

When Algorithms Become the New Trend Shaper: The Aesthetic Production Mechanism of 'White, Young, and Thin' in Chinese Social Media and Fashion Culture

Jiarun Li

UCL Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences, University College London, WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom

Abstract. This essay explores how algorithmic platforms generate and reinforce the aesthetic ideal of 'white, young, and thin' in contemporary Chinese social media and fashion culture. Using qualitative network observation, visual analysis, brand analysis, and secondary literature research methods, the essay examines how platform recommendation systems interact with fashion practices, thereby constructing and normalizing specific body ideals. Firstly, through the observation of Redbook and TikTok, the visibility of recommended body types and fashion content under non-personalized conditions was analyzed. Secondly, taking Brandy Melville as an example, through its one-size-fits-small strategy, visual branding, and aesthetic labour. Finally, this essay explores how young Chinese women respond to these norms through selective and strategic fashion participation. Through research, the results show that the ideal of 'white, young, and thin' does not only reflect personal preferences, but also the result of the interaction of algorithmic visibility, business fashion strategies and repetitive visual performance. This essay believes that this process leads to the homogenization of fashion aesthetics, reinforces size-based exclusion, and limits the diversity of fashion expression.

Keywords: Algorithmic Aesthetics, Aesthetic Labour, Brandy Melville, Chinese Social Media, 'White, Young, and Thin', One-Size-Fits-Small, Fashion Participation.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms are now important places to produce, circulate and evaluate the contemporary fashion. Users do not only use them as spaces to show their existing preferences anymore, but the platforms also more and more influence the styles, body shapes and appearances that can be shown. Under the background of Chinese fashion, this change is especially important, and platforms of social media like Redbook and TikTok are already the main ways for people to discover fashion and communicate visually.

Under this background, the aesthetic ideal of 'white, young, and thin' still has a deep influence. Although international fashion groups pay more and more attention to the diversity and inclusiveness of body, the narrow body standard is still very common in China's digital fashion culture. Because people's body shapes are constantly influenced by clothing, visual presentation and cultural expectations, this aesthetic does not exist outside the fashion system [1]. The digital platforms use algorithms to decide which images can get repeated exposure, and this makes the aesthetic ideal more strong.

Therefore, algorithms play an important role, and it is not only because they can recommend fashion content. The recommendation system also has a great influence on the visibility and repetition of some specific aesthetic forms. Gillespie (2014) pointed out that what kind of content people can see in the digital environment is partly decided by algorithms [3]. Also, Pariser (2011) described how personalized systems reduce the scope of information obtained by users. Through this process in the fashion culture, the repeated visual exposure can turn into a seemingly natural understanding of what is a good-looking body or a fashionable look [8].

To look into this relationship, Brandy Melville is a very useful case. The brand has a one-size-fits-small strategy, very consistent visual identity and pays much attention to youthful and thin bodies, so it is closely connected to a specific ideal of the body. Wu, Zha and Li (2021) showed in their research that the strategy of this brand has a close relationship with how consumers in China understand

thinness, beauty and success [9]. Meanwhile, employees, models and consumers repeatedly copy the same visual image, and this aesthetic labor inside the brand makes this image stronger [10] [11].

Therefore, the way algorithm recommendation, fashion brand shaping and user behavior interact to shape and normalize the 'white, young, and thin' aesthetics in Chinese fashion culture is explored in this essay. The essay thinks we cannot see the algorithm as a neutral system which only shows existing preferences. Not like this, but algorithms take part in building aesthetic norms and have a great influence on how fashion users show and manage their bodies, which is done through repeated visibility and commercial adaptation.

2. Methodology

This essay adopts qualitative research methods. It combines online observation, visual analysis, brand analysis and second-hand literature, and the focus of the research is on the public content on the social media and fashion platforms in China.

To make the influence of personalized recommendations smaller, a small-scale observation was done on Redbook and TikTok by using two new accounts that did not have existing likes, followers, or browsing histories. We used non-aesthetic search words like 'summer outfit', 'fit check', and 'fashion trend' to see the top 30 results that the system recommended on each platform. The goal is not exploring the technical working way of the algorithm itself, but looking at the visual rules that its recommendations produce.

After that, Brandy Melville was checked by looking at its official product information, size charts, product imagery, social media content, and publicly available user discussions. To understand images as the cultural texts which are shaped by the processes of production, circulation, and viewing, visual analysis was used [4]. Also, we consider public comments about body type and clothing size as the evidence of how users react to mainstream aesthetic expectations, and all the materials are from public channels.

