

# "Only When I'm Idle Do I Pay Attention to Myself in the Mirror" : The Underlying Concern behind Appearance Anxiety among Chinese Female College Students

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## ABSTRACT

Appearance anxiety has become a widespread sociocultural phenomenon among contemporary Chinese young women, yet the deeper developmental concerns that underlie this anxiety remain under-examined. This study investigates what appearance anxiety is really about for Chinese female college students and how identity work may attenuate such anxiety. This study conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 14 Chinese female college students and analyzed transcripts using reflexive thematic analysis. Interviewees often equated others' approval with self-realization, and uncritical adherence to narrow beauty ideals intensified anxiety. They recognized that their excessive focus on appearance sometimes served as a refuge for feelings of worthlessness and idleness. Through ongoing self-exploration, they gradually abandoned the pursuit of "perfection" defined by others, embraced authentic self-presentation, and built confidence by developing "acquired abilities" beyond appearance. Body-image journeys were experienced as developmental processes of self-acceptance, self-exploration, and self-improvement—the underlying concern of "appearance anxiety" was frequently confusion about self-identity rather than appearance per se. Psychological practitioners and youth workers should promote holistic capability development and cultivate multiple sources of self-worth to help young people move from externally-driven appearance concerns toward stable self-identity.

**Keywords:** Appearance Anxiety; Body Image; Chinese Female College Students; Self-Identity; Qualitative Research

## INTRODUCTION

The rise of new media has amplified "appearance culture." Digital retouching technology, an extension of makeup and plastic surgery, immerses individuals in unrealistic body ideals (Murnen & Seabrook, 2012). "Appearance culture" actively interacts with and reinforces media ideals, peer conversations, and other sociocultural influences related to appearance (Jones et al., 2004). For contemporary Chinese women, the prevailing beauty ideal is "fair-skinned, young-looking, and slim," with specific and stringent criteria: a girlish appearance, a weight under 100 jin (50 kilograms), fair skin, a palm-sized face, a high cranial vault, double eyelids, a high nose bridge, "smiling lips," white teeth, a pointed chin, a "swan neck," right-angle shoulders, collarbones that can hold coins, an "A4 waist," and "comic legs" (Liu, 2022; Liu, 2023).

Due to these rigid and homogenous beauty standards prevalent in the culture, "appearance anxiety" has become a buzzword among Chinese young people since 2021. Initially recognized as a pathological symptom in psychology, appearance anxiety is now becoming a widespread sociocultural phenomenon among young people. The 2022 Chinese Youth Internet Users' Social Mindset Report surveyed the anxious status of 5,492 young

people across different regions, age groups, and education levels, revealing that appearance anxiety was the third most common concern, following study/work and health anxiety (CCSGR, 2023). College-aged women are particularly vulnerable to body image disorders due to the significant physical, psychological, and environmental changes they experience (Neighbors & Sobal, 2007; Snapp et al., 2012). Cross-cultural research indicates that Chinese college women report higher levels of appearance anxiety compared to their American counterparts (Jung et al., 2009). A survey conducted by China Youth Daily among 2,063 college students nationwide found that approximately 59% reported experiencing appearance anxiety, with moderate anxiety being more prevalent among female students (nearly 60%) than male students (37%) (China Youth Daily, 2021).

Over a century, basic and applied research on negative body image has developed considerably. This body of work has expanded its scope from initial investigations of clinical populations to include nonclinical populations, shifting its focus from pathology towards public health. However, much of this literature treats appearance anxiety as exclusively appearance-focused and pays insufficient attention to its underlying developmental concerns (e.g., identity work) among emerging adults. Qualitative, context-sensitive examinations of what lies beneath appearance anxiety in everyday life remain limited.

This study explores the deeper concern that underlies appearance anxiety among Chinese female college students and examines how identity exploration and capability development may alleviate such anxiety. It contributes to a conceptual clarification that reframes appearance anxiety as frequently rooted in self-identity confusion and practical implications for capability-oriented interventions in higher-education and youth-work settings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Negative Body Image

Body image is a multidimensional construct encompassing subjective perceptions and attitudes toward one's body, especially physical appearance (Cash, 2012). Negative body image, an aspect of body image, refers to an individual's negative perceptions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors about specific body parts (Cook-Cottone & Phelps, 2003). It exists on a continuum, ranging from widespread "benign dissatisfaction" to intense disturbances and pathologic distress (Cash, 2002), occurring when a discrepancy arises between the desired ideal self-image and the perceived actual self-image. Certainly, the degree of satisfaction with one's appearance often depends on the importance one places on achieving the ideal image (Cash & Szymanski, 1995; Kong & Harris, 2015).

