

Social Media Use and Self-Objectification among Female Undergraduates

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Abstract: Objective: To examine the relationship between social media use and self-objectification among female college students, while further distinguishing active social media use from passive social media use. **Methods:** A questionnaire survey was conducted among 412 female college students. The Active Social Media Use Scale, the Passive Social Media Use Scale, and the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale were used for measurement, and correlation and regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among the variables. **Results:** Passive social media use was significantly positively correlated with self-objectification ($r = 0.551$, $p < 0.001$), and active social media use was also significantly positively correlated with self-objectification ($r = 0.520$, $p < 0.001$). Regression analyses showed that passive social media use significantly and positively predicted self-objectification among female college students ($\beta = 0.551$, $t = 13.357$, $p < 0.001$), and active social media use also significantly and positively predicted self-objectification ($\beta = 0.520$, $t = 12.362$, $p < 0.001$). **Conclusion:** The more frequently female college students use social media, the more likely they are to attend to their bodies and appearance from an external observer perspective and to show higher levels of self-objectification. These findings suggest that college mental health education and social media platform governance should pay attention to body image pressure among young women in social media environments.

Keywords: Social Media Use; Active Social Media Use; Passive Social Media Use; Self-Objectification

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1. Introduction

With the rapid development of Internet technology, social media has become one of the most common arenas in college students' daily lives for receiving information, displaying personal images, and engaging in interpersonal interaction. Compared with traditional media, social media is not a one-way channel of communication; rather, it integrates content production, relationship maintenance, instant feedback, and personalized recommendation. Social media allows individuals to establish online relationships, share personal updates, photos, and life information, and obtain feedback and evaluations from others during interaction. Recent research has suggested that social media use can no longer be understood simply in terms of "usage duration"; instead, it is necessary to further distinguish users' specific patterns and contexts of use, such as active posting, commenting and interaction, information browsing, and passive viewing^[1]. Female college students can not only browse photos, videos, and daily updates posted by others on social media, but also actively present themselves by updating profiles, posting selfies, liking and commenting, and participating in online topics. Thus, social media is not merely a leisure

tool; it has gradually become an important space in which individuals construct self-image, compare body appearance, and obtain social evaluation.

The convenience brought by social media is obvious. It has broadened the channels through which college students obtain information and maintain relationships, and it provides young women with opportunities for self-expression, life display, and social support. A meta-analysis showed that both active and passive social media use are related to perceived online social support, suggesting that social media has certain positive significance in relationship maintenance and social support ^[1]. However, social media environments also contain large amounts of content related to the body, appearance, aesthetics, and consumption. After image editing, beauty filters, visual effects, and algorithmic recommendation, female images on social media often present highly idealized and standardized features, such as a thin body, delicate makeup, fair skin, particular body postures, and narratives of a “perfect life.” Visual social platforms are more likely than text-based platforms to trigger body image problems, and social media features such as selfies, photo editing, and appearance feedback may also affect individuals’ body-related cognition ^[2]. A review further found that social media use is associated with body image concerns and eating problems among young people, with social comparison, thin-ideal internalization, and self-objectification serving as important pathways ^[3]. For female college students who are in the stage of identity development and self-identity construction, social media may subtly strengthen their sensitivity to appearance evaluation and make them more likely to understand their bodies from the perspective of being watched and evaluated by others.

Self-objectification is a core concept in objectification theory. It generally refers to the tendency for individuals to treat their own bodies as objects to be viewed, evaluated, and compared, and to continuously monitor their bodily state from an external observer perspective rather than understanding the self from subjective bodily experience. Objectification theory proposes that in sociocultural contexts emphasizing women’s physical appearance and sexual attractiveness, women may gradually internalize an external observer perspective and examine their own bodies from this perspective ^[4]. Research on objectified body consciousness also indicates that body surveillance, body shame, and appearance control beliefs are important dimensions for understanding women’s bodily experience ^[5]. Individuals with high levels of self-objectification are more likely to focus on “How do I look?” rather than “What do I truly feel?” or “What can I do?” This cognitive style may closely connect bodily appearance with self-worth and may lead to body shame, appearance anxiety, eating problems, attentional resource depletion, and mental health risks. Recent research further supports this view, indicating that appearance comparison, photo investment, and exposure to visual content on social media may influence women’s body image through processes such as body surveillance and self-objectification ^[6,3].

