

# Exploration of the Reasons for Contemporary Young Women's Body Anxiety under the Background of New Consumerism

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**Abstract:** Throughout history, the aesthetic expression of the female body has continuously evolved with the advancement of media technologies. The pursuit of bodily beauty by women is actually a history of the female body being shaped by discourse. In this process, the media, as a significant force, plays a crucial role in constructing the discourse on female bodily beauty. The singular aesthetic realm constructed by mass media and the commodification of the female body under the backdrop of consumer culture have triggered body anxiety among contemporary young women. This paper starts from the perspective of how new consumerism triggers body anxiety among contemporary young women and summarizes the phenomenon of body anxiety characterized by longing for a perfect body, dissatisfaction with one's own body, pathological control over body shape, and self-objectification among women. Further analysis identifies the deep-rooted causes of body anxiety among contemporary young women, including the desire to attract the opposite sex and enhance allure, seeking identity in intimate relationships and social acceptance, discipline and scrutiny from the social environment, assistance from media dissemination and marketing, and the guidance of aesthetic culture and fashionism.

**Keywords:** New Consumerism, Body Anxiety, Ideal Body Image, Social Discipline

## 1. Introduction

With the development of social media today, the concept of "beauty" has become increasingly blurred, transforming from a practical object into a form of wealth, thereby turning the "body" from an expression of individuality into something that can be viewed as an asset. Whether consciously or unconsciously, people use the term "slim" as a reference to social aesthetic norms, believing that having a healthy figure represents self-respect, diligence, and courage, while excessive fat may indicate a negative mindset. In today's era, TV shows like "A4 waist," "collarbone coin challenge," "ant waist," and "girl group legs" profoundly demonstrate the pursuit of slimness. They popularize ideals like "long legs, willowy waists, and pale thinness" as fashion trends and integrate them into their culture and lifestyle, making "thinness" a symbol of fashion. In everyday social settings, a beautiful and slim appearance often receives special treatment, [1] yet those who are excessively thin are often overlooked.

As "thinness" increasingly becomes a reference standard for the social value of contemporary young women, the "perfect body" is undeniably a focal point in the social evaluation system. Meanwhile, new consumerism endeavors to create numerous "perfect body images" and uses social media to promote and indoctrinate female body aesthetics, thereby generating anxiety and catalyzing the phenomenon of "body anxiety" among women. Regardless of facial features or skin color, almost no one is completely satisfied with their looks; and regardless of height or weight, women's pursuit of the "ideal body" is ongoing. People are increasingly discovering so many perceived flaws in their own bodies. Thus, "body anxiety" has begun to spread among more people, becoming a syndrome of the era. In simple terms, the body—human physique—has become increasingly significant through creative, design, and marketing efforts in today's world. It is no longer just an individual's sensory pleasure but can also be a symbol of the contemporary world.

## 2. Conceptual Definitions and Theoretical Foundations

### 2.1 Conceptual Definitions

New Consumerism can be seen as a new socio-economic model that originates from global economic transformations and social reforms. It represents a modern consumption method designed to adapt to trends such as globalization, informatization, and servitization, with distinctive features that emphasize consumer initiative, personalized needs, and the pursuit of quality and experience. [3] The core of New Consumerism is not confined to the consumption of material products but leans more towards the consumption of services, experiences, and personal development. Compared to traditional consumerism, where consumers passively accept and are limited to product consumption, consumers under New Consumerism are more willing to participate in the production process and deeply consider aspects like the manufacturing process, origins, and sustainability of products. At the same time, consumer behavior has shifted from mere purchasing to enjoying the consumption process and pursuing a quality lifestyle.[2]

It can be said that modern consumption is not just the acquisition of material goods but also an expression of social and cultural behavior. New Consumerism represents a proactive involvement of consumers in the market, where their behavior is not passively accepting but actively choosing, fulfilling their material needs while simultaneously expressing their value concepts and lifestyle philosophies.

### 2.2 Theoretical Foundations

"Self-Presentation" is a theory based on symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes that individuals influence others by conveying their intentions. Erving Goffman's early research focused on the "stage," particularly exploring face-to-face methods of self-expression. He used the term "performance" to describe the behaviors that occur and the impacts these behaviors have on specific observers over time. Self-presentation theory divides everyday interpersonal interactions into "front stage" and "back stage." The "front stage" refers to a structured, observer-defined situation, while the "back stage" is a starkly different setting, inaccessible to the audience, who can only passively accept this environment without the ability to change it. At the forefront of the stage, a spectacular performance is displayed (Figure 1).

