Why are Chinese High-school Girls Anxious About Their Appearances?

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ABSTRACT

Appearance anxiety has already become a common phenomenon in today's society. Some high school girls begin to worry about their appearances and even feel anxious about the narrow definition of beauty and the influences of other people. This study utilizes online questionnaires to explore high school girls who lived in different cities in China to study their levels of anxiety, social impacts on their appearance anxiety, the effects of anxiety, and the ways to reduce appearance anxiety. This research finds out that high-school girls' appearance anxiety is mostly the result of social interactions including social comparison, conformity, and social media's use. Moreover, this anxiety mostly arises from people's internal perceptions instead of actual discrimination experiences. To tackle with this anxiety, our research shows that a small number of high-school girls learn information about make-up and dress up before going out. However, as students, high-school girls own little time to actually solve their anxiety and therefore maintain a neutral attitude towards this anxiety.

Keywords : *Appearance anxiety, High-school girls, Social comparison, Social media*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the narrow definition of beauty in today's society, an increasing number of people tend to be worried about their appearances and even have anxiety about them. More noticeably, this appearance anxiety has already existed in high-school girls, whose main focus should be study rather than appearance [1]. Due to the exposure to social media, including photos or videos of beautiful Internet celebrities, high-school girls begin to look critically at their faces and compare themselves with those beautiful people [2]. Under the influence of social media, high-school girls also compare their appearances with their peers, which causes unnecessary anxiety for them to bear. Because of others' influences, high-school girls begin to hold low self-esteem and negative emotions for themselves.

To improve their appearance and relieve anxiety, people are eager to consume clothes, cosmetics and even have plastic surgery on their faces after realizing the importance of beauty [3]. Unfortunately, there is always news about people who destroy their appearances after taking the surgery. Also, even after making make-up or photoshop to beautify appearances, people still bear negative comments about their original appearances.

However, the definition should not be that narrow; instead, it should embrace diversity such as different facial features, different skin colors, different makeup choices, different hairstyles or cloth styles. As all people desire to pursue beauty in their mind, they should hold a positive and open-minded understanding of beauty and therefore help them relieve their appearance anxiety. To tackle with this social phenomenon about appearance anxiety, this research will further analyze the reasons for this anxiety and propose feasible solutions at the same time.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's society, youngsters are struggling with appearance anxiety, which causes negative influences on social relationships, emotions, and life as well. Caused by appearance anxiety, most girls have experienced increasing appearance anxiety symptoms and low appearance esteem [1]. Beauty is ingrained in humans 'minds and benefits us a lot; the pursuit of beautiful appearance does not appear just recently. Throughout history, people pay much attention to the concept of beauty. As a pleasant-sounding word, beauty provides people with joyful emotions or pleasurable perceptions.

It is the symbol of people pursuing idealization including transcendence and self-renewal and elicits aesthetic emotions during the process. Moreover, from the psychological perspective, beauty can act as the defense to present unconscious impulses and fantasies, or as the protection against self-crisis. More significantly, considered from a religious perceptive, beauty can bring the console to the anxiety regarding death and vulnerability [4]. However, the seemingly nice concept— beauty— can cause endless anxiety for people. Anxiety is seen as a wide and probably an inborn form of distress that arises from real or potential exclusion from significant social groups, which is illustrated in separation anxiety theory. The reasons including behind this type of exclusion ought to be linked to anxiety. Also, events that indicate the self as incompetent, guilty, or unattractive can create anxiety for people as well.

Based on the definition of beauty and anxiety, several types of previous researches narrow down their focus to appearance anxiety. Self-objectification, resulting from objectification, strengthens that people view themselves as objects for use instead of as human beings. Noticeably, although both men and women struggle with self-objectification, this scenario is observed more in women. Undoubtedly, self-objectification contributes a lot to appearance anxiety [5]. Apart from self-objectification, other internal emotions may also lead to appearance anxiety. For instance, general fear of negative evaluation and perfectionism within people's hearts act as the stimulant to cause people to feel anxious about their appearances in other people's hearts. Since people always pursue the optimal images of themselves in others' hearts, too much focus on the image may lead people to feel anxious [6]. Despite these internal psychological factors, social appearance anxiety is also the consequence of problematic Internet utilization and social media utilization [2]. Living in a fast-developing society, youngsters today own easy access to numerous Internet resources and therefore are under the influence of the social trend or social aesthetic appreciation that is expressed in social media. The fancy pictures of stars or Internet celebrities result in people's reflections upon their appearances and thus become anxious. Evidence from previous research also attests to this factor. It examines the correlation between nursing students' problematic Internet use, social appearance anxiety, and social media use levels. Its result shows that nomophobia levels have a positive relationship with problematic Internet use, social appearance anxiety, and social media use levels [2].

