

The Construction of Women's Fashion Perceptions and Body Image on Social Platforms

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Abstract. In the digital age, social media has revolutionized how young women perceive fashion, identity, and body image. Platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Instagram, and TikTok serve as spaces of expression, but also as mechanisms of commercial influence. This paper explores how two fashion influencers—Tansuan and Acrylicn—shape gendered aesthetics, body norms, and consumption behavior through curated content. Using feminist media theory and a socio-cultural lens, the study analyzes their posts and audience interactions to unpack the tensions between empowerment and conformity in digital culture. A third case study introduces Nuanhua, whose body-neutral approach contrasts with dominant influencer trends. As influencer culture continues to reshape how women relate to fashion, identity, and digital visibility, its impact cannot be left solely to platform algorithms, brand marketing teams, or personal taste. The findings of this study, drawn from three distinct yet influential figures, underscore the importance of developing multi-level strategies to ensure that the influencer ecosystem evolves in a more ethical, inclusive, and emotionally sustainable direction.

Keywords: Fashion influencers; body image; digital femininity; Xiaohongshu; algorithmic aesthetics; social media.

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, digital platforms have profoundly reshaped the relationship between fashion, identity, and self-presentation. No longer confined to the pages of glossy magazines or the runways of elite fashion weeks, fashion is now crafted, consumed, and contested in real time through social media. Among these platforms, Instagram, TikTok, and China's Xiaohongshu (also known as RED) have emerged as influential arenas where individuals—particularly young women—negotiate their sense of style, body image, and social value. Within this visual ecosystem, fashion influencers play a crucial role. Through curated content, personal narratives, and branded collaborations, they construct powerful models of femininity and aspirational living that extend beyond mere clothing choices [1,2]. The rise of influencer culture has coincided with broader shifts in media consumption and gender norms. Contemporary young women face complex, often contradictory expectations: to be authentic yet aesthetically pleasing, confident yet modest, effortlessly stylish yet meticulously curated. Social media offers a platform to navigate these tensions, but it also reinforces them. As women scroll through endless images of influencers who appear to live idealized lives—fit bodies, minimalist apartments, glowing skin, and perfect wardrobes—they are subtly, and sometimes overtly, encouraged to compare themselves and strive for similarly polished appearances. This dynamic has significant implications for self-esteem, mental health, consumer habits, and gender identity [3,4]. Unlike traditional celebrities, social media influencers cultivate their status by constructing a sense of relatability. Their followers perceive them not as unreachable icons, but as peers—people who seemingly live normal lives yet have “figured it out.” This intimate parasocial relationship gives influencers a unique persuasive power. They are not just selling products; they are selling ways of being. Through aesthetic choices, body visibility, tone of captions, and lifestyle framing, they teach followers how to look, dress, feel, and even think [1, 5]. In China, the influencer economy has taken a distinct shape. Xiaohongshu, a hybrid platform that combines social networking and e-commerce, is a prime example of how social media is intertwined with consumerism [6]. With a user base that is over 70% female and predominantly under the age of 35, Xiaohongshu has become a space where



beauty, wellness, fashion, and lifestyle intersect. Influencers on the platform are not just content creators—they are commercial agents whose identities are shaped by both market demands and cultural expectations [6, 7]. The dominant aesthetic on Xiaohongshu aligns closely with East Asian beauty ideals: fair skin, petite frames, gentle features, and an emphasis on subtle elegance [6, 8]. These norms, while culturally specific, also resonate with global standards of thinness and femininity found on Western platforms like Instagram [3,9]. This paper investigates how fashion influencers on social media construct and reinforce particular perceptions of the female body and style. Specifically, it examines three case studies—Tansuan, a minimalist lifestyle influencer; Acrylicn, a bold and edgy style icon; and Nuanhua, a lesser-known body-neutral content creator. By analyzing their visual content, audience engagement, and branding strategies, this study explores how these influencers embody different facets of digital femininity. It also considers how platform structures, such as algorithmic visibility and soft advertising mechanisms, shape what kinds of bodies and identities are most likely to succeed [10-12].

