, universities, and platforms should disseminate more authentic, diverse, and healthy images of women and reduce the overemphasis on single standards such as “pale, young, and thin,” “extreme thinness,” and “perfect facial features.”

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Based on questionnaire survey data, this study can indicate correlations and predictive relationships between social media use and ideal beauty internalization among female college students; however, several limitations remain. First, this study adopted a cross-sectional design and cannot strictly infer causality. Although the results showed that social media use predicted ideal beauty internalization, it is also possible that individuals with higher levels of ideal beauty internalization are more willing to pay attention to appearance- and beauty-related content. Future studies may use longitudinal tracking or experimental designs to further test the direction of this relationship. Second, this study divided social media use into active and passive dimensions, but differences exist across platforms. For example, Xiaohongshu, Weibo, Douyin, and WeChat Moments differ in content form, interaction mode, recommendation mechanism, and aesthetic atmosphere. Future research can further compare the effects of different social media platforms on ideal beauty internalization.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the relationship between social media use and ideal beauty internalization among female college students. The results showed that both active and passive social media use were significantly positively correlated with ideal beauty internalization among female college students, and both significantly and positively predicted the level of ideal beauty internalization. In other words, the more frequently female college students used social media, the more likely they were to accept and identify with sociocultural standards of ideal appearance and ideal body image.

Social media provides female college students with spaces for self-expression, information acquisition, and interpersonal

interaction, but it also constitutes an environment in which aesthetic standards are continuously disseminated and repeatedly reinforced. Passive browsing may promote ideal beauty internalization through exposure to idealized images and upward appearance comparison, whereas active posting may strengthen individuals' identification with mainstream aesthetics through image management and feedback dependence. Therefore, colleges and universities should strengthen body image education and media literacy education, guiding female college students to understand aesthetic information on social media in a more rational, diverse, and healthy way.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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