Although many people are unaware of appearance anxiety's power, it instills into people's everyday life and affects their behavior invisibly. The low self-esteem exhibited through people's words or behavior is the direct result of appearance anxiety. As we can observe in our surroundings, low self-esteem people are diffident about themselves and even doubt their competence in performing a task. The increasing feeling of loneliness also arises from people's appearance anxiety [7]. Involved in social media's broadcasting, many people believe that people with attractive appearances own more benefits. This may be the best explanation for billions of dollars spent on appearance-enhancing products every year.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Method

This research aims to study Chinese high-school girls' attitudes towards the phenomenon "appearance anxiety". This study utilizes the method of questionnaire to conduct the research. The questionnaire is divided into four parts to specify it, which are the level of anxiety, social impacts on appearance anxiety, the effects of anxiety, and the ways to reduce appearance anxiety. Then, the questions are presented in the above sequence. From questions 3 to 7, the level of appearance anxiety is evaluated by questions about the degree of anxiety. For social impacts on appearance anxiety, which is from questions 8 to 15, our research shows how social interaction has affected this phenomenon. Finally, from questions 16 to 22, which are the last two sections, the questionnaire explores the expressions of anxiety and the ways to reduce it. The background information such as age, city, and grade of the samples is also collected in the questionnaire for further classification and analysis of data. The questionnaire has 23 separate questions, including single-choice, multiple-choice, and blank-filling questions. In the questionnaire, the use of the term "appearance anxiety" is limited and replaced by phrases and sentences like concerns about your appearance or how do you feel about your appearance. As a result, the participants are not influenced or offended by the question's expression due to social desirability.

3.2. Sample

In this research, researchers collect valid responses from 150 participants. Among the participants, 10th-grade students take up 22.67%, 11th-grade students take up 15.33%, 12th-grade students take up 56%, and freshmen take up 6%. Despite the diversity of grades, our participants also possess the diversity of regions. 32.67% of the participants come from Shanghai, 28.67% of the participants come from Nanjing, 13.33% of the participants come from Shenzhen and Zhongshan, while the rest 25.33% of the participants come from other places like Jiangmen, USA, Changsha, and so on.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaire into designed into four parts to specify appearance anxiety, including the level of anxiety, social impacts on appearance anxiety, the effects of

anxiety, and the ways to reduce appearance anxiety. The format of the questionnaire is an online questionnaire that is designed by ourselves to collect data for the research after doing a literature review and having some basic ideas about appearance anxiety. Each group member sends this questionnaire to at least 40 acquaintances, mainly our classmates CIS program and students in school and friends who are high school girls, through the most popular communication application in China— WeChat, especially for Chinese young people. When the number of participants reached 150, we pause the questionnaire so that we can control the number of samples we get. The questionnaire is made in Wen Juan Xing, a program that can automatically collect data and produce reports of it. It is considered efficient to possess adequate and representative data for our research. Therefore, the results are analyzed qualitatively by Wen Juan Xing. As for the final analysis, the data is approached from several different perspectives. For example, the effects of anxiety.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Anxiety Analysis

To have a basic idea of high-school girls' appearance anxiety, 3 questions are set up. These questions include the time when high-school girls began to care about appearances, how much they are concerned with appearances, what part they are most concerned about. Concluded from the option with the highest frequency in every question, high-school girls' general preference can be seen clearly.

