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ABSTRACT

In Taiwan's platformed social media ecologies, feminist awareness coexists, often uneasily, with embodied appearance anxiety. Everyday participation is shaped by layered forces: family, society routines, and algorithmic curation that normalise comparison and self-scrutiny. The study brings postfeminist scholarship into conversation with platform governance and East Asian and Taiwanese beauty regimes, treating appearance governance as an infrastructural aspect. It mobilises concepts of disciplining and surveillance, peer comparability, and digital self-presentation to illuminate how a 'background hum' of regulation operates, and it anticipates how users negotiate visibility, re-anchor value away from a single beauty metric, and translate critique into livable micro-governance.

Adopting a feminist-informed, constructivist design, the research draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with 14 Taiwanese young adults (20s–30s) who self-identified as having feminist awareness and experience of appearance anxiety. Purposive recruitment occurred via Instagram and Threads with snowballing.

Interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five interlinked themes emerged. (1) The Background Hum of Cumulative Disciplining. (2) A praise–self-censure feedback loop intensifies self-monitoring, with proximity to peers amplifying comparison more than celebrity images. (3) A negotiated visibility workflow aims for 'natural yet presentable' self-presentation. (4) In marketised intimacy, dating apps translate investigates countable capital; some participants re-anchor valuation to function and vitality, loosening a single aesthetic standard. (5) Participants shuttle among knowing–feeling–doing critical literacy names structures, bodily residues still tug at affect.

The study reframes appearance anxiety and governance from individual psychology to platformed infrastructure and social relations, and points to connective avenues between micro-governance and platform design.

INTRODUCTION

In today's platformed media ecologies, online spaces are primary sites where bodies are displayed, discussed, and judged (Merino et al., 2024). However, this terrain is paradoxical: it appears to enable self-expression and empowerment while reproducing narrow aesthetic norms and gendered value systems (Gill, 2007, 2019; Toffoletti et al., 2025). Building on postfeminist scholarship, social media is a field where 'choice', 'confidence', and 'authenticity' are celebrated yet tethered to self-optimisation and surveillance (Darling, 2022; Kang, 2019). Feminist work has long argued that appearance anxieties are structurally produced, not merely individual insecurities (Khoo, 2019; Orbach, 2019; Wolf, 2013), a dynamic intensified by algorithmic visibility and appearance-based comparison (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Perloff, 2014). Situated in Taiwan, where K-beauty and influencer cultures institutionalise 'fair, thin, young' ideals even as local feminist discourse circulates alternative meanings (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012; Keyser-Verreault & Rail, 2023; Kim, 2003), this study asks how feminist awareness coexists, often uneasily, with persistent appearance anxiety.

The point of departure for this project is both scholarly and personal. Growing up and later working in Taiwan, I encountered everyday pressures surrounding appearance: casual family remarks about weight or facial features, school routines that monitored bodies, and social media platforms that repeatedly pushed beauty tips and benchmarks. At different times, I also adopted strict dietary regimes and tight bodily control, and I underwent multiple aesthetic and cosmetic procedures. As a feminist, these choices became a site of tension, seeking comfort, competence, and recognition while knowing how such practices are organised by gendered norms, producing feelings of conflict and, at times, shame. I watched people around me negotiate similar frictions, adjusting what they show, how they show it, and to whom. This reflexive positionality, combined with critical literacy and embodied ambivalence, shaped a design that centres on lived experience and ordinary practice.

The dissertation proceeds in three chapters. The Theoretical chapter offers a critical literature review and conceptual framework, situating body and beauty governance within postfeminism, platform logics, and East Asian and Taiwanese beauty cultures, and defining the key constructs used in the analysis. The Methodology chapter details the feminist-informed, constructivist design, including semi-structured interviews, analytic procedures for reflexive thematic analysis, and considerations of ethics and reflexivity. The Analysis and Discussion chapter presents the findings in four interlinked sections: The Background Hum of Cumulative Disciplining, The Feedback Loop of Praise and Self-Critique, The Negotiated Visibility of Platformed Beauty Norms, Re-anchoring Value in Marketised Intimacy, and The Postfeminist Negotiation of Knowing, Feeling, and Doing, and synthesises their implications for appearance as capital and for everyday agency. A brief conclusion distils contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

This chapter establishes the study's background and framework. It reviews scholarship on body politics and beauty governance, digital self-presentation and platform logics, and East Asian and Taiwanese beauty cultures to situate appearance anxiety as structurally produced, digitally mediated, and locally shaped. It then clarifies key concepts that underpin the analysis, including disciplinary power and the body, the beauty myth, postfeminist sensibility, neoliberal subjectivity, self-presentation, and platform governance, alongside the operational definitions of body dissatisfaction and social appearance anxiety. Finally, it outlines the aim of the study and presents the research questions that guide the subsequent chapters.

Literature Review

Beauty, Appearance, and Body Anxieties

The body has long been a key site of politics and power. It is an object to be disciplined, managed, and invested in. Appearance norms are often internalised through everyday practices; in seemingly trivial details, they produce bodily discipline (Foucault, 1975, 1990). Such norms are a paradigmatic mechanism of micro-power in daily life. Bartky (1990) argues that in mundane self-management, grooming, dress, weight, and posture, women internalise an inspecting gaze and disciplinary norms, producing 'docile bodies'. Subsequent feminist and body scholars extend and revise this framework, analysing women's everyday bodily experience and consolidating the body as a site where power and inequality are reproduced

(Bordo, 1993; Butler, 2011; Orbach, 2019; Young, 2005). Bordo (1993) demonstrates how cultural norms infiltrate subjectivity through the body interface via anorexia, dieting, and fitness practices, and Orbach (2019) traces these logics into brand culture and the contemporary body industry, where 'plasticity' promises autonomy yet inaugurates new forms of control.

Turning to surveillance and valuation of bodies, Wolf (1991) advances the 'beauty myth': beauty is sacralised and centred in women's lives, not as a matter of individual preference but as an effect of social structures and gendered power. Beauty anxiety is thus entangled with gender oppression. Dieting and eating disorders, for example, can be read as outcomes of internalised cultural norms (Bordo, 1993). Moreover, when women make gains in education, employment, or political participation, rising appearance standards can re-discipline their agency and confidence. Under the beauty myth, women's unease stems less from personal deficiency than from institutions that generate an ever-unattainable ideal, prompting self-doubt and depletion. When women judge themselves against culturally idealised bodies, the perceived gap often produces shame (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Lewis, 1995).

Operationally, body dissatisfaction is typically defined as a negative subjective evaluation of one's body (e.g., weight, shape) and functions as a significant risk and maintenance factor for eating pathology (Silberstein et al., 1988; Stice & Shaw, 2002). A related construct, social appearance anxiety, denotes anxiety about being negatively evaluated by others on the basis of one's overall appearance rather than a single feature (Hart et al., 2008; Levinson et al., 2013).

