Within Chinese Social Media, Do the Gendered Gaze Impact the Female Appearance Anxiety of Chinese Z Generation?

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Abstract: Based on the observation of social media, the male gaze and female gaze have become two essential factors that trigger the appearance anxiety of young Chinese women. Considering the conventional patriarchal ideologies in China, the male gaze is primarily deemed the root of female appearance anxiety. However, with social media development, the female gaze has also become the origin of female appearance anxiety. Hence, the study utilized a mixed-method and took the Tik Tok as an example to lunch the research to determine whether the gendered gaze impacts their appearance anxiety while using social media for the Chinese female Z generation. Therefore, the study sent out 206 questionnaires and collected 175 effective responses; further, it did 19 in-depth female interviews aged 18 to 24 from different backgrounds. These data analyses pointed out that the female gaze is generally and gradually more influential than the male gaze, but the male gaze still invisibly and stiffly affects females in social media. In conclusion, the paper argued that the male gaze does not disappear but becomes unseen; global media promotes female empowerment so that the gaze and evaluation in the female community are increasing. In the future, for audiences, it is crucial to think of how to escape the "shackles" of media on females within the era of digital feminism.

Keywords: social media, appearance anxiety, female gaze, male gaze, digital feminism

1.   Introduction

In recent years, with the "beauty economy" continuing to grow, social media has been scrambling to envoke trending topics related to appearance, making trends change even more rapidly. Many aesthetic concepts such as "fairy ear" and "young, white and super skinny" have emerged constantly, encouraging the public to show a tendency of convergence in aesthetics. In social media, outstanding appearance has become a vital label for females to establish themselves; many females suffer from appearance anxiety and renounce the initiative in appearance discourse.

According to the Mob Research Institute reported that 76.4 percent of the interviewees expressed a certain degree of appearance anxiety, and 20.3 percent of them considered themselves to have moderate or severe anxiety [1]. Meanwhile, data in the 2021 Chinese Working Women Insight Report shows that more than 50% of working women have facial anxiety. According to these data, "appearance anxiety" has been quite common in China.

Tik Tok, as the most popular creative short video social software, has more than 600 million daily active users in China. Hence, it was selected as the target platform to do the study.

Conventionally, for Chinese females, social media's visible and invisible male gazes could easily evoke their appearance anxiety. However, the research found that the female gaze gradually determined the extent of female appearance anxiety, especially for the Z generation. Does it mean Chinese feminism has developed?

However, in China, relatively few studies only focus on female appearance anxiety and the impact of social media on female appearance anxiety from communication science, instead of considering how social media affects female appearance anxiety. Even in western, academic studies realized the aspect problem; these studies were conducted on western female samples. Moreover, there are few empirical studies on domestic and localization about the sort of studies. In accordance with the differences between western and Chinese cultures, Chinese women need to be studied in more detail in female appearance anxiety on social media.

Therefore, the paper will explore how the gendered gazes impact female appearance anxiety for the Chinese Z generation. The purpose of this paper is to arouse the cognition of the society against appearance anxiety and call on women to be aware of and get rid of the gender gazes around them. Moreover, females can avoid and escape some traps that come from appearance anxiety while using social media.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Male Gaze

The "Male Gaze" concept comes from Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" [2]. In the article, she pointed out that the nature of film making and watching is closely related to the voyeurism proposed by Freud. She argues that female viewers are forced to see the female body from the male point of view, and those male viewers, while bringing themselves into the male protagonist, recklessly project their predispositions onto the objectifying female characters on screen. However, Mulvey's views have been criticised for their essentialist tendencies and criticised for being trapped in rigid male/female and subject/object antagonism.

Silverman extended the concept [3]. Within his works, he emphasises that the act of watching, and staring should be essentially separated, deepening the unidirectional interpretation of the staring mechanism. He believes that even if the viewer occupies the viewing position, he still cannot escape being the object of being stared at by others. Gaze is in a dynamic power relationship full of tension; that is to say, anyone who initiates gaze cannot exist without gaze manipulation. For Silverman, the operation of gaze does not only exist in the subject-object relationship of deprivation and oppression but is also deeply embedded in the structural power relationship.

