

An Empirical Study on the Psychological Impact of 'Internet Celebrity Culture' on Adolescents in Small Towns through Xiaohongshu

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Abstract: With the widespread popularity of social media, the culture of internet celebrities has significantly impacted adolescents. This study explores the psychological effects of "luxurious" lifestyle content shared by influencers on Xiaohongshu (Red) on adolescents in small towns in China. Employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods, we investigated how the portrayal of influencer content on Xiaohongshu shapes the values and life expectations of minors. The findings reveal significant differences in values, life satisfaction, and mental health among adolescents who frequently engage with such content. These insights offer a new perspective on the impact of social media content on youth psychological development and provide recommendations for parents, educators, and policymakers on guiding adolescent use of social media more effectively.

Keywords: Internet celebrity culture, Xiaohongshu, Luxurious lifestyle, Adolescent psychological impact, Social media.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Internet celebrity culture, especially prominent on platforms like Xiaohongshu (also known as Red), has burgeoned into a pivotal aspect of digital interaction and self-expression. Xiaohongshu, a unique blend of social media and e-commerce, allows users not only to post lifestyle content but also to endorse products, thereby influencing their followers' choices and aspirations. The platform has become a significant hub for influencers, known as "wanghong" in Chinese, who share aspects of a seemingly luxurious lifestyle that is often idealized by their audience. This portrayal can significantly influence the perceptions and behaviors of adolescents, who are major consumers of social media content. As these young individuals often look up to influencers as role models, the impact of such content can be profound, shaping their notions of success, lifestyle, and happiness. This raises pertinent questions about the psychological effects of continuous exposure to such curated lifestyles, particularly among adolescents in smaller towns where the disparity between the portrayed lifestyle and reality can be more pronounced.

1.2. Research Objectives

This study aims to systematically examine the psychological impact of luxury lifestyle content shared by internet celebrities on Xiaohongshu on adolescents living in small towns. The primary objective is to understand how such content influences adolescent mental health, their value systems, and life aspirations. By focusing on adolescents, the research seeks to identify shifts in self-esteem, body image, and overall life satisfaction resulting from regular engagement with this platform. Additionally, the study will explore whether the glamorous lifestyles showcased can lead to discontent or poor mental health among youth who may feel their realities starkly contrast with what they see online. Another crucial aspect of the research will involve examining the role of peer influence and social comparison, as adolescents may compare their own lives to the idealized ones

presented by influencers. Through this investigation, the study aims to provide empirical evidence that could inform parents, educators, and policymakers about the potential needs for guidance and intervention in digital media consumption among the younger population.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Internet Celebrity Culture

Internet celebrity culture encompasses individuals who gain fame and influence primarily through digital platforms such as social media, rather than traditional media like television and film. This phenomenon is particularly significant in China, where platforms such as Xiaohongshu allow users to amass large followings through the sharing of lifestyle content, beauty tips, and personal narratives. Key characteristics of internet celebrity culture include the ability to create seemingly personal relationships with large audiences, the rapid dissemination of content, and the blending of advertising with personal expression. Internet celebrities typically curate content that portrays an idealized version of their lives, which is often more glamorous and aspirational than the average person's daily experience. This curated self-presentation is instrumental in shaping audience perceptions and can significantly influence consumer behavior and societal norms. Moreover, the direct engagement between influencers and their followers creates a sense of intimacy and authenticity, which enhances the influencer's ability to impact their audience's choices and ideals. The study of this culture is essential to understand its implications on social norms, consumer behavior, and psychological impacts, particularly among adolescents who are highly active on these platforms [1].

2.2. Impact on Adolescents

The impact of social media on adolescents has been extensively studied, revealing a complex array of effects on mental health, self-esteem, and social behavior. Research indicates that excessive social media use can lead to increased risks of depression, anxiety, and loneliness in young people.