In a postfeminist context, these anxieties take on more contradictory forms (Gill, 2007). Women are encouraged to perform 'choice' and 'confidence' through self-surveillance and self-discipline. As McRobbie (2008) implies, feminism is 'taken into account' yet simultaneously neutralised and depoliticised, such that female agency is redefined as self-management of beauty and appearance. Postfeminist sensibility continues to centre on sexual attractiveness, and scholarship suggests that the aesthetic standard remains narrow and mainstream (Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2008; Orbach, 2009). From makeover culture to everyday routines, these representations invite women to craft a sexy body as the route to pleasure and success, demanding constant monitoring and checking. Such postfeminist representations intertwine with neoliberal subjectivity: within brand culture and the platform economy, women must not only look beautiful but also look confident, recoding agency as visible, brandable affective labour and appearance management (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Although early work centred on women, growing evidence shows that men also face intense appearance pressures, albeit with different ideals: women are steered toward thinness, while men confront a muscular, low-fat ideal indexed by the drive for muscularity and attendant risks to body image and health (Griffiths et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2000). Meta-analytic evidence further indicates that men's body dissatisfaction has not declined over time (Karazsia et al., 2017). Crucially, the logics of objectification and self-objectification are increasingly observed among men as well, suggesting that bodies across genders are governed within a shared economy of visibility.

Digital Culture and Self-Representation

Digital culture enables individuals to ceaselessly construct and perform the self through images, text, and routine practices. Long before platforms, (Goffman, 1959) framed self-presentation as strategic, context-sensitive performance; in networked environments, this dramaturgy is intensified and archived, as everyday life becomes public, visible, and monetizable (Baym, 2015; Hogan, 2010). Social media cultures further push this trend via self-branding (Marwick, 2013) and micro-celebrity (Senft, 2013), encouraging continuous curation to attract attention and maintain visibility.

Self-presentation online is not simply free expression; it is shaped by surveillance and platform logics. In a Foucauldian sense, bodies and conduct are normalised under the watchful eyes of others (Foucault, 1977). Platform governance through ranking, curation, and moderation regulates what content and which bodies are seen (Gillespie, 2014), while algorithmic systems enact subtle politics of visibility. Therefore, these infrastructures magnify, sort, and compare appearance, making looks a core currency of participation.

Under these conditions, appearance anxieties intensify, and narrow aesthetic ideals are reproduced and circulated. A substantial body of scholarship associates social media use with increased body image concerns, frequently through appearance-based social comparison

(Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Perloff, 2014). At the same time, platform culture rallies users to 'be yourself' and 'show confidence', while translating appearance management into invisible labour (Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). This contradiction exemplifies postfeminist, neoliberal subject formation, where agency is recast as self-optimisation and emotional display. Users must project pleasure, positivity, and self-assurance even as constant comparison produces anxiety (Gill & Orgad, 2017). Overall, digital self-presentation is both agentic and disciplinary, opening new modes of self-making while tightening platform-driven demands on affect and appearance.

East Asian and Taiwanese Beauty Cultures

East Asian beauty culture is anchored in the ideals of fairness, thinness, and youth, and has been highly institutionalised through the beauty industry, popular culture, and the transnational circulation of media (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012; Keyser-Verreault & Rail, 2023; Kim, 2003). The regional and global reach of K-beauty means that the management of body and appearance is not merely a matter of personal choice, but a normative practice embedded in social culture and market logics (Elias & Gill, 2018; Wang & Lee, 2021). In the platform era, influencer cultures across East and Southeast Asia foreground calibrated amateurism and intimate publics, cultivating a mode of digital self-construction based on intimacy, interactivity, and affective labour (Abidin, 2015, 2017).

Taiwan's beauty culture at once inherits the East Asian aesthetic of being slim, fair, beautiful, and youthful, and is reshaped by Western feminisms and local social movements, producing a hybrid formation (Chen et al., 2010; Keyser-Verreault & Rail, 2023). The beauty industry, consumer culture, and social media interlock to normalise appearance management as an everyday practice (Huang, 2011; Moslehpour et al., 2017). Moreover, women's bodies frequently materialise collective values, family honour, and gender order; shaming comments reproduce gendered shame and underscore the family as a crucial site where appearance norms are reproduced, compelling women to negotiate selfhood within intimate relationships (Keyser-Verreault, 2023).

Within a neoliberal context, Taiwanese women occupy a contradictory position. On one hand, they are called to perform aesthetic labour, continually investing in their looks to accrue capital, attention, and recognition; on the other, some adopt anti-aspirational stances, refusing or delaying pursuit of the ‘ideal’ body, as a way to resist commodified femininity (Keyser-Verreault & Rail, 2023). These tensions reveal that Taiwanese beauty culture mirrors globalised neoliberal logics while also containing distinctly local modes of contestation and subversion.

Feminist Awareness and Everyday Negotiation

With the diffusion of feminist thought in Taiwan, particularly the arrival of second- and third-wave feminism, people have become increasingly aware of the idea that appearance norms are not ‘natural’, but rather part of a gendered power structure (Kang, 2019; Yu, 2011). In public discourse, this has helped rename appearance anxiety: no longer framed only as individual ‘dissatisfaction’ or ‘insecurity’, it is also understood as a structural form of oppression. However, the spread of feminist consciousness has not erased appearance anxiety. Instead, it highlights the everyday contradiction that actors navigate, moving between critique and self-surveillance, oscillating between resistance and compliance (Kang, 2019; Keyser-Verreault, 2024).

The rise of social media intensifies this tension. On one hand, platforms serve as vital spaces for feminist discourse and body-positivity activism, through ‘bare-face selfies’, ‘real-body’ campaigns, and ‘no-retouching’ practices that contest dominant beauty standards (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dobson, 2015). On the other hand, the same digital environment heightens visibility and competition, compelling ongoing beauty labour to maintain attention and social capital (Duffy, 2017; Elias & Gill, 2018). Taken together, social media is both a field for feminist sensibilities and a site where discipline is further refined.

This study thus notes ambivalent bodily feelings and equivocal practices in everyday life: in fitness, makeup, or selfies, women may experience pleasure and confidence while also recognising how these routines are shaped by gendered norms (Kang, 2019; Keyser-Verreault & Rail, 2023). Men and gender-minority users report similar ambivalence, deriving affirmation from grooming or muscle training even as they feel the pressure and exclusions of masculinist ideals (Pope, 2000; Griffiths et al., 2021). Accordingly, in Taiwan, ‘feminist awareness’ is neither simply liberating nor purely oppressive; it exposes the paradoxes of appearance and body anxiety. People understand the constructed nature of norms, yet must negotiate them in daily life. This everyday negotiation is a key dimension of contemporary appearance politics, showing how, under neoliberal and digital conditions, feminism provides critical resources even as it becomes entangled with disciplinary power.