Therefore, the male gaze is inseparable from male discourse power. In China's orthodox power model and division of labour model, females are disadvantaged, while males have fame, wealth, and power and gaze at women from a top-down perspective. Social norms also frame and normalise the relationship between staring and being stared at and develop detailed and numerous "verbal teachings" that limit a female's sight and scope of vision while encouraging a male's dominant posture.

Through a set of values, institutional norms and cultural customs, the society puts forward differentiated role expectations and requirements for males and females. On this basis, once a female has some "behaviour deviation", she will be naturally gazed at by other people, and the gaze exerted enormous pressure on her from the outside in.

With the development of modern commerce and the dissemination of media, the "male gaze" has penetrated all fields of society. It is common for the male to consume female images, gorgeous and sexy female images. The bodies and costumes of fashionable females presented by the media directly show the meaning of male "gaze", and males are more aggressive and more forceful to show their strong vision and see females as objects to be watched. In the context of commercial society and consumer society, this kind of "gaze" constructs females as a kind of "objectification" and "sex object". As the camera moves and selects close-ups, males' eyes "decompose" females' bodies into parts to satisfy their pleasure. Some scholars have critically pointed out that the deterministic male gaze projects their sexual fantasy onto the female image, and the female image is modelled according to this fantasy.

2.2. Female Gaze

From a historical perspective, there are two primary concept definitions of the female gaze. Firstly, the traditional definition of the female gaze is opposite to the male gaze. As Mulvey [2] defined the male gaze in her essay, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female form which is styled accordingly." Another scholar Hemman, quotes Mulvey's words and then defines the female gaze: "pleasure in looking has been split between active/female and passive/male [4]. The determining female gaze projects its fantasy onto the male form which is styled accordingly."

Therefore, the traditional definition of female gaze means how females observe males in society. The significance of this traditional explanation is that it emphasizes the independence of females in this new era. Women are no longer just the object of males' judgment and observation in society but become subjects who can express their demands and ideas. From the object to the subject, women can pursue their independent personality and will no longer be trapped in the patriarchal society and materialized into a symbol of sexual behaviour and consumerism.

In addition, transnational network communities' attention on females has further reshaped the global mainstream media. In other research, authors analyzed a social phenomenon— female empowerment, revealed by Japanese comics and Madonna's music [4]. It reflects the virtual world to the real world: many literatures and artworks begin to pay attention to the female audiences' preferences and follow their values, which further implies the rise of female independence and the social trend of female empowerment in the real world [5]. Connecting female independence and female empowerment to transnational/global media, we can find that the global media values the female community, emphasizing that women also have equal representation and independent personality, which forms a female gaze representing the rise of feminism.

Secondly, there is a relatively new definition of the female gaze, which is becoming more and more popular, especially in social media. Malone's analysis of the increasing participation of female film producers and the increasing importance of female perspectives in films also reflects the social reality. The films directed by women are being examined and judged by more female audiences, which weakens the significance of male audiences' perspectives [6]. Female gaze means women's gaze at women, which means that a woman is being observed and evaluated by other women. This

new definition is vital in social media because it points out the pressure and competition in the female community, which further triggers females' negative emotions, such as appearance anxiety.

2.3. Appearance Anxiety

The concept of "appearance anxiety" comes from the psychological concept "anxiety". Anxiety refers to the emotions experienced by the individual in undesirable or unpleasant situations [7]. Hart defied the appearance anxiety as the "a type of social anxiety that focuses on the perceived negative evaluation of one's physical appearance" [8]. Appearance anxiety is defined as a concept that encapsulates detailed body image characteristics such as facial features and complexion and general physical properties such as muscle structure, height, and weight [8].

When the case is evaluated in terms of different genders, it is thought that women pay more attention to their physical appearance due to social factors. That is because the role of women has long existed or been forced to exist as an object under the pressure of beauty and aesthetics, and their ideas, thoughts, personality, and individuality were overshadowed mainly by their physical appearance [9]. This situation has led to the emergence of anxiety.

Within current social media, females suffer both male and female gaze, leading to increased appearance anxiety. Hence, they could concentrate on their appearances and other comments about it. If they get negative comments, they could have negative moods such as overpressure and behaviours such as unhealthy keep fit or suicide.