Previous studies have paid considerable attention to the effects of traditional media, peer evaluation, and face-to-face interaction on women’s self-objectification. However, against the background of the widespread use of social media, it is no longer sufficient to explain self-objectification only from traditional media or offline contexts. Social media not only provides large amounts of appearance-related information but also creates an evaluative environment characterized by continuous visibility, comparability, and quantifiable feedback. Likes, comments, reposts, number of followers, and platform recommendation mechanisms may all make women attach greater importance to others’ responses to their own images. Especially on platforms dominated by images and short videos, bodily appearance is often placed at the center of information dissemination. A study among young adult women found that TikTok use could indirectly affect body dissatisfaction through upward appearance comparison and body surveillance ^[7]. Other research also suggests that idealized appearance content, peer feedback, and appearance-related self-presentation on visual social media may jointly exacerbate body image concerns among adolescents and young women ^[8]. Therefore, individuals may passively receive others’ idealized images as viewers, and they may also actively adjust, edit, and display their own images as posters. Both active social media use and passive social media use may be related to self-objectification among female college students.

Based on these considerations, this paper focuses on female college students and examines the core question of the relationship between social media use and self-objectification. This study aims to answer two questions. First, is social media use significantly associated with self-objectification among female college students? Second, can both active social media use and passive social media use positively predict female college students’ levels of self-objectification? By addressing these

questions, this paper seeks to further clarify the role of social media use in the formation of self-objectification among female college students and to provide a basis for understanding young women's body cognition and mental health issues in social media environments.

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 subscales: active social media use and passive social media use.

Active Social Media Use Scale. Active social media use was measured using the Active Social Media Use Scale developed by Frison and Eggermont^[9]. The scale contains 5 items and uses a 5-point scoring method from 1 (never) to 5 (always). It measures individuals' active use behaviors on social media platforms, such as updating personal profiles, posting photos, commenting, liking, 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, indicating good internal consistency.

Passive Social Media Use Scale. Passive social media use was measured using the Passive Social Media Use Scale revised by Liu et al.^[10]. The scale contains 4 items and uses a 7-point scoring method from 1 (never) to 7 (several times a day). It measures 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, indicating good internal consistency.

2.2.2 Objectified Body Consciousness Scale

The Objectified Body Consciousness Scale revised by Chen and Jiang was used in this study^[11]. The scale contains 8 items and is used to measure individuals' attention to, monitoring of, and objectified tendency toward bodily appearance. Higher scores indicate a greater tendency to view one's own body from an external observer perspective. In the present study, Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale was 0.935, indicating high internal consistency.

2.3 Data Processing

SPSS 27.0 was used for data processing in this study. First, questionnaire data were screened. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the correlations between social media use and self-objectification. Finally, regression analyses were conducted to further examine the predictive effects of active social media use and passive social media use on self-objectification among female college students.

3. Results

3.1 Correlation Analysis of Social Media Use and Self-Objectification

Pearson correlation analysis showed that social media use was significantly positively correlated with self-objectification among female college students. Specifically, the correlation coefficient between passive social media use and self-objectification was 0.551, reaching significance at the 0.001 level; the correlation coefficient between active social media use

and self-objectification was 0.520, also reaching significance at the 0.001 level. This indicates that both passive use, mainly involving browsing others' updates, and active use, mainly involving posting content and interaction, are associated with higher levels of self-objectification among female college students.

