



# A Study on Consumption Behavior and Its Influencing Factors in the "Appearance Economy" Among College Student

Zhu Ziyi <sup>1</sup>, Li Moying <sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences, Hohhot, China

<sup>2\*</sup> Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences, Hohhot, China

Email: [raidyzzy@126.com](mailto:raidyzzy@126.com), [0711200111@163.com](mailto:0711200111@163.com)

**Abstract:** In the context of the "appearance economy", this study analyzes the consumption behaviors of college students influenced by appearance in the economic consumption sphere, as well as their influencing factors. The results show that love, marriage and career choice in appearance benefits exert a significant impact on the consumption behaviors of college students. Meanwhile, internal factors such as self-confidence and psychological status play a dominant role in consumption decision-making. This paper provides scientific consumption guidance for college students and reveals the multiple effects of the appearance economy on their consumption behaviors.

**Keywords:** Appearance economy; College students; Evaluation indicators; Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP); Appearance benefits

## Introduction

With the popularization of social media and the evolution of consumer culture, the "appearance economy" has emerged as a major economic sector in contemporary society. As an important group in the consumer market, college students' appearance-related consumption behaviors not only shape their personal images but also bear close relevance to economic interests, career development and social identity. This study intends to examine, from the perspective of consumption economics, the specific influencing factors of college students' appearance consumption behavior, and to further reveal the multi-dimensional impacts of the appearance economy on their consumption decisions.

It should be noted that all data utilized in this study are collected from universities located in Inner Mongolia, China. Consequently, the generalizability of the overall conclusions to a wider population of Chinese students may be constrained.

## Literature Review

The appearance economy has received extensive attention in recent years. Xu et al. (2022) pointed out that high appearance, as a scarce resource, can stimulate strong market demand<sup>[1]</sup>. Shao and Fan (2019) demonstrated the existence of a "beauty premium" among high-appearance executives<sup>[2]</sup>, further confirming the economic impact of appearance.

Foreign scholars have examined the influence of appearance on job potential, starting salaries, employment and promotion opportunities from the perspective of the labor market (Morrow et al., 1990; French, 2002; Chiu et al., 2002). Brooks et al. (2014) also found that individuals with attractive appearance affect economic income through multiple channels (Kanazawa et al., 2004). Most domestic studies explore the appearance phenomenon from sociological and psychological perspectives. Liu (2024) analyzed the false empowerment and real discipline of aesthetic values in the social media era<sup>[3]</sup>, while Guo (2024) investigated college students' confusion regarding beauty filters in virtual social interactions<sup>[4]</sup>. Nevertheless, few studies have examined college students' appearance-related consumption behavior from an economic consumption perspective.

### 1. Connotation of the Appearance Economy

Appearance refers to a numerical evaluation of an individual, similar to facial attractiveness scoring yet with subtle distinctions. Generally, appearance denotes a comprehensive assessment of external expressions such as facial features, physique, temperament and overall image, which is susceptible to external influences including social environment, social stratum and media guidance. Guan (2019), through model estimation, found that each one-unit increase in college students' appearance score was associated with a 722-yuan increase in income, representing a 14% rise<sup>[5]</sup>.

### 2. Innovations of This Study

First, a novel research perspective. This paper adopts a new angle of constructing an indicator system influencing the appearance economy among college students, conducting in-depth and detailed quantitative analysis of the appearance phenomenon to more accurately capture the key factors and changing trends within the appearance economy.

Second, an innovative research subject. From the perspective of the appearance economy, this study focuses on college students, who are more prone to appearance anxiety, and carries out multi-dimensional investigations to deeply explore the critical indicators affecting college students' engagement in the appearance economy.

Third, innovative research methods. This study emphasizes the various indicators influencing college students'



appearance-related economy and employs the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) to analyze key indicators and obtain their impact factors, thereby re-examining the dilemmas college students face in the appearance economy and exploring effective solutions.