4.2. Source Analysis

To examine social interactions among high-school girls, 3 questions are set up to ask how often high-school girls compare appearances with others, comment on others' appearances, and care about other people's negative comments. From sector diagrams, the option which takes up the maximum percentage shows most people's preference. The data can also show whether there is a similarity between these three frequencies. Moreover, to learn about high-school girls' ideal beauty, several questions concerning appearance's benefits are established. Then, a question is presented to ask whether participants have been treated differently because of their appearances. Finally, the data from those two questions are combined to analyze, the data can clearly show people's attitudes towards appearance's benefits and their real experience.

4.3. Factor Analysis

Throughout the questionnaire, several questions are provided to ask the reasons for participants' appearance anxiety. The multi-choice questions cover all possible reasons for high-school girls. Basic categories include social relationships, social media, and individual factors. When the data is made into sector diagrams, the option in one diagram that takes up the biggest area can be considered as the most important factor. When options with high frequency are combined, a list of favorable reasons can be concluded.

4.4. Effect Analysis

To seek the effects of appearance anxiety on high-school girls, 3 questions are asked about the general behavior influenced by appearance anxiety and the frequency of several specific actions. The options contain all possible actions for high-school girls (making up, photoshopping selfies, feeling unconfident, having plastic surgeries). Combining different responses' frequency which owns the highest percentage, the level of influence on high-school girls can be observed directly. 2 questions are set up to examine ways that high-school girls tackle with appearance anxiety. The questions provide 2 ways (dressing up before going out and learning information online) for high-school girls to beautify their appearances and examine the time they spend in those two things. When 3 question's data are combined, it can clearly show whether high-school girls practically solve their appearance anxiety.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Concerns about Appearances

Results from these three questions can show the basic information about high-school girls' appearance anxiety, including anxiety level, the start of anxiety, and which part of the face they are anxious about.
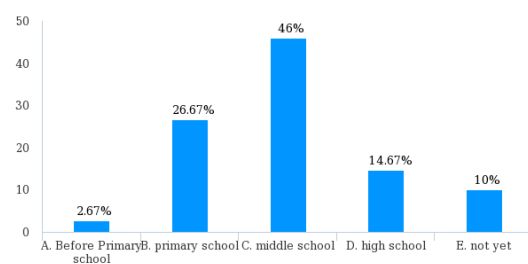

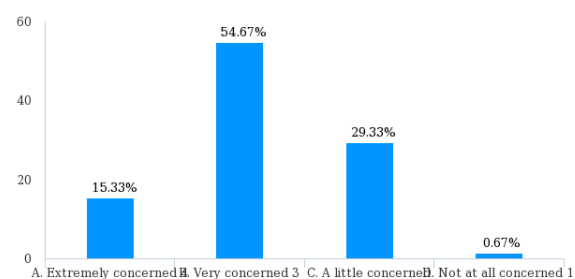**Figure 1.** The time when participants start to care about their appearances

Figure 2. The participants' concern level towards their appearances
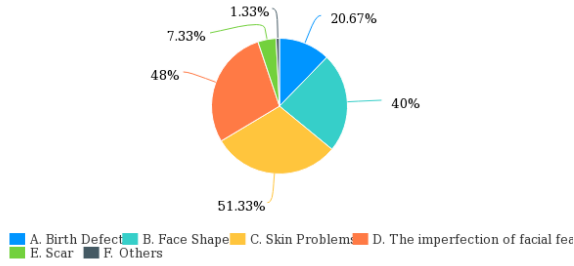
Figure 3. Participant's unconfident parts of their face

From the three graphs, most people (46%) tend to care about their appearances at an early age around middle school. Caused by premature concern about appearance, half of the high-school girls are very concerned about their appearances, and almost none of them (0.67%) are concerned. To be more specific, about the most anxious part of appearance, participants are concerned about skin problems (51.33%) and the imperfection of facial features (48%). Moreover, 40% of participants are concerned about their facial shapes.

