

“I want to be just like them”: Examining the impacts of Xiaohongshu usage on young female’s body comparison and dissatisfaction in Taiwan

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Xiaohongshu, a popular social media among young female users in Taiwan, is a topic and algorithmic-centric platform where body image-related topics such as weight loss and makeup are the most popular among users. In this study, we used in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore how structural factors of Xiaohongshu affect the relationship among social media usage, body comparison, and body dissatisfaction. Results from eight participants showed that body image is atomized into segmented and manageable concepts due to Xiaohongshu’s unique mechanisms and culture, such as its recommendation system and exaggeration culture. Consequently, we suggest that such structural factors on Xiaohongshu may increase users’ body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies. We also discovered that such structural factors may, in turn, influence users’ beauty standards and perceptions, further exacerbating such body-related concerns. Our results also suggest that users may utilize strategies to mitigate these adverse effects consciously.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: body image, body dissatisfaction, body comparison, social media, in-depth interview

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1 Introduction

Body image, a picture of the body formed in our minds [8, 34], is heavily influenced by cultural, media, and social norms [3, 22]. If one perceives one’s actual body image as different from his/her desired body image, body dissatisfaction will ensue consequently [9]. The forming of body dissatisfaction is influenced by extrinsic factors, such as social support deficit, socioeconomic status, depression [29, 31], and, most importantly, body comparison [24, 27, 39].

Body comparison is derived from Social Comparison Theory [13], which posits that competitive behavior and social influence processes both stem from the drive for self-evaluation, and this self-evaluation is based on comparison with other persons [19]. Such social comparisons can be upward or downward, depending on how one identifies the subject of comparison as superior or inferior. In general, scholars have validated that people have a stronger tendency to compare with those who are perceived to be similar to themselves [25, 26] or same-sex peers [7, 23].

Social media usage has been frequently associated with the adverse impact on increased body comparison, especially among young female populations [30]. For instance, [21] has verified that social media usage is correlated with maladaptive effects on body image and eating disorders. [40] also verified the significance of the relationship between time spent on the internet and internalization of the thin ideal, as well as the relationship between Facebook

usage and body image concerns. Other studies reported similar results while emphasizing the importance of the mediating effect of comparisons in the case of Facebook usage [15]. As most studies investigated correlational relationships, evidence also indicates that social network site usage predicts increased body dissatisfaction [14].

Similar results have also been documented about body comparisons. [38] posited that social comparisons are particularly pertinent to social media due to providing a platform as a means for fast and numerous comparisons and providing comparison targets. Existing literature provided evidence that in the instance of social media usage, body and/or appearance comparison can mediate the relationship between the frequency of social media use and body image concerns [15, 16, 20]. In particular, upward appearance-focused social comparisons are positively related to body image disturbance [28].

However, the majority of existing research primarily focuses on the effects of mainstream social media platform usage on body image and/or body dissatisfaction, such as Facebook [15, 37, 40] or Instagram [16, 18, 38]. One social media that has received less academic attention is Xiaohongshu (translated as “Little Red Book”), a popular Chinese social media option for Gen-Z East Asian females with over 200 million monthly active users [33]. Xiaohongshu is different from many other mainstream social media, such as Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter), in at least two ways. Firstly, in terms of content, Xiaohongshu is topic-centric as it clusters short-form videos and other content under different topics. In addition, the most popular topics on Xiaohongshu are body image-related, such as makeup, outfits, and skincare-related content [32]. Secondly, its user experience is algorithm-driven. In contrast to the relatively discrete topics on mainstream social media, Xiaohongshu’s topics are connected with other topics to provide users with a combination of similar and tailored topics [33, 35].

In addition, literature has documented certain structural factors of social media may augment the effects that provoke body dissatisfaction and body comparison. For example, Instagram’s image-based nature provides filters that promote mainstreamed beauty ideals, and its prominent “fitspiration” culture can exacerbate body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies [17]. In response, this research focuses on how structural factors of social media platforms, such as elements within their user experience, may affect this process on a macro scale. In the instance of Xiaohongshu, its unique user experience and platform culture may result in different implicit structures when modeling the effects of social media usage on body dissatisfaction and body comparison. Building upon the well-validated presence of the relationship among body dissatisfaction, body comparison, and social media usage, this study aims to delineate further the mechanisms of such relationships with the instance of Xiaohongshu. In this study, we ask: *How does the usage*

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of Xiaohongshu among young female users affect their body comparison and dissatisfaction, if any?

