

# Body Image and Social Media in China: Examining Body Image Discourses among Young Chinese Women on the Xiaohongshu Platform

**Chen Zhang**

*School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia Email: zhang.1.chen@student.usm.my, ORCID: 0009-0004-0378-9008*

## **Abstract**

This study utilised qualitative methodologies to investigate the positive body image narratives of young Chinese women in Xiaohongshu platform. The study sought to investigate the complexities of how these women influenced and managed their perceptions of body image in the online environment, utilising data collected from 15 participants recruited through Xiaohongshu. This study invited participants to participate in structured interviews, where they shared their experiences, opinions, and attitudes about beauty standards, self-acceptance, and empowerment. The study aimed to analyse the strategies utilised by Chinese women to challenge conventional beauty standards, evaluate the impact of online platforms on beauty ideals and self-perception among young Chinese women, and assess how individual traits and digital experiences interacted to shape body image. The study employed NVivo 14 software for data analysis, which encompassed coding and theme analysis. Through the utilisation of iterative coding processes, researchers successfully identified repeating themes and patterns, hence enhancing their understanding of the narratives and experiences given by the participants. Through the use of thematic analysis, we were able to understand the deeper meanings and reasons behind the participants' responses, revealing the complex portrayal of body image on Xiaohongshu.

**Keywords:** *Positive body image; Young Chinese women; Self-expression; Beauty standards And Empowerment*

## **Introduction**

The discussion around body image in modern Chinese culture has gotten more intricate, as it is shaped by globalised media, cultural standards, and internet platforms (Jankauskiene and Baceviciene, 2024). Xiaohongshu explored social e-commerce app in China where young Chinese women actively participate in conversations related to beauty, fashion, and lifestyle. This digital environment fosters the creation and questioning of representation about body image, which mirror broader social standards and personal experiences. This study aims to explore the intricate dynamics of body image portrayal on Xiaohongshu, with a special focus on how young Chinese women navigate and create positive narratives about body image on this Xiaohongshu (Rashid, 2024).

## **Research Background**

Body image dissatisfaction is a prominent global issue that has a negative influence on people's mental health and overall well-being (Nugent et al., 2024). The beauty standards in China have undergone a transformation due to fast economic growth and greater exposure to Western media (Dong et al., 2024). These new standards frequently prioritise thinness, a fair complexion, and certain facial traits. These standards are propagated through several mediums, including advertising, social media, and entertainment sectors, and can result in adverse body image perceptions among young Chinese women. Xiaohongshu is a well-known social e-commerce website that has become notable for its role as a forum where users participate in conversations around beauty, fashion, and lifestyle (Tao et al., 2024). The platform enables users and businesses to create, share, and consume content, promoting relationships between them. Discussions regarding body image in the internet ecosystem provide vital insights into how young Chinese women manage social beauty standards and shape their self-identities.

## **Problem Statement**

Although there is already a large number of works on the relationship between body image and social media, there is still a lack of knowledge on how young Chinese women specifically create positive body image representations within the setting. (Ye et al., 2024). Although past studies have explored the impact of Western media on Chinese beauty ideals, there has been less focus on how native internet platforms contribute to the formation of body image belief (Zhang, 2024). In addition, current research frequently emphasises the adverse elements of body image, such as discontentment and unhealthy eating habits, while neglecting the possibility of internet platforms fostering positive body image encounters and empowerment (Huang et al., 2024).

This research intends to enhance our understanding of body image dynamics among young Chinese women by examining how Xiaohongshu fosters the formation of positive body image narratives. Furthermore, personal characteristics such as age, financial level, and cultural background might combine with digital encounters to impact how individuals perceive and behave towards their body image. The research aims to analyse these intersections in order to discover possible moderators and mediators in the correlation between digital involvement and body image outcomes. This will provide valuable insights into the intricate nature of young women's experiences in digital settings. Initiatives and policies that promote healthy attitudes towards body image and inclusion in digital spaces can benefit from the research findings. By comprehending the processes by which Xiaohongshu and comparable platforms impact body image beliefs, stakeholders may formulate strategies to exploit these platforms for favourable results, fostering self-acceptance and diversity among young Chinese women.

