

# The Influence of Metaphorical Information in Social Media on Female Body Anxiety

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### Abstract:

The issue of female body anxiety has received widespread attention. However, there are still shortcomings in the exploration of body anxiety caused by metaphorical information in social media in existing research. The article analyzes the methods by which information about regulating women's body shape is disseminated on social media. Through a detailed exploration of the classification and characteristics of metaphorical information, it is possible to reveal the objective and subjective reasons that trigger female body anxiety on social media and explore the formation mechanism and impact of such metaphorical information. The article concludes that metaphorical information is hidden in social media expressions and difficult to avoid, which exacerbates women's dissatisfaction with their bodies and promotes the emergence and spread of body anxiety. Based on the above conclusions, the article proposes the following suggestions: reduce exposure to negative information, cultivate critical thinking, and enhance women's positive cognition of the body through physical and mental coordination. The aforementioned methods can effectively cope with body anxiety.

**Keywords:** social media; metaphorical messages; body image anxiety

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of Internet technology, social media has become an important channel for information dissemination in today's world. The decentralized nature of social media enables users to receive and disseminate information autonomously. The nature of the co-constructed communication landscape in which both transmitters and receivers express ideas and engage in linguistic interaction or cultural transfer makes social media a digital micro-

cosm of society. Sociocultural Theory suggests that sociocultural factors play a key role in human cognition and that individual cognition stems from interactions within the larger context of society, which likewise influences and shapes individuals [1].

Many studies on female body anxiety have found that social culture brings dramatic effects on the formation and development of female body imagery. Body image refers to an individual's aesthetic and perception of his or her own body [1]. Every social

culture constructs its own ideal body [2]. Women should be skinny and sexy if they want to be regarded as pretty; if they conform to the socially constructed image of beauty, then along with that they are given positive compliments such as nobility, elegance, sensuality, success, etc. Perceptions are reinforced by the promotion of the ideal body in social media. When individuals do not meet the criteria of the ideal body, they will have negative evaluations of their bodies, resulting in body image disturbance, leading to anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions.

Many researches have shown that the homogenization and idealization of women's body image is because women had long been in a traditionally male-dominated society in the past, where women were not considered to be independent individuals, but were 'disciplined' and 'gazed at' by men. Women had to package or train themselves into the 'ideal' image of a male-dominated society to cater to men. Fortunately, with the improvement of the political system and social economy, women's family and social status have been elevated, the idea of affirmative action has gradually developed into the mainstream of social ideology, and women's self-thought has awakened. They begin to consciously rebel against the messages that are directly disciplined and gazed at by their figures. According to statistics, from 2017 to 2022, the number of 'anti-body anxiety' blog posts on China's online social media platform Weibo increased year by year, and the reading volume of related blog posts has already exceeded 1 billion [1]. Women spontaneously produce topics that alleviate and reject body anxiety, support the development of female diversity and autonomy, and rebel against the societal evaluation of women's bodies. Yet women's struggle against body anxiety still has a long way to go. The influence on women's body image in the mass media is subtle, and the messages are pervasive and varied. This is specifically reflected by the fact that many messages on social media do not explicitly convey body anxiety but implicitly imply a message of discipline about women's bodies, which often catches female users off guard. Therefore, the paper intends to study the metaphorical information regarding women's body anxiety on social platforms, analyze the characteristics of the relevant content, deeply explore the essential reasons why such kind of information triggers women's figure anxiety, and put forward suggestions to the women against body anxiety.

## 2. Characteristics of Metaphorical Messages in the Category of Body Anxiety

A metaphor is a rhetorical device, which refers to making

cognitive and emotional connections by borrowing a concept or thing to be described in terms of other different but similar concepts or things. Metaphors are generally indirect and figurative, which not only convey the message itself but also the emotion or deeper meaning behind the message, prompting people to resonate with it. Metaphorical information is not only expressed in language but also through images, symbols, actions, and other forms.

In social media, metaphors utilize their covert, diverse, and flexible expressive characteristics to simplify expression while carrying complex social and cultural meanings. Metaphorical messages can circumvent direct, sensitive topics and convey ideas as well as their emotions to the audience in a more subtle way. Social media can accelerate the dissemination efficiency of metaphorical information, expand the scope of dissemination, and enhance the effect of metaphorical information dissemination through the interactivity among Internet users, to make the audience produce a sense of participation and a sense of immersion [3].