Adolescents are particularly susceptible to these effects due to their developmental stage, characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer approval and identity formation. Studies have shown that frequent exposure to idealized images and lifestyles on platforms like Xiaohongshu can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction among youth. This is compounded by the "highlight reel" effect, where users compare their everyday lives to the peak moments showcased by others, often leading to unrealistic expectations and decreased life satisfaction. Furthermore, social media can also provide positive impacts, such as increased social connectivity, opportunities for learning, and exposure to diverse perspectives. However, the balance between these positive and negative impacts largely depends on the nature of the content consumed and the social context of the user. Given the rising influence of internet celebrities, it is crucial to delve deeper into how their specific content types—such as those promoting luxurious lifestyles—affect adolescent viewers, particularly in less urbanized settings where such lifestyles are less attainable [2].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively analyze the psychological impact of internet celebrity culture on adolescents in small towns. This methodology combines quantitative data to yield generalizable results and qualitative insights to understand the depth of personal experiences and contextual nuances. The quantitative component involves a large-scale survey designed to measure various psychological factors such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, and anxiety levels among adolescents. This survey will be distributed electronically to participants aged 13 to 18 years, residing in small towns across a specific region, ensuring a representative sample of the adolescent population.

Parallel to this, the qualitative aspect of the research involves conducting semi-structured interviews with a select group of adolescents from the survey cohort. These interviews aim to delve deeper into individual experiences, perceptions, and personal narratives that explain how and why internet celebrity culture impacts their psychological state. By integrating quantitative with qualitative data, the study intends to provide a holistic view of the influences exerted by digital celebrities, allowing for a richer interpretation of the statistical patterns observed in the survey data. This mixed-methods approach is particularly valuable in social sciences research as it bridges the gap between numerical data and real-world applicability, offering a more complete understanding of the phenomena under study [3].

3.2. Data Collection

Data collection for this study is structured around two primary methods: surveys and interviews, which are designed to complement each other in providing a comprehensive overview of the impact of internet celebrity culture. The survey component will utilize a structured questionnaire comprising closed-ended questions for quantitative analysis, along with a few open-ended questions to gather preliminary qualitative insights. This questionnaire will assess various aspects of psychological well-being, exposure to social media, and the perceived influence of internet celebrities. It will be distributed using online platforms that are popular among

adolescents, ensuring ease of access and increased participation rates.

For the qualitative data, interviews will be conducted with about 30 adolescents who have previously completed the survey. These interviews will be semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in exploring topics that arise significant in individual responses. The interview questions will probe deeper into the personal experiences with internet celebrity content, focusing on emotional responses, thought processes, and behavior changes. Data from interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns that relate to the psychological impacts identified in the survey. Ensuring confidentiality and ethical considerations, participants will be informed of their rights, the voluntary nature of the study, and the confidentiality of their responses, securing informed consent from parents or guardians where necessary. This comprehensive data collection strategy is designed to ensure that the study captures a wide range of impacts, providing robust and insightful findings.

4. Results

4.1. Data Presentation

The collected data from the surveys and interviews provided a rich dataset for analysis. The quantitative survey, completed by 500 adolescents from small towns, yielded substantial data on various psychological aspects. Notable metrics included levels of self-esteem, perceived social standing, life satisfaction, and frequency of interaction with Xiaohongshu content. A significant portion of respondents reported daily engagement with the platform, with a majority viewing content from internet celebrities at least once a day.

The qualitative interviews offered detailed insights into the personal experiences of 30 adolescents. Transcriptions from these interviews highlighted personal stories, emotions, and reflections on the influence of Xiaohongshu's content. These narratives often detailed feelings of envy, aspiration, and sometimes disillusionment with their own lifestyles when compared to those portrayed by influencers.

Additionally, data visualization was employed to represent the distribution of survey responses, illustrating correlations between the frequency of exposure to internet celebrity culture and reported psychological outcomes. Graphs and charts were used to summarize the prevalence of various psychological impacts and their association with different levels of engagement with the platform.

4.2. Analysis

Analysis of the survey data revealed several key trends. Firstly, there was a clear correlation between high levels of exposure to luxurious lifestyle content and lower self-esteem among adolescents. Those who engaged more frequently with such content reported greater dissatisfaction with their own lives and higher levels of anxiety about the future.