2 Method

We conducted a semi-structured in-depth interview with eight participants screened by an online survey. The procedure and participants are described below. Our study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of our university.

2.1 Procedure

2.1.1 Screening survey In December 2023, we recruited potential participants through a screening survey through Facebook groups of college students. After completing the survey, respondents will be given the option to fill in their email addresses if they were willing to engage in future in-depth interviews. The survey consisted of the following three measures.

Xiaohongshu usage. Questions in this section assessed individuals' usage duration, usage frequency, and most-browsed categories. Duration and frequency are both measured with an ordinal scale, and most-browsed categories is an open-ended question to encompass possible niche categories.

Body image perception. This measure evaluated individuals' body image perception with the Body Image States Scale (BISS) [10], translated and re-coded to a five-point Likert Scale to lower the cognitive demand of respondents. This measure averaged all items with a greater score indicating a greater degree of body dissatisfaction.

Physical appearance comparison. This measure was based on the Physical Appearance Comparison Scale (PACS) [36] with revisions based on [15], which took three items from the original scale and recoded to a five-point Likert Scale. This measure averaged all items with a greater score indicating a greater tendency to conduct body comparisons.

As we aim to focus on how social media usage effects body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies, we select participants who frequently use Xiaohongshu are body image-sensitive. The selected participants are those: (1) who identify themselves as female, (2) who regularly view at least one appearance-related category, (3) who use Xiaohongshu more than once per day, and (4) who scored over 3 in both the BISS and revised PACS.

2.1.2 In-depth interview Before the interview, participants were informed about the study, procedure, and the presence of an audio-recording device. An opt-out opportunity was provided to each participant after the aforementioned terms were explained. The interview session then started upon obtaining the participant's consent. The interview protocol is developed and refined based on [11]. Each session took roughly an hour long, and one facilitator guided the participant through the process while taking notes of the participants' responses and other observations. After the interview, each participant received a convenience store gift card worth 200 New Taiwan Dollars as compensation.

2.1.3 Data analysis After each interview, a transcription of each participant's audio recording was conducted to complement the notes and observations recorded in the interviews. Transcriptions

Table 1. List of interview participants

Partici-pants	Age	Most Viewed Categories	BISS	PACS	Usage Frequency	Usage Duration
P1	23	Celebrities, Food, Makeup	3.17	4.00	Once every few hours	1 ~ 3 years
P2	25	Makeup, Outfits, Pets	4.00	5.00	Once every 2 ~ 4 hours	1 ~ 3 years
P3	26	Entertainment, Travel, Outfits	3.30	3.30	Once every few hours	1 ~ 3 years
P4	19	Makeup, Outfits, Workout	3.16	4.60	Once every 1 ~ 2 hours	More than 3 years
P5	19	Makeup, Pets, Outfits	3.66	4.34	Once every 0.5 ~ 1 hour	1 ~ 3 years
P6	21	Food, Music, Outfits	3.17	3.34	Once every 1 ~ 2 hours	More than 3 years
P7	23	Makeup, Pets, Lifestyle	3.15	4.00	Once every 0.5 ~ 1 hour	1 ~ 3 years
P8	22	Makeup, Food, Celebrities	3.17	4.34	Once every 2 ~ 4 hours	More than 3 years

were then thoroughly read and coded in an inductive-oriented reflexive thematic analysis approach, aligning with this study's aim to interpret and describe how users' body dissatisfaction and body comparison are influenced by social media usage [4, 5]. Initial codes were developed with the first iteration of coding, in which all participants were coded, followed by multiple revisions across all participants until a consistent codebook was formulated. Candidate themes were then constructed based on this codebook and then revised through multiple iterations of thematic mapping to define our final themes.

