

The Relationship between Internalization of Ideal Beauty and Self-Objectification among Female College Students

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Abstract: Objective: This study explored the relationship between internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification among female college students, and examined whether female college students' acceptance of sociocultural appearance ideals was associated with body surveillance and self-objectification tendencies. **Methods:** A questionnaire survey was conducted among 412 female college students. The internalization-related dimensions of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 and the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale were used for measurement. Reliability analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and regression analysis were used to process the data. **Results:** Internalization of ideal beauty was significantly and positively correlated with self-objectification ($r = 0.586, p < 0.01$). Regression analysis showed that internalization of ideal beauty significantly and positively predicted self-objectification among female college students ($\beta = 0.586, t = 15.029, p < 0.001$). **Conclusion:** The more strongly female college students internalize ideal beauty standards, the more likely they are to attend to and evaluate their bodies from an external observer's perspective and to show higher levels of self-objectification. College mental health education should pay attention to young women's acceptance and internalization of narrow beauty standards and guide them to develop healthier, more diverse, and more agentic body cognition.

Keywords: Internalization of Ideal Beauty; Self-Objectification; Body Image; Appearance Standards

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1. Introduction

In recent years, social discussions surrounding body image have continued to increase. Unlike earlier forms of beauty communication dominated by television, magazines, and advertising, the appearance standards encountered by young women today are more often embedded in everyday, fragmented, and highly visualized online environments. Makeup tutorials, outfit displays, fitness and body-shaping content, cosmetic-procedure experiences, and narratives about becoming beautiful on social media have made appearance information not merely occasional media content, but a continuous background in the daily lives of many female college students. Previous studies have indicated that image-based content, appearance feedback, and social comparison in visual social media can exert important influences on young women's body image^[1,2]. For female college students in early adulthood, the body is not only a biological existence, but is also closely related to self-identity, interpersonal evaluation, intimate relationships, and social adaptation. Therefore, it is practically important to examine how female college students understand sociocultural beauty standards and how these standards further influence the way they view their own bodies.

In body image research, internalization of ideal beauty is an important concept for understanding how appearance pressure is transformed into individual psychological experience. Internalization of ideal beauty refers to the process through which individuals transform sociocultural appearance standards that are repeatedly emphasized and approved—such as thinness, delicacy, fairness, youthfulness, symmetry, or sexually attractive body images—into self-evaluation standards. In other words, external aesthetic expectations are no longer simply what others consider beautiful, but become internal demands regarding how one should look to be considered attractive. Recent research on social media and body image suggests that idealized images, selfie editing, appearance feedback, and social comparison on visual platforms may strengthen young people's acceptance and pursuit of mainstream appearance standards^[1,2]. Dane and Bhatia^[3] also found that social media use is related to body image concerns and eating-related problems among young people, with ideal-body internalization, social comparison, and appearance evaluation serving as important psychological pathways. Papageorgiou, Fisher, and Cross^[4] further showed that sexualized images on social media may trigger appearance comparison among adolescent girls and lead them to pay more attention to whether they meet appearance expectations from others and from society.

Internalization of ideal beauty deserves attention because it is not merely a simple attitude of liking beauty or caring about appearance, but a deeper process of psychological standardization. When individuals strongly identify with the ideal appearance constructed by sociocultural contexts, they may continuously compare their bodies with these standards and evaluate their self-worth accordingly. Especially under the influence of consumer culture and the appearance economy, many forms of ideal beauty are often linked to positive meanings such as self-discipline, success, popularity, and a refined lifestyle. When young women encounter such messages, they may regard conformity to beauty standards as a way to gain recognition, increase attractiveness, and enhance social competitiveness. Prichard, Taylor, and Tiggemann^[5] found experimentally that viewing Instagram influencer images led young women to experience stronger appearance comparison, body dissatisfaction, and self-objectification. Brasil, Mitzman, Gattuso, and Rodgers^[6] further pointed out that appearance preoccupation on social media is associated with body surveillance, body shame, and the pursuit of thin and lean body goals. Thus, internalization of ideal beauty connects sociocultural aesthetics with individual self-evaluation and represents an important pathway through which appearance pressure enters psychological structures.