Conceptual Framework

From this literature, this study theorises appearance anxiety as structurally produced, digitally mediated, and locally situated. First, feminist accounts of disciplinary power treat the body as the surface where micro-practices of self-management (grooming, posture, weight work) reproduce inequality, allowing us to read routine 'care' as governance rather than private taste (Foucault, 1975, 1977; Bartky, 1990). Second, the beauty myth frames appearance regulation as a gendered technology that sacralises beauty and relocates deficit to the individual, helping the analysis avoid psychologising 'low confidence' and instead track how shame and self-blame are structurally organised (Wolf, 1991). Third, a postfeminist sensibility links the rhetoric of 'choice', 'confidence', and 'authenticity' to neoliberal subjectivities of self-optimisation and affective display, providing a vocabulary to interpret participants' simultaneous critique and compliance without casting either as a contradiction or failure (Gill, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Fourth, classic dramaturgy and contemporary platform governance concepts let us specify how visibility is organised via interfaces, metrics, ranking, and moderation, so that algorithmic and audience dynamics can be analysed as infrastructural conditions rather than mere backdrops (Goffman, 1959; Gillespie, 2014). Finally, situating the analysis in East Asian and Taiwanese beauty cultures anchors global theories in a context where K-beauty and influencer economies institutionalise 'fair–thin–young' ideals, yet meet hybrid, local negotiations and emerging refusals; this makes space for region-specific trajectories of governance and resistance (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012; Keyser-Verreault & Rail, 2023). Taken together, these constructs function as sensitising concepts within a feminist-informed, constructivist design using reflexive thematic analysis: they warrant sampling everyday episodes, orient coding at semantic and latent levels, and recognise ambivalence as analytically meaningful.

Research Question

Based on the foregoing literature, this study aims to explain how and why feminist awareness coexists with appearance-related anxieties in the everyday life of social media in Taiwan. While scholarship has mapped the structural logics of beauty governance, it has paid less attention to how contradictions are negotiated in routine practice; moreover, analyses remain largely Western-centric, rarely grounding arguments in East Asian and Taiwanese beauty regimes and platform cultures; and the 'discomfort gap' and tension between knowing, feeling, and doing is under-theorised and seldom traced empirically. Taking Taiwan as the site, the project centres lived practice to connect family talk, schooling, and platform governance with users' minor adjustments, ambivalences, and limits.

From this point of departure, the study asks: How do Taiwan-based participants navigate feminist awareness alongside ongoing appearance anxieties in social media environments? In particular, it examines how appearance norms circulate across family, society, and platforms; how algorithmic visibility shapes comparison and evaluation; how users manage visibility and whether valuation shifts beyond a single beauty metric, across genders and with what limits.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter sets out the research strategy and design. Guided by a constructivist, feminist-informed qualitative approach, this study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore how Taiwanese young adults navigate feminist awareness alongside body/appearance anxiety. Purposive sampling targeted Taiwanese participants aged 20-30 who met the specified criteria; recruitment occurred via Instagram/Threads, with snowball referrals. Analysis used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), with feminist/postfeminist sensitising concepts informing the themes. The chapter concludes by reviewing research ethics and the researcher's reflexive stance, outlining their implications for design, data collection, and analysis.

Research Strategy

In-Depth Interviews

Qualitative interviewing seeks to understand participants' lived worlds and to unfold the meaning of their experiences, providing a route into how people construct meaning around what they live through (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In-depth interviews are particularly well-suited for exploring complex, subjective experiences, especially the internal conflicts and social pressures that structured instruments often struggle to capture. As Johnson (2002) notes, in-depth interviewing involves a certain style of social and interpersonal interaction. This orientation invites participants to articulate meanings in their own terms. This study used semi-structured interviews with Taiwanese participants who self-identified as feminists or as having feminist awareness and who had experienced body and appearance anxiety. Semi-structured interviewing balances a consistent interview guide with flexibility for participants to shape the conversation, while enabling the interviewer to probe, clarify, and follow emergent lines of meaning (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Kallio et al., 2016). This flexibility aligns with the study's focus on lived tensions surrounding feminism and appearance, as it supports detailed, experience-near accounts and yields the kind of rich, nuanced data for which reflexive thematic analysis is designed.

All interviews were conducted in 2025, each lasting approximately one hour, with a total of 14 participants. Audio recordings were transcribed and then coded. As analysis progressed, codes developed for the final interviews substantially overlapped with those from earlier interviews, and a coherent, systematic categorisation scheme had been established. On this basis, we determined that thematic saturation had been achieved and concluded data collection with 14 participants.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach used to systematically identify, organise, and interpret recurring patterns of meaning across a dataset. It is intentionally flexible in its theoretical stance and can address both what participants state directly and the assumptions and social meanings that underlie those accounts (Clarke & Braun, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This approach proceeds through iterative engagement with the data, moving back and forth between the corpus, codes, and candidate themes until a coherent analytic account emerges. In its reflexive form, researcher subjectivity is treated as an analytic resource rather than a bias to be eliminated, and themes are built through active, interpretive work rather than discovered as fixed entities (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

As an analytical strategy, thematic analysis is an apt choice because it can hold together lived experience and social meaning in a single analytical frame. The method enables movement between what participants say and the cultural logics that shape those accounts, allowing tensions between feminist awareness and anxiety to be traced rather than flattened. Its flexible yet principled workflow also complements semi-structured interviews: rich narratives are first attended to in their specificity, then organised into patterned insights without losing nuance.

Moreover, the approach supports coherence and rigour in ways that fit an interpretive, feminist orientation and a medium-sized corpus. Decisions about coding and theme development can be made explicit, revisited through iterative refinement, and documented in an audit trail (Clarke & Braun, 2014). This combination of interpretive depth and transparent procedure enables an account that is both sensitive to participants' experiences and analytically robust.

Research Design

Sampling

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy suited to qualitative research, with the goal of gaining in-depth insights from individuals who are especially experienced in the phenomenon under investigation (Warren, 2002). Purposeful selection enables depth over breadth and aligns with interpretive aims typical of qualitative designs.

The target population was Taiwanese young adults who (a) self-identified as feminists or as having feminist awareness and (b) had experienced body or appearance anxiety. Young adulthood is defined here as the stage that follows adolescence and extends across the twenties. The definition follows Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood, which spans the late teens into the twenties, particularly ages 18-25, and contemporary usage that extends into the late twenties; accordingly, bounded eligibility is typically defined as 20-30 years (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2007). The age focus is also consistent with postfeminist and media scholarship, which documents elevated body-image and appearance concerns among young women and young adults in digitally mediated contexts (e.g., mass and social media exposure linked to body dissatisfaction and related outcomes) (Cohen et al., 2017; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Grabe et al., 2008; Perloff, 2014). These patterns support concentrating recruitment in this life stage.

Recruitment materials were disseminated on Instagram and Threads, issuing a public call to maximise cohort reach. In early 2025, Instagram's ad tools reported approximately 11.3 million reachable users in Taiwan (49% of the total population), indicating substantial penetration among local young adults (DataReportal, 2025); Threads was used as a secondary channel given its integration with Instagram logins and follower graphs. To complement platform recruitment and extend into relevant networks, snowball sampling was also implemented, whereby initial participants referred additional eligible participants. This approach is well established for accessing communities connected by shared interests or experiences.

The 14 participants varied meaningfully in demographic features, including gender (11 women, 3 men), age (21-30), and educational and occupational backgrounds. All were tertiary educated. Occupational roles included three undergraduates, four master's students, one researcher, one staff member in a campus gender-equity office, two with prior experience in gender-issue NGOs, and three employed in other sectors. Detailed characteristics are provided in Appendix 1.

Interview Process

Each interview was planned for about 60 minutes. Due to geographic proximity, one interview was conducted face-to-face, while the remainder were conducted online. Synchronous videoconferencing is well-suited to qualitative interviewing because it widens geographical reach, lowers participation burdens, and can yield rapport and rich data comparable to in-person settings (Archibald et al., 2019).