There are many metaphorical messages in social media that may indirectly contribute to women's body anxiety. These metaphors convey implicit standards of body ideals through a variety of mediums and tie a particular body image to high social value, representing the outward appearance of a 'successful' woman. This type of message is communicated from a more subtle entry point, inadvertently reinforcing women's concerns and anxieties about their body image. Metaphorical messages can be broadly categorized into the following three types.

### 2.1 Personal Sharing

In social media, online bloggers use various self-media platforms to regularly post shares about professional knowledge, skills, personal opinions, or interests, which shape the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of others [4]. In the new media era, social media bloggers are also referred to as 'mobile opinion leaders' because of their ability to express opinions, provide information, and exert personal influence on their audiences in their communication landscape. Bloggers usually have a certain fan base and adjust their content production by interacting with their fans or collecting their feedback. Because of this, social media bloggers can be more specific about their audience's needs, know what topics they are interested in, and be more sensitive to hot topics. Studies have shown that there are four main success factors for media bloggers, which are: content appealing to the general public, market demand for bloggers, ease of use of the media format, and the role of secondary distribution between followers and platforms [5]. Face bloggers, fitness bloggers, and other

social media bloggers who produce content by self-presentation explore the public and the market preference for the ideal body, present their bodies to obtain clout, and turn them into economic revenue. Face bloggers show themselves as ‘thin’, ‘slim’, ‘A4 waist’, and many other ideal body qualities touted by social media in their videos, and the frequent viewing of such content by users is likely to lead to self-examination behavior and a blurring of self-perception. Based on this, it further triggers a decline in the user’s self-satisfaction. Fitness bloggers compare their pre-fitness ‘fat’ body with their post-fitness ‘obese’ body, or title their videos as “...days to obtain Cygnus arms”, or “... days to obtain slender legs”, to strengthen the concept of ideal body awareness, triggering the desire for self-body transformation, but at the same time will also stimulate the user’s anxiety. The influence of this type of blogger is often convert, they are not like traditional opinion leaders to grasp the actual dissemination of the right to speak, but to utilize social media interaction mechanisms to broaden the dissemination channels, each recipient of the information can become a new information release center, and in the role of the Internet personality algorithm recommendation mechanism, the phenomenon of “information cocoon” will be exacerbated.

## 2.2 Public Discussion

Entering the Web2.0 era, User-Generated Content (UGC), as an up-and-coming mode of creating and organizing network information resources, allows every user to publish creative content such as text, pictures, audio, video, etc. on the network in various forms [6]. One of its characteristics is that it is created by non-professionals or authoritative organizations, and by deconstructing the professionalism and occupationality of the content production subject, it takes the sharing of interests, group interaction, and the development of group interesting relationships as the user’s motivation for the production of content [7,8]. Metaphorical information is hidden in the content produced under the UGC model. By triggering discussions on relevant topics among the target audience, the audience will unconsciously add ideas to themselves as they express views with others.

On social media platforms, there are numerous content around one’s body image, such as “Please help me see if I need to be thinner to look good,” “Why doesn’t my body look good in any clothes,” and other posts that will engage users in discussion and evaluation. Perhaps the starting point is to get advice from netizens, but as the public discussions get more and more, the body image in each post becomes the carrier of the message sent by both sides, and the body itself gradually becomes a visual ‘symbol’ in the

process, The body is endowed with a symbolic value that is easier to disseminate, and transmits the anxiety of the users behind the post to the outside world. Young women are the main target of the ‘ideal body’ topic, and they will react more to the aesthetic standards rendered by social media. In the UGC model, anxiety about one’s body image is more likely to be rendered to the audience, subconsciously exacerbating the audience’s body anxiety.