2. Literature Review

The intersection of social media, fashion, and identity has become a prominent focus of scholarly inquiry in the past decade. Fashion influencers—often young women using platforms such as Instagram or Xiaohongshu—have emerged as central figures in shaping aesthetic and bodily norms online. This chapter reviews key areas of the literature relevant to the present study, focusing on three domains: self-presentation theory, influencer labor and authenticity, and body image under algorithmic systems.

2.1. Self-Presentation and the Rise of Influencer Culture

Erving Goffman’s theory of self-presentation remains foundational in understanding digital identity. Goffman likens social interaction to theatrical performance, where individuals construct roles to control how they are perceived. Marwick and Boyd extend this theory into digital spaces, describing “micro-celebrity” practices that involve strategic intimacy, aesthetic curation, and audience awareness [2,13]. In the realm of fashion influencers, this manifests through carefully selected poses, wardrobe choices, and background environments. Abidin introduces the idea of “calibrated amateurism,” whereby influencers balance polish with relatability to foster trust among followers [10]. Whether on Instagram or Xiaohongshu, the influencer’s body and daily life become media through which selfhood is performed and evaluated.

2.2. Influencer Labor and the Authenticity Paradox

The labor behind influencer content is not merely technical; it is affective and emotional. Duffy and Hund describe this as the “authenticity bind,” where influencers must appear real while still maintaining aesthetic appeal and commercial viability [1]. This bind is especially gendered: female influencers are expected to be vulnerable yet composed, aspirational yet accessible. Banet-Weiser argues that in a neoliberal culture, authenticity itself becomes a brandable asset—another form of capital [11]. As seen on Xiaohongshu, influencers often share personal anecdotes, wellness routines, or “flaws” in highly controlled ways, suggesting sincerity while maintaining visual cohesion. This carefully curated intimacy forms the foundation for brand partnerships and monetization [6].

2.3. Body Image and Algorithmic Bias

Another critical area of literature involves the impact of influencer content on body image. Multiple studies have shown that repeated exposure to idealized images online contributes to appearance anxiety, social comparison, and dissatisfaction, particularly among young women [3,4]. While the body positivity movement sought to counteract these pressures, it has often been commodified. Cwynar-Horta argues that many so-called inclusive campaigns still privilege certain types of bodies—slim, light-skinned, and able-bodied [7]. Algorithmic platforms exacerbate these issues by prioritizing content that aligns with mainstream beauty norms. Bishop explains how certain posts are

suppressed not by explicit censorship, but by invisibility: if a fat or disabled body receives fewer likes or slower engagement, the algorithm quietly down-ranks it [9]. These systems reproduce narrow ideals of desirability under the guise of neutrality. In China, Liu finds similar patterns on Xiaohongshu, where even posts tagged as “body positive” often feature fair skin and styled bodies, reinforcing rather than resisting hegemonic norms [6]. Such findings highlight how influencer culture, though appearing more diverse, often replicates the same structural exclusions found in traditional media.

3. Methodology

This study utilizes a multi-method qualitative approach informed by feminist media theory and cultural studies. The three main methods are:

Visual Semiotics: Interpreting imagery, color schemes, body poses, fashion elements, and spatial composition.

Discourse Analysis: Examining the language used in captions, hashtags, and follower comments to identify recurring emotional, ideological, and consumerist patterns.

Platform Logic Analysis: Investigating how features like shopping links, engagement algorithms, and explore-page visibility affect influencer content creation and visibility.

Three influencers—Tansuan, Acrylicn, and Nuanhua—were selected based on their stylistic contrast, platform engagement (over 20k followers), and cultural relevance within Xiaohongshu and Instagram’s fashion subcultures.

For each influencer, 20 posts were collected over a six-month period (October 2023 to March 2024), totaling 60 posts. Posts included still images, short-form videos, and accompanying captions. Over 300 follower comments were sampled for engagement analysis.