2.2 Participants

Our participants were eight urban-based, non-homosexual Taiwanese females aged between 19 and 26 who completed the screening survey. Their responses to the screening survey are listed in Table 1.

3 Results

3.1 Influences of Xiaohongshu usage

Our participants reported that Xiaohongshu usage has altered their beauty standards and beauty perceptions, as their beauty standards have become more mainstreamed (n = 3) and their beauty perceptions have become more atomized (n = 5). In addition, the majority of our participants have also reported that Xiaohongshu usage resulted in a higher degree of body dissatisfaction (n = 6) and body comparison (n = 7). Worth noting, participants identified that such shifts in beauty standards and beauty perceptions also influenced the effect of exacerbated body dissatisfaction and body comparison. We elaborate on the results below.

3.1.1 Mainstreamed beauty standards As users extensively rely on Xiaohongshu's algorithm in their daily usage routine (n = 7), participants reported that their personalized content would gradually become more homogeneous, which pivots the beauty standards of users towards being more mainstreamed (n = 3). Such content may convey the notion that certain body images are superior when reinforced by a positive tone and manner. P5 elaborated on this concept, "Those posts imply that girls should look like this, guys should look like that, makeup should look like this, and beauty should be like that."

Consequently, the internalization of such mainstream beauty standards often leads to providing new bases for comparison, as P4 said: *"They say that hairstyle is a symbol of economic status and class ... I will particularly care about my hair. It can't be frizzy, it should be appropriate."* As content converges to certain trending and mainstream styles, users can easily compare themselves with content creators, which can result in increased body comparison tendencies. P1 elaborated on this concept:

"Xiaohongshu makes a style trending in a certain period more mainstream. This will result in people applying the same elements to them, and this makes people compare with each other. Take the Y2K trend, for example, when people use the same composition for selfies and wear similar styled outfits, the winner is evident ..."

3.1.2 Atomized beauty perceptions In addition, the majority of our participants ($n = 5$) reported that their beauty perceptions became "atomized" after using Xiaohongshu. In contrast to perceiving body image as a holistic umbrella term encompassing multiple aspects of one's body, participants reported that they started to perceive their body as individual atoms that encompass a minimized concept of their body, such as P8, *"More often, I take it bit-by-bit, eventually merging into a style I like and suits me."*

Users may perceive other unmentioned body segments individually when viewing such atomized content, increasing the tendency to compare or mimic these externally atomized elements. This may compound body dissatisfaction-related anxiety and pressure as a result of increased body comparison. For instance, P2 said,

"If I click a post and I see someone I like, I may think I need to buy what she wears, mimic her hairstyle and her makeup. In this case, when you click a post, three things are on your to-do list. This is where your stress comes from: You need to do a lot to catch up to them."

3.1.3 Increased body dissatisfaction When we asked them how they felt about their appearance when using Xiaohongshu, they mostly reported negative emotions of envy, as these participants said they "wanted to be like" those they saw on Xiaohongshu. P1 said, *"To be frank, me and them, we're all girls, but there are still so many differences. I envy them, and I want to be just like them."* In addition, participants also shared that they cast doubt on themselves, wondering whether they could be like them or not, such as P3, *"(When seeing her ideal body image) I doubt that can I really achieve the same results by my own efforts?"* Consequently, users may deploy strategies to respond to their body dissatisfaction. For instance, our participants reported that they mimic their ideal body image ($n = 5$), manage calorie intake ($n = 4$), do workouts ($n = 4$), and even undergo cosmetic surgeries ($n = 2$).

3.1.4 Increased body comparison tendencies Similarly, participants also reported a greater degree of body comparison after Xiaohongshu usage ($n = 7$), despite a few participants are not certain whether

it can be directly associated with Xiaohongshu ($n = 2$). This comparison process is diverged as users focus on different aspects. Some users focused on the similarities of the content on Xiaohongshu, providing a basis for comparison (P1), while others may focus on the values conveyed by the platform's culture as a whole (P4). In general, these comparisons provoke negative emotions and thoughts, as elaborated by P8: *"(When comparing with others) I feel I'm a terrible person. I think that I'm promoting the intrasexual competition among girls."* In terms of the subject of comparisons, our participants reported a stronger tendency to compare with those they perceived to be similar ($n = 5$). Some participants narrowed the definition of similarities down to those they meet in real life (P5, P7), while others view Xiaohongshu content creators not as celebrities but instead as peers similar to them (P1, P2, P8).