The conversations are organised into four parts, and the semi-structured guide was developed through an iterative process. This involved deriving question areas from the research aims, drafting prompts, piloting and revising wording, and finalising sequencing, following established guidance for building and refining semi-structured interview guides (Kallio et al., 2016).

Part 1: Opening and orientation.

The researcher introduced the study aims, confirmed informed consent and participants' rights (voluntariness, confidentiality), and invited brief self-introductions. Interviews opened with descriptive questions to ease participants into the topic in their own terms (Spradley, 2003).

Part 2: Lived experience.

Interviews moved to more specific prompts about appearance discourse and body self-perception in social media use, utilising probes and follow-ups to clarify meanings and pursue emergent leads while maintaining focus on the research questions.

Part 3: Interpretive framing.

Participants were invited to reflect on feminist discourse, such as reproduction, resistance, and ambivalence, to elicit underlying meanings and tensions, consistent with responsive interviewing's emphasis on exploring categories, contradictions, and participant interpretations (Knapik, 2006).

Part 4: Closure and reciprocity.

The researcher concluded with summarising and open-ended prompts (e.g., 'What feels most important that we have not discussed?'), Then, offered space for participants' questions. Providing this 'participant voice' time is a common strategy to reduce interview power asymmetries and enact relational ethics (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009).

Throughout, every question was explicitly linked to the study aims; wording, order, and prompts were refined based on the pilot and early interviews to optimise clarity and depth. The complete interview guide appears in Appendix 2.

Analytical Techniques

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to interpret the interview transcript, treating the analysis as an iterative, recursive, and interpretive process through which themes are actively constructed. The analysis progressed from familiarisation and inductive coding at both semantic and latent levels to collating codes into candidate themes, reviewing coherence across the dataset, and defining and naming themes prior to the analytic write-up, with non-linear movement between phases as insights developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

Coding proceeded primarily inductively, while sensitising concepts from feminist scholarship informed interpretation where appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bowen, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Gill, 2007). This hybrid strategy combined inductive and deductive logics, aligning with the theoretical flexibility of reflexive thematic analysis and the study's aim of understanding how Taiwanese young adults with feminist awareness navigate body and appearance anxiety in digitally mediated contexts. Analysis progressed from line-by-line inductive coding to iterative clustering of conceptually related codes, with later cycles attending to latent meanings informed by feminist and postfeminist concepts. Candidate themes were refined through checks for internal coherence and external distinction, constant comparison across cases, attention to deviant instances, and repeated returns to the complete transcription. Each theme was then delimited with a brief scope statement and inclusion/exclusion criteria, named to reflect its central organising concept, and evidenced with representative extracts. The final thematic structure, comprising five themes and nine subthemes, is presented in Appendix 3. All materials were collected and analysed in Mandarin; excerpts presented in English were translated for conceptual equivalence, recognising translation as an additional interpretive act and attending to potential meaning shifts across languages.

Ethics and Reflexivity

The study received departmental ethics approval and adhered to institutional guidelines. All participants provided informed consent after being briefed on aims, voluntary participation, withdrawal rights, and confidentiality. Identifiers were removed at transcription; audio files, transcripts, and consent records were saved on encrypted drives with restricted access. Because most interviews were conducted through videoconference, platform settings (e.g., meeting access, recording permissions) were checked against consent agreements to minimise privacy risks. These practices align with established guidance on procedural ethics and 'ethics in practice', emphasising ongoing attentiveness to risk, context, and participant expectations (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Reflexivity was treated as integral to rigour. Researcher's standpoint, feminist training and lived experience of appearance anxiety facilitated rapport yet required disciplined self-scrutiny to avoid over-identification or projection. Analytic notes, a reflexive journal, and explicit decision trails documented how assumptions shifted and how interpretations were warranted in the data. This approach treats the researcher as an analytic instrument while 'bridling' preconceptions, rather than pursuing value neutrality (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002).

Interviews were conducted with critical respect and empathic listening to reduce power asymmetries, invite dissent, and foreground participants' terms. Questions were phrased to elicit experience-near accounts before moving to interpretive prompts; probes clarified meaning without steering toward researcher-preferred narratives. Offering time at the end for participants' questions or corrections further supported relational accountability (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009).

Empathy was maintained alongside theoretical discipline by returning themes to the transcription, testing rival explanations, and grounding claims in transparent evidentiary links (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis provided a structure for documenting interpretive moves while keeping participants' meanings central, ensuring that participants' voices are authentically heard.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter synthesises interview data to show appearance governance as a durational regime, a low-level 'background hum' seeded in family talk and school routines and reactivated by platform logics. First, the analysis examines how reminders, jokes, weigh-ins, and algorithmic feeds collectively establish a continuous baseline of cumulative disciplining. It then examines a feedback loop of praise and self-critique in which peer comparability, instead of distant celebrities, sharpens self-monitoring. Next, the negotiated visibility of platformed beauty norms is analysed: participants assemble posting workflows and audience controls to appear 'natural yet good enough', translating feminist awareness into micro-governance rather than grand refusal. Further, within marketised intimacy, such as dating apps, looks are converted into quantifiable capital, while value is re-anchored from a single aesthetic metric to functionality and felt vitality. Finally, a postfeminist negotiation of knowing, feeling, and doing is theorised: critical insight names the system, embodied residues sustain anxiety, and pragmatic adjustments keep it liveable. Together, these analyses connect micro-practices to platform infrastructure and the gendered political economy, clarifying not only how anxiety is reproduced but also how workable margins of agency are carved within it.

The Background Hum of Cumulative Disciplining

From early adolescence, participants described living with a background hum of cumulative disciplining. Family comments about being 'fat/thin' or about one's facial features, nickname-making and teasing around appearance, and quantified weigh-ins in dance or club settings all turned the body into something continually rated and self-monitored:

> *My grandma would joke and clip my nose with a clothespin, saying, 'This way your nose will grow higher!' [...] (Participant R, Female)*

> *People would make nicknames out of your features—if you were chubbier, you'd be called things like 'X-fat' or 'X-chubby.' That was what middle school was like for me [...] (Participant W, Male)*

> *Weight was controlled from early on. In elementary school dance class, we had to be weighed before the recital or at the end of the term. If you had gained weight, points were deducted. (Participant S, Female)*

This disciplining is not a single blow, but a low-intensity force wrapped in the language of everyday reminders, jokes, and 'care', sinking into the rhythms of life to form an omnipresent baseline.

> *It's not an anxiety that happens every minute of every day; it's more like a low-level noise sitting in the back of our minds during that whole period […] (Participant B, Female)*

In adulthood, the effect does not fade. It is reactivated and amplified by the platform. Algorithms then feed back and intensify appearance anxiety, pushing makeup, slimming, and cosmetic-surgery content, so that people are trapped in comparison and evaluation within digital spaces:

> *On Threads, the algorithm surfaces posts like, 'At X centimetres and Y kilograms, is that too fat?' […] (Participant S, Female)*

> *When I want to use a particular product, I start searching for it; after that search, the algorithm changes, and my page fills up with cosmetics and skincare advertisements or 'user experience' posts […] (Participant G, Female)*

This is not the result of active search but of passive exposure: a technically mediated background hum, not just an inner voice but a platform-produced noise field that keeps telling users which looks are 'worth seeing, liking, or saving', while retriggering earlier internalised rating scripts.