The study focuses on Chinese digital ecosystems and young, cisgender female influencers. It does not address nonbinary, LGBTQ+, or differently-abled representations, which are crucial areas for future research. Additionally, follower demographics are assumed based on content tone and engagement style, but not directly verified.

4. Case Analysis

4.1. Tansuan: Ordinary Romance, Urban Cool, and Algorithmic Realness

Tansuan, whose full Xiaohongshu handle is “Goodbye to carbonated drinks,” represents a compelling hybrid of casual rebellion, artistic femininity, and lifestyle realism. Unlike many fashion bloggers who operate with either hyper-minimalist aesthetics or high-gloss luxury, Tansuan curates a visual and narrative identity that balances grounded relatability with striking individualism. With over 1 million followers and 80 million accumulated likes, her presence is far from niche. Yet, she retains a tone of intimacy and sincerity that makes her content stand out in a platform saturated with hyper-polished imagery. Her visual style is highly distinctive. Tansuan often features layered outfits that mix textures, silhouettes, and moods. She blends oversized menswear-inspired pieces (blazers, cargo pants, vintage tees) with delicate details like chokers, crop tops, or pink eyeliner. Her poses and expressions are refreshingly unfiltered—slightly open mouths, wide eyes, or deliberately awkward facial gestures. She frequently shoots in everyday locations like stairwells, sidewalks, subway stations, or elevators. These are not accidental settings but carefully selected backdrops that align with a broader cultural aesthetic of “ordinary romance”—a genre that celebrates imperfection and spontaneity. One of her most iconic stylistic strategies is the use of situational captions. Phrases like “They drive to change outfits, I can only bike” tap into a sense of generational irony, economic humility, and public-space self-expression. The tone is humorous but also reflective of social realities faced by urban young women who might not own cars or designer wardrobes, but still want to participate in aesthetic culture. Her playful captions and semi-narrative photo sets evoke small stories

that make each post feel like a moment in a longer personal film. Commercially, Tansuan collaborates with high-end brands like Chanel, LV, and emerging designers, but often does so in a low-key way that integrates sponsored items into her personal style rather than highlighting them. Her brand partnerships reflect a new kind of “soft luxury” communication, one that matches Xiaohongshu’s broader ethos of “use-scene realism” —meaning that promotions should emerge naturally from believable daily life. Her success, however, is not purely aesthetic. It is algorithmically tuned. As one analysis by a MCN professional points out, Tansuan aligns perfectly with platform logic: she uses grounded settings (elevators, stairwells, public parks) that evoke emotional closeness and authenticity, avoids heavily filtered content, and builds a recognizable brand through “style above all”. Her fans say they follow her not just for outfits, but because “she feels like the beautiful daughter I never met”. In essence, Tansuan embodies a type of digital femininity that is self-aware, stylish without being exclusionary, and deeply in sync with the emotional rhythms of her followers. She is not selling fashion—she is telling stories with clothes.