3.2 Influencing mechanisms

Within the usage milieu of Xiaohongshu, participants identified certain structural factors of Xiaohongshu's user experience that can exacerbate such adverse effects. These structural factors are critical in molding how users experience a higher degree of body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies resulting from Xiaohongshu usage.

3.2.1 Tags and tag states We discovered that body image-related content on Xiaohongshu is often atomized into individual segments of one's complete body image. These atomized concepts often encompass a minimal aspect of one's body image presented under a manageable or achievable narrative. P5 commented on this concept, *"Because every content creator on Xiaohongshu creates content on one single aspect regularly, you only receive discrete information ... some creators even only focus on pants on trousers."*

In response, the Xiaohongshu community often comes up with labels to embody these atomized concepts in the form of tags, concretely dissecting these concepts from a broader context of generalized body image. For example, unlike generalized concepts such as thinness or attractiveness, these tags on Xiaohongshu more often encompass a more refined connotation and are mutually exclusive, such as "Swan Necks" and "Perpendicular Shoulders," which may provoke users to notice segments of their bodies that are previously not noticed. P6 elaborated on this concept, saying, *"As for the instance of 'perpendicular shoulders,' I never thought of not having a right-angled shoulder is a bad thing, but everyone on Xiaohongshu is saying, 'let's make our shoulders perpendicular.'"*

Furthermore, such tagged content on Xiaohongshu often emphasizes the effectiveness of their methods to achieve the ideal "tag state." A tag state is not only an ideal body image state encompassing certain body image concept(s) under a specific tag, but it also provides clear steps to emphasize the possibility and/or effectiveness of realizing such a body image state. This emphasis on effectiveness transforms these body image tags from abstract concepts to concrete tasks with specific, manageable steps and measurable outcomes. Under this narrative, content on Xiaohongshu often provides specific steps or rules of thumb to achieve a particular tag state, showcasing the possibility of achieving and managing the appearance espoused by the tags. For instance, P3 shared her experience with weight loss topics, *"Some of their videos have impressive titles to attract you to*

click into it, for example, ‘lose xxx kilos in 30 days.’... these posts made me think I can really be like her if I follow these steps.” Consequently, this may increase users’ body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies as previously unnoticed aspects of their bodies are “reminded” through the usage of Xiaohongshu. For instance, P1 said, “I found out that when I see figure and skin-related topics, I feel reminded, feeling that I need to face these issues.”

3.2.2 Recommendation system One of the most frequently mentioned exacerbating features is Xiaohongshu’s recommendation system. Xiaohongshu’s Explore tab, which consists of content recommended by Xiaohongshu, is used in our participants’ daily routine unanimously, and five of our participants reported that they use the Explore section the most. In the context of general usage, Xiaohongshu’s recommendation system is a feature that enhances the overall experience with accurate searching ($n = 4$) and provides content that meets users’ preferences ($n = 3$). However, in the context of body image-related content, participants identified it as a mechanism that exacerbates body dissatisfaction, body comparison, and negative emotions ($n = 5$). When using the Explore tab, users may be recommended content that often resembles similar ideal tag states, resulting in a self-catalytic cycle of compounding negative emotions. P5 said, “When you click something, it will recommend you with tons of similar content. This forms a cycle: you keep looking at similar things, always anxious about the same thing.” P7 shared a similar view: “You’ll see beautiful or exquisite girls in the Explore section; when you click into it, the frequency of its appearance increases. You’ll still click it, and it’ll keep appearing.”