5.2. Effects of Appearance Anxiety

Holding appearance anxiety definitely has a few effects on high-school girls' life. According to the sector graph below, when asked about the influence of anxiety, over 70% of participants state that they lack confidence, and around 40% of the participants admit that appearance anxiety has negative effects on social interactions.
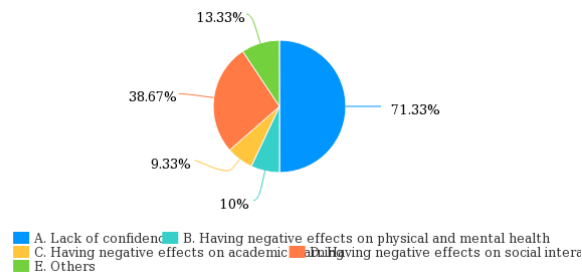

Figure 4. Appearance anxiety's effects on high-school girls

To be more specific, observed from the below graph, 62.67% of the participants care about others' opinions of their appearances; 46.67% of the participants want to photoshop their selfies before sending out the photos. Also, participants will feel unconfident (26.67%) when looking at the mirror and think of their appearances in mind (34.67%).
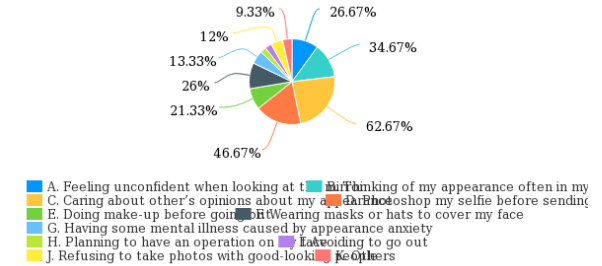

Figure 5. Participant's behavior influenced by appearance anxiety

5.3. Reduce Appearance Anxiety

To tackle with appearance anxiety, 61.33% of high-school girls only spend 0-20 minutes dressing up themselves, and around half of the high-school girls spend less than 1 hour studying make-up, hairstyle, or skincare. In the same way, when tackling with the negative emotions caused by appearance anxiety, approximately 50% of participants believe that it's a normal phenomenon, and around 40% of participants choose to distract themselves.
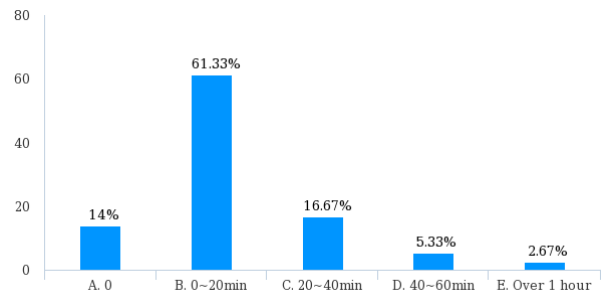

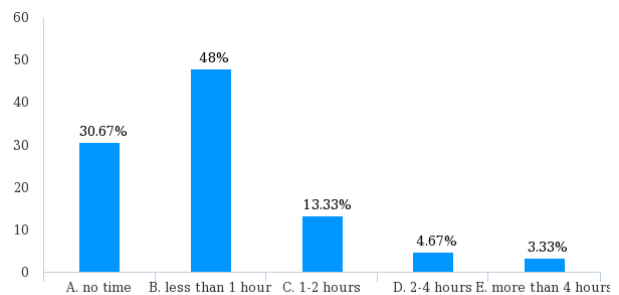**Figure 6.** Time spent on dressing up before going out

Figure 7. Time spent on the Internet to study make-up, hairstyles, or skincare
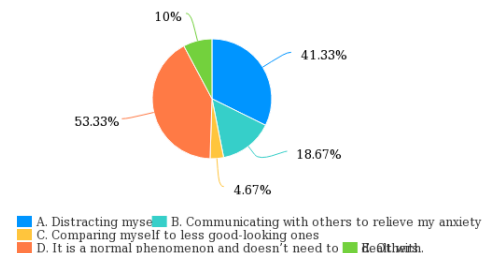