Adolescence is consistently identified as a high-risk period for negative body image (Mahon et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2022). For many, the body image concerns of adolescence persist into emerging adulthood (Frisén et al., 2015; Grogan, 2017). Zhang et al. (2018) found that over 57% of surveyed Chinese female college students desired thinness despite many being underweight. However, emerging adulthood also offers potential for positive change (Gattario & Frisén, 2019; Piran & Teall, 2012; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). A survey of positive body image among Chinese college students showed that 67.8% had a positive body image (Yan, 2025). According to the holistic model proposed by Wood-Barcalow (2010), despite the protective filter of positive body image, negative body messages may sometimes bypass the filter and be internalized in certain situations. Having a positive body image does not exclude the occasional "bad days." These findings suggest that women may experience appearance anxiety all the time.

### Emerging Adult, Self-identity and Body Image

Erikson (1950) posited that identity formation is the central task of adolescence. However, with the subsequent development of industrial society, young people experienced an "extended adolescence," a period during which they could explore and find their appropriate roles in society through free role experimentation (Erikson, 1968, p. 156). Today's emerging adults possess unprecedented freedom, and identity formation extends beyond high school graduation and continues into "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2015, pp. 7, 10).

Self-identity involves a deep exploration of one's living conditions and the meaning of life. It addresses questions like "Who am I?", "Where do I come from?", and "Where am I going?". The body self is an important component

of one's self-concept (Bermúdez et al., 1995). Webster and Tiggemann (2003) found that self-esteem and self-concept were more significantly related to body satisfaction in a young female population. An individual's appearance holds significant meaning: firstly, it has substantive meaning, as appearance can be a component of self-identity; secondly, it has symbolic meaning, as appearance can be a symbol expressing self-identity (Wang, 2001). Therefore, the external image is not only a physiological existence but also a carrier of self-identity and a symbol of social interaction.

## Method

This study utilized a generic qualitative research method. By asking participants to recount their experiences struggling with their bodies, we aimed to gain rich, contextualized insights into when they experience appearance anxiety, what are they truly anxious about.

Purposeful sampling guided participant selection. A recruitment poster was disseminated via popular Chinese social media platforms among young women (e.g., Xiaohongshu, Douban, WeChat Moments). Eligibility criteria included: (a) being female Chinese citizens enrolled in mainland Chinese colleges; and (b) having a history of negative body image coupled with a current generally positive body image, which may provide them with richer body image experiences and stronger reflective abilities. Following the initial online recruitment, snowball sampling was employed. Saturation was achieved after interviewing 14 participants.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted by researcher. Interviews were conducted both offline and online according to participants' preferences. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. An interview guide, informed by the research questions and literature, was used. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim shortly after completion. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase thematic analysis. NVivo 14.0 software aided data management, coding, and theme development.

Credibility was addressed through reflexivity and member checking. Researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research. Preliminary findings were shared with participants to ensure alignment between identified themes and their lived experiences. Transferability was enhanced through thick description, and the use of maximum variation sampling further contributed by capturing diverse experiences within the target population. Ethical approval was obtained from Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM-2024-051).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Across participants' narratives, what was labelled as "appearance anxiety" often indexed identity work during emerging adulthood rather than a purely appearance-centered problem. The developmental movement described by participants ran from externally driven perfectionism to authenticity and capability-anchored confidence. There are three interlinked themes: (1) underlying anxieties beyond appearance; (2) accepting imperfections and presenting the authentic self; and (3) building confidence through efforts beyond appearance. Throughout, we interpret the data with reference to classic and contemporary perspectives on the looking-glass self, the "true/false self," positive body image, and youth development. The anxiety associated with a negative body image appears to be about appearance but fundamentally stems from confusion about self-identity. To alleviate their anxiety, apart from making adaptive investments in their appearance, the girls further establish self-identity through "efforts beyond appearance." Their self-identity is continuously constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed along the journey of body image, becoming increasingly solid over time.