## 2.3 Information Rendering

Even if the presentation of body image doesn’t play the dominant role in the communication content, anxiety about body image can be indirectly rendered through the message. For example, the mass media place the metaphorical message in the plot of an online short drama, in which a girl who was originally ugly and fat is reborn as a thin and beautiful heroine. They used to be the objects of ridicule, but undergo a metamorphosis of their appearance to hit others in the face, and gradually achieve a reversal of fortune. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory states that ‘respect needs’ are at the top of the hierarchy of human needs, and that people prove their worth in society by gaining respect. Through the repeated rendering of the above episodes in online short drama, people are led to equate the metamorphosis of their appearance with gaining the respect of others, and the audience will project their pursuit of self-esteem onto the pursuit of an ideal body, overemphasize the position that the body occupies in self-shaping, and scrutinize their bodies too rigorously. In advertisements and e-commerce sales, the media magnify body details, such as ‘muscular legs’, ‘wide hips, and other physical attributes that have little impact on life, the media emphasize the unattractiveness of those physical attributes and deliver consumer products that can cover or change these attributes promptly, and further create consumer demand. Some women’s clothing shop models on the network are tall and thin, they wear beautiful clothes in the shops and give out a sense of noble, and elegance, so people are full of desire to buy. But when the customers buy the goods back, only to find that the size of the clothes is very small. With the sharp increase in the number of online women’s clothing shops in recent years, women’s clothing sizes have become smaller and smaller, women find it increasingly difficult to buy suitable clothes, and women’s clothing return rate is extremely high. Users are constantly rendered anxious and question their selves in a downtrodden atmosphere of online shopping failure.

The pseudo-environment theory states that the media process and reshape the information they are exposed to as it is disseminated, and audiences scrutinize others, as well as their bodies in a “virtual” environment created by

the media. In the network social environment rendered by the media, the proportion of thin groups is higher than that of the real society, and thin groups generally have a higher sense of well-being, which leads to the 'ideal body' becoming the mainstream ideology and code of conduct. Women are eager to show their ideal body shape, actively matching the body discipline brought to them on the network. This has further unified the ideal body standards of women in social networks, making it increasingly hard for women to escape from the prison of body discipline.

### 3. Formative Mechanisms and Impacts

In today's era of highly developed social media, metaphorical messages permeate people's daily lives, influencing audiences' self-perceptions and values, these messages have gradually shaped a societal standard of the 'perfect' body shape, which in turn has led to body anxiety in women's pursuit of this idealized goal. The mechanisms of body anxiety formation can be understood in both subjective and objective dimensions: subjectively, individuals are susceptible to personal internalization of external standards; objectively, the external world reinforces the promotion of a certain body image, invariably exacerbating feelings of anxiety.

#### 3.1 Subjective Reasons

##### 3.1.1 Social comparison theory

The concept of 'social comparison' was first proposed by Festinger in 1954, who believed that individuals would subjectively take others as the object of comparison to measure their performance and ability due to the lack of objective evaluation criteria in self-assessment [9]. Wood breaks down the steps of thinking about social comparison into three steps: acquisition of social information, examination of social information, and response to social information [10]. While social media is a channel for the acquisition of social information; examination of social information, on the other hand, is the individual's subjective evaluation of the similarities and differences between others and themselves. Social Comparison Theory suggests that people are more inclined to contrast differences. Festinger divides the direction in which social comparisons are made into upward and downward comparisons, and because the images of women presented in social media are more idealized, most of the comparisons that occur are upward comparisons with ideal body owners. Many studies on upward comparisons have demonstrated that the ideal body is significantly correlated with self-satisfaction and that the further one moves away from this ideal image, the less satisfied one is with one's self, and

that upward comparisons are more likely to trigger anxiety. It has also been noted that comparison is related to an individual's personality tendencies and that an individual with a higher tendency to make social comparisons is more likely to engage in comparative behaviors [11]. This comparison is subjective because it is initiated in the inner emotional activity of the individual, so to avoid the comparison, it is necessary to inhibit the beginning of the comparison. When confronted with direct messages of body anxiety in the media, many awakened women can inhibit comparative behaviors before they begin, however, when confronted with metaphorical messages in the media, women often struggle to take a defensive stance in time against such messages. The vast majority of people are not aware of the beginning of the comparison, and when they passively get the result of the comparison they internalize it as a stimulus to themselves, in which they magnify the gap between themselves and their ideal body, and the negative body imagery is deepened.

##### 3.1.2 Self-objectification theory

Bartky put forward the concept of 'Sexual Objectification Theory' in 1990, which refers to the phenomenon of women using their bodies to please others and reducing them to tools. The 'three-inch golden lotus' of Chinese women in ancient times and the 'girdle' of European women in the 19th century are all products of female sexual objectification in a patriarchal society. Women experience examinations from others themselves, and sexual objectification further develops into women's self-objectification. Self-objectification refers to the fact that women see themselves in a third-person perspective, where their bodies become objects to be observed and watched by themselves. The complete process of self-objectification is that women's bodies are frequently observed and evaluated in social life, which leads women to internalize others' perspectives and evaluate themselves as objects, which then results in negative psychology such as anxiety and dissatisfaction with their bodies [12].