## **Literature Review**

Due to its interaction with cultural beauty norms and expectations, individuals, especially young women, have acknowledged the significance of body image in their overall well-being. It is crucial to comprehend how young Chinese women are being navigate and create positive body image representations on digital platforms like Xiaohongshu, given the significant impact of globalisation and digitalization on cultural norms and views in modern Chinese society. Western media has extensively recorded its impact on beauty ideals in China. The prevalence of thinness, fair skin, and specific facial features as indicators of beauty has become more prominent due to rapid economic growth and greater exposure to Western beauty standards through television, films, and social media platforms. The pursuit of unattainable norms frequently leads to body dissatisfaction and psychological suffering among Chinese women, exacerbating their efforts to adhere to societal expectations (Tie et al., 2024).

Social media platforms have a substantial impact on the formation of body image beliefs and behaviours among young adults globally. Research has emphasised the influence of being exposed to idealised beauty pictures on social media platforms, which results in higher levels of dissatisfaction with one's own body and a greater likelihood of engaging in harmful weight management activities. Nevertheless, studies indicate that social media may function as a medium for promoting body positivity and empowerment since users defy conventional beauty standards and embrace a wide range of body types (Fardouly et al., 2016).

Xiaohongshu has become a popular social e-commerce platform in China, drawing in millions of users, particularly young women, who are interested in beauty, fashion, and lifestyle content. Xiaohongshu is a social media platform that combines content production, sharing, and buying features. It offers a distinct digital environment where users may interact with companies and other users while watching and generating content. In this particular setting, conversations around body image provide vital perspectives on how young Chinese women navigate social standards of beauty and shape their own sense of identity (Morris, 2024).

Although Xiaohongshu has gained significant popularity and has a strong impact on the beauty ideals of young Chinese women, there is a lack of information on how users navigate and negotiate these standards on the digital platform. Previous studies have focused on the

influence of Western media and traditional social media platforms on body image judgements in China (Zhong, 2022). However, there has been less investigation into the impact of native digital platforms such as Xiaohongshu. Hence, this study seeks to address this deficiency by examining the tactics employed by Chinese women on Xiaohongshu to contest conventional beauty standards, examining the influence of the platform on beauty perceptions and body image, and analysing how personal factors and digital experiences intersect to shape body image on Xiaohongshu. Gaining insight into the intricacies of body image portrayal on Xiaohongshu is critical for formulating treatments and policies that aim to foster more positive body image perspectives among young Chinese women (Qian, 2024). This research aims to enhance our understanding of body image dynamics in contemporary Chinese society by investigating how users resist beauty standards, analysing the influence of the platform on beauty perceptions, and examining the interplay between personal factors and digital experiences.

### **Research Methodology**

The discussion around body image in modern Chinese culture has gotten more intricate due to the impact of globalised media, cultural norms, and internet platforms. Xiaohongshu is a significant social e-commerce app in China where young Chinese women actively participate in conversations related to beauty, fashion, and lifestyle. This digital environment shapes and questions people's perceptions of their bodies, reflecting wider social beliefs and personal encounters. This study aims to explore the intricate dynamics of body image portrayal on Xiaohongshu, with a special focus on how young Chinese women navigate and create positive narratives about body image on this online platform (Longhurst et al., 2024).