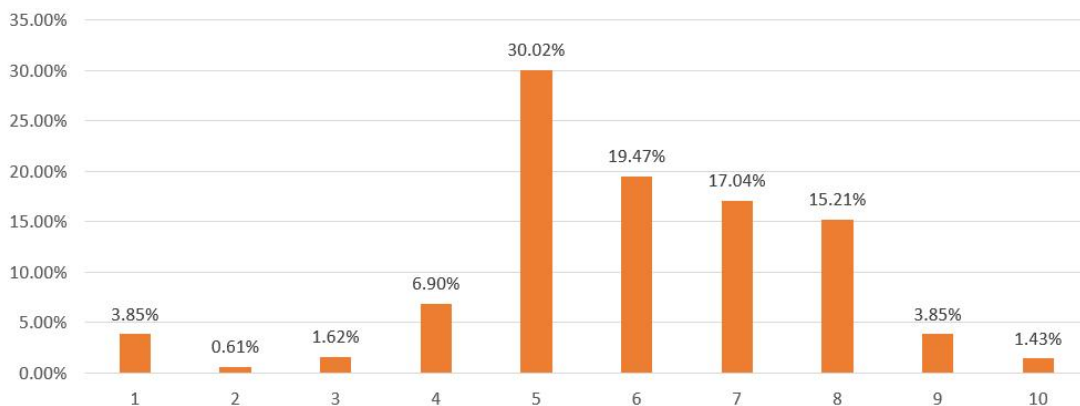
### I. Analysis of Influencing Factors on College Students' Appearance-Related Consumption Behavior

A questionnaire survey was conducted in this study, covering nine undergraduate universities in Inner Mongolia, with a total of 1,972 valid questionnaires collected.

#### 1. Factor of Differences in Appearance Level

According to the survey results, on a 10-point scale, 30.02% of college students rated their own appearance as 5 points. Most respondents' self-evaluation scores were concentrated in the range of 5 to 8 points, accounting for as high as 81.74% of the sample. Detailed data are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Statistics of College Students' Self-rated Appearance Scores



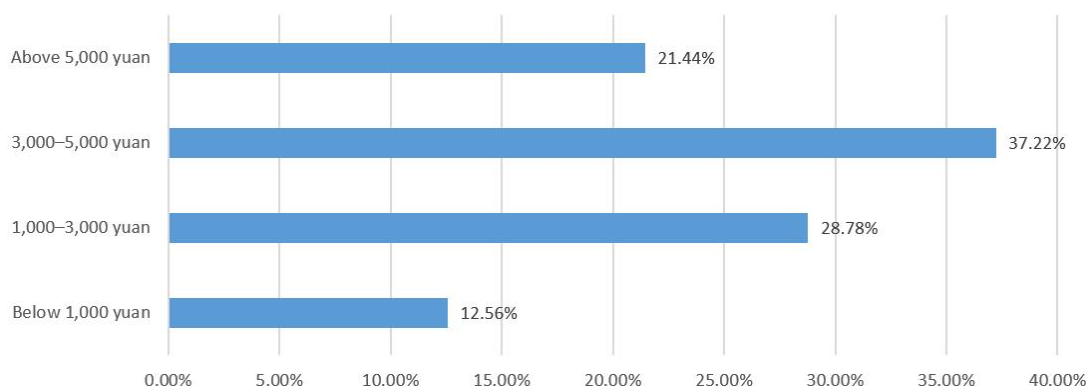
We further investigated college students' self-perception of their physical appearance and identified significant variations among individuals. These differences were measured using quantitative indicators including facial features, face shape, temperament, skin tone, body shape, physique, and overall image. Among them, 77.28% of college students regarded overall image as a key factor affecting appearance, followed by facial features, face shape, body shape and physique.

#### 2. Factor of Appearance-Related Consumption Level

The survey results show that as many as 92.7% of college students incur certain monetary and time costs in pursuing appearance improvement, covering beauty treatment, plastic surgery, cosmetics and other related fields. Among them, 75.27% of students focus primarily on skincare, daily makeup and fashion dressing. This may be closely associated with the fact that most college students rely financially on their families and have not yet achieved economic independence. With limited disposable funds, they tend to choose relatively routine consumption methods that can rapidly enhance their external image.

Although the vast majority of college students are financially dependent, their enthusiasm for appearance-related consumption remains strong. A total of 58.66% of respondents explicitly stated that they would be willing to spend more than 3,000 yuan per month on appearance improvement in the future, among whom 37.22% expected a monthly budget ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 yuan. These figures fully demonstrate the strong willingness of contemporary college students to spend generously on appearance and reflect the important role of appearance-related consumption in their daily lives. Detailed data are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: College Students' Intention of Appearance-Related Consumption