Social media is the main trigger for 'self-objectification', which presents the media-constructed ideal body and transforms the qualities of the ideal body portrayed by the media into the standards that individuals internalize, forcing them to subjectively recognize these standards and direct themselves towards them. Research has shown that social media can enhance an individual's level of self-objectification and exacerbate body dissatisfaction [13]. Social media is rife with metaphorical messages that regulate body image, and the body continues to be discussed as an object of visual 'symbol', whether it is a blogger being praised for being beautiful or thin or being discussed or asked for an opinion on body image, there is a sense in

the message that a good appearance or body image does indeed bring attraction, affection and internet clout. This causes the individual to place more value and significance on what the body can bring about, constantly examining and correcting the parts of themselves that don't match up to the standard, ignoring the more important inner character as a human being, and driving an increased self-objectification.

## 3.2 Objective Reasons

### 3.2.1 Consumer society in social media

Jean Baudrillard explores the stimulation of bodily desires in consumer society in his book *The Consumer Society*, where he argues that consumer society is an era of extreme bodily desires, which are stimulated to develop markets and pursue profit [14]. Feminist Simone de Beauvoir states that women are socially constructed as 'feminine', femininity is the result of being socially constructed, and therefore the female body is endowed with more economic and social significance. Women either consume passively or consume voluntarily on their bodies, both of which are manifestations of the deprivation of the value of women's bodies in consumer society.

The mass media provides a huge platform for the presentation of the ideal body as a commodity. Consumer society combines with social media, body market combines with body discipline. The media constructs the standard of women's ideal body through the display of women's slimness in advertisements and the shrinking sizes of online women's clothing shops, which leads to the fear of becoming accidents, women passively consume for the sake of slimness to follow the trend. Social media defines the meaning of the 'ideal body', links it to a higher social identity and status, makes it a source of female glamour and attractiveness, and creates an atmosphere of happiness, self-confidence, and beauty that comes with having an ideal body. As a result, women change their body image by purchasing skincare products, plastic surgery, fitness, and other means of consumption, and then take the initiative to go back to social media platforms to present their perfect selves.

### 3.2.2 Algorithmic recommendations in the digital world

The personalized algorithmic recommendation mechanism of social media fabricates a prison for users to spread body image anxiety in the digital world. Users' personal information and historical browsing data when using social media will be recorded by the platform and empowered by big data algorithms to match the content that users are interested in, improving the efficiency of information

screening and information reception. At the same time, however, social media can also encase users in an 'information cocoon', causing them to be trapped in a single, one-sided field of information, leading to cognitive limitations and a loss of control over their personal information. For female users, the algorithm already preemptively pushes a pool of information related to slimming, plastic surgery, dressing, and other content that focuses on the female body to the user when they sign up for an account and fill in their gender and age. Even when opening the platform for the first time, female users have a high probability of receiving body-related content pushed to them by the algorithm, which renders information to users about improving their body shape. When a female user clicks or browses a relevant phrase whether she intends to do so or not, the algorithm recognizes it as the user's interest preference and continuously provides the user with homogeneous information. Forced to be exposed to information that presents, corrects, and scrutinizes women's bodies, the pseudo-environment will definitely be reinforced, and women's perception of their shortcomings will be further magnified.

## 4. Recommendations

Social media continues to present an ideal body, magnifying the view of looking at the self or looking at others, causing women to ignore their bodily feelings and pleasurable experiences as body subjects. The social media push for the ideal body image and body discipline has yet to stop, but as Virginia says, 'People should not be still-lives in vases for admiration, but melodies spread across the prairie to dance with the wind.' Women's breakout and reconciliation of body image anxiety in metaphorical messages is a process of awakening the consciousness of the female subject and reconciling her body with the external world. As individuals with independent consciousness, how to fully understand the bodies, farewell to excessive anxiety about the bodies, and embrace the beauty of the bodies has become an urgent issue.