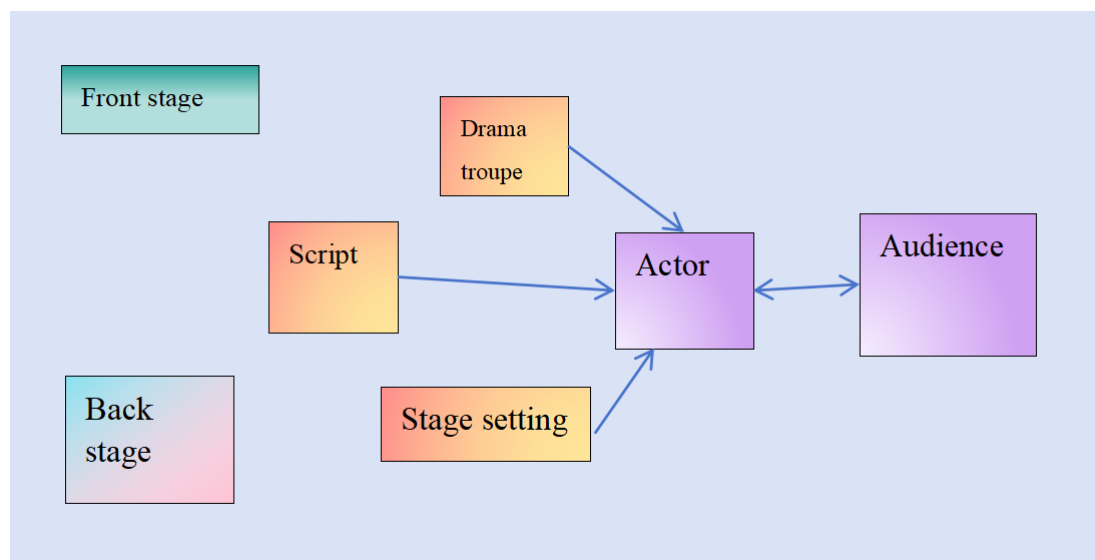


Figure 1: Self-Presentation Theory Diagram

With the rise of consumerism, online self-presentation has evolved beyond merely depicting the "self" to a deeper form of expression. On social media, women, with their outstanding appearances and perfect figures, become symbols of self-presentation, but this also leads to a series of body anxieties and the dilemma of "involution." The emergence of online social platforms introduces not just a new mode of social interaction but also significant changes to people's social habits. [4] Individuals play dual roles online: both as content creators (bloggers) and as audiences. Bloggers manage their impressions by posting information and images, while audiences interact by responding to these posts.

In the mix of real and fabricated self-presentation on these platforms, people actively choose to use the internet to show everything they want the audience to see, whether on the front stage or backstage. They voluntarily move their lives online. "Appearance anxiety" delves into how to display personality traits by playing the protagonist, and thus, as artists, we need to retain the characteristics of the guest while playing the protagonist to meet the audience's needs. In this process, we need to balance the conflicts between individualism and socialized guests.

### **3. Characteristics of Contemporary Young Women's Body Anxiety under the Context of New Consumerism**

#### ***3.1 Longing for the Ideal Body***

Under the context of new consumerism, an array of photo editing apps and beauty-enhancing cameras continue to emerge, and many images on the internet are meticulously designed and modified before they are presented to the public. The practice of editing images in videos and advertisements is no longer a commercial secret; it has even become an unwritten rule prevalent across various industries.

The use of techniques such as photo editing, fine retouching, beauty filters, and leg stretching not only fulfills contemporary young women's aspirations for the "ideal body" but also stimulates their positive emotions, making them pay more attention to their figures. This, in turn, enables them to engage more effectively in social comparisons, thereby motivating themselves. The use of technology that projects the idea, "I can also become that thin," not only provides women with more hopes of slimming down but also motivates them to strive harder towards perfecting themselves. Although the immediate desire to lose weight may not lead to actual weight loss actions in the short term, in the long run, it might inspire a healthier and more positive lifestyle.[5]

With technological advancements, various formats such as images and videos have appeared on many online media platforms to motivate women to lose weight and achieve a healthy figure. Young women are inspired by these online materials, and while they may experience negative emotions, they may also adopt a positive attitude towards pursuing a beautiful life after slimming down.[6] Thus, many women have adopted active lifestyles, diligently controlling their weight to maintain their health and beauty.