3. Algorithmic Production of Body Ideals

Because social media changes from searching to recommending, the way that users get fashion content becomes different. Users do not actively choose all the information they consume anymore, but they see more and more recommended content according to the predicted relevance. Coleman (2018) points out that algorithms are the systems to analyze user behavior and decide what content to show [5]. In addition, the power to decide the visible content is mentioned by Gillespie (2014) [3]. Because the aesthetic norms mainly depend on repetition, this is very important for fashion. Algorithms do not have to directly say one body type is more popular. As long as similar body types, clothing, poses and visual styles appear all the time, they will start to look normal or attractive, and the repeated exposure itself can build the hierarchy of visibility.

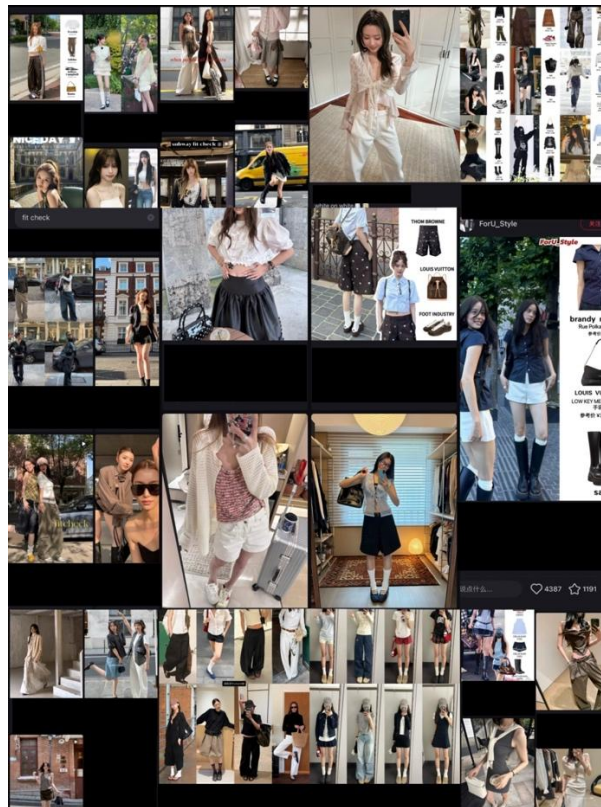


Figure 1. Screenshots in Redbook

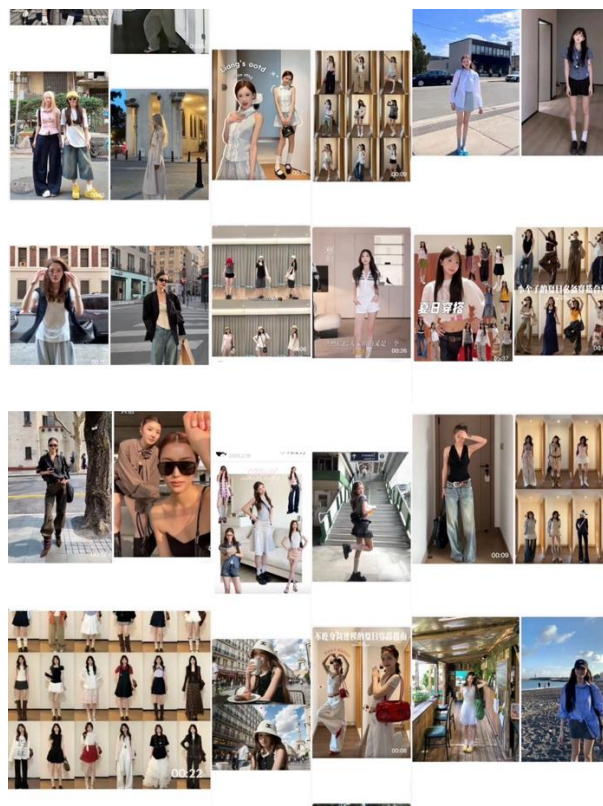


Figure 2. Screenshots in TikTok

Images of thin bodies and youthful fashion are shown repeatedly on these two platforms, even when users do not have any browsing history. Usually, the features of the recommended content include long limbs, slim waistlines and relatively light skin tones. It can be seen that specific body

types highly meet the requirements of the visual logic in the fashion recommendation, because these presentations are very consistent.

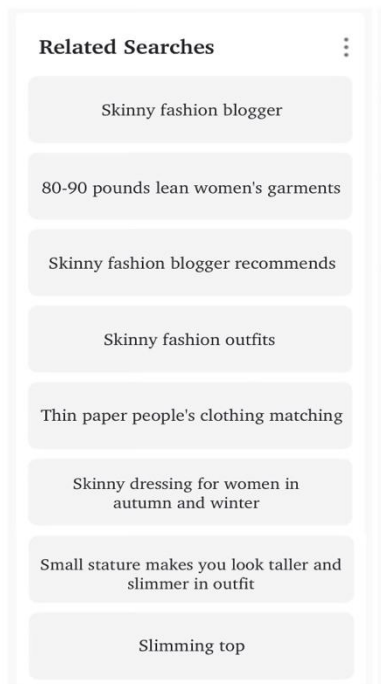


Figure 3. Screenshot of related searches on TikTok

The algorithm system also goes beyond the initial search terms, because keywords like ‘skinny’, ‘ideal figure’, ‘lean girl’s outfit’, and ‘XS Size’ appeared in the recommended content and search suggestions. Thus, the algorithm system not only meets the existing fashion interests, but also connects the fashion consumption with more specific expectations of the body.