These embodiment experiences sediment into bodily habits and feeling rules (Young, 1980): managing expressions and angles before a photo, calculating timing and audience before posting, and the instantaneous scan for whether an image is 'presentable enough'. What emerges is not a discrete trauma but a durational regime, a continuing circuit of body governance that links kinship talk, school discipline, and social-media visibility.

The Feedback Loop of Praise and Self-Critique

On social platforms, others' praise and one's harsher self-audit work together in a reinforcing loop. Public encouragement coexists with an everyday culture of comparison that sharpens self-scrutiny around looks and lifestyle. For participants, pressure comes primarily from comparable peers rather than decontextualised celebrities or KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders). The familiar triad of beauty, travel, and consumption in friends' posts cuts closest to self-evaluation. A comparability hypothesis, the more similar, the sharper the sting, helps explain why peer posts bite more than celebrity content (Fardouly et al., 2015). The sharing of similar age and resources makes gaps feel like things one ought to attain but hasn't.

> *I actually feel more indifferent when it's a KOL's really polished photos, because I know that's their line of work, and they obviously have more ability to, to manage, no, not 'manage', more like… to make their appearance look better. But when it comes to my peers around me, we're all still college students. On the one hand, they have the means to travel abroad and dress beautifully; that's the kind of capital power that makes you envious. So, it's a double thing: they can go abroad, and they also have great skin and really good bodies. All of that takes money, and you just end up feeling so envious. (Participant Z, Female)*

At the same time, participants reported a clear split between positive others' evaluations and harsher self-evaluations. Comments on appearance-focused posts tend to be supportive, while the internal audit is stricter. The comparison target is not only others but also past selves, that thinner, more photogenic, or more socially advantaged version. Even amid friendly feedback, many continue to measure themselves against granular details (size, angle, skin condition, shooting conditions), producing a long-running, low-intensity form of self-monitoring. This affective structure resonates with a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007): under the language of choice and empowerment, women are invited to keep optimising and, when falling short, to blame themselves, even as they recognise the arbitrariness of beauty norms.

> *Even if the change isn't very obvious, people will say, 'You seem a bit heavier lately.' Then I think, no, no, I need to slim back to how I was, and I get anxious. (Participant Q, Female)*

> *The hardest part is definitely body size. I catch myself thinking, If I lose five kilos, I'll look better… more clothes will fit. [...] Then I snap out of it and say, That's their problem! Their sizes are too narrow. Do they think everyone is thin? (Participant C, Female)*

> *Only later did I realise my body used to bring me certain advantages. [...] I gained a lot of weight and felt I was losing what I used to have. I'd think, I look terrible, so ugly, and it didn't match my own internal aesthetic, so I felt really discouraged [...] (Participant R, Female)*

Social platforms also work the other way. They create spaces to see diversity and speak it, which can buffer appearance anxiety. Several participants described specific accounts, brands, or close-friend circles where feminist and body-positive content offer reflection and emotional support. However, the relief is often conditional; a return to public feeds or short-video streams pushes comparison back to the foreground through algorithms and peer display.

> *Because I feel like they'd post, like, photos with a bit of belly, and that's when I started to feel really that people don't particularly care about it, or that this is just the real you. So I think I was, I really was, affected by them; I really like the way they share, and it also makes me feel that having a bit of belly, or thicker legs, is just... just a very natural thing. (Participant S, Female)*

> *Ada (an influencer) also posts, like, saying they have some lines, marks or whatever, and I feel like those are the people who make the online environment better. [...] Although they all post their bodies, you can still tell it's curated. Like makeup, or using certain ways to package and present themselves. For example, maybe Ada uses a more Western style to package a body like theirs. So I think, for ordinary people, if you just copy their way directly, that could be pretty risky. (Participant F, Female)*

> *I think this is a very positive way of looking at it, but I know some accounts already overemphasise it (body positivity) to the point that it becomes off-putting. It kind of backfires; the more you stress something, the more it feels like you don't actually have it. I do think the original intent was good, but… I often see that almost every post is about this, which ends up feeling a bit too much and, if anything, makes me pick up on your anxiety even more. (Participant Y, Female)*

Therefore, social media is a paradoxical field that both amplifies anxiety and supplies resources. Peer comparability routinises beauty disciplining in everyday life, so public praise rarely softens private self-reproach. Body-positive content in small, close circles can offer brief buffering, but its ability to ease appearance anxiety is limited and uneven, effective for some, and not readily applicable to all.

The Negotiated Visibility of Platformed Beauty Norms

Participants assemble the small before-and-after actions around posting into a self-presentation workflow (Uski & Lampinen, 2016) that turns 'being seen' into something operational, allowing a provisional balance between feminist awareness and appearance anxiety. The workflow renders visibility operational: brief pre-shoot management (angles, lighting, hair, expression) followed by light post-production (filters, colour tuning, crop, occasional emoji cover) and curation of a single image that looks 'natural yet good enough'. It also reshapes publishing: face shots are largely reserved for dressed-up moments, everyday posts tilt toward landscapes or objects, and visibility is often restricted to close circles to lower the risk of rating and misreading.

> *With filters and the front camera, you can manage your expression, fix your bangs, and adjust your body as you shoot. Once you get the angle, you no longer need to take a hundred photos to pick one. And if I'm not wearing makeup, a filter can handle it. So honestly, I'm less anxious now. (Participant E, Female)*

> *When something slips through, I'll cover it with an emoji. I'm the kind of person who does a lot of self-screening before posting [...] (Participant R, Female)*

> *I still post personal photos, but only when I'm dressed up. I want to record the effort of doing makeup and choosing clothes. [...] Most other times, I post landscapes or culture. [...] (Participant L, Female)*

Alongside this workflow, participants manage who sees and how they read. In practice, Instagram is used for intimacy and aesthetics, Threads for public issues and quick affect, Facebook for family and older relatives, while Dcard (Taiwan's largest anonymous forum) is often avoided due to anonymous rating and gendered banter. These are not mere preferences but responses to an imagined audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011): each toggle public/private, feed/stories, close friends lists/comment closures, seeks a more controllable interpretive frame. Before uploading, participants forecast likely readings and costs; to avoid being read as 'seeking beauty/likes', they legitimise posts with eventfulness (trips, performances, milestones) and tune visibility and interaction permissions as audience valves.

> *I want to take natural, unedited photos, but I also want them to meet my own standard of what looks good, so they end up looking more like everyday shots. If it's a travel or outing photo, I feel it has a kind of 'legitimacy', so I'll post it. But if it's just an ordinary 'my makeup looks nice today' selfie, I wouldn't post it. (Participant Z, Female)*

> *When you post, you naturally factor in all your social relationships. It isn't limited to photos that show your face [...] It's true for any Story: you consider your relationships first, and only then do you finish and post the Story. (Participant D, Male)*

Within close-friend spaces, some participants cultivate a curated, idealised self, a small-scale 'cyber-utopia' that promises safety and recognition. Paradoxically, the safer the enclave, the stricter the self-screening: subtle retouches, careful captioning, and selective posting are used to mend perceived gaps between the offline self and the desired presentation. The enclave works as both buffer and amplifier, buffering public judgment while amplifying the labour required to sustain 'naturalness' and coherence.