### **Research Design**

This study utilises a phenomenological to investigate the subjective experiences and viewpoints of young Chinese women on Xiaohongshu and their perception of their own bodies (Allen, 2013). Phenomenology enables a thorough investigation of participants' personal experiences, revealing insights into the meaning and importance individuals assign to their interactions in the digital realm. Structured interviews are the main way researchers gather data, allowing them to obtain in-depth and extensive descriptions of participants' ideas, attitudes, and behaviours around body image on Xiaohongshu. Purposive sampling techniques will select a total of fifteen individuals from Xiaohongshu. The eligible participants for this study will consist of young Chinese women between the ages of 18 and 30 who regularly interact with beauty-related information on the site. We will actively seek individuals from various age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural backgrounds in order to encompass a wide spectrum of opinions. This study will contact prospective participants via direct message on Xiaohongshu and extend an invitation to participate in the study. Prior to participating in the research, all participants will be required to provide informed consent (Wu, 2021).

This study conducted structured interviews with participants, either in person or through video conferencing platforms. Logistical factors and the participants' interests will determine the chosen method. The interviews will adhere to a semi-structured approach, which will provide the opportunity to investigate emerging themes while maintaining uniformity throughout all interviews. It employed interrogative inquiries to delve deeper into specific subjects, such as participants' views on beauty norms, their experiences with body acceptance, and their interactions within the Xiaohongshu community. This study also anticipates that each interview will last approximately 60–90 minutes, and with the participants' explicit consent, it will be recorded in audio format. In this study, we also recorded field notes during the interviews to document non-verbal signals and contextual factors (Archibald et al., 2019).

The data analysis technique involved doing theme analysis using NVivo 14 software. The interviews' transcripts were systematically coded and analysed using NVivo. The study

objectives influenced the decision to use a deductive approach in order to find pre-established themes. This study used a deductive approach to uncover developing themes and patterns in the data. It iterated the coding method, ensuring that the analysis remained dependable and meticulous through ongoing comparisons across data segments.

Lastly, it achieved theoretical saturation when the data no longer revealed any new themes, signifying a comprehensive comprehension of the participants' experiences (Sotiriadou et al., 2014).

## Result and discussion

**Research Question- 1:** *How does Chinese women resist standards for ideal body image?*

Code	Description
Cultural Norms	Cultural beliefs and societal norms pertaining to beauty standards within Chinese society
Body Perception	Subjective views and attitudes towards one's physical appearance and body image
Resistance Tactics	Strategies and actions employed to challenge or counter prevailing beauty ideals
Media Influence	Examination of the impact of digital platforms, such as Xiaohongshu, on body image perceptions
Agency and Empowerment	Assessment of feelings of empowerment and agency in navigating societal beauty expectations
Cultural Influence	Influence of traditional Chinese values, cultural practices, and historical contexts on body image
Social Support	Role of social networks, peers, and community in fostering positive body image attitudes
Body Acceptance	Embrace of diverse body types and promotion of self-acceptance and self-love
Coping Mechanisms	Adaptive strategies utilized to manage negative body image perceptions or societal pressures
Gender Dynamics	Examination of gender roles and societal expectations concerning femininity and beauty standards
Social Comparison	Comparative assessments with others, both online and offline, regarding body image
Self-Esteem	Overall evaluation of self-worth and confidence, particularly in the context of body image
Online Communities	Participation and engagement in digital forums and communities where body image discourse occurs
Psychological Resilience	Capacity to withstand and rebound from societal pressures while maintaining a positive body image
Ideal Body	Societal standards and ideals regarding beauty and attractiveness

The study examined the overlap between cultural norms and beauty standards among Chinese women, uncovering a complex environment in which social values that prioritise fair complexion and slimness have a substantial impact. Although they faced challenges related to their body image, the individuals demonstrated resilience by actively opposing societal beauty standards and felt powerful in their rebellion. However, studies have shown that Xiaohongshu and similar digital platforms promote unattainable beauty ideals, intensifying individuals' tendency to compare themselves with others and exacerbating feelings of dissatisfaction with their own bodies. However, individuals discovered comfort and assistance in online forums, which acted as venues for questioning traditional beauty standards. Gender dynamics within Chinese culture were discovered to impact beauty views, emphasising the necessity for

treatments that tackle cultural pressures and develop resilience to cultivate a good body image among Chinese women.