In terms of correlation magnitude, the correlation between passive social media use and self-objectification was slightly stronger than that between active social media use and self-objectification. This result suggests that continuous exposure to others' appearance and body images during passive browsing may be more likely to induce social comparison and body surveillance. However, the relatively strong correlation between active use and self-objectification also indicates that active posting and self-display may make individuals more frequently consider how others evaluate their appearance.

Table1: Correlations between social media use and self-objectification

Variables	1	2	3
1 Passive social media use	1		
2 Active social media use	0.525***	1	
3 Self-objectification	0.551***	0.520***	1

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

3.2 Predictive Effects of Social Media Use on Self-Objectification

To further examine the predictive effects of social media use on self-objectification among female college students, passive social media use and active social media use were separately entered as predictors, and self-objectification was entered as the outcome variable in regression analyses. The results showed that passive social media use significantly and positively predicted self-objectification, with a standardized regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.551$, $t = 13.357$, $p < 0.001$, and a model explanatory rate of $R^2 = 0.303$. This indicates that the higher the level of passive social media use, the higher the level of self-objectification among female college students.

Active social media use also significantly and positively predicted self-objectification, with a standardized regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.521$, $t = 12.362$, $p < 0.001$, and a model explanatory rate of $R^2 = 0.272$. This suggests that the more frequently female college students actively post content, upload photos, and participate in interactions, the more likely they are to treat their own bodies as objects to be viewed and evaluated. Overall, both dimensions had significant predictive effects on self-objectification, supporting the research hypothesis that social media use is closely related to self-objectification among female college students.

Table2: Regression results for social media use predicting self-objectification

Predictor variable	Outcome variable	β	t	p	R^2
Passive social media use	Self-objectification	0.551	13.357	0.000	0.303
Active social media use	Self-objectification	0.520	12.362	0.000	0.272

Note: $p = 0.000$ indicates $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Relationship between Social Media Use and Self-Objectification

The results showed that social media use was significantly positively correlated with self-objectification among female college students. In other words, the more frequently female college students use social media, the more likely they are to regard appearance and bodily presentation as important bases for self-evaluation. This result is consistent with objectification theory, which holds that in sociocultural environments emphasizing women's physical appearance and external evaluation, women are likely to gradually internalize an external observer perspective and view their own bodies through the eyes of others^[4]. Social media provides an important context for this self-objectification. A large number of photos and videos on platforms are edited through retouching, beauty filters, visual effects, and pose design, presenting idealized body images. After repeated exposure to such content, female college students may use these images as references for evaluating their own appearance and body shape, thereby paying greater attention to whether they conform to external aesthetic standards.

Previous studies have also indicated that appearance-related content on social media is closely related to women's body dissatisfaction, appearance comparison, and body image concerns ^[12,13].

At the same time, social media has changed the way women are viewed. On social media, individuals are not only viewers but may also become those who are viewed. When female college students post selfies, daily-life photos, or videos, they often consider whether the photo looks good, whether the angle is appropriate, whether the body shape appears ideal, and whether the post can obtain likes and positive comments. Such self-selection before posting and attention to feedback after posting may strengthen body surveillance. Body surveillance is an important manifestation of self-objectification and reflects individuals' continuous attention to their appearance and bodily state from an external perspective ^[5]. Therefore, the continuous display and feedback mechanisms of social media may make self-objectification more routine in daily life.

4.2 Passive Social Media Use and Self-Objectification

Passive social media use was significantly positively correlated with self-objectification. Passive use mainly involves browsing others' updates, viewing photos and videos, and reading comments. Although individuals do not directly participate in interaction, they still continuously receive information pushed by platforms. Because social media content is often selective and modified, what female college students see is usually the packaged appearance and life fragments of others. Long-term browsing of such content may easily trigger upward social comparison, making individuals pay greater attention to their own appearance, body shape, and others' evaluations. Previous research has found that passive browsing of social media may reduce well-being and may induce social comparison and negative self-evaluation ^[14]. In social media environments rich in appearance-related content, this comparison may further manifest as continuous scrutiny of the body and appearance.