2.4. Digital Feminism

Digital feminism is in the vein of contemporary neoliberalism. The explosion of collectives and blogs is, in a sense, inspired by the model of small start-ups in the digital world. The promotion of feminist activism is infiltrated by the logic of marketing and the values of entrepreneurship of "the new spirit of capitalism" [10]. On the social media, feminism is experienced as a form of self-realization and of collective empowerment. Digital practices and feminist engagement are, in some ways, constituted through assemblages bound up with global liberalism even though feminists criticize the principles of neoliberalism and the social inequalities it leads to [11]. Digital platforms also double as places of empowerment and identity formation, as well as being monitored and self-monitored (especially for women).

Thus, the digital feminism not only fostered awareness of discussing feminist issues in the public sphere, but also promoted new dynamic participation within feminism. Secondly, the Internet provides a space where feminists can learn why what feminists consider harmless can be harmful or offensive to others. Most feminists are aware of intersectionality, but not all are aware of every form of intersectionality oppression [12].

3. Method

3.1. Research design overall

The study launched a mixed method, including both quantitive research and qualitative research. In the case of this research, for qualitative research, survey research was used at the beginning of the research to ensure the purpose of the research could exist meaningful for doing research. The study posted an online questionnaire as an instrument for three days and got 206 responses. Among the return questionnaires, the effective responds only 175.

Then, the primary methodology for the study should be the focus group and in-depth interview, which was involved in the quantitive research. In accordance with the finding from survey research, the study selected eligible nineteen interviewees to respond to some open-ended questions related to the study.

Based on the interview recording and analysis, the study will get some findings and results about the association between different gender gazes among social media and Chinese Z generation female appearance anxiety.

The purpose of survey research is to ensure the association between gender gazes and appearance anxiety, and because of the consequence, the age of in-depth interviewees was restricted from 18 to 24. Moreover, the target of an in-depth interview is to explore the prominent relationship between gender gazes and appearance anxiety for the Chinese female Z generation. Furthermore, we also intend to find out the exceptional cases in the research process.

3.2. Survey research

The purpose of survey research for the study is to ensure that Chinese Z generation female netizens feel the male gaze and female gaze from social media, and these gazes evoke or reinforce the extent of their appearance anxiety while using social media, especially Chinese Tik Tok.

As Babbie (2013) mentioned, the most common instrument for survey research is the questionnaire, and the study utilized online survey technology to post and gather responses from the internet. This approach is practical and economical for the study. Meanwhile, appearance anxiety could be a sensitive and private topic for some respondents; the anonymous and online responding method could get a more reliable and honest reply about our questions.

Furthermore, obey the rules from Babbie, within the questionnaire, contain the questions about demographic statistics about age and gender to eliminate some exclusive data, the rest of the questions are closed-ended questions and scales choices based on the appearance anxiety select [13]. The construct of the questionnaire also tries to make it easy to answer.

The online survey only posted on the internet for 3 days to gather responds. As the result, it gets 206 responds from the internet. In accordance with the purpose, the study focuses on the female netizens instead of male netizens, and the age only evolved from 18 to 24. Therefore, the effective responds only have 175 in total.

After doing the survey research, we found that these females with the highest degree of appearance anxiety are the female netizens from 18 to 24, also called generation Z.

Meanwhile, from the date of the final question, we recognized that their appearance anxiety could not only be encountered from the male gaze on social media but also from the male gaze form among social media. In the cause of finding the change, which is not the same as what we learned from the previous article, we designed the quantitive research to do the additional research.

3.3. In-depth interview

The in-depth interview was paired to collect some prominent data from participation directly, considering survey research limitations. This method was based on the goal and semi-structured interviews. Kvale mentioned the "miner metaphor" and "traveller metaphor" in his work [14]. He emphasized that when researchers interviewed, the purpose of our interview was to dig out the in-depth "buried metal". Therefore, the structured questions could be limited to our research, and the semi-structured and unstructured questions could encourage interviewees to respond with more details about the topic.

Meanwhile, due to the pandemic restriction, the study used online and face-to-face interviews. The topic of appearance anxiety could be private and sensitive for somebodies. Hence, the online interview could make them more relaxed to share their opinions with researchers. Furthermore, some face-to-face interviews also can gather some non-verbal information. This information can also be deemed a kind of metaphor and attitudes of these interviewees about the topic. For both interview formats, we explained our purpose and research for the participants and promised to protect their privacy. Thus, later, the article will use A, B, C to represent each participant. For the duration, the interview was controlled from 30 to 60 minutes.