Self-objectification is a core concept in objectification theory. It refers to the tendency to view one's own body from an internalized external observer's perspective and to treat the body as an object to be looked at, evaluated, and compared. Fredrickson and Roberts^[7] proposed that women who are chronically exposed to sociocultural contexts emphasizing being viewed and evaluated may internalize an observer's perspective and continuously monitor their appearance and body state. From the perspective of objectified body consciousness, McKinley and Hyde^[8] further suggested that body surveillance, body shame, and beliefs about appearance control are important dimensions for understanding women's bodily experiences. Individuals with high levels of self-objectification tend to focus on whether they look consistent with external standards and pay less attention to bodily functions, authentic feelings, and subjective experiences. Such an appearance-centered relationship with the body may increase risks of body shame, appearance anxiety, eating problems, and attentional resource depletion. Recent studies have also shown that appearance-focused content and visual exposure on social media may influence body image through processes such as body surveillance and self-objectification^[3,6].

Internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification are closely related. Internalization of ideal beauty provides evaluative standards for self-objectification, whereas self-objectification represents the way individuals inspect their bodies according to these standards. In other words, the more female college students identify with external beauty ideals, the more likely they are to regard their bodies as objects that need to be examined, modified, and optimized. Schaefer et al.^[9], in the development and validation of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4, noted that internalization of appearance ideals is closely associated with body dissatisfaction, eating problems, and other body-related outcomes. Huang et al.^[10], in validating the SATAQ among Chinese adolescents, also found that sociocultural appearance attitudes were related to body-related outcomes and eating-disorder risks. These studies suggest that once appearance standards are accepted and internalized, they may influence individuals' bodily cognition, emotions, and behaviors.

Focusing on internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification, the present study examined whether internalization of

ideal beauty is significantly associated with self-objectification among female college students and further analyzed the predictive effect of internalization of ideal beauty on self-objectification. This study may help clarify the mechanism of beauty-standard internalization in female college students' body cognition and provide implications for body image education and media literacy education in colleges.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Participants

This study adopted a questionnaire survey method and recruited female college students as participants. Questionnaires were distributed in university classes and through online social networking platforms. After participants understood the research purpose and voluntarily agreed to participate, they completed the questionnaire anonymously. A total of 433 questionnaires were distributed. After excluding invalid questionnaires with excessively short completion times, missing responses, repeated answers, failed reverse-item checks, or clearly inconsistent response logic, 412 valid questionnaires were obtained, yielding 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 freshmen, accounting for 4.612%; 116 were sophomores, accounting for 28.155%; 141 were juniors, accounting for 34.223%; and 136 were seniors, accounting for 33.010%. The sample covered female college students from different grades and thus provided a data basis for examining the relationship between internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Internalization of Ideal Beauty Scale

This study used the internalization-related dimensions of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4) developed by Schaefer et al.^[9] to measure female college students' acceptance of sociocultural ideal appearance standards. The scale mainly examines whether individuals identify with and adopt sociocultural standards concerning ideal body shape, ideal appearance, and appearance attractiveness. Higher scores indicate a stronger tendency to transform external ideal beauty standards into self-evaluation standards. In the present study, the Cronbach's α coefficient of the internalization of ideal beauty scale was 0.964, indicating high internal consistency.

2.2.2 Objectified Body Consciousness Scale

This study used the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale developed by McKinley and Hyde^[8] and revised by Chen and Jiang^[11] to measure self-objectification among female college students. The scale is mainly used to assess individuals' attention to body appearance, body surveillance, and objectification tendencies, reflecting whether individuals tend to view their bodies from an external observer's perspective. Higher scores indicate that individuals are more likely to treat their bodies as objects to be viewed, evaluated, and compared. In the present study, the Cronbach's α coefficient of this scale was 0.936, demonstrating high internal consistency and applicability.

2.3 Data Processing

SPSS 26.0 was used for data processing. First, questionnaire data were screened and invalid questionnaires were removed. Second, reliability analyses were conducted to examine the internal consistency of the measurement tools. Finally, Pearson correlation analysis was used to test the relationship between internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification, and regression analysis was used to further examine the predictive effect of internalization of ideal beauty on self-objectification among female college students.

3. Results

3.1 Correlation Analysis between Internalization of Ideal Beauty and Self-Objectification

Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant positive correlation between internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification among female college students, with a correlation coefficient of 0.586, reaching the 0.01 significance level. This indicates that the more strongly female college students identify with sociocultural ideal beauty standards, the higher their level of self-objectification. In other words, individuals who are more inclined to use external aesthetic standards as the basis for self-evaluation are more likely to continuously attend to and evaluate their bodies from an external observer's

perspective.