Figure 8. Ways to tackle with appearance anxiety

5.4. Reasons for Appearance Anxiety

When high school girls are asked about the reasons for their concerns, over half of participants state that they always observe good-looking people, and 42% of the participants claim that they are influenced by people around, around 30% of the participants are influenced by social media like make-up bloggers or fashion bloggers. Caused by social media and nearby people's influence, approximately 60 percent of people believe that there is only one single standard of beauty in today's society (60%) and are under the influence of fashion trends (62.67%). Caused by the single appreciation of beauty in society, the motivation for beautifying appearance is basically increasing one's attractiveness (56.67%), making mood better (76%), and wanting to get more opportunities in society (25.33%).
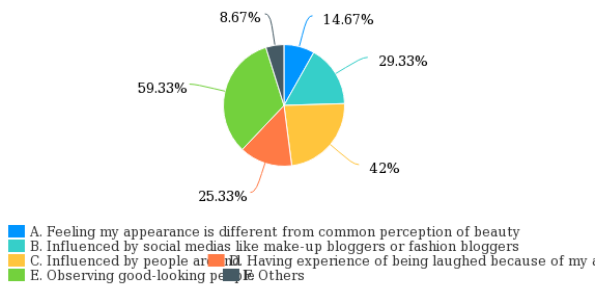
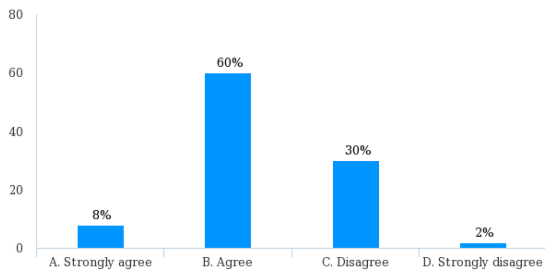**Figure 9.** Reasons for high-school girls caring about their appearances

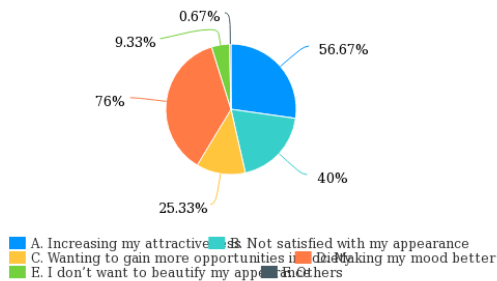**Figure 10.** Attitudes towards single appreciation of beauty in today's society

Figure 11. Reasons for beautifying appearances

When people are asked whether they want to compare with or comment on people's appearance, high-school girls admit that they considerably care about these things, occasionally compare with others' appearances (44.67%), and sometimes comment on others' appearances (42%).
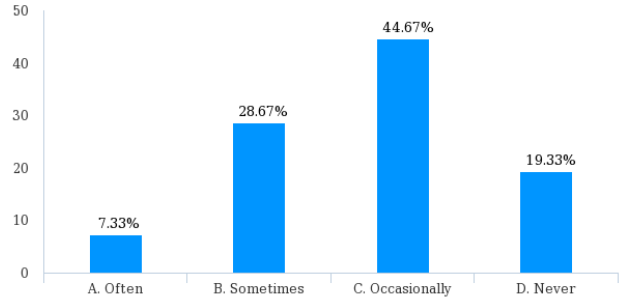
Figure 12. The frequency of high-school girls comparing with other's appearance
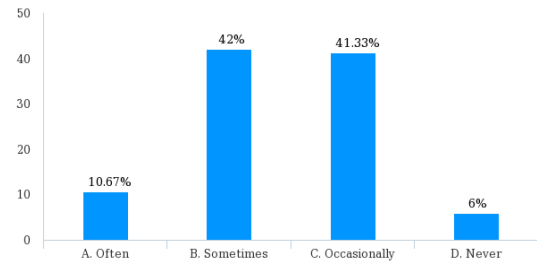
Figure 13. The frequency of high-school girls commenting on others' appearances