Table 1: Education degree and location for 19 female interviewees

Interviewee	Education degree	Location
A	Technical school graduate or above (in mainland China)	Rural
B	Technical school graduate or above (in mainland China)	Urban
C	Technical school graduate or above (in mainland China)	Rural
D	Technical school graduate or above (in mainland China)	Urban
E	Technical school graduate or above (in mainland China)	Urban
F	Technical school graduate or above (oversea)	Urban
G	Bachelor degree (graduated and in school)	Urban (Now is oversea)
H	Bachelor degree (graduated and in school)	Urban
I	Bachelor degree (graduated and in school)	Urban
J	Bachelor degree (graduated and in school)	Urban (super-first-line city)
K	Bachelor degree (graduated and in school)	Urban (Now is oversea)
L	Bachelor degree (graduated and in school)	Urban (Second line city)
M	Bachelor degree (graduated and in school)	Urban (First line city)
N	Bachelor degree (graduated and in school)	Urban (New first line city)
O	Master degree (in school)	Rural
P	Master degree (in school)	Urban (Hongkong)
Q	Master degree (in school)	Urban (Macau))
R	Master degree (in school)	Urban (super-first-line city)
S	Master degree (in school)	Urban (Second line city)

Table 1 shows the different situations of 19 female interviewees about their education degree and grown-up location. In accordance with the research, the study selected nineteen female interviewees aged 18 to 24 years old. Moreover, based on the findings from survey research, these interviewees have considered their growth-up regions (in urban or rural); and their education degrees (bachelor below, bachelor, master, or above). Finally, six nineteen-year-old females, three twenty-year-old females, two 21-year-old females, two 22-year-old females, two 23-year-old females, and four 24-year-old females have been selected to be the interviewees.

4. Findings

4.1. Results of survey research

The online survey was only posted on the internet for three days to gather responses for survey research. As a result, it gets 206 responses from the internet, and female netizens have 175. The data

indicated that for such kind of topic, it could urge females to take part in replying instead of males. Moreover, we detailly indicated that the most considerable population interested in such kind of online topic volunteers could be females aged 18 to 24. The survey results showed that 84 per cent of females thought they had appearance anxiety, and the average score for the feeling of appearance anxiety was 2.72 (total score is 5).

For the frequency of female netizens using Tik Tok, plenty of them showed one to three hours per day. Furthermore, the data indicated the fitness videos and photo sharing videos among Tik Tok are most easy to invoke their appearance anxiety within reality. Meanwhile, gender gazes are felling both male and female gazes while using social media, such as Tik Tok.

However, the surprising thing was, compared with previous research, which indicated that the male gaze should increase the extent of female appearance anxiety, the data depicted that the female gaze made more pressures for female appearance anxiety while using social media. The data shows that the considering rank for females when they are using social media, as follows, the known female followers (3.19) > the known male followers (2.89)> the female strangers (2.79)>the male strangers (2.49).

Furthermore, the female audiences also thought that the female post less focuses on the male gaze when they manufacture their content. This finding is also against the stereotype for the conventional concept. Thus, the study ulteriorly narrowed the age from 18 to 24 and focused on the relationship between gender gazes and appearance anxiety.

4.2. Result of in-depth interview: The female competition within male gaze

The in-depth interview furtherly verified some results about the male gaze in the survey and dug out the depth effects for the female gaze. Some typical comebacks will display the findings while talking about the same question.

Firstly, we mentioned that most female interviewees had the opposite idea with the survey research about the target audience on social media. The female respondents indicated that the female posts less focus on the male gaze when they manufacture their content within the survey research. However, when we showed them some picture-sharing videos, they still said these producers could mark the males as the target audiences. Furthermore, interviewee Q said, "the similar context female producers could be rivals for each other." Interviewee K also indicated that social media exits a kind of female intrasexual competition, and the purpose of the competition is the satisfied male audience. Moreover, these photo-sharing videos could not invoke or increase their appearance anxiety because they thought these pictures were not accurate. Interviewees P and interviewee J emphasized that the good-looking, genuine, high-quality females with a high education degree and suitable manner could make them more anxious.