3.2.3 Exaggerated content Content on Xiaohongshu is often exaggerated in order for content creators to increase post engagement. Such content may convey unrealistic states or results that are decontextualized, often in a deterministic narrative, implying that anyone who follows these steps should and would achieve the desired results. Participants reported that viewing such exaggerated content provokes body dissatisfaction and body comparison, such as P4, “They also share how they become pretty exaggeratedly, I can also Our participants reported that such a narrative might provoke negative emotions when users fail to achieve such results ($n = 4$), such as being reminded of their flaws (P1), doubtful (P3), a sense of discrepancy (P5), and anxiousness (P6). For instance, P1 shared with us her experience of viewing exaggerated content:

“Many of those titles are exaggerated, such as ‘you’ll be 30 years older.’ Even if you don’t click it, you feel terrified and anxious ... For example, if I see content like ‘Become Chou Tzu-Yu (a Korean celebrity) in thirty days,’ I think that if I’m being lazy and fat.”

Exaggerated content is not limited to how the titles are presented but may also be reinforced by its visual elements, such as its thumbnails. Such content is often accompanied by “terrifying” photos showcasing the consequences of not achieving a certain negative body image state. P1 also elaborated on this concept: “Xiaohongshu depicts slouching and round shoulders in a terrifying tone and manner, feels like the entire person is curled up. See, this is terrifying.”

3.3 Mitigation strategies

Our participants also reported that they enacted strategies in attempting to mitigate the adverse effects of Xiaohongshu-related body dissatisfaction and comparison ($n = 4$). However, among these participants, only two participants displayed significant success with these strategies, showcasing a lower degree of negative emotions compared with the other two participants (P3, P6).

3.3.1 Awareness of the Xiaohongshu narrative Users may be aware that the unitary narrative of beauty standards on Xiaohongshu may not encompass the complete spectrum of the notion of body image. This awareness may be fostered intrinsically but also extrinsically, as certain content creators may avoid presenting content in a comparison-inducing narrative. P6 elaborated on this concept:

“Those (content creators) I like won’t say that their appearances are equivalent to beauty, so I think such content will not make their viewers anxious ... You’ll see tons of content creators on Xiaohongshu will say that you need to have fair skin and big eyes, maybe those who like to watch these will be more anxious?”

3.3.2 Diverse representation of body image Users may also borrow experiences from different platforms to appreciate a more diverse representation of body image. P6 said, “Even though I may be influenced by Xiaohongshu, I still see what I think is beautiful on other social media platforms.” Similarly, such experiences can also be borrowed from real-life experiences, which introduces different possibilities of body image. P4 said, “After college, I perceive a different world, so I know that many of them (posts) are photoshopped or ads. Those body images only provoke anxiety, and only a few people can achieve that.”

3.3.3 Substitute comparison In addition, users may also compare other aspects of themselves with content creators, feeling superior on aspects other than body image. When compared with content creators, even if users perceive themselves to be inferior in terms of holistic body image, users may mitigate this discrepancy by perceiving themselves to be superior in aspects such as grades and intelligence, even if these aspects are not public and available to users. For instance, P7 said, “I compare with them (content creators) by thinking that I’m not as beautiful as them, but I’m smarter, I have better grades, and I study in a better university.” P6 also elaborated on this concept: “They can’t study as well as I do, and I think that many things are mere pixels on our display; I may borrow ideas or make references, and that’s it; I think I won’t be too anxious about it.”

4 Discussion

This study aims to dissect how structural factors in social media usage may influence users’ body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies. So far, our results suggest that Xiaohongshu users’ beauty standards and perceptions are altered by Xiaohongshu usage, in addition to increased body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies. With respect to Xiaohongshu, certain structural factors of its mechanisms and culture may also exacerbate such body-related concerns. In addition, the utilization of individual mitigation strategies is also suggested, similar to the results documented in [6]. In

general, complementing previous research focusing on **what** is the relationship between social media usage and body dissatisfaction-related concerns, this study aims to determine **how** these effects are put into practice and perceived by users. Consequently, this study may provide additional insights for future research aimed at examining the potential individual and structural risk factors that may exacerbate such concerns.