Despite comparing with or commenting on others' appearance, around 50 percent of the participants admit that others' appearance influences their first impressions of others a little, and 34.67% of the participants recognize that others' appearance influences their impressions of others. More noticeably, 90% of the participants agree that being good-looking can bring benefits to people. However actually about 40% of the participants recognize that they never felt being treated differently.
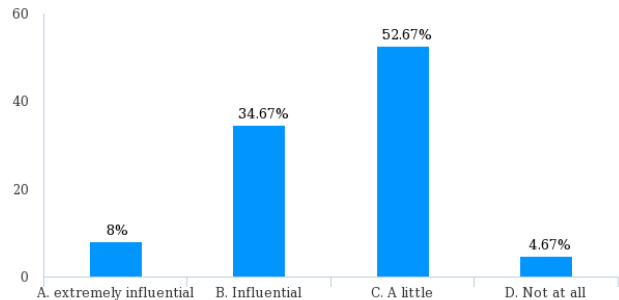
Figure 14. Appearance's influence on high-school girls' first impressions of others
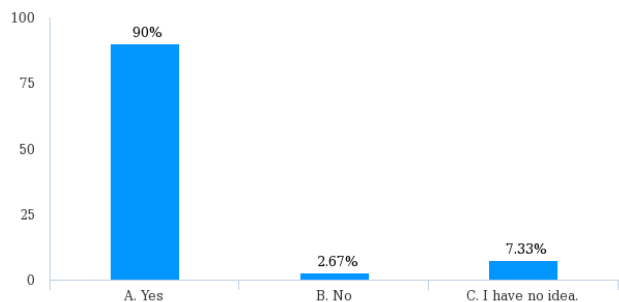
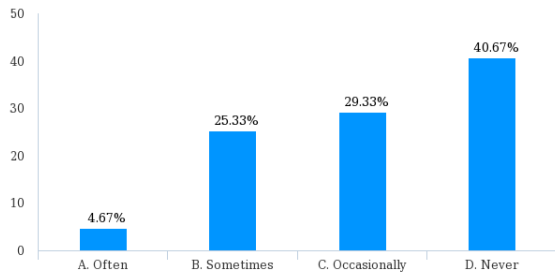**Figure 15.** Whether good appearance can bring benefits

Figure 16. The frequency of high-school girls receiving different treatment because of appearances

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Social Factors Analysis

Through research, the fact that a large portion of participants shows a tendency for comparing with other people's appearances demonstrates high-school girls' internal desires to compare with others. Social comparison theory states that people prefer comparing with others to assess their abilities. When they compare with others' appearances and win this comparison, they can gain a sense of fulfillment for their beautiful appearance. Whenever people receive any information about others, they will relate it to themselves, which explains the reason for high-school girls' preference to feel anxious when meeting good-looking people. Since their appearance is not as beautiful as those good-looking people's, their sense of loss motivates them to hold anxiety towards their appearances.

Despite the innate tendency to compare with others, people also prefer showing a better view of their self-images to others. Desires for social acceptance and desirability motivate high-school girls to behave in a socially favorable way and thus to show a socially attractive image. As a member of the big society, every individual depends on social interrelationships and therefore cannot ignore others' opinions. Influenced by the concerns towards others, high-school girls care more about their appearances mostly due to social influence.

As most participants agree with the statement that "there is only one single appreciation of beauty in today's society", they take faith that people around themselves hold one ideal image of good-looking people. Accordingly, they will easily feel anxious, when a small part of their face is different from the common perception of beauty. This difference causes them to become fearful of dispatching from the optimal image in other people's minds and lose affection or favorable impressions from others.

Apart from caring about self-images and other's opinions, high-school girls' anxiety about their appearance is also motivated by their experience. When they observe or experience an example of good-looking people receiving additional benefits than normal people,

they will become more likely to believe that being good-looking can bring advantages to people. When they meet similar situations or think about this problem, they will depend on availability heuristic to make judgments and recall past hands-on experiences. People tend to become anxious about their appearance under the influences of social factors including social comparison, availability heuristics, and social desirability; meanwhile, they also judge others' appearances and make comments. According to the questionnaire, about half of the participants make comments on others' appearances, which invisibly proves people's concerns towards other people's judgment on their own appearances. This social circle causes people to continuously make judgments on others' appearances, compare with others' appearances, and become worried and anxious about others' potential judgments of their appearances.

6.2. Anxiety Source Analysis

The questionnaire's result shows that Chinese high school girls began to concern a lot about their appearances in middle school. They are unconfident about their skin problems or facial features. This anxiety may arise from observing good-looking people or comparing those people to themselves. Since high-school girls take an active part in social activities and school events, they involve in society and become exposed to many people. When other people around begin to pay much attention to their appearances or dressing, high school girls will copy them and increase their concerns about appearances, which is the manifestation of conformity. What's more, due to the rapid development of social media online, apps or websites like Xiaohongshu and Bilibili that broadcast videos of teaching make-ups and dress-up are really popular among young girls. With easy access to the Internet, high-school girls are influenced a lot by the information online. Under the presence of make-up bloggers and fashion bloggers, high-school girls can always take notice of young beautiful girls. However, at the same time, they are likely to ignore those normal good people around them. Accordingly, they assume that there are many good-looking people around, which causes anxiety or lack of confidence due to confirmation bias. Besides the influence of social media, having the experience of being laughed at because of appearances motivates people to feel concerns about their appearances. Those high school students may have low esteem and care much about others' comments of them.