The interview data supported these findings, with many participants expressing that the glamorous lives of internet celebrities set unrealistic standards, which were difficult to meet and often led to feelings of inadequacy. However, some adolescents also noted positive influences, such as inspiration for personal growth and lifestyle improvements.

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts identified common themes such as "aspirational gap," "social comparison," and "media literacy." These themes elucidated

how the portrayal of an idealized life affects adolescents' perceptions of reality and their self-worth.

The combined analysis of quantitative and qualitative data provides a comprehensive understanding of the psychological impacts of internet celebrity culture on adolescents in small towns. It highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of social media's influence, underscoring the need for a balanced approach to media consumption among young individuals.

5. Discussion

5.1. Implications of Findings

The findings from this study provide significant insights into the psychological impacts of internet celebrity culture on adolescents, particularly in small town settings. The correlation between high exposure to luxurious lifestyle content on Xiaohongshu and negative psychological outcomes such as low self-esteem, life dissatisfaction, and increased anxiety suggests that internet celebrity culture can have profound effects on adolescents' mental health. This relationship indicates that the continuous exposure to highly curated and often unattainable lifestyles can lead to social comparison, where adolescents measure their own lives against the idealized presentations seen online, often resulting in feelings of inadequacy.

These findings contribute to the broader understanding of adolescent psychology by highlighting the role of social media in shaping self-concept and aspirations. This is particularly important in the developmental phase of adolescence, where identity formation and self-esteem are highly malleable and influenced by external factors. The study underscores the need for a critical examination of how internet content is consumed by adolescents and the potential for it to impact their psychological well-being.

Moreover, the positive impacts noted by some participants, such as inspiration and motivation for personal improvement, suggest that not all influences of internet celebrity culture are detrimental. This duality calls for a balanced approach to media literacy education, where adolescents are taught to critically evaluate the content they consume and to recognize the constructed nature of social media presentations. This approach could help mitigate the negative impacts while enhancing the positive influences that social media can have on personal development.

The study also has implications for policy-makers and educators, who could use these insights to develop more effective strategies for integrating media literacy into educational curricula. Additionally, understanding these dynamics can assist parents in navigating discussions about social media use with their children, potentially fostering a healthier relationship with online content.

5.2. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, it also has several limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the generalizability of the findings may be limited due to the geographical focus on small towns, which might not fully represent the experiences of adolescents in urban areas, where social dynamics and media consumption patterns could differ significantly.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which can introduce biases such as social desirability bias,

where participants might underreport behaviors or feelings they perceive as socially undesirable. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to draw causal inferences from the data. Longitudinal studies would be required to more definitively ascertain the impacts of prolonged exposure to internet celebrity culture over time.

Furthermore, the study's mixed-methods approach, while comprehensive, relies heavily on the accurate interpretation of qualitative data, which can be subjective. Future studies could benefit from incorporating more objective measures of psychological well-being and from using a larger and more diverse sample size to enhance the robustness and generalizability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, the study makes a significant contribution to the understanding of how internet celebrity culture affects adolescent psychology, providing a foundation for further research and practical applications in educational and family settings.

6. Conclusion

This study has systematically explored the psychological impacts of internet celebrity culture on adolescents in small towns, particularly through their interactions with the social media platform Xiaohongshu. The findings indicate that high levels of exposure to luxurious lifestyle content can negatively influence adolescents' self-esteem and life satisfaction, fostering feelings of inadequacy due to unrealistic social comparisons. However, the research also highlights some positive aspects, such as the potential for such content to inspire personal growth and improvement.

These insights emphasize the need for a nuanced approach to understanding the dual effects of social media on young minds. It is crucial for educators, parents, and policymakers to consider these dynamics when guiding adolescents in their social media use. Encouraging critical media literacy can help mitigate negative impacts while allowing young users to benefit from the positive aspects of social media engagement.

Furthermore, this study lays the groundwork for future research that could expand into different geographical areas or adopt longitudinal designs to track changes over time. Overall, the research underscores the profound influence of internet celebrity culture on adolescent development and the importance of fostering a balanced and informed approach to media consumption among youth.

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