### 3. Factor of Appearance-Related Benefits

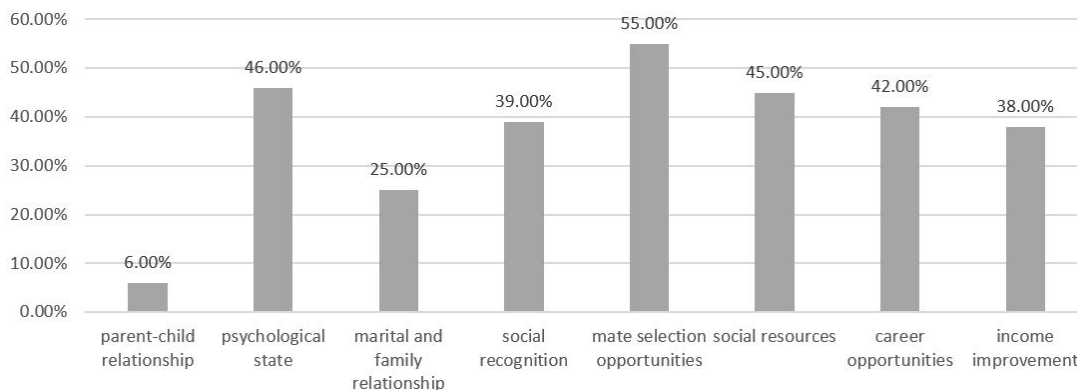
It has become a prominent phenomenon that college students seek potential economic benefits and social resources through appearance enhancement.

The survey clearly indicates that college students regard the following as significant economic and social advantages brought by appearance improvement: higher income, more employment opportunities, expanded social networks, increased chances in romantic relationships, greater social recognition, harmonious marriage and family relations, and better mental health.

Specifically, higher income is one of the expected outcomes of appearance enhancement for many students. In the competitive job market, a positive physical appearance may help them secure more interview opportunities and better salary offers. Regarding employment, appearance advantages can help candidates stand out among applicants and gain access to target industries and enterprises. Expanded social resources are also notable, as attractive appearance tends to attract attention and goodwill, facilitating connections with high-quality contacts. Increased opportunities in romantic relationships are similarly evident, as physical attractiveness often leads to more romantic pursuits. Furthermore, higher social recognition boosts confidence in social settings; harmonious family relationships bring stability and happiness; and sound mental health contributes to better coping with life challenges.

All these indicators were selected by more than 25% of respondents, demonstrating high expectations and recognition of the benefits from appearance enhancement, as shown in Figure 3. (It should be noted that the above only reflects statistical results. In real society, personal development is determined not only by appearance but also by individual effort, moral character, attitude and other factors.)

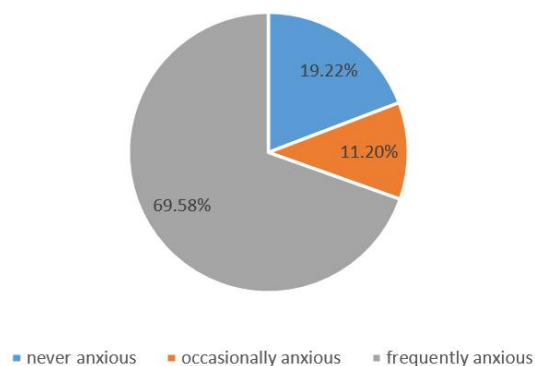
Figure 3: Status of Appearance Benefit Factors Among College Students



### 4. Factor of Appearance Anxiety and Mental Health Issues

According to the survey, in the context of diverse aesthetic standards and the prevalence of social media, appearance anxiety has become a prominent psychological problem plaguing college students. As high as 69.58% of respondents reported frequent anxiety related to their appearance, while an additional 11.2% experienced such anxiety occasionally. This statistic directly illustrates that the vast majority of college students bear a considerable psychological burden associated with physical appearance to some extent, as detailed in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Appearance Anxiety of College Students



The sources of such appearance anxiety are complex and diverse. It may stem from dissatisfaction with one's own appearance, such as the perception that facial features, body shape and other attributes fall short of ideal standards. It can also arise from excessive concern about others' judgments, including fear of receiving unfavorable looks or negative comments due to unsatisfactory appearance. Prolonged appearance anxiety tends to induce negative psychological states such as self-doubt, inferiority and general anxiety. These conditions may further restrict students' behaviors: they may reduce participation in social activities, thus missing opportunities to make new friends and expand social networks. In terms of career development, low self-confidence may prevent them from pursuing promotions or seizing important career opportunities, ultimately hindering personal growth and development.

## II. Construction of an Evaluation Index System Model for the Appearance Economy Among College Students

The construction of an evaluation index system for the appearance economy among college students is a complex and multi-layered process involving numerous key indicators. Although these indicators collectively form the foundation of the evaluation system, their respective importance differs significantly. Moreover, such differences are continuously adjusted and optimized with the dynamic changes in the external environment, including socio-cultural norms, the speed of information dissemination, and technological progress. Only in this way can the evaluation system accurately reflect the impact of the appearance economy on college students.