4.2. Acrylic: Whimsical Chaos, Post-Y2K Boldness, and Hyper-Personal Fashion Language

Acrylic, known as “Acrylic Gun” on Xiaohongshu, exemplifies a vibrant and whimsical aesthetic that blends post-Y2K maximalism with self-deprecating humor and personal storytelling. With her distinctive style, Acrylic has carved out a niche as a fashion influencer whose brand is built not on visual perfection but on deliberate imperfection and chaotic charm. Her presence disrupts the highly curated, minimalist aesthetics that dominate influencer spaces, instead offering a visual diary that feels both unpredictable and emotionally charged. Acrylic’s style is deeply eclectic. She mixes oversized cartoon-printed T-shirts with platform sandals, lace gloves with bucket hats, and sparkly accessories with normcore basics. Many of her outfits appear intentionally mismatched—animal-print skirts paired with Hello Kitty bags, or vintage tracksuits with socks pulled over sandals. This visual “disorder” is not a lack of coordination but a conscious styling strategy. It signals to her followers that fashion is not about rules, but about expression, chaos, and play. Each look seems to tell a small story about youth, awkwardness, longing, or sarcasm. Her photo settings also distinguish her from more commercialized influencers. Rather than shooting in pristine cafes or luxury venues, she often photographs herself in apartment corners, stairwells, local supermarkets, or even next to vending machines. These mundane or kitschy environments enhance the “real-girl-next-door” tone of her posts. She embraces unflattering angles and goofy expressions, and her captions are often dryly humorous, reading like the inner monologue of an artsy, overthinking, caffeinated college student. Phrases like “If spring doesn’t end soon, I’ll collapse” or “Tried on new clothes—felt like the end of the world, but I was just in a mall” perfectly capture her mix of drama and relatability. Acrylic also navigates the platform’s commercial logic with creativity. While she partners with fashion brands, she doesn’t frame sponsored posts with conventional calls to action or glamour shots. Instead, she integrates the products into her visual universe in surreal, situational narratives—for example, standing next to a milk delivery bike while wearing branded streetwear, with a caption like “Riding the milk truck home.” These ironic presentations blur the line between ad and art. Most notably, Acrylic resists the hyper-sexualized body presentation common in influencer culture. Her fashion does not frame the body as a site of desire but as a canvas of energy and mood. Her gender expression is fluid: sometimes boyish, sometimes dreamy, often messy. Followers frequently comment, “You dress like my childhood imagination,” or “Your clothes have emotions.” This shows that her influence is less about aspiration and more about recognition, making the weird, poetic, and awkward parts of femininity visible and celebrated.

4.3. Nuanhua: Soft Defiance and the Aesthetic of Body Neutrality

Nuanhua. Unlike mainstream influencers who rely on polished aesthetics or narrative glamor, Nuanhua embraces a radically different approach: vulnerability, imperfection, and emotional transparency. Her aesthetic can be described as “soft defiance”—a calm yet resistant response to the expectations placed on women’s bodies and appearances in the digital age. Visually, her feed is muted and low-contrast. Her photos often include natural lighting, grainy textures, and compositions that

feel spontaneous rather than staged. In many posts, she wears oversized hoodies, wrinkled linen, or basic cotton pieces—clothing that prioritizes comfort over trend. Her outfits do not hug the body but obscure or neutralize it. This sartorial choice aligns with the growing movement of body neutrality, which seeks not to celebrate the body for its appearance, but to shift focus away from appearance altogether. Nuanhua does not use her body to perform femininity; instead, it exists in her content simply as a vehicle for living. Her captions deepen this aesthetic. Rather than product reviews or inspirational mantras, she writes journal-like entries: “I cried today but made soup anyway,” or “Didn’t want to post but this outfit felt like my mood.” The emotional rawness in her text gives her content a deeply therapeutic feel. This is not just fashion—it is feeling, fatigue, and fragments of inner dialogue. While her reach is smaller than that of Tansuan or Acrylicn, her engagement is remarkably loyal. Her followers often leave comments like “Thank you for being real,” or “You remind me that not being okay is also a kind of beauty.” Commercially, Nuanhua collaborates rarely, and when she does, it is with brands that reflect her values—such as ethical clothing labels, mental health organizations, or sustainable product lines. These partnerships are typically understated, and promotional material is integrated into longer personal reflections rather than isolated product pitches. Her influence lies not in setting trends but in validating emotions that are often hidden. In an ecosystem that often rewards perfection, Nuanhua offers quiet resistance. Her soft gaze, hunched shoulders, and captioned insecurities reveal an undercurrent of strength rooted in slowness and self-acceptance. Ultimately, Nuanhua represents a digital femininity that is not about achievement or aesthetic control but about gentle presence. She gives visibility to the unfiltered, the unplanned, and the unbranded—reminding followers that style can be a form of care, and authenticity can be silent.