Table1: Correlation results for internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification

Variables	1	2
1 Internalization of ideal beauty	1	
2 Self-objectification	0.586***	1

Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

The correlation results indicate a moderately strong positive correlation between internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification. This finding suggests that internalization of ideal beauty is not an isolated attitudinal variable, but is closely related to specific ways in which female college students view and evaluate their bodies. When individuals identify more strongly with external aesthetic standards, they are more likely to place bodily appearance at the center of self-evaluation.

3.2 Predictive Effect of Internalization of Ideal Beauty on Self-Objectification

To further examine the predictive effect of internalization of ideal beauty on self-objectification among female college students, this study conducted a regression analysis with internalization of ideal beauty as the predictor variable and self-objectification as the outcome variable. The results showed that internalization of ideal beauty significantly and positively predicted self-objectification. The standardized regression coefficient was $\beta = 0.596$, $t = 15.029$, $p < 0.001$, and the model explained $R^2 = 0.355$ of the variance. This indicates that internalization of ideal beauty can explain approximately 35.5% of the variance in self-objectification among female college students.

Table2: Regression results of internalization of ideal beauty predicting self-objectification

Predictor	Outcome	β	t	R^2
Internalization of ideal beauty	Self-objectification	0.586	15.029***	0.355

Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

These findings indicate that internalization of ideal beauty is not only correlated with self-objectification but also significantly predicts self-objectification. The more female college students regard external ideal beauty standards as goals they should achieve, the more likely they are to examine their bodies according to appearance standards and to engage in continuous body surveillance in daily life.

4. Discussion

4.1 Relationship between Internalization of Ideal Beauty and Self-Objectification

This study found a significant positive correlation between internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification among female college students. This means that the more female college students identify with sociocultural ideal appearance standards, the more likely they are to treat their bodies as objects to be viewed, compared, and evaluated. This finding is consistent with the basic view of objectification theory. Objectification theory argues that women who are chronically exposed to environments emphasizing body appearance and sexual attractiveness may gradually inspect their own bodies from an internalized observer's perspective^[7]. Internalization of ideal beauty is an important psychological premise in this process: only when external aesthetic standards are accepted and transformed into self-demands does the body more easily become an object of continuous surveillance and evaluation.

Specifically, internalization of ideal beauty may lead female college students to treat sociocultural standards such as a standard body shape, refined appearance, or ideal femininity as the basis for self-evaluation. Once these standards are internalized, individuals no longer pay attention to appearance only occasionally, but may more frequently check whether they meet these standards. For example, they may care more about whether they appear thin in photos, whether their skin is flawless, whether their facial contours are refined, or whether their outfits conform to popular aesthetics. Such continuous self-inspection is an important manifestation of self-objectification.

This finding also suggests that the influence of appearance pressure on individuals is not a simple process of external stimulation. Sociocultural beauty standards can exert deeper influences on bodily experiences only after they have been

identified with and adopted by individuals. In other words, internalization of ideal beauty is a bridge between external aesthetic environments and internal body cognition. For female college students, the more they believe that conformity to mainstream beauty standards is a source of value, the more likely they are to view the body as an object that should be displayed, corrected, and optimized.

4.2 How Internalization of Ideal Beauty Strengthens Body Surveillance

Internalization of ideal beauty may influence self-objectification by strengthening body surveillance. Body surveillance refers to individuals' continuous attention to their appearance state and their tendency to examine the body from the perspective of possible evaluation by others. McKinley and Hyde^[8] argued that body surveillance is an important component of objectified body consciousness. When female college students highly internalize ideal beauty standards, they are more likely to regard bodily appearance as an object that requires continuous inspection, thereby increasing body surveillance behaviors.

In daily life, body surveillance may be reflected in frequently looking in the mirror, repeatedly checking photos, paying attention to weight and body-shape changes, and being overly concerned about whether clothing covers perceived bodily flaws. Taken individually, these behaviors do not necessarily indicate serious problems. However, when they revolve around ideal beauty standards and occur repeatedly, they may weaken individuals' subjective bodily experience. The body is no longer first experienced as the basis of life and action, but instead becomes something like how others will evaluate my appearance.