**Research Question- 2:** *How does influence beauty perceptions among young Chinese women?*

Code	Description
Beauty Perceptions	Attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions regarding beauty standards among young Chinese women
Body Positivity	Promotion of acceptance, love, and appreciation for diverse body types and appearances
Resistance to Beauty Norms	Actions and strategies employed by young Chinese women on Xiaohongshu to challenge mainstream beauty norms
Supportive Community	Role of Xiaohongshu as a platform for fostering support networks and promoting body positivity
Changing Beauty Standards	Examination of how positive body image narratives on Xiaohongshu reflect evolving beauty standards in China
Empowerment	Feelings of strength, confidence, and agency experienced by young Chinese women through Xiaohongshu
Media Influence	Impact of Xiaohongshu and other digital platforms on shaping beauty perceptions and ideals
Cultural Shift	Assessment of broader cultural shifts and trends influencing beauty perceptions among young Chinese women
Self-Expression	Exploration of how Xiaohongshu facilitates self-expression and individuality in beauty standards
Social Comparison	Comparisons made by young Chinese women on Xiaohongshu regarding beauty standards and body image
Well-Being	Impact of Xiaohongshu on the mental and emotional well-being of young Chinese women
Normative Pressures	Pressure to conform to societal beauty norms and standards, as perceived and experienced by users of Xiaohongshu

In this section, the study revealed a complex and diverse range of beauty opinions among young Chinese women, highlighting the crucial influence of Xiaohongshu in moulding these beliefs. Participants demonstrated a range of perspectives regarding beauty standards, frequently questioning conventional norms on the site by promoting body acceptance and accepting a variety of beauty ideals. Xiaohongshu has become a nurturing platform that encourages the development of good body image stories, enabling individuals to redefine beauty ideals according to their own principles. Although social beauty standards exerted normative influence, participants expressed a sense of empowerment and confidence in their identities as a result of their involvement with the platform. Nevertheless, Xiaohongshu faced difficulties in terms of its impact since users often found themselves involved in comparing themselves to others, while this occurred in a setting that encouraged self-expression and uniqueness. Xiaohongshu has had a substantial impact on pushing cultural changes towards more inclusive beauty standards. It has provided a platform for young Chinese women to express themselves honestly and question traditional conventions. These findings emphasise the significance of digital platforms in influencing beauty ideals and demonstrate the possibility of treatments that use these platforms to encourage a healthy body image and resistance to societal pressures.

**Research Question- 3: What factors shape body image for Chinese women?**

Code Name	Code Description
Cultural Influences	Encompasses societal expectations, values, or norms related to body image in Chinese culture, influencing perceptions and narratives.
Digital Platforms	Refers to online platforms, technologies, or communities, particularly Xiaohongshu, shaping body image perceptions and discussions.
Peer Influence	Encompasses interactions, discussions, or influences from peers, friends, or social circles regarding body image perceptions.
Narrative Evolution	Refers to changes, shifts, or developments in body image narratives on Xiaohongshu over time, influenced by digital platforms and peer interactions.
Xiaohongshu	Any mention, discussion, or reference to the Xiaohongshu platform and its role in shaping body image narratives.