We can understand this process as algorithmic aesthetic allocation. Lichtcsien (2021) points out that when consumers interact with algorithmic systems, they use different forms of capital to take part in fashion [2]. Because users have a higher probability to see and imitate the styles that have been recognized by the algorithm, visibility becomes a part of this process.



Figure 4. Screenshot of comments on Redbook

In the observed recommendations, the lack of body diversity is also a very important point. The frequency of medium-sized and larger bodies is much lower than the frequency of thin bodies. People leave comments to ask how much weight they need to lose to wear a certain outfit, which shows how body shape becomes a part of fashion evaluation. Users may not think clothes can adapt to different bodies, but instead, they feel that the body is something that must be changed to meet the requirements of the clothing.

By repeatedly leaving out alternative representations, the dominant beauty systems can make specific bodily ideals natural, and Wolf (2002) pointed out this view, which is supported by this [7]. However, under the algorithm environment, visibility makes this exclusion stronger. It becomes harder and harder to see the body types that are not mentioned often, while the mainstream body types become more and more common.

Therefore, what is hard to be seen is as important as what people can see in the algorithm recommendation. With the help of repeating, recommending and interacting, 'White, young, and thin' can turn into a fashion standard which looks normal and visible. Under this background, how fashion brands and sizing practices make this kind of aesthetic into reality can be analyzed by us.

4. Brandy Melville as an Algorithmic Fashion Model

Brandy Melville is a useful case to explore the connection between algorithmic aesthetics and physical clothing. The brand has a strong relationship with youthful vitality, American campus style, fitted silhouettes and highly consistent visual image. More importantly, its one-size method highly meets the narrow body type.

Wu, Zha and Li (2021) pointed out that the one-size strategy of Brandy Melville links thinness with the beauty and success of the Chinese market. On the Chinese social media, people often use words such as “BM style” and “American campus style” to talk about this brand, and these labels are not only about clothing, but also show a kind of imagined lifestyle and body type [9].

4.1 One-size-fits-small and the Materialization of Body Ideals

We should not understand the 'one size' of Brandy Melville as a one-size-fits-all model that includes everyone, because its measurements are closer to the XS-S range in the normal women's clothing.

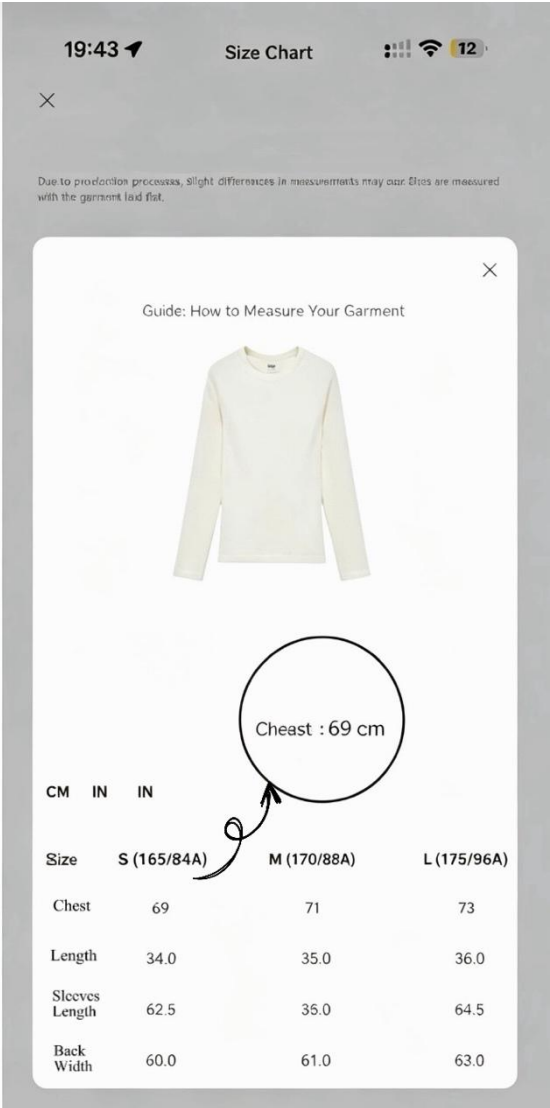