Recent research on social media and body image supports this explanation. Vandenbosch, Fardouly, and Tiggemann^[1] suggested that selfie editing, appearance feedback, and image comparison in visual social media environments may prompt individuals to inspect their bodies more frequently. Bissonette Mink and Szymanski^[12] also found that TikTok use may influence body dissatisfaction through upward appearance comparison and body surveillance. Although the present study focuses on the relationship between internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification, these findings suggest that when idealized appearance standards combine with everyday visual environments, individuals' tendency toward body surveillance may be further strengthened.

4.3 Internalization of Ideal Beauty and the Appearance-Based Self-Worth

Internalization of ideal beauty may also lead female college students to connect appearance excessively with self-worth. When individuals regard sociocultural ideal beauty standards as important goals, appearance may no longer be only one component of personal image, but may be assigned broader values such as self-discipline, excellence, popularity, refinement, and worthiness of love. In this situation, appearance evaluation can easily penetrate self-evaluation, causing individuals to judge their own value through appearance.

This appearance-based self-worth may further promote self-objectification. Female college students with high levels of internalization of ideal beauty may be more likely to believe that only when their bodies sufficiently conform to standards are they more attractive, more likely to gain recognition, or even more qualified to present themselves. As a result, they may be more inclined to manage their bodies from the perspective of an external observer rather than understand their bodies from the perspective of their own feelings and life functions. Rodgers and Rousseau^[2] noted that the relationship between social media and body image may be modulated by users' identity characteristics, social comparison, and aesthetic norms, suggesting that how individuals understand and accept appearance standards plays an important role in body cognition.

It should be noted that the pursuit of beauty itself is not equivalent to a psychological problem. Individuals may express themselves through clothing, makeup, exercise, and image management and may obtain positive experiences from these practices. The problem lies in the fact that when ideal beauty standards become a narrow, rigid, and compulsive self-evaluation criterion, individuals may find it increasingly difficult to accept their real bodies. At that point, the body is reduced to an object of external evaluation, while body functions, health, mobility, and authentic bodily feelings may be neglected.

4.4 Educational Implications

First, colleges should strengthen body image education and guide female college students to understand the social construction of ideal beauty standards. So-called ideal beauty is not a fixed natural standard, but is shaped jointly by historical period, culture, commercial promotion, and media technology. Through courses, lectures, and group counseling, colleges can

help students recognize the selectivity and limitations of mainstream aesthetic standards and reduce blind pursuit of a single appearance ideal.

Second, female college students' ability to identify appearance culture and consumer discourse should be improved. At present, many beauty-related messages are closely connected with consumption, such as weight-loss products, cosmetic procedures, skincare marketing, and outfit templates. Female college students need to realize that such content not only provides advice but may also create dissatisfaction and anxiety. Only by improving media literacy can individuals maintain reflection when encountering appearance information instead of directly internalizing it as self-demands.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Based on questionnaire survey data, the present study shows that internalization of ideal beauty is significantly correlated with and predictive of self-objectification among female college students, but it still has several limitations. First, this study adopted a cross-sectional design and therefore cannot strictly infer causality between the two variables. Although the results showed that internalization of ideal beauty significantly predicted self-objectification, it is also possible that individuals with higher levels of self-objectification are more likely to accept ideal beauty standards. Future studies may use longitudinal or experimental designs to further examine the direction of this relationship. Second, the participants of this study were female college students. Although the findings are highly relevant to this group, whether they can be generalized to other female groups requires further examination. Women at different developmental stages may face different appearance pressures and aesthetic standards. Future research may include high school students, graduate students, and working women to compare differences in the relationship between internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification across developmental stages.

6. Conclusion

This study analyzed the relationship between internalization of ideal beauty and self-objectification among female college students. The results showed that internalization of ideal beauty was significantly and positively correlated with self-objectification and significantly and positively predicted self-objectification. In other words, the more strongly female college students identify with and adopt sociocultural ideal beauty standards, the more likely they are to attend to and evaluate their bodies from an external observer's perspective.

Internalization of ideal beauty is an important psychological variable for understanding self-objectification among female college students. It transforms external aesthetic standards into internal self-demands and further strengthens body surveillance and appearance-centered evaluation. To reduce the risk of self-objectification, colleges should strengthen body image education and media literacy education and guide female college students to develop more diverse, healthy, and agentic body cognition.

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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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