#### ***3.2 Dissatisfaction with One's Own Body***

Body dissatisfaction is a common emotion that may stem from an individual's problematic perceptions of their weight and body shape, leading to negative beliefs and emotions. This sentiment can affect a person's mental health and their satisfaction with themselves. As more people showcase the idealized thin image through various means, comparing oneself with this slender ideal has become a natural process for women: whether consciously or unconsciously, they compare their bodies to the ideal shape. If they do not meet these ideal standards, they are deemed "not in line with societal aesthetic expectations," leading to feelings of dissatisfaction, negative self-perception, and emotional downturns. The emergence of "slenderness" has led many young women to reassess their bodies, [7] discovering that this negative experience makes them more obsessed with their appearance and even dissatisfied with their body image. [8] This phenomenon of slenderness tyranny is not a neutral viewpoint but a prevalent social issue.

#### ***3.3 Pathological Control of Body Shape***

As women are seen as benchmarks of social value, long-term body monitoring may lead to negative psychological or subjective experiences, such as feelings of shame, reduced optimal motivation (flow), and decreased awareness of bodily states (such as hunger or sexual arousal). This can result in body dissatisfaction or a negative body self-image, thereby triggering a range of psychological disorders. As societal views on the aesthetic value and status of the body have dramatically changed over time, expectations for physical appearance, including body shape, have also risen, making body sculpting a plannable endeavor.[9]

As the topic of female bodies increasingly gains attention, more women on social media platforms like Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) and Weibo are sharing posts tagged with "binge eating and purging," "liposuction," "dieting," in an attempt to achieve the perfect figure as per mainstream

aesthetic standards. This has led to more extreme control over body shape and size, even evolving into an extreme lifestyle. As more women find that they cannot achieve satisfaction through exercise, dieting, or diet pills, they turn to social media articles about cosmetic surgery and medical aesthetics. When they see influencers share before-and-after comparison pictures, [10] such extreme slimming behaviors are triggered. Influenced by anxiety and impulsive emotions, many focus only on the end results, overlooking the risks and harm that can occur during medical cosmetic procedures, thus making irrational decisions.

### ***3.4 Female Self-Objectification***

Bartky's theory of sexual objectification posits that in today's society, women are compelled to treat their bodies, body parts, or sexual functions as tools rather than as true aspects of their individual selves. This practice leads women to scrutinize themselves from a third-person perspective, viewing their bodies as objects subject to external appraisal. Self-objectification focuses on appearance, and it can be seen as a form of body surveillance, allowing individuals to better meet the expectations of others or societal norms, and to avoid negative evaluations. Thus, individuals are encouraged to view their bodies from the perspective of an observer.

In consumer society, while it appears that women have control over their bodies, under the influence of body anxiety, the desire for an idealized body has become a quasi-religious absolute command. [11] Women have unconsciously come to view their bodies as utilitarian commodities. Women must achieve the state of perfection expected by female subjects through external adornments and self-discipline of their bodies, leading to temporary emotional relief and a sense of "liberation" of the body. This also means that when women use cosmetics, clothing, hairstyles, and other feminine symbols for self-care, their bodies become tools for profiting on social media and cultural capital, displaying characteristics of being objectified, commodified, and commercialized. Women's bodies lose their original agency, becoming absorbed in an environment created by others. [12] Media propaganda in consumer society defines and delimits the "beauty" of the female body, reinforcing the social mainstream aesthetic discipline of women. The beauty of a woman's body or a beautiful body image becomes an important marker of female allure. In this process, women are subject to strict scrutiny and evaluation, their bodies are severely constrained, and this oppression leads them to emphasize the self more, but also results in an unhealthy self-concept.

## **4. Analysis of the Causes of Body Anxiety among Contemporary Young Women**

### ***4.1 Desire to Attract the Opposite Sex and Enhance Charm***

In today's society, people's identities have undergone significant changes; they are no longer seen merely as material wealth but as spiritual wealth, which can be converted into various forms of wealth, including money, skills, fame, and others. [13] Under the concept of "exchange," "reciprocity" refers to the mutual exchange of wealth between spouses, who hope to gain each other's recognition and respect through their beauty, talent, and capabilities. "Slimness" offers a new perspective for women, integrating people's aesthetic views and highlighting the physiological and psychological value of individuals, making people pursue not just material satisfaction but spiritual fulfillment for a better future.