### "What Are My Real Life Issues? " — Underlying Anxiety Beyond Appearance

This subtheme is reflected by three progressive codes: "Continuous Mental Burnout," "Continuous Self-Discovery," and "Self-Identification as Deep Anxiety." Appearance anxiety is not necessarily triggered by a specific appearance-related event. The interviewees believe that, often, appearance anxiety is not just about appearance itself. It is frequently accompanied by anxiety in other areas. Appearance anxiety is often accompanied by mental drain or overthinking. Han Yu used to spend a lot of time watching beauty videos on

Douyin (one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms) or browsing clothes on Taobao (the most popular Chinese shopping website). "...I couldn't stop until I felt nauseous. It seemed like appearance anxiety, but it was essentially an unfillable void and an inescapable tension inside me." This was because she felt stagnant and unproductive, keeping herself in a state of endless anxiety. Siwen believed that appearance anxiety is actually caused by constant self-examination.

It's like there's always another voice inside you, and it's completely negative. Then you really start to believe you're not good enough. Actually, no one has even called you fat! Some people may have experienced verbal attacks from others, but many people are just fighting with themselves, engaging in mental burnout. It's about constantly finding fault with yourself, like finding bones in an egg. (Siwen)

Therefore, appearance anxiety was just an external manifestation of deeper anxiety. Zhou Lu believed that cognitive efforts are key to alleviating anxiety. She used to be an anxious, sensitive, and insecure person with very unstable emotions. Now, when facing appearance anxiety, she no longer confines herself to superficial matters but instead asks, "What are my real life issues? I don't avoid them; I solve them!"

My current good mental state is the result of long-term efforts. I don't like to stay on the surface; I discover the essence of things bit by bit. Only by understanding the nature of things can I truly solve my problems. Later, I really felt that I was getting better bit by bit. My current state is increasingly relaxed because I have gradually figured out my past confusions. (Zhou Lu)

Wang Huan mistakenly thought that her persistent anxiety just came from our appearance at first. However, with each fluctuation in body image, her self-exploration deepens continuously. The essence of appearance anxiety lies not in appearance itself, but in self-worth and self-identity.

Larson (2000) observes that boredom, worthlessness, and a lack of motivation are pervasive among contemporary youth, producing "an ennui of being trapped in the present, waiting for someone to prove to them that life is worth living." The sample of this study consists of a group of college women who are in the stage of "emerging adulthood," exploring and struggling amidst uncertainties by their bodies. Arnett (2015) proposed emerging adults experience "both excitement and uneasiness, wide-open possibility and confusion, new freedoms and new fears." It is "an extended period of exploration and instability" (p.1-2). Therefore, the primary characteristic of emerging adulthood is "identity explorations: answering the question 'who am I?' and trying out various life options, especially in love and work" (p. 9). Consistent with those opinions, our participants—after navigating changes and fluctuations in body image—gradually recognized that what appears as appearance anxiety is often the surface expression of a deeper, more persistent concern about self-identity. For most non-clinical female college students, appearance-related anxiety is best understood as a developmental form of anxiety rather than a purely aesthetic problem.

### **"I'm Now Starting to Accept My Imperfections" — From Perfectionism to Authenticity**

In the early stages of pursuing beauty, the interviewees were accustomed to viewing themselves from others' perspectives, equating others' approval with self-fulfillment. They dressed not to please themselves but to chase the "perfection" in others' eyes. They took photos not to authentically record themselves but to create a beautiful yet deceptive image through filters. After exploring themselves from appearance to their inner self, the interviewees not only began to accept their appearance but also eventually came to embrace their entire selves, which allowed them to present their true selves. This theme is generated through the following two codes: "Acceptance of Imperfections" and "presentation of True Self."

When beauty has a unified standard, people tend to think that failing to meet this standard is imperfect and flawed. Han Yu believed that every instance of negative body image is accompanied by intense self-denial. She further explained: "I don't think that chubby body, that unattractive face belongs to me. I despise my big face, freckles, double chin, waist fat, thick legs... I internally reject them. It feels as if the body is not my own." After entering college, Weiwei also realized that appearance was just the initial stage of self-identity. After experiencing negative body images and repeated fluctuations, she embarked on a path of self-acceptance that began with appearance anxiety:



I'm now starting to accept my imperfections: I have some belly fat, freckles, high cheekbones, and a receding hairline. This journey began with appearance anxiety. Then, I started to ponder many other aspects of myself. I began to accept all my imperfections, starting with my appearance and gradually moving towards my inner self. It's been a progressive process. (Weiwei)

Xinxin used to strive to maintain a perfect image in front of the boy she liked. "I didn't even dare to blow my nose in front of him, fearing he would see my imperfections. Now, I don't care about these things anymore. I just want to present my true self. I don't accept anyone's judgment." When discussing girls liking to use filters in photos, Song Jia shared her perspective: "I used to enjoy editing my photos to make myself look better, but now I prefer uploading the original images. I now appreciate the natural and authentic look." After experiencing repeated fluctuations and breakthroughs in her body image, Siwen can now confidently show herself. She believed, "Those who truly accept themselves can exude charming confidence and grace from the inside out."