6.3. the Discrepancy Between Internal Perception and Truth

Surprisingly, although most high-school girls think being good-looking brings advantages to people, they are not often treated differently or discriminated against due to their appearances. This obvious discrepancy reflects

the difference between people's inside perceptions and the reality outside. They believe that others may pay much attention to their appearances, but others do not. The anxiety is caused by internal activities or entanglement in people's minds rather than others' actual prejudice or discrimination. With the notion that appearance can bring benefits, high-school girls take this perspective into everything around them. Influenced by this notion, they utilize appearances as an explanation for people's success or failure, which gradually strengthens their belief about the advantages of beautiful appearances. Therefore, they easily ignore other alternative and objective explanations for these events. Noticeably, social media or publications also take this perspective and utilize good appearances to explain celebrity or businesswomen's success. Misled by media and publications, high-school girls are more likely to believe in the statement that a good appearance can bring benefits. Indeed, most of the participants' report is against the previous statement, meaning that they are not treated differently because of their appearances. In conclusion, appearance anxiety in high-school girls' minds is mostly the consequence of their solidifying opinion or internal perception instead of external stimulations or hands-on discrimination experience.

6.4. Ways to Tackle Appearance Anxiety

Appearance anxiety has a slight effect on high school girls' life, causing them to be unconfident and negatively impacting their social interactions. To tackle with the lack of confidence or negative emotions, they always photoshop their selfies before sending them out to beautify the unconfident parts on their faces. After photoshopping their photos, they can portray a good view of their ideal self to others and avoid worries about others' negative comments. Despite this common tactic for most high-school girls, they also do make-ups before going out in order to make their faces look perfect and exquisite. Involved in many social activities like parties or ceremonies, high-school girls hold the desire to look more beautiful than their peers and therefore gain high self-esteem and fulfillment for their fine faces. To solve negative emotions caused by appearance anxiety, high-school girls find ways to distract themselves from considering appearances, which helps them to distribute focus to other issues instead of appearance. Except considering ways to beautify their faces, most high-school girls do not consider appearance anxiety very seriously and believe that it is a normal phenomenon. It demonstrates that high-school girls do not possess such high-level appearance anxiety. In conclusion, high-school girls choose to automatically manage emotions and believe that it's a normal phenomenon to hold appearance anxiety.

6.5. Situational Factors Analysis

Although most high school girls express their concerns about appearances, they neither spend a long time dressing up before going out nor learning make ups, hairstyles, or skincare through the Internet. High school girls may not have enough free time to spend looking through related videos or passages about their appearances, since academic performance is their most important task at present. Especially for those students who will take the Chinese College Entrance Examination, studying should be their only concern and the source of anxiety at this age. Even though most high-school girls began concerning about their appearance from middle school and admit the influence of appearance anxiety on their life, they do not own chances to practically deal with this anxiety like learning about ways to beautify their appearances. Therefore, their attitude towards appearance anxiety is plain and flat without exaggerated attempts to beautify or change their appearance. Even though they have internal concerns of appearance, heavy workload, and academic pressure limit high-school girl's chances of learning about make-ups, hairstyles, or skincare.

7. CONCLUSION

Appearance anxiety has become a social problem in today's society with an increasing number of high-school girls who worry about their appearances at an early age. Based on the data of this research, high-school girls are easily influenced by social media and people around them, which increases their anxiety level. However, they do not have enough time to dress up and find ways to reduce their anxiety probably due to the pressure from attending Gaokao and concentrating on studying. This study has provided future researchers with valuable information and inspired them to focus more on the reasons behind this appearance anxiety and propose ways for high-school girls to reduce their anxiety.

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