On an individual level, our results suggest that mainstreamed beauty standards and atomized perceptions may exacerbate these effects. Although similar results on how thin-ideal internalization affects body dissatisfaction [2] and how facial dissatisfaction differs from body dissatisfaction [38] are documented, our results further delineated this relationship. In particular, mainstreamed beauty standards and atomized beauty perceptions function similarly as both provide new bases for conducting body comparisons. In the instance of mainstreamed beauty standards, such notions may converge the appearance of users under the influence of such standards, thus providing new bases for users to compare with each other. Atomized beauty perceptions also function in a similar manner as point-of-comparisons increase as a result of the atomization of body image, which may provoke previously unperceived body dissatisfaction aspects. Consequently, users experience higher body comparison tendencies under these factors, which may result in a higher degree of body dissatisfaction and negative emotions.

On a structural level, our results also suggest that structural factors of social media platforms can also exacerbate these effects. Similar to how [17] documented platform-specific mechanisms and cultures on Instagram come into play in affecting social media usage on body image-related concerns, our results suggest that Xiaohongshu's tagging culture, recommendation system, and exaggerating narrative can all exacerbate users' body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies. As various tag states that are framed in an exaggerated narrative become prevalent in users' Xiaohongshu usage routine, users may notice previously unnoticed body image concepts, which may increase their point-of-comparisons and body dissatisfaction. In addition, due to users' reliance on Xiaohongshu's recommendation system, the effect of viewing such content on Xiaohongshu may quickly compound body image-related concerns due to the convergence of the content recommended by Xiaohongshu's recommendation system. Such structural factors may also exacerbate the aforementioned individual factors, resulting in a higher degree of body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies. We propose that such structural differences between Xiaohongshu and other traditional social media platforms stem from it being short-form video-based and its users' reliance on its recommendation system. Content creators on Xiaohongshu are constrained by these factors and thus may be incentivized to dissect body image-related content into atomized segments. By doing so, content creators can effectively convey one concept per video while simultaneously enabling themselves to utilize tags to exploit Xiaohongshu's recommendation system, increasing post engagement and click-through rates.

One of the major limitations of this study lies in the intrinsic bias of qualitative research. Unable to rely on any standardized metrics to statistically infer relationships between variables, generalizations cannot be inferred, and potential subjective bias may exist in how

the codes and themes were derived based on our interpretation. In response, we followed the suggestions made by [1] and the six-phase thematic analysis protocol proposed in [4] to minimize the potential bias in the interviewing process and data analysis. Future quantitative research is necessary to test the hypotheses and interpretations made in this study statistically.

Another major limitation of this study is our selection of participants. As our participants solely consist of urban Taiwanese females, how the individual and structural factors identified in this study interact with users from different socio-cultural backgrounds may differ from the results made in this study. In addition, as our participants are users who display a rather high degree of body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies, the extent of the influence of such factors on users who are not body image-sensitive may also differ from the results drawn from our participants. In response, future research on how these factors interact with users who differ in socio-cultural background (i.e., non-urban, homosexual, or non-Asian females) and degree of body dissatisfaction (i.e., those with little body dissatisfaction) is also critical in understanding the extent, direction, and interpretation of such factors on a more generalized population of social media users.

The instance of Xiaohongshu may also result in limitations in terms of how Xiaohongshu compares with other social media platforms. How our identified factors come into play in a broader context of social media platforms, with different platform cultures, user distribution, content type, usage orientation, etc., should also be considered when conducting cross-platform analysis. Therefore, future research on the role these structural factors play in the instance of other social media platforms that differ in form (i.e., traditional social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter) or content orientation (i.e., non-appearance-focused social media platforms such as TikTok) can provide deeper insights on how body dissatisfaction and body comparison is affected in different instances of social media.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study's results strongly suggest that certain social media platform mechanisms and cultures can increase users' body dissatisfaction and body comparison tendencies and influence how individuals perceive their body image and beauty standards. Therefore, in addition to individual factors, as users clearly identified that social media usage indeed increased their body dissatisfaction and body comparison, how structural factors of social media platforms come into play should also accounted for to holistically understand how such body concerns are influenced by social media usage. This is particularly important as social media users nowadays often use multiple social media platforms in their daily usage [12]. Understanding how each social media platform alters users' body dissatisfaction and body comparison, implications can be drawn in understanding the nuances of such body concerns in the context of modern social media usage.

Acknowledgments

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