5. Discussion

This study examined how fashion influencers on social media—particularly on Xiaohongshu—construct and circulate gendered ideals of style, identity, and embodiment. Through qualitative analysis of three influencers—Tansuan, Acrylicn, and Nuanhua—it became clear that influencer culture, far from being a monolithic trend, is a dynamic field of competing aesthetics, emotional tones, and commercial strategies. Tansuan evokes a soft, melancholic elegance through poetic captions and muted visuals. Her brand is aspirational but rooted in emotional resonance, offering followers a model of graceful urban femininity [1, 10]. Acrylicn disrupts normative fashion through post-Y2K maximalism, chaotic styling, and ironic narratives, yet still fits algorithmic and aesthetic boundaries in terms of youthfulness and body type [6, 7, 9]. Nuanhua, meanwhile, represents a quieter form of resistance, rejecting perfection and embracing body neutrality through oversized clothing and unfiltered vulnerability [3, 12]. Despite their distinct styles, all three influencers are shaped by the same structural forces. They perform “authenticity” for commercial visibility, curate emotions to maintain engagement, and adapt content for platform algorithms [1, 2, 14]. Their perceived freedom is conditioned by the logic of digital capitalism, where relatability and desirability are monetized. A key insight from this research is that influencer culture offers both affordances and constraints. On one hand, it provides marginalized voices—especially women—new opportunities to express identity, build community, and generate income. On the other, it often replicates long-standing hierarchies around beauty, labor, and emotional availability [4, 8, 11]. Even body-positive or emotionally raw content must remain aesthetically palatable to be amplified and monetized.

Another critical dynamic is the role of audiences. Followers are not passive recipients of influencer messages; they co-create meaning through likes, shares, comments, and mimicry. Their engagement reinforces algorithmic success and aesthetic trends, making them participants in the reproduction—or disruption—of dominant norms [1, 7]. This feedback loop blurs the line between consumer and producer, highlighting how influencer culture functions as a relational ecosystem rather than a one-way broadcast. Importantly, influencer content is not just about selling products—it sells ways of being. Through visual and emotional storytelling, influencers teach viewers how to inhabit femininity: how to dress, pose, think, and feel. This pedagogical function is powerful, particularly for young women forming identities in a visually saturated world [3, 8, 13]. What makes influencers like

Tansuan, Acrylicn, and Nuanhua influential is not just their fashion sense, but their ability to tap into collective emotion. Whether through poetic stillness, rebellious flair, or vulnerable honesty, they shape digital femininity by narrating experiences their followers recognize and feel. Their bodies are not simply displayed—they are lived, storied, and semiotically loaded [1, 10, 12]. Thus, the study concludes that fashion influencers should be seen not merely as trendsetters or content creators, but as cultural intermediaries. They mediate between personal selfhood and platform optimization, between emotional truth and visual storytelling, between self-expression and commercial labor. Recognizing this duality allows us to appreciate the creativity and agency of influencers without ignoring the pressures they face. Future research should continue to expand the scope of analysis to include male, queer, trans, disabled, and older influencers. Intersectional and cross-cultural approaches are vital to understanding how platformed femininity is constructed differently across regions and identities [5, 7, 15]. Moreover, deeper collaboration between scholars, platforms, and creators could lead to more inclusive and ethical digital environments. In a world where attention is currency and style is discourse, influencers are not peripheral—they are central to how femininity is learned, lived, and sold.

5.1. Platforms: Rebuilding from the Algorithm Up

Social media platforms like Xiaohongshu and Instagram are not passive carriers of content—they are active participants in shaping cultural norms through algorithmic design, visibility mechanisms, and monetization policies. To create a healthier ecosystem, platforms must:

Improve algorithmic transparency: Users should be informed how content is ranked, recommended, and suppressed. Clear guidelines can help creators understand the boundaries without stifling expression. Promote aesthetic diversity: Algorithms should be redesigned to amplify content that features a broader spectrum of body types, racial identities, ages, and gender expressions—not just the most “engaging” or commercially viable posts. Support wellness-centered content: Features like content warnings, emotional tags (e.g., “calm,” “vulnerable,” “funny”), and non-appearance-based categories could shift focus from pure aesthetics to emotional resonance and value.

Platforms must acknowledge their editorial role and take ethical responsibility for the kind of digital femininity they promote.