In this study, the basic model of the evaluation index system is defined as:

$$M = C_1 \omega_1 + C_2 \omega_2 + C_3 \omega_3 + \dots + C_5 \omega_5$$

where  $M$  represents the comprehensive evaluation index<sup>[6]</sup>;  $C_1$  to  $C_5$  are the first-level indicators influencing the appearance economy of college students, corresponding precisely to five core and highly influential evaluation dimensions. These five first-level indicators can be further logically subdivided into  $A_1$  to  $A_{14}$ , namely 14 second-level indicators. The symbol  $\omega$  denotes the weight coefficient of each indicator. To ensure the timeliness and accuracy of the evaluation system, these weights are flexibly adjusted according to variations in indicator importance and subtle changes in environmental factors. The model adopts the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) as its core methodology, which combines qualitative and quantitative analysis to accurately calculate the relative importance of factors at each level and thus scientifically determine the weights of each evaluation indicator.

By constructing a hierarchical structure model using AHP, and after logical judgment and consistency checks, the following conclusions are drawn:

The weight coefficients  $\omega$  of the first-level indicators are:  $C_1$  Appearance Level 3.64%,  $C_2$  Appearance Investment 16.75%,  $C_3$  Appearance Anxiety 9.89%,  $C_4$  Appearance Benefits 40.80%, and  $C_5$  Other Indicators 28.92%. The weights of the second-level indicators are calculated using the sum-product method, and the final results are presented in Table 1.

First-Level Indicator	Second-Level Indicator	Information Source	Indicator Weight	Detailed Content
Appearance Level Indicator ( $C_1$ )	Personal Basic Information ( $A_1$ )	External Indicators	0.0040	Includes personal external factors affecting appearance, such as facial features, face shape, body shape, skin tone, and physique.
	Personal Evaluation Information ( $A_2$ )	Internal & External Indicators	0.0324	Individuals' self-evaluation of their own appearance, mainly derived from personal cognition and the guidance of the external environment.
Appearance Investment Indicator ( $C_2$ )	Economic Investment Information ( $A_3$ )	Internal Indicators	0.0120	Economic information invested to change appearance.
	Time Investment Information ( $A_4$ )	Internal Indicators	0.0380	Time information invested to change appearance.
	Energy Investment Information ( $A_5$ )	Internal Indicators	0.1175	Energy information invested to change appearance.
Appearance Anxiety Indicator ( $C_3$ )	Anxiety Level Information ( $A_6$ )	Internal & External Indicators	0.0165	The degree of anxiety generated regarding appearance.
	Psychological Pressure Information ( $A_7$ )	Internal & External Indicators	0.0824	The degree of psychological pressure generated regarding appearance.

First-Level Indicator	Second-Level Indicator	Information Source	Indicator Weight	Detailed Content
<b>Appearance Benefit Indicator (C<sub>4</sub>)</b>	Career Choice & Employment Information (A <sub>8</sub> )	Internal & External Indicators	0.1173	Advantages in career choice and employment brought by improved appearance.
	Academic Pursuit & Further Study Information (A <sub>9</sub> )	Internal & External Indicators	0.0197	Advantages in academic pursuit and further study brought by improved appearance.
	Romantic Relationship & Marriage Information (A <sub>10</sub> )	Internal & External Indicators	0.2030	Advantages in romantic partner selection and harmonious marriage brought by improved appearance.
	Social Recognition Information (A <sub>11</sub> )	Internal & External Indicators	0.0680	Advantages in social recognition brought by improved appearance.
<b>Other Indicators (C<sub>5</sub>)</b>	Social & Cultural Concepts (A <sub>12</sub> )	External Indicators	0.2178	The influence of social culture on the appearance economy.
	Information Communication Orientation (A <sub>13</sub> )	External Indicators	0.0217	The influence of information communication orientation on the appearance economy.
	Technological Progress & Development (A <sub>14</sub> )	External Indicators	0.0497	The influence of technological progress on the appearance economy.

Table 1: Weight Table of Evaluation Indicators for College Students' Integrity

### III. Analysis of Influencing Factors on College Students' Appearance-Related Consumption Behavior

The above research reveals that college students' consumption behavior under the background of the "appearance economy" tends to be aesthetic-oriented, benefit-oriented and susceptible to external influences. The main influencing factors include individual internal factors, appearance benefit factors, and socio-cultural factors.