Under a platformed gaze, this becomes everyday body governance (Heyes, 2007): tools make the body a fine-tunable project, and self-surveillance extends from features to files, cadence, and visibility settings, checking that a post doesn't read as fishing for praise yet still looks good and natural.

> *I want what I shoot to look natural, but that actually means I do things on purpose. [...] I set up the angle, take time to tweak and record, so others will feel it's just a casual snap. (Participant W, Male)*

A tension remains: while many endorse feminist critiques of objectification, they rely on these routines as micro-resistances (fewer face shots, more landscapes, narrowed audiences). Meanwhile, naturalness itself is labour, which is planned, staged, and maintained. Participants do not eliminate anxiety, but through process management and contextualised visibility, they keep it manageable, allowing feminist awareness and everyday aesthetics to co-exist without spinning out of control.

Re-anchoring Value in Marketised Intimacy

This study found that participants navigate a regime of marketised visibility: dating apps convert appearance into quantifiable social capital, while participants counter these pressures through practices of re-anchoring discourse. In Taiwan's dating context, appearance is felt as both an entry ticket and a bonus: beauty norms are tied to heterosexual recognition and social value. Family, friends, and potential partners' gazes, along with swipes, matches, and likes, convert looks into scored social and mating capital. Dating apps render this rating real-time and visible, making it easy to equate 'am I good enough' with 'am I worthy of whom'. Even off-app, offline matchmaking, friend introductions, and relatives' reminders (e.g., 'have you gotten a bit rounder lately?') extend the same market logic.

> *I used to have a little (appearance anxiety), but now I'm okay. First, I just be myself, and second, I don't have a strong need to find a partner now. (Participant K, Male)*

> *There are occasions when, so as not to make your partner feel like you never dress up, like, 'is it a bit embarrassing to take you out?' that kind of feeling. (Participant L, Female)*

> *There was a period when I really lacked confidence. It was especially when I was drifting around in the dating-app market. It feels like a marketplace where people choose based on photos—most people still do. When I kept running into what felt like a bunch of duds, I started to wonder: maybe, in terms of how I ranked among women, I was also a 'dud', and that's why I kept getting matched with these people. [...] It's not an anxiety that happens every minute of every day, but in the mating market, the 'mating market'? When I'm rolling around in that market, that's when I keep asking myself this. (Participant B, Female)*

> *I started to feel that I looked different from my photos, and then I'd worry that if I went out with these strange men, they'd see me and think I'd cheated with photos; then I'd feel very sad. Or I'd start to believe that my current body is not worthy of the kind of date I want, because I want to date a muscular guy with eight-pack abs, and I can't reach that level, my body doesn't match, and then I would start to feel anxious [...] (Participant R, Female)*

Rather than simply de-centring appearance as capital, most participants described re-anchoring self-evaluation and life goals to functionality and felt vitality. A 'good state' is less about weight or lines and more about concentrating at work, sleeping well, regular bodily function, and being physically present in activities with friends or communities. This shift does not deny aesthetic desires; it widens the value equation, putting what the body can do/where it can take me alongside how I look, and bringing study and work achievements, relationship quality, and practised interests into self-valuation beyond a single beauty metric.

> *It was healthy eating that made me lose weight, but 45 (kilograms)... I felt very unhealthy, and my period stopped, so I thought, I don't want this. I also don't want osteoporosis later or anything [...] so I try as much as possible to keep myself within a healthy, reasonable range. (Participant S, Female)*

> *I've thought about double-eyelid surgery, but I feel that if I did it, it wouldn't be to meet everyone's beauty standards. It's just that my eyes look dull; I want them to look a bit more lively. (Participant Y, Female, Female)*

> *Now I want to lose weight again because I think it will put a burden on my body in the future. And my ideal is to be healthy and energetic, someone who can develop a lot at work. The better state I imagine is that my fitness can keep up. (Participant B, Female)*

> *I think you need to have a brain first, then consider your appearance. [...] Sometimes, when I notice I'm getting anxious about appearance anxiety or other unnecessary things, I tell myself, 'Okay, then I'll go read', and after reading, my state eases a lot. (Participant G, Female)*

> *Not everyone needs to be put on a 'beautiful or not' scale. For example, when Tsai Ing-Wen (former president of Taiwan) or Hsiao Bi-Khim (Taiwan's vice president) posts something, we don't judge them by how good-looking they are—we judge them by what they say: whether it has depth, strength, or moves people. So, why do we judge our friends' posts by whether the photo looks good when we look at them? Not everything needs to be judged that way. (Participant E, Female)*

Across online and offline contexts, appearance is routinely quantified through app feedback and partner norms, transforming looks into mating capital and linking self-worth to perceived desirability. Participants counter by shifting the evaluation from aesthetics to function and vitality. These strategies do not erase appearance as capital, but they loosen its hold, translating the tension between feminist commitments and appearance anxiety into manageable, everyday routines.

The Postfeminist Negotiation of Knowing, Feeling, and Doing

Across interviews, many participants said they had 'grown' a critical capacity, knowing, while continuing to feel a background hum of anxiety and therefore turned to doable, sustainable micro-adjustments within platform and interpersonal contexts. University education and feminist awareness provided tools to recognise and name it, but a gap remains between understanding and immunity. Most affirmed that appearance should not equate to worth; still, everyday cues from family life, platform algorithms, and peer comparison continued to convey their message through the body. Critical awareness, in short, did not automatically translate into emotional inoculation or structural loosening.

This gap operates alongside postfeminist co-optation. Markets and brands package 'being yourself/loving yourself' as purchasable techniques and styles (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). The lexicon of diversity and healing appears to widen what can be said about bodies, but it often reabsorbs self-optimisation and self-surveillance into an aesthetic frame (Gill, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Thus, comforting recognition doesn't equal cure: seeing 'diverse bodies' can soothe briefly, yet when visibility still depends on filters, touch-ups, and algorithmic staging, those with high anxiety are easily pulled back into the comparison regime.

> *Of course, it (the clothing brand) will flatter your shape a bit, but the people it works with really promote this idea. They actually seek out folks who don't fit mainstream beauty standards. For example, someone who's… a bit curvier; they'll work with them too, to show that anyone can wear the clothes and look good. I really like the sense of affirmation the brand gives me. Even though I'm not very… yeah, I just end up feeling, 'Oh, right, I can wear this too.' When I put it on, I don't have to be afraid. (Participant Q, Female)*

> *Cosmetics brands will market things like: women need to seize their skin before the age of 25. It's expanded from body anxiety to age anxiety. They'll say, 'Everyone's using it—aren't you?' […] Especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone loves travelling, and they keep saying buy, buy, buy. At the same time, shopping really does relieve stress. I have a strong desire to shop, so I easily end up torn. (Participant Z, Female)*

> *Who are the people talking about 'love yourself'? Yoga studios, beauty and skincare. They're selling you skincare and whatever. I think that's an illusion; it's a kind of emotional blackmail that asks you to submit to their paradigm, still inside the aesthetic frame. They use 'love yourself' as packaging: you have to become your ideal self to love yourself truly; if you haven't reached that, then you don't love yourself enough! And at the same time, they tell you to make peace with your body while selling you these things. I just felt like, damn, are they out of their minds? (Participant R, Female)*

The same ambivalence was also evident in educational and professional settings.