In addition, platform algorithmic recommendation may intensify this process. When users frequently browse content related to appearance, clothing, weight loss, and fitness, the platform may continue to push similar information, leaving individuals exposed to a single aesthetic standard for a long time. Thus, passive social media use is not merely simple browsing; it may also become a process of continuous exposure to an appearance-evaluation environment. With repeated presentations of idealized body images, female college students may gradually internalize appearance standards as bases for self-evaluation, thereby increasing their levels of self-objectification.

4.3 Active Social Media Use and Self-Objectification

Active social media use was also significantly positively correlated with self-objectification and could positively predict self-objectification. Active use includes updating profiles, posting photos, commenting, liking, and interacting with others, and it has functions of self-expression and relationship maintenance. However, in a social media environment dominated by visual display, active expression may also be transformed into self-scrutiny. Active social media use is commonly understood as a process in which individuals actively post information, interact with others, and maintain relationships ^[15], but when such interaction mainly revolves around appearance display, its effects may not be entirely positive.

When female college students post photos or videos, they often select and modify their own images, such as choosing angles, using filters, beautifying skin, or adjusting body proportions. If individuals repeatedly present themselves according to others' evaluations, they may easily form an external observer perspective and thus show higher levels of self-objectification. The feedback mechanism of social media may also strengthen this process. Likes and positive comments may make individuals place greater emphasis on appearance display, whereas insufficient or negative feedback may trigger appearance doubt and further editing. Relevant studies have shown that photo-related social media activities are associated with body image concerns, especially when individuals frequently attend to, post, and compare appearance photos, making them more vulnerable to body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety ^[13,16]. Therefore, although active social media use has functions of interaction and expression, it may also become an important source of self-objectification when the interaction centers on appearance evaluation.

4.4 Educational Implications

First, colleges and universities should strengthen body image education. Through mental health courses, special lectures, and group counseling, schools can guide female college students to recognize the edited and selective nature of social media images and reduce blind pursuit of idealized body standards. Second, media literacy among female college students should

be improved. Appearance-related content on social media is often influenced by commercial promotion, platform algorithms, and consumer culture. Female college students need to learn to identify appearance marketing, weight-loss anxiety, cosmetic surgery promotion, and sexually objectifying expressions, thereby reducing the impact of social media content on self-evaluation. Third, body positivity and diverse aesthetics should be advocated. Female college students should be encouraged to understand the body more from the perspectives of health, function, and subjective experience, rather than simply treating the body as an object to be viewed and evaluated. Colleges, universities, and social media platforms should also disseminate more authentic, diverse, and healthy images of women and reduce the negative influence of a single aesthetic standard on women's body cognition.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Based on questionnaire survey data, this study can indicate correlations and predictive relationships between social media use and self-objectification among female college students, but several limitations remain. This study adopted a cross-sectional design and therefore cannot strictly infer causal relationships. Although the results showed that social media use predicted self-objectification, it is also possible that individuals with higher levels of self-objectification are more likely to pay attention to appearance-related content. Future studies may use longitudinal or experimental designs to further verify this relationship. In addition, the participants in this study were mainly female college students, and whether the findings can be generalized to other groups of women requires further examination. Future research may include high school students, graduate students, and working women to compare differences among women at different developmental stages.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the relationship between social media use and self-objectification among female college students. The results showed that both active social media use and passive social media use were significantly positively correlated with self-objectification among female college students, and both could positively predict levels of self-objectification. In other words, the more frequently female college students use social media, the more likely they are to attend to their bodies and appearance from an external observer perspective. Social media provides female college students with spaces for self-expression and interpersonal interaction, but it also creates a continuous environment of visual comparison and appearance evaluation. Passive browsing may trigger social comparison through idealized body images, whereas active posting may strengthen body surveillance through self-presentation and feedback dependence.

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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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