#### 1. Individual Internal Factors

In the in-depth analysis of factors related to the appearance economy in this study, to measure the influence of each indicator more accurately and comprehensively, the indicators are subdivided into "external indicators" and "internal indicators". Based on extensive expert opinions and large-scale questionnaire survey data, rigorous calculations show that internal indicators and external indicators account for 54.5% and 45.5% of the total indicators respectively. Quantitative results demonstrate that among various components of the appearance economy, internal indicators such as individual psychological state and self-cognition account for more than half of the total, constituting an indispensable core part of the appearance economy evaluation system, and directly reflecting the dominant role of individual internal factors in the system.

First, self-confidence level. Self-confidence plays a key role in college students' pursuit of and investment in appearance. Students with higher self-confidence usually hold a clear and positive self-perception, and tend to improve their personal image through diverse means such as skincare, makeup and fashion dressing. For them, such image shaping and investment are not merely external modifications, but an important way to realize self-worth and demonstrate personal charm. In contrast, students with lower self-confidence are prone to anxiety due to dissatisfaction with their appearance. Such anxiety may drive them to consume blindly, attempting to relieve inner unease by purchasing various beauty products and fashionable clothes to change their appearance. However, such excessive consumption often fails to solve the problem fundamentally, and may instead trap them in a vicious cycle of "appearance anxiety – excessive consumption – increasing financial burden", further aggravating psychological pressure.

Second, psychological state. Psychological state and anxiety level exert a significant and profound influence on college students' appearance-related consumption behavior. Students in a sound psychological state generally view their appearance with a calm and positive attitude, recognizing that appearance is only part rather than the whole of a person. Therefore, they maintain moderate investment in appearance consumption without blind conformity or overconsumption. By contrast, students with higher levels of anxiety focus excessively on their appearance defects, which easily leads to unhealthy consumption behavior. For instance, they may spend large sums of money on plastic surgery in pursuit of so-called "perfect appearance", or buy numerous expensive cosmetics unsuitable for themselves.

Third, self-cognition. Self-cognition is also an important internal factor affecting college students' appearance consumption. Students with mature self-cognition can evaluate their appearance objectively and rationally, with a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. They make rational consumption decisions based on their actual needs and financial conditions. However, students with developing self-cognition often lack confidence in their appearance and rely excessively on external evaluations, regarding others' judgments on their looks as an important criterion for measuring self-worth. This mentality easily leads to irrational consumption: they spend blindly to conform to others' aesthetic standards, ignoring their real needs and actual situation.

## **2. Appearance Benefit Factors**

As a primary indicator, "C4 Appearance Benefit Information" plays a pivotal role among the five first-level indicators. Meanwhile, the two secondary indicators "A10 Romantic Relationship and Marriage Information" and "A8 Career Choice and Employment Information" carry relatively high weights of 0.2030 and 0.1173 respectively, ranking second and fourth among the 14 secondary indicators.

In terms of romantic relationships and marriage, a subtle connection exists between appearance and the improvement of economic conditions. Most college students hold the view that appearance is one of the key factors in attracting the opposite sex and establishing romantic relationships. Outstanding physical appearance acts like a distinctive advantage, enabling them to stand out in the romantic and marital market, attract more attention from the opposite sex, and gain more opportunities for in-depth interaction and relationship development, which may further exert a positive influence on their future economic life. In the employment field, appearance is no longer merely external decoration; it has gradually become a potential competitive competency that helps college students gain advantages in the workplace.

## **3. Social and Cultural Concept Factors**

Among the first-level indicators, "C5 Other Indicators" accounts for 28.92%, while the secondary indicator "social and cultural concepts" accounts for 21.78% of the 14 secondary indicators, indicating that social and cultural concepts exert a substantial influence on the formation and development of the appearance economy.

First, the malleability of aesthetic standards. In the era of information explosion, modern media and social media serve as invisible fashion mentors, continuously disseminating specific aesthetic preferences extensively. These preferences act as a trend barometer, constantly shaping college students' aesthetic perceptions. Influenced by media narratives, delicate makeup, fair skin, and fashionable dressing have become standardized paradigms of beauty. Deeply affected by such trends, college students willingly invest considerable money, time, and energy in cosmetics, skincare products, and other appearance-related items to conform to these aesthetic standards. They carefully select products and earnestly learn makeup techniques, hoping to shape an attractive image in line with current trends.