As 'bodily autonomy and aesthetic medicine' becomes a normalised routine and openly discussed, shame decreases, and options appear to expand. For example, Participant F described that, after entering a gender studies graduate program, they noticed that some professors had perfect skin and would openly share their experience of undergoing cosmetic procedures with students. However, this normalisation blurs the line between fitting in and pushing back. Attention shifts from critiquing structures to individualised risk and benefit calculations. The list of things a person could do grows longer, while the more complicated questions: why do it, for whom, and by whose standards, fade into the background. In practice, academic and professional norms still reward a polished, mainstream aesthetic; under this patriarchal common sense, the language of ‘autonomy’ can end up justifying more cosmetic work.

In this co-opted environment, participants did not pursue grand reversals but sustainable micro-governance. Critical awareness offered discrimination and language; the emotional background noise reminded them that regulation persists; and micro-practices translated tension into workable routines. These practices do not eliminate anxiety, but they prevent it from taking over, allowing feminist awareness and everyday aesthetic preferences to coexist in a livable way.

> *The environment has changed, but the culture hasn’t, so it’s really hard to break away. Unless your family consciously manages this, whatever you do, they won’t say anything; only then can you. If the core members around you have very strong convictions, then you’re able to resist these things. (Participant S, Female)*

> *You realise you can’t really loosen it. If I truly made peace with my appearance and with aesthetic norms, I might as well become a monk. I can’t thoroughly peel apart the patriarchal aesthetics imposed on me from my own looks, and then fully accept my appearance. If I did, I’d be desireless, transcending the world, but I can’t do that! Hahaha [...] (Participant R, Female)*

What emerges here is not freedom after critique, but the ongoing shuttling among knowing, feeling, and doing. Knowing names the system; feeling registers its aftershocks; doing translates tension into small, steady adjustments. These do not end the force of appearance as capital, but they make the premise that appearance determines value contestable, revisable, and shareable, opening a little more room for bodies and selves to breathe.

CONCLUSION

This study, grounded in Taiwan’s social media context, shows how feminist consciousness and appearance anxieties coexist in everyday practice. The interview analysis indicates: first, family discourse, school discipline and platform algorithms overlap to form a sustained ‘low-frequency background hum’ of regulation; second, public praise coupled with harsher internal auditing produces a praise, self-censure feedback loop, with peer comparability, more than celebrity images to intensify comparison; third, users pursue 'natural yet presentable' self-presentation through a visibility workflow of shooting, editing and audience management; fourth, in dating and intimacy, appearance is converted into countable capital, though some participants try to re-anchor evaluation to function and vitality (ability to sleep well, focus, and participate socially), loosening a single aesthetic metric; Finally, participants move back and forth across knowing–feeling–doing: critical literacy can name structures, bodily residues still pull affect, and sustainable micro-governance (reducing exposure, tuning audiences, contextualised posting) keeps life livable.

The research bridges postfeminism and platform governance by placing algorithmic ranking, peer comparability and the institutionalisation of East Asian aesthetics in the same frame. It also highlights an important but neglected theoretical gap: men's experiences of being looked at still lack a lexicon and saying ability; deep conversations among men are scarce but crucial, and emotional expression is constrained by masculine norms that make shame, comparison, and body anxiety difficult to articulate.

> *Regarding men's being looked at, theoretically, I see it as still a blank space. That is, I tend to feel that men's being looked at also involves power, perhaps also oppression. But that remains a space where language has not yet been found. And because of the way I choose to live, my friends and I seem to have broken through certain gender boundaries? [...] So to some extent, once that boundary of a clear divide between men and women is blurred, you don't really need to keep thinking about men's being looked at, or its difference from women's being looked at; you only need to focus on the fact that the pressure women face under the gaze is unjust [...] (Participant D, Male)*

> *I feel that within groups of biologically male people I often think of myself as different—sometimes even as an odd one out—precisely because I care when others do not. But I also won't bring it up, because I feel that… it isn't something worth showing off, [...] because most of the time, speaking up first would actually take courage for me. (Participant W, Male)*

Lexicon and blankness are deficits identified by this study, but they are also governance problems: when men lack sayable terms and dialogic venues, the algorithmic and peer norms that govern men's bodies become harder to name, resist, and redistribute.

In addition, participants were broadly pessimistic about whether social media can improve in reducing appearance anxiety, finding it hard to choose between the free speech–harm boundary. Facing platform toxicity and bargaining-style content governance, interviews revealed a 'retreat–migration' rationality: rather than incurring high governance costs, migrate to cleaner environments to protect mental health and allocate time more effectively. In context, political polarisation produces spillover effects, for example, the 'Dcard-isation' of Threads after major political events (the infiltration of anonymous banter and accusatory tone), rewriting platform atmospheres, and indirectly amplifying hostile tones in body and appearance discussions. Furthermore, an algorithm–peer dual push makes short videos and friend groups jointly amplify facial and skin anxieties; some participants resort to a 'digital retreat' (reducing use, switching off notifications, limiting audiences, and pausing short-video consumption) as a self-help strategy. On this basis, the study proposes elevating 'giving less unsolicited advice' into a publicly debated norm of friendly interaction, upgrading it to a platform culture guideline and bystander responsibility rather than leaving it as personal etiquette.

This study has certain limitations. The sample size and composition included relatively few men and gender-diverse participants, limiting the breadth of cross-gender comparison. In terms of context and language, Taiwan's specificity warrants caution in generalisation, and quotations translated from Mandarin into English may still drift in meaning. Regarding the researcher's positionality, the researcher's proximity to the topic facilitated access but may have heightened resonance and over-identification. Reflexive notes and decision trails were used to reduce bias; however, this remains a limitation that needs to be acknowledged.

Future research and practice can develop a lexicon and create dialogic spaces for men's self-examination, establish supportive environments for in-depth peer conversations, and monitor the long-term effects on affect regulation and platform exposure. Comparative, cross-site, and life-course approaches can be extended across cohorts, sectors, and East Asian cities, following trajectories and turning points in the knowing–feeling–doing dynamic. At the platform level, defaults could provide audience narrowing and interaction-throttling tools, alongside feedback frictions and violation prompts for appearance rating and shaming language.

This study shows that in a platformed society, appearance does not disappear simply because it is critically read; it persists as a low-frequency background hum. Although value re-anchoring, contextualised visibility and the publicisation of friendly interaction norms can loosen the bind of appearance as capital. Real progress need not target the total eradication of anxiety; more realistic milestones include the renegotiation of value, the thickening of the lexicon and dialogue, and the consolidation of norms in migrated spaces. From here, the task is to connect individual micro-governance with platform design so that more people, including men and gender minorities who have long been absent from the conversation, can be seen, can speak, and can live with ease in diverse bodies.