According to a study by a street blog, both men and women are valued, but "thinness" as a beauty standard is particularly important to young women. It not only helps them enhance their physical attractiveness and gain admiration from the opposite sex but also satisfies their psychological needs for attention from the opposite sex, thereby creating a form of communication based on body shape in society. This leads women to consciously prioritize "thinness" in their body management.

### ***4.2 Seeking Intimate Relationship and Social Recognition***

The pursuit of recognition in intimate relationships and within society significantly affects women's self-identification with their bodies. "Frustrated" case studies show that intimate relationships between men and women can greatly change one's social role, thereby enhancing their social status. However, in general social contexts, relationships between men and women may not be stable, potentially leading to a decrease in their social status and sense of social responsibility. When an individual faces dual challenges, he/she may need to take measures to maintain a good external image. These measures could

include enhancing personal traits to attract their target and cultivating unique qualities to earn respect. In this context, an individual's personal characteristics can influence their social abilities.

In the process of gaining social recognition, the importance of reference groups cannot be overlooked, and the media plays a crucial referential role. Although the identity images created by the media might only represent a virtual concept and not an actual benchmark, the standards of identity established by them could be seen as external expectations. Women use these standards as references, which can lead them to feel dissatisfaction, confusion, and anxiety about their appearances.[14]

#### ***4.3 Social Discipline and the Gaze***

Foucault believed that the aim of "discipline" is not merely limited to "submissive bodies" but should also focus on how discipline changes people's thinking and behavior. This change originates from the integration of contemporary mass media and commercial culture, which have led to the diversion of male attention and the neglect of women. With the development of social media, the influence of discipline has become more widespread; it can control, cultivate, and manage individuals and also create new information, making it a tool subject to authority constraints. By using mobile facilities and instant communication tools, people can stay informed about societal changes anywhere and at any time. Historically, women's body shapes have been constrained by traditional views, measured against male standards. Traditional family views have regarded women's body shape as an oppressed group, as well as an institution deprived of autonomy and capacity for development. Thus, traditional family and societal views, along with other adverse factors, have led to a more tolerant perspective on women's body shapes.

#### ***4.4 Media Influence and Marketing Assistance***

Contemporary youth possess strong digital skills and media literacy, treating their "smartphones and tablets" as essentials, from breakfast to dinner, from eating to entertainment, continuously transforming their lives. Social media platforms such as Weibo, Kuaishou, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu are also changing their consumption habits. As media evolve, their profound impacts on people surpass previous imaginations. This new marketing model has changed people's thinking and allowed many new brands to rise rapidly. [15] Similarly, the concept of "thinness" has been widely implanted into female consumers, becoming a symbol for them. The influence of "beauty myths" and "perfect body images" has deeply penetrated the hearts of contemporary young women, redefining their aesthetic views of the body and guiding them to consider how to better protect their health. However, the ideals of "beauty in thinness" and "slim as the standard" are increasingly used to represent contemporary aesthetic views and the emphasis on health.

#### ***4.5 Aesthetic Culture and Fashionism***

In recent years, the BM style clothing popular among young women has undeniably captivated thousands of girls. The "short, tight, and revealing" style of BM clothing, with its exquisite tailoring and elegant design, perfectly combines women's elegance and charming allure. It is currently the mainstream aesthetic attire championed in the fashion circle. Clothing, as women's "second skin," embraces both tradition and modernity, becoming a benchmark of current trends. BM style emphasizes women's body curves; designs like cropped and tight-fitting cater to the societal aesthetic culture of "beauty in thinness," wildly pursued by extremely slender women.[16]

For example, in this semester's course practice, my group chose to profit by selling women's accessories, including pearl bracelets, agate bracelets, various styles of hair clips, hair ties, rings, and earrings. During the stall setup, I noticed that most female university students are more or less influenced by popular culture, always prioritizing fashionable accessories over practicality, paying for looks. Occasionally, they encounter bracelets that do not fit, and consumers tend to "blame themselves," leaning towards self-deprecation and negative self-suggestion. Additionally, during a holiday charity clothing sale, I was responsible for selecting and ordering clothes. This experience gave me deep insight into a phenomenon: under the current consumerist culture, the mainstream and popular garments favored by modern young women tend to be smaller in size, almost as small as children's clothing. This phenomenon is further exemplified in sales: compared to loose, casual styles, those with tight lines and shorter designs sell better. Most women disregard loose sportswear, yet compete to try on noticeably smaller, tight-fitting garment sizes; some, facing a mismatch in clothing size, comfort themselves with "I need to lose weight, I've gained weight again," revealing a deep-seated body image