Second, the selectivity of consumption concepts. Physical appearance has been endowed with greater social value and social recognition. College students keenly perceive that a good appearance serves as a unique "social business card" that enhances their competitiveness in interpersonal communication, job hunting, and other scenarios. Consequently, they tend to spend on appearance improvement and shift part of their consumption focus to enhancing their external image. Whether purchasing fashionable clothing or opting for high-end beauty treatments, they expect such consumption to help them build a more outstanding personal image.

Third, the guidance of gender role expectations. Deeply imprinted by traditional social and cultural concepts, women are expected to maintain an attractive and pleasing appearance at all times. This deep-rooted expectation acts as an invisible constraint, intensifying college students' persistent pursuit of good appearance. Fearful of being marginalized for failing to meet such expectations, they continuously strive to improve their physical appearance.

## **Conclusion**

This study reveals that core dimensions including appearance level, appearance investment, and appearance benefits are interwoven and mutually influential, jointly forming the primary evaluation system of the appearance economy among college students. This system, like a sophisticated network, comprehensively and meticulously captures the diverse manifestations and values of appearance in college students' daily lives.

Of particular note is that within the key dimension of "appearance benefits", the indicators of "romantic relationships and marriage" as well as "career choice and employment" exert an especially significant impact on college students. In romantic and marital contexts, attractive appearance often helps college students gain greater popularity among the opposite sex and increases opportunities to develop intimate relationships, which may further exert positive effects on their future family life. In terms of employment and career development, outstanding physical appearance can sometimes serve as a competitive advantage in the job market, supporting them in securing better employment opportunities and career prospects. These findings fully demonstrate the important role of the appearance economy in social and professional domains. In addition, internal factors (such as self-confidence, psychological status, anxiety level, and self-cognition) play a dominant role in the appearance economy, further emphasizing the profound influence of college students' internal psychological conditions and cognitive patterns on their appearance-related consumption behavior.

Although this study has achieved certain progress in constructing an evaluation index system for the appearance economy among college students, several limitations remain. First, due to the identity of college students, most respondents have not yet entered society and may lack a comprehensive understanding of the real-world impact of the appearance economy. Future research may expand the sample to include graduates who have entered the workplace to explore the sustained influence of the appearance economy on their careers. Second, the sample is limited by geographical and demographic distribution. The data in this study are mainly collected from several universities in Inner Mongolia, and the overall results

may be biased due to an insufficient sample size. Third, the research methods are relatively limited. This study mainly adopted questionnaire surveys, thematic seminars, and expert interviews; future research may integrate in-depth interviews, observational methods, and other approaches to more fully understand college students' authentic experiences and perceptions within the appearance economy. Fourth, it should be clarified that results derived from data analysis cannot fully explain the favorable conditions for contemporary college students in personal development, employment, mate selection, and other aspects. Accordingly, the content presented in this paper only represents insights obtained by the author through data analysis.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Y. Liu, "Fake Empowerment and True Discipline: A Study of Aesthetic Values in the Social Media Age from the Perspective of Marxist Philosophy," *Modern Bus. Trade Ind.*, vol. 45, no. 18, pp. 183–185, 2024, doi: 10.19311/j.cnki.1672-3198.2024.18.063.
- [2] W. Guo, "The Beauty Dilemma and Relief Paths in Female Virtual Socialization," *J. Shandong Women's Univ.*, no. 04, pp. 97–108, 2024.
- [3] Z. Xu, M. Xu, and H. Zhang, "Heterogeneity and Mechanism of Appearance Impact on Income," *J. Guangdong Univ. Finance & Econ.*, vol. 37, no. 02, pp. 29–41, 2022, doi: 10.20209/j.gcx.441711.2022.02.003.
- [4] Y. Guan, J. Wu, Y. He, *et al.*, "Does High Appearance Increase Income? Evidence from CFPS Panel Data," *Finance Trade Econ.*, vol. 30, no. 09, pp. 16–28, 2019, doi: 10.19337/j.cnki.34-1093/f.2019.09.002.
- [5] J. Shao and C. Fan, "Is There a Beauty Premium? Evidence from Executive Excess Compensation," *J. Guangdong Univ. Finance & Econ.*, vol. 34, no. 02, pp. 31–45, 2019, doi: 10.20209/j.gcx.441711.2019.02.003.
- [6] S. Gong, Y. He, and F. Xie, "Construction of College Students' Integrity System from the Perspective of Credit Reference: A Case Study of Tianshui City, Gansu Province," *Credit Ref.*, vol. 35, no. 04, pp. 45–48, 2017.