### 4.1 Information Selection: Reducing Negative Information Exposure and Finding Positive Information Support

When metaphorical messages hide in social media and are difficult to avoid, it is important to take a proactive stance against the onslaught of metaphorical messages. Many bloggers of all shapes and sizes have taken to social media sites to present the beauty of their bodies, regardless of whether fat, short, tall, or dark-skinned, the bodies presented in the videos are positive and healthy, and the bloggers' emotions are high, and their images are

confident, using themselves as examples to talk about real ideas of physical health and beauty. Women can actively subscribe to the content produced by the aforementioned types of bloggers and listen to the discourse of mobile social leaders about anti-body anxiety. By focusing on more messages that advocate for body diversity to find support for positive messages, the negative automatic thinking of individuals can be changed; furthermore, by constantly browsing through anti-body anxiety content, the algorithm can also be trained to push more body-positive, mental health-related content to the users. Women can participate in communities that promote body positivity, where they can encourage each other and gain emotional resonance from others. Through the above methods, women actively seek out positive expressions of the body and positive messages in the media to strengthen their understanding of the aesthetics of the female body.

#### **4.2 Shift in Thinking: Developing Critical Thinking and Redefining Beauty**

In today's consumer society, social media is complicit with consumerism in making the female body a consumer product, and women become comparative, passive objects to others. However, women need to be made aware that they should always be in control of their subjectivity as human beings and break away from the barriers of body image regulation. Cultivate women's critical thinking, learn to analyze the commercial motives behind the metaphorical messages in social media, and look beyond the anxieties rendered in the commercial marketing of women's body image. Since the onset of social comparison behavior is difficult to predict, it is vital to make a conscious effort to question comparisons promptly after they occur. Why are comparisons made? What is the point? Will the comparison make you better or just add to your anxiety? It is necessary to detach oneself from the situation of 'objectification' in time and restore the obscured and tamed subjective consciousness. Redefine the terms 'fat' and 'slim', understand that these two words are just different expressions of the body, and they do not represent good or bad behavior or the value of an individual. Being slim and slender cannot be the only criteria for an ideal body, and is not the only condition for being appreciated and appealing. It is important to encourage the diversity and free expression of women's body image, refusing to be labeled and self-labelled, and avoiding stepping into the confusingly monolithic aesthetic trap.

#### **4.3 Harmony of Body and Mind: Learning to Accept Oneself, Physical and Mental Unity**

Shusterman believes that the body is not just a tool or

material carrier, but a critical part of human perception of the world and experience of life. She advocates 'body awareness', which refers to the integration of the human body and mind by paying attention to and enhancing one's awareness of the sensations and movements of the body, to achieve a state of harmony between the body and the mind [15]. Shusterman's theory offers a new perspective on improving body anxiety. The starting point for refining the body shape should be self-sufficiency and acceptance of oneself; fitness sculpting is about exercising one's body and enhancing one's sense of self-body well-being. Women need to take back control of their bodies. Controlling over the bodies should be based on the principles of moderation and enjoyment of pleasure [16]. Any change to the body should be done in the pursuit of happiness, not from the anxiety and oppression that the outside world brings to women. In the process of mind-body coordination, anxiety is allowed to arise, but instead of loathing your body for it, learn to embrace all of yourself. Complete the Physical and Mental Unity in the process of self-care.

### **5. Conclusion**

In today's highly developed social media, the issue of female body image anxiety is prominent. The paper analyzes how metaphorical messages permeate and spread in social media and reveals the mechanisms by which these subtle messages create body image anxiety among women. Women's body image has long been subject to socio-cultural discipline and the ideal body image has been further reinforced with the impulse of social media. Aesthetic standards conveyed through metaphorical messages often prompt women to unconsciously self-compare and self-objectify, leading to dissatisfaction and anxiety about their bodies.

Although there has been an increase in the number of discussions on 'anti-body anxiety' in recent years, it still requires the concerted efforts of all sectors of the community to eliminate the root causes of size regulation. Women have expressed their resistance to a single standard of beauty and have promoted the awakening and dissemination of multiple aesthetics. However, the personalized algorithms of social media and the commercial motives of the consumer society continue to reinforce women's pursuit of the 'perfect' body image.

The paper calls on women to revisit body image through critical thinking and move away from reliance on a single aesthetic standard. At the same time, it is only through the selection of positive messages in social media, the training of mind-body coordination, and the vigilance and confrontation of body image regulation by society as a whole that people can realize the inclusion and recognition of the

diversity of women's bodies in reality as well as on the internet, and then build a healthier and more harmonious aesthetic environment.

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