anxiety. This is not an isolated phenomenon; it reflects a deeper societal cultural trend: the distorted thinness aesthetic under a consumerist backdrop. Under this intense societal and cultural pressure, women are forced to align their personal body images with socially preset standards, leading to widespread body dissatisfaction and symptoms of body anxiety. Not only this, but such aesthetic tendencies further reinforce the pursuit of the "ideal body," causing women to seek societal acceptance and confirmation of their self-worth through constant self-denial and criticism. Therefore, we must deeply reflect on how to find a path that promotes healthy body image awareness and breaks distorted aesthetic concepts in the current strong consumption-oriented culture, to prevent women from falling into endless anxiety about their body image.

## **5. Summary and Reflection**

As materialistic values become increasingly popular and consumerism gains traction, the prevailing concept that celebrates material, wealth, and dazzling appearances prioritizes the pursuit of material enjoyment as its main characteristic, neglecting physical and mental health. Consequently, the body is misconstrued as merely a means of material enjoyment rather than a true reflection of one's inner world. Therefore, the body is not only recognized but also deemed a necessary part of social aesthetic culture, holding significant importance. With technological advancements, more and more consumers are pursuing healthier diets, whether tangible or virtual, and are gaining more attention through a "slim" appearance. This concept is not only widely accepted but also increasingly understood and adopted by teenagers.

However, the reality is that "fat and thin" are merely constructions of meaning by the media. Online beauty images are all crafted by the media, which can easily mislead women, especially young women, leading to frequent occurrences of young girls developing conditions like anorexia in their efforts to lose weight, a trend not unrelated to the new consumerism's excessive portrayal of "thin as beautiful." As time progresses, the concept of "thin" has become more pronounced in society, particularly among today's youth. From body control, exercise, and appearance changes to nutritional balance, the pursuit in each area enhances the concept of "thin" to meet various societal demands. "Body anxiety" is a pervasive and significant social phenomenon, yet it still requires further scientific, systematic, and meticulous exploration.

## **6. Optimization and Improvement Strategies**

### ***6.1 Reshaping Healthy Aesthetic Concepts***

A healthy aesthetic concept emphasizes the importance of inner beauty, encouraging people to focus more on virtues, good habits, and personal charm. It is essential to promote diverse aesthetic standards: through education and media campaigns, emphasize that different body types have their unique beauty, breaking the narrow view that "thinness equals beauty." [17] This can help reduce excessive anxiety about body shape among women and foster societal recognition and respect for diverse beauties. Highlight intrinsic values: through education and cultural activities, emphasize women's internal values, such as intelligence, kindness, and bravery, rather than just focusing on their appearances. This can help enhance women's self-awareness and self-worth, reducing the excessive focus on body shape.

### ***6.2 Strengthening Positive Guidance in Media and Social Media***

Government agencies should strictly review advertising content: rigorously scrutinize advertisements related to slimming and beauty to avoid conveying incorrect consumer concepts. They should ensure that the advertising content is truthful and healthy, not misleading consumers. Regulatory bodies should regulate social media platforms: strengthen the supervision of social media platforms to clean up and correct harmful information, preventing negative impacts on women. These authorities should also encourage social media platforms to share more content about health, confidence, positive life attitudes, and values, providing positive guidance for women.

### ***6.3 Enhancing Women's Self-Awareness and Self-Esteem***

Educational institutions should conduct consumer knowledge education: through education and

training, enhance women's consumer knowledge to help them establish rational consumer concepts. This includes teaching women how to identify false advertisements, how to evaluate the true value of products, and how to make reasonable consumption decisions. Community organizations should foster confidence and self-esteem: through psychological counseling and cultural activities, help women build confidence and self-esteem. They should encourage them to focus on their strengths and achievements to enhance their sense of self-identity and self-worth.

#### 6.4 Strengthening Regulation and Standardization of the Consumer Market

Government regulators should ensure the neutrality and authority of management bodies: strengthen the management of the consumer market to ensure that management bodies maintain a neutral role and authority in the market. This can help protect fair competition and consumer rights. Lawmakers should establish relevant legal systems: formulate normative, democratic, and transparent legal systems to ensure the healthy development of the consumer market. Authorities should take strict action against illegal and non-compliant behaviors to maintain market order and protect consumer interests.

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