In Chinese society, ingrained cultural norms that value modesty and femininity significantly shape Chinese women's evaluations of their body image. The cultural values that romanticise a slim body as a symbol of attractiveness can exert societal pressure on individuals to conform to established standards about body size and proportions. Furthermore, the emergence of internet platforms such as Xiaohongshu has accelerated the creation of body image narratives. Users of Xiaohongshu regularly interact with content that promotes beauty standards and physique ideals, seeking validation and motivation from their fellow community members. This digital platform fosters an environment of comparison and aspiration, where individuals may internalise curated images and content that might influence their perception of their own body image. Interactions with peers might worsen these impacts, since comments and assessments from peers, family members, and social circles can influence individuals' self-perception and satisfaction with their body image. Interactions with peers serve to strengthen cultural norms around physical appearance, sometimes resulting in feelings of insufficiency or a strong desire to conform. However, despite these pressures, there is a discernible shift in Xiaohongshu's narratives around body image, marked by the emergence of the body positivity movement. On the website, influencers and content creators aggressively promote a diverse spectrum of beauty ideals, encouraging users to appreciate their own unique features and reject narrow beauty standards. This shift in narrative reflects a growing acknowledgment and acceptance of diverse physical appearances, as well as a rejection of the unrealistic standards of beauty perpetuated by mainstream media.

**Recommendation**

Based on the findings and comments, we propose the following recommendations: To enhance cultural awareness and sensitivity, interventions targeting positive body image among Chinese women should recognise and tackle the impact of cultural norms and societal expectations on beauty ideals. Providing cultural sensitivity training to healthcare workers, educators, and media practitioners may foster the creation of inclusive environments that affirm varied body shapes and question restrictive beauty norms.

**Harnessing the Power of Digital Platforms:** The influential role of digital platforms such as Xiaohongshu in influencing beauty ideals, there is a chance to utilise these platforms to advance body positivity and empowerment. Partnering with influencers and content producers that advocate for various portrayals of beauty may enhance the spread of positive messages and cultivate inclusive online communities.

**Strengthen Peer Support Networks:** By acknowledging the influence of peer interactions on body image judgements, efforts that cultivate supportive peer networks and promote open discussions about body image might enhance resilience and self-acceptance among Chinese women. Peer-facilitated seminars, support groups, and virtual forums offer secure environments for individuals to exchange their experiences and collectively question prevailing standards of beauty. Promoting media literacy skills can equip individuals to critically assess

and deconstruct beauty ideals expressed in online material, given the effect of media, especially digital platforms, on beauty perceptions. Implementing educational programmes and seminars that impart media literacy skills, such as the ability to discern digital manipulation and comprehend the financial incentives underlying beauty standards, can effectively alleviate the adverse effects of media on body image.

**Champion policy and regulatory measures:** Advocacy endeavours aimed at boosting inclusive representation in media and advertising have the potential to influence social beauty norms and foster variety in beauty standards. Advocating for policy and regulatory measures that mandate varied representation in media images and advertising campaigns may contribute to the establishment of inclusive and affirming settings for everyone, irrespective of their body size, shape, or appearance. Following these suggestions, those with a vested interest may strive to cultivate a culture that embraces and supports body acceptance, empowerment, and inclusion among Chinese women, eventually advancing good body image and overall well-being.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the intricate factors that impact body image beliefs among Chinese women, with a specific emphasis on cultural norms, internet platforms such as Xiaohongshu, and interactions with peers. The findings demonstrate a complex scenario in which traditional Chinese values that prioritise thinness and fairness collide with the impact of digital media and social networks on changing beauty standards. Chinese society is heavily influenced by cultural norms that impose substantial pressure on individuals to adhere to specific beauty standards, which prioritise a slender physique and a light complexion. Notwithstanding these cultural expectations, individuals exhibited resilience by actively opposing popular beauty standards, deriving empowerment from their rejection. Digital platforms, specifically Xiaohongshu, have emerged as crucial spaces for the formation and challenge of body image narratives. Xiaohongshu provides a favourable atmosphere for promoting body acceptance and showcasing a variety of beauty standards.