Initially, respondents simply believed that if they look in line with societal beauty standards, they can expect to gain others' approval. When beauty is defined by a singular standard, girls come to believe that anything deviating from it is unacceptable. As a result, they habitually express dissatisfaction or even disgust with their bodies. "I have excess fat on my belly; I have freckles; my cheekbones are high; my hairline is receding..." (Weiwei). Society imposes idealized beauty standards on women, leading many to devote significant time and effort to chasing an unattainable vision of perfection. Since it is impossible to fully achieve the societal standards of female beauty, which demand a near-transcendence of natural limitations. "A woman may live much of her life with a pervasive feeling of bodily deficiency. Hence, a tighter control of the body has gained a new kind of hold over the mind" (Bartky, 1988).

The essence of body image fluctuations is the inability to accept the real self at this moment, because one's self-worth is attached to external aspects and others' recognition. Viewing others as extensions of their self-perception, they rely on others' comments to support an increasingly fragile self. Negative evaluations or social neglect can significantly undermine their self-worth, making it even more difficult to accept their authentic selves and ultimately leading to a negative body image. According to the "Looking-Glass Self" theory, others act like a mirror, allowing people to form self-awareness by observing others' reactions to themselves (Cooley, 1998). We equate others' recognition with self-realization.

However, an identity shaped by others' perceptions and expectations is inherently false and fragile. Donald W. Winnicott proposed the concepts of the true self and the false self. The true self is constructed around one's own feelings; "Only the true self can be creative and only the true self can feel real" (Winnicott, 1960, p. 148). Individuals with a false self are constantly concerned with others' words and actions, unaware of their own suffering. Their mind and body are separated. They have "managed to put on a successful 'show of being real.'" Such patients suffered inwardly from a sense of being empty, dead, or 'phony'" (p. 146). Only by learning to accept and appreciate the real self can one create a positive cycle in various aspects of life. Positive interpersonal interactions, embodied activities, and significant life events help interviewees gain perception, acceptance, appreciation, and gratitude for their bodies. Xuanxuan eventually overcame appearance anxiety and boldly showcased her body and personality through different styles of dress. Han Yu achieved a connection between body and mind through yoga practice. Traditional Chinese medicine not only improved Weiwei's health and skin condition but also changed her attitude towards appearance, body, and even life. They abandoned the pursuit of "perfection" in others' eyes, accepting and appreciating their real selves. Increasingly, voices on Chinese social media advocate for "turning off filters" and "making peace with bare faces." Beauty is not about catering to others' eyes; it is a free expression of the true self. "Only by truly accepting oneself can a woman radiate charming confidence and style from the inside out" (Jingwen).

### **"Exploring Multiple Aspects of Yourself and the World"— Capability Building and Confidence**

The interviewees asserted that "there are many things in this world worth your attention," suggesting that girls should build confidence beyond their appearance. "When there are many sources of confidence, appearance will not cause too much anxiety" (Wang Huan). They also believed that growth in other areas brings a state of confidence from the inside out. When a person's overall sense of value is enhanced, their body is upright and relaxed, and their eyes and face have a "glow," making them look even more attractive. This theme is generated

through the following three codes: "Experiencing Appearance Anxiety When Lacking a Sense of Achievement," "Becoming Confident When Gaining a Sense of Achievement," and "Exploring Multiple Aspects of Yourself and the World."

The respondents thought girls should gain a sense of control over their lives through their own efforts. Remaining in a state of "lying flat" only leads to focusing on a static external self. As they gradually gain a sense of control over their lives, their appearance anxiety will also be alleviated. In high school, Shanshan had poor grades and was overweight, which led her to give up on herself, believing that her life would always remain the same. After entering university, she became the class monitor and participated in many activities.

I felt capable again. At that point, I thought, I need to change quickly and cannot remain stuck in the past. So, I researched healthy recipes online and started going to the gym. Soon, I not only lost weight and looked better, but I also became more confident. (Shanshan)

When an individual's abilities are demonstrated or recognized, they become more confident. Zhou Lu asserted that inner confidence can make her appear more attractive. Her friends often remarked that when she was on stage articulating her views, her eyes and face exude a "glow" that makes her particularly attractive. Han Yu posited that a beautiful face can eventually lead to aesthetic fatigue. "My mother always says, 'Confidence is a woman's best cosmetic.' Confidence stems from one's capabilities. Confident individuals tend to look more attractive. This can indeed create a positive feedback loop."