However, when the interviewees talked about themselves, plenty of them thought the female audience's opinions could impact their appearance anxiety and the content of what they post on the internet. This result is the same as the survey research. As interviewee B said, "if I post something on social media, I will consider the female audiences including acquaintances and strangers." Hence, interviewee K mentioned, "from my perspective, the reason why females would like to pay attention to other female gazes is the female intersexual competition."

Thus, the women's intrasexual competition was regarded as negative competition by derogating other women [15]. As the words from interviewee P said, "I am a journalist internship, and I realized that the appearance competition between female journalists is more serious than male journalists. In fact, I think to get more positive feedback, females could have some negative behaviours, for example, derogating other females or judging other female appearances on social media."

Indeed, in the reality, if the female who have a good-looking and better dressing style, she could suffer more spites from others, especially women [16].

5. Discussion and limitation

5.1. Discussion

In the survey and in-depth interviews, while browsing social media，a female individual who thinks they cannot make a good impression on other people due to their appearance is likely to be experiencing social appearance anxiety. The research finds that same-sex comments and comparisons cause most female appearance anxiety. Since it was reported that individuals who think themselves unable to meet the expectations of others on social media regarding appearance start experiencing anxiety.

5.1.1. Male gaze widely appeared in social media and caused appearance anxiety

From the male gaze perspective, in the survey, 14.86 per cent of female participants said they often saw videos of the male gaze on TikTok, and 30.29 per cent said they sometimes saw videos of the male gaze. More female participants, 34.86 per cent, said they rarely watched such videos. However, through in-depth interviews, after researchers introduced the definition of the male gaze in detail and gave specific examples, most interviewees believed that TikTok's short videos were still full of male gaze content, but their increasing female subjectivity made them less affected by the male gaze. More women's facial anxiety stems from the fact that they actively choose to self-gaze under the guidance of social media, forming a kind of female gaze that integrates self-management, self-exploitation, and self-empowerment. Thus, although mediating between social media and female facial anxiety, the male gaze is becoming invisible.

5.1.2. Gender gazes impact the female competition for appearance anxiety

On the sign of the female gaze, as shown in the results of our survey and in-depth interviews, we can conclude that both the male gaze and female gaze play essential roles in bringing Chinese females appearance anxiety. Nevertheless, Chinese females suffer more from appearance anxiety from other females' observations and evaluations. Women always have a sense of competition and comparison among the female communities; they want more attention and praise, so they will feel anxious while seeing other good-looking females, and their sense of competition also motivates them to have. On the one hand, it implies the rise of female liberation and empowerment since females have stronger desires to voice their opinions and engage in social evaluation. On the other hand, it demonstrates the intensely competitive environment in the female community, resulting in triggering appearance anxiety.

5.1.3. Development of Chinese digital feminism

Furthermore, digital feminism has highlighted the potential of digital culture to overcome gender duality, which provides self-presentation on social media platforms for females. In addition, the digital dissemination of physical body images has made hegemonic femininity even more desirable. Therefore, digital media allow females in different age groups that we interviewed to express themselves, exchange, and build up their identity. It is a form of empowerment at the individual level.

5.2. Limitations

For the study, the primary restriction was displayed on the methodology. Even though the in-depth interview remedies the limitation of the survey research, there are some inadequate interview data involved in the study. For instance, some interviewees did not explain their feeling well, and they did not precisely recognize their anxious feelings. Therefore, even we intend to research the media effect, we still consider our method whether is suitable for the psychological problem research. These data could impact the result and analysis of the study.

5.3. Future direction

In the future, the topic could continue to research because we only find that the male gaze is not disappearing or decreasing. Instead of that, it became invisible. It should be mentioned for females to realise. Especially for today's media, in China, the authority is still controlled by men. For the audience, how to escape the media effect and build critical thinking for the media content is important.

6. Conclusion

On the Chinese social media platform, the young female appearance anxiety (Z Generation) arose from the gendered gazes, including the male and female gaze. Compared with the conventional concept, the male gaze becomes gradually invisible due to the digital feminism awareness trigging. Moreover, plenty of young females appearance anxiety emanates from the reality that they actively choose to self-gaze under the guidance of society or the content from social media, initiating a kind of female gaze that integrates self-management, self-exploitation and self-empowerment. In the future, with the digital feminism development in China, the study will continue to explore how social media affects females' appearance anxiety from both positive and negative sides.

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