5.2. Brands: From Visibility to Responsibility

Brands benefit tremendously from influencer collaborations, especially in the fashion and beauty sectors. However, many brands continue to favor partnerships that reinforce narrow standards of attractiveness. To foster more ethical marketing, brands should:

Diversify campaign criteria: Move beyond metrics like follower count and engagement rates to prioritize authenticity, narrative creativity, and community impact. Ensure representational equity: Include influencers of different sizes, backgrounds, and abilities in campaigns—not just for tokenism, but as meaningful voices in the fashion conversation. Respect creative boundaries: Allow influencers freedom to interpret product promotion in their own voice and style. Over-policing content reduces authenticity and trust.

Ethical branding today means investing in influence that builds long-term credibility, not just short-term clicks.

5.3. Influencers: Navigating Visibility with Integrity

Influencers are not just performers or marketers—they are cultural workers. Their choices matter, and their power carries responsibility. As the digital landscape matures, influencers can:

Practice conscious curation: Be intentional about the emotional and visual tone of their feed, recognizing the potential mental health impacts on audiences. Be transparent about partnerships: Clearly label paid posts and explain selection criteria to maintain audience trust. Mentor upward: As

they grow, influencers can spotlight emerging voices, collaborate across aesthetic lines, and de-center perfection in favor of connection.

While individual labor cannot undo structural inequality, intentional choices within one's sphere of influence can still reshape culture.

5.4. Educators and Institutions: Teaching Media Literacy from the Ground Up

The next generation of social media users is already online. However, few receive formal guidance on how to interpret influencer content, resist harmful comparisons, or recognize curated performances. Media literacy must be embedded across educational levels. Key priorities include:

Unpacking visual culture: Teach students to critically assess the aesthetics of influencers and understand the work behind the image. Identifying emotional manipulation: Help students recognize when posts are designed to provoke envy, desire, or insecurity. Promoting creative self-expression: Encourage young people to participate in digital culture as creators, not just consumers—without mimicking harmful templates.

Digital citizenship in the influencer age means teaching users how to navigate with both curiosity and skepticism.

5.5. Scholars and Researchers: Expanding the Frame

Finally, this study calls for continued scholarly attention to the evolving dynamics of influencer culture. Future research should:

Move beyond Western platforms: As shown with Xiaohongshu, non-Western platforms have unique logics and aesthetics deserving of deeper study. Center marginalized voices: Examine how queer, disabled, and older influencers navigate beauty culture differently—and how they are received. Combine qualitative and quantitative methods: Mixed-method approaches can capture the richness of influencer expression and the scale of its impact.

The influencer ecosystem is no longer a niche topic—it is a critical cultural, economic, and psychological terrain. Research must keep pace.

6. Conclusion

The paradox of influencer culture lies in its promise of individuality and its delivery of sameness. Women are encouraged to be “themselves,” yet only within frameworks that are camera-ready, brand-safe, and emotionally accessible. Emotional labor is central. Influencers are expected to be mentors, therapists, models, and marketers all at once. This creates burnout and performance anxiety, yet these experiences are often concealed beneath smiling photos and soft filters. Algorithms deepen these tensions. Posts that deviate from conventional beauty—acne, aging, fat bodies, disability—are often suppressed. Thus, diversity exists, but often only in tokenized or aestheticized forms. For followers, the psychological cost is real. Young women internalize a double bind: be confident, but not loud; be natural, but not messy; be empowered, but desirable. These contradictions foster anxiety, comparison, and disordered self-perception. There is a need for interventions: digital literacy curricula in schools, transparent moderation policies from platforms, and ethical standards for brand-influencer partnerships.

As influencer culture continues to reshape how women relate to fashion, identity, and digital visibility, its impact cannot be left solely to platform algorithms, brand marketing teams, or personal taste. The findings of this study—drawn from three distinct yet influential figures—underscore the importance of developing multi-level strategies to ensure that the influencer ecosystem evolves in a more ethical, inclusive, and emotionally sustainable direction.

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