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APPENDICE

Appendix 1: Participant Profiles

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation	Date of interview
Y	Female	24	Graduate Student	2025 April, 25
S	Female	27	Researcher	2025 April, 28
L	Female	25	E-commerce Brand Consultant	2025 May, 1
B	Female	27	Corporate ESG Consultant	2025 July, 25
D	Male	25	Publishing Industry	2025 July, 27
C	Female	22	Graduate Student	2025 July, 27
Z	Female	21	Undergraduate Student	2025 July, 28
E	Female	26	Graduate Student	2025 July, 28
W	Male	26	NGO Worker	2025 July, 29
G	Female	21	Undergraduate Student	2025 July, 30
K	Male	21	Undergraduate Student	2025 July, 31
R	Female	29	University Office of Gender Equity Administrator	2025 July, 31
F	Female	23	Graduate Student	2025 August, 1
Q	Female	28	Retail Industry	2025 August, 2

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

I. Background and Social Media-Use

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself (age, educational background, occupation)?

2. Which social media platforms do you usually use? How often and for what purposes? Do you have any specific browsing habits (for example, viewing certain topics, accounts, or types of content)?

II. Appearance Discourse and Bodily Self-Perception

3. Have you ever experienced appearance anxiety? In what kinds of situations? Have you discussed appearance anxiety with people around you?

4. What characteristics do you think define an 'ideal appearance'? Do these standards create psychological pressure for you or influence your behaviour?

5. When browsing content on social media, have you developed particular feelings or evaluations about your own appearance or body?

6. Do you share posts or images related to your body or appearance on social media? What factors do you consider when sharing such content?

7. When you share content related to your body or appearance on social media, what kinds of comments or messages have you received? How did you feel or respond?

8. Have you seen the 'Appearance Advice' board on Dcard? How do you feel about it? Have you ever thought about posting or commenting there?

III. Feminist Consciousness and Discourse

9. How would you describe your relationship with feminism? Would you call yourself a 'feminist'?

10. Have you ever adjusted your appearance (for example: photo retouching, dietary control, makeup, cosmetic procedures)? What were the reasons?

11. Have you seen content on social media that advocates feminism or body positivity? How did you feel and how did you respond? What impact did this content have on you?

12. Do you follow specific celebrities or influencer accounts? Do these figures influence your views on beauty or the body in any way?

13. Have you ever deliberately tried to 'not conform' to mainstream beauty standards? What does such behaviour mean to you?

14. In your view, how are women's bodies or images presented or viewed differently from those of other genders? What kinds of evaluations do they receive?

IV. Conclusion and Open-Ended Questions

15. Do you think the discourse on appearance and the body on social media needs to be changed in any way? If you could make suggestions, what would you change?

16. Are there any other important experiences or thoughts related to this topic that you would like to add?

17. Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?

Appendix 3: Thematic Analysis Grid

Themes	Sub-Themes	Description	Extracts Example
The Background Hum of Cumulative Disciplining	1) Familial talk and school discipline as a baseline	Family comments on 'fat/thin' and school/body measurement routines sediment into a low-frequency 'background hum' that trains ongoing self-monitoring from adolescence into adulthood.	B: *'It's not an anxiety that happens every minute of every day; it's more like a low-level noise sitting in the back of our minds during that whole period.'* | S: *'In elementary school dance class, we had to be weighed before the recital or at the end of the term. If you had gained weight, points were deducted.'*
The Background Hum of Cumulative Disciplining	2) Algorithmic re-trigger as a 'technical hum'	Recommendation systems re-activate internalised rules through pushed content (beauty/diet/aesthetics), making comparison passively received rather than actively sought.	S: *'The Threads algorithm sometimes throws up posts like, 'At X cm and Y kg, is that too fat?''* | G: *'After that search, the algorithm changes, and my page fills up with cosmetics and skincare advertisements or 'user experience' posts.'*
The Negotiated Visibility of Platformed Beauty Norms	3) Platform partitioning and relational calculus	Instagram = intimacy/aesthetics; Threads = public/quick affect; Facebook = family/relatives. Before posting, participants forecast likely readings and adjust audiences/permissions.	D: *'When you post, you naturally factor in all your social relationships. [...] and only then do you finish and post the Story.'* | Z: *'If it's a travel or outing photo, I feel it has a kind of 'legitimacy', so I'll post it.'*

Themes	Sub-Themes	Description	Extracts Example
The Negotiated Visibility of Platformed Beauty Norms	4) Self-presentation workflow and naturalness-as-labour	Pre-shoot management (angles, lighting, hair, expression) to light edits (filters/crop/emoji cover) to selective publishing (face shots mainly when 'dressed up'); 'natural' is achieved through ongoing labour.	E: *'With filters and the front camera, you can manage your expression, fix your bangs, and adjust your body as you shoot.'* | W: *'I want what I shoot to look natural, but that actually means I do things on purpose. [...] so others will feel it's just a casual snap.'*
The Feedback Loop of Praise and Self-Critique	5) Peer comparability and composite display	Pressure comes mainly from comparable peers; the beauty, travel, and consumption triad in friends' posts hits closer to self-evaluation than decontextualised celebrity content.	Z: *'I actually feel more indifferent when it's a KOL's really polished photos, because I know that's their line of work [...] But when it comes to my peers, they have the means to travel abroad and dress beautifully; that's the kind of capital power that makes you envious.'*
The Feedback Loop of Praise and Self-Critique	6) Conditional buffering via body-positive content	Close-friend enclaves and select accounts provide brief relief and recognition, but public feeds/short-video streams draw comparison back to the foreground.	S: *'I really like the way they share, and it also makes me feel that having a bit of belly, or thicker legs, is just... just a very natural thing.'* | *F: 'Ada (an influencer) also posts, like, saying they have some lines, marks, or whatever, and I feel like those are the people who make the online environment better.'*

Themes	Sub-Themes	Description	Extracts Example
Re-anchoring Value in Marketised Intimacy	7) Dating-app ranking and self-worth coupling	Matches/replies turn into countable mating capital, momentarily equating 'am I good' with 'am I worthy (of whom)'. Offline comments extend the same market logic.	B: *'There was a period when I really lacked confidence. It was especially when I was drifting around in the dating-app market. It feels like a marketplace where people choose based on photos.'* | R: *'I started to feel that I looked different from my photos, and then I'd worry that if I went out with these strange men, they'd see me and think I'd cheated with photos.'*
Re-anchoring Value in Marketised Intimacy	8) Re-anchoring to function/vitality and supportive talk	Value shifts from a single beauty metric to function and energy (sleep, stamina, pain, focus); partners' non-shaming language (health-oriented) sustains change.	S: *'45 (kilograms)... I felt very unhealthy, and my period stopped, so I thought, I don't want this. I also don't want osteoporosis later or anything [...] so I try as much as possible to keep myself within a healthy, reasonable range.'* | B: *'My ideal is to be healthy and energetic, someone who can develop a lot at work. The better state I imagine is that my fitness can keep up.'*
The Postfeminist Negotiation of Knowing, Feeling, and Doing	9) Normalisation, co-optation and blurred boundaries	'Love yourself' and autonomy discourses lower shame yet reabsorb self-optimization into aesthetic norms; structural critique gives way to individual risk–benefit calculus, under	R: *'They use 'love yourself' as packaging: you have to become your ideal self to love yourself truly; if you haven't reached that, then you don't love yourself enough! And at the same time, they tell you to make peace with your body while selling you these things.'* | S: *'The environment has changed, but the culture hasn't, so it's really hard to break away. Unless your family consciously manages*

Themes	Sub-Themes	Description	Extracts Example
		enduring patriarchal expectations.	*this, whatever you do, they won't say anything; only then can you.'*