Wang Huan believed that if individuals do not make efforts, do not "explore other aspects of life," and do not gain recognition from themselves or others through their efforts, they will only see a static external self. At this point, they will focus heavily on appearance and are likely to develop appearance anxiety. "Because you have not made efforts to explore other aspects of your life, it is essential to develop acquired abilities; this is the foundation of confidence. People only care about themselves in the mirror when they are idle."

Self-identity are crucial developmental tasks during their emerging adulthood, and pursuing a better self is the fundamental way for them to address overall anxiety. "Growth has not only rewards and pleasure, but also many intrinsic pains and always will have. Each step forward is a step into the unfamiliar and is thought of as possibly dangerous" (Friedan, 1963, p. 305). When reviewing her experiences with negative body image, Han Yu often finds herself in a state of endless anxiety. She describes the essence of appearance anxiety as "an unfillable void inside me, an inescapable tension." As Wang Huan analyzed, "If you don't make an effort, have nothing to do, and don't explore more aspects of yourself inwardly, you can only see a static external self. The only thing you can focus on is your appearance." It is evident that appearance anxiety is not necessarily triggered by specific appearance-related events. Sometimes, it may be caused by an individual's overall anxiety, which then generalizes to their appearance.

Facing the fluctuations in body image, the interviewees believe that "anxiety is not necessarily a bad thing" (Siwen). Anxiety reflects dissatisfaction with one's current state and the desire of a better self. In our culture, women's development is hindered on a physiological level. However, like men, women also aspire to achieve secular accomplishments, gain others' respect, and attain independence and freedom through their efforts and abilities (Friedan, 1963, p. 303-304). This aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory: after basic survival needs are met, humans develop higher-level needs for belonging and love, esteem, and ultimately self-actualization. Moreover, self-actualization is not an end state but a process of realizing personal potential at any moment and to any degree (Maslow, 1954). The surface of anxiety is appearance, but the deeper issue is self-identity. Recognizing this essence, the interviewees actively alleviate their anxiety through efforts beyond appearance. Zhou Lu no longer confines herself to superficial matters but instead "thinks about what her real life issues are and faces and solves them!" Wang Huan also suggests developing "acquired abilities beyond appearance," stating that "only by exploring other aspects of life" can one avoid being preoccupied with appearance.

## Implications

This study reconceptualizes "appearance anxiety" as a developmental identity phenomenon rather than a purely appearance-bound disturbance. Drawing on participants' narratives, what is experienced as anxiety "about looks" often operates as an index of identity confusion, especially salient during emerging adulthood, when commitments and self-definitions are in flux. This ontological re-specification shifts the analytical and intervention focus to constructing the self (e.g., values clarification, role exploration, capability building). It also explains the common coexistence of generally positive body image with episodic "bad days" in non-clinical populations: fluctuations are expected features of ongoing identity work and are often self-correcting as developmental resources strengthen. In doing so, the study extends body-image scholarship to dynamic processes of identity formation and regulation.

Gattario and Frisé (2019) suggested that addressing young people's overall sense of belonging, competence, and empowerment is crucial for developing a positive body image. Success in work and study can foster a sense of agency and empowerment, which is vital for the positive transformation of body image. Accordingly, to help young people overcome negative body image, it is crucial for the practitioners and policymakers to foster their positive development and ignite their inner passion.

## CONCLUSION

This study reframes "appearance anxiety" among Chinese female college students as a developmental identity phenomenon rather than a purely appearance-bound disturbance. The participants in this study are in the developmental stage of "emerging adulthood," a period primarily characterized by identity exploration. They are exploring and struggling amidst uncertainties by their bodies, with each fluctuation in body image reflecting a process of self-exploration and discovery. They viewed appearance anxiety as "not necessarily a bad thing," but as a sign of striving toward self-improvement. Consequently, the participants believed that only through "efforts beyond appearance" can they truly accept their authentic selves, achieve better selves, and ultimately establish a sense of self-identity.

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### Ethical Approval

This study is approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects of Universiti Putra Malaysia (Reference No.: JKEUPM-2024-051).

### Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

### Data availability statement

Considering the privacy of the participants, the data is confidential and used only for this study.

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