However, it also reinforces unattainable ideals of beauty, leading to social comparisons and intensifying feelings of dissatisfaction with one's own body. Peer relationships intensify these impacts as individuals manage societal constraints and seek affirmation from their social groups. Online forums offer a place for questioning traditional beauty standards and cultivating support systems, showcasing the potential of digital platforms to support a healthy body image. The study highlights the significance of treatments that target cultural factors and enhance resistance against conventional beauty standards. Through the strategic use of digital platforms, interventions have the potential to empower Chinese women by promoting inclusive beauty standards and fostering supportive networks through strategic use of digital platforms. This, in turn, can enable them to embrace a wide range of body types and develop good attitudes towards their own body image. This study improves understanding of the intricate factors that impact body image evaluations among Chinese women, providing significant perspectives for the creation of effective interventions targeted at promoting body positivity and resilience in the face of societal pressures.

### **Reference**

- Jankauskiene, R., & Baceviciene, M. (2024). Mindful monitoring and accepting the body in physical activity mediates the associations between physical activity and positive body image in a sample of young physically active adults. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 6, 1360145.
- Longhurst, P., Aspell, J., Todd, J., & Swami, V. (2024). "There's No Separating My View of My Body from My Autism": A qualitative study of positive body image in autistic individuals. *Body Image*, 48, 101655.
- Rashid, A. (2024). Yonder: Care coordination, anal cancer prevention, lay online communication, and positive body image. *British Journal of General Practice*, 74(738), 23-23.

- Nugent, K., Joshi, A., Viana, R., Payne, M. W., Unger, J., & Hunter, S. W. (2024). How has body image been evaluated among people with lower limb loss? A scoping review. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 1-14.
- Dong, J., Li, X., Kelly, F. J., & Mudway, I. (2024). Lead exposure in Chinese children: Urbanization lowers children's blood lead levels (BLLs). *Science of The Total Environment*, 170910.
- Tao, M., Alam, F., Lahuerta-Otero, E., & Mengyuan, C. (2024). Get Ready to Buy With Me: The Effect of Social Presence Interaction and Social Commerce Intention on S-commerce Live Streaming. *SAGE Open*, 14(1), 21582440241232751.
- Ye, Z., & Krijnen, T. (2024). "Being pretty does not help your success": Self-representation and aspiration of China's female showroom livestreamers. *Global Media and China*, 20594364241230436.
- Zhang, X., & Riley, S. (2024). Empowering middle-aged women? A discourse analysis of gendered ageing in the Chinese television reality show sisters who make waves. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1-17.
- Huang, Y., Zheng, B., & Peng, Y. (2024). Social Media Users' Visual and Emotional Preferences of internet-famous sites in Urban Riverfront Public Spaces: A Case Study on Changsha, China.
- Tie, B., Yang, X., & Qiu, J. (2024). Validation of the Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale with Chinese adolescents and young adults. *Body Image*, 48, 101677.
- Fardouly, J., & Vartanian, L. R. (2016). Social media and body image concerns: Current research and future directions. *Current opinion in psychology*, 9, 1-5.
- Morris, C., & Cong, Y. (2024). The Spatial Effects of China's Ascendant Digital Culture. *Anthropology of Ascendant China: Histories, Attainments, and Tribulations*.
- Zhong, Y. (2022). The Influence of Social Media on Body Image Disturbance Induced by Appearance Anxiety in Female College Students. *Psychiatria Danubina*, 34(suppl 2), 638-638.
- Qian, L. (2024). The influence of Xiaohongshu female bloggers on female values. In *SHS Web of Conferences* (Vol. 185, p. 03009). EDP Sciences.
- Allen-Collinson, J. (2013). Feminist phenomenology and the woman in the running body. In *Phenomenological approaches to sport* (pp. 113-129). Routledge.
- Wu, X. (2021). A qualitative analysis on Xiaohongshu: Conspicuous consumption, gender, social media algorithms and surveillance.
- Archibald, M. M., Ambagtsheer, R. C., Casey, M. G., & Lawless, M. (2019). Using zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 18, 1609406919874596.
- Sotiriadou, P., Brouwers, J., & Le, T. A. (2014). Choosing a qualitative data analysis tool: A comparison of NVivo and Leximancer. *Annals of leisure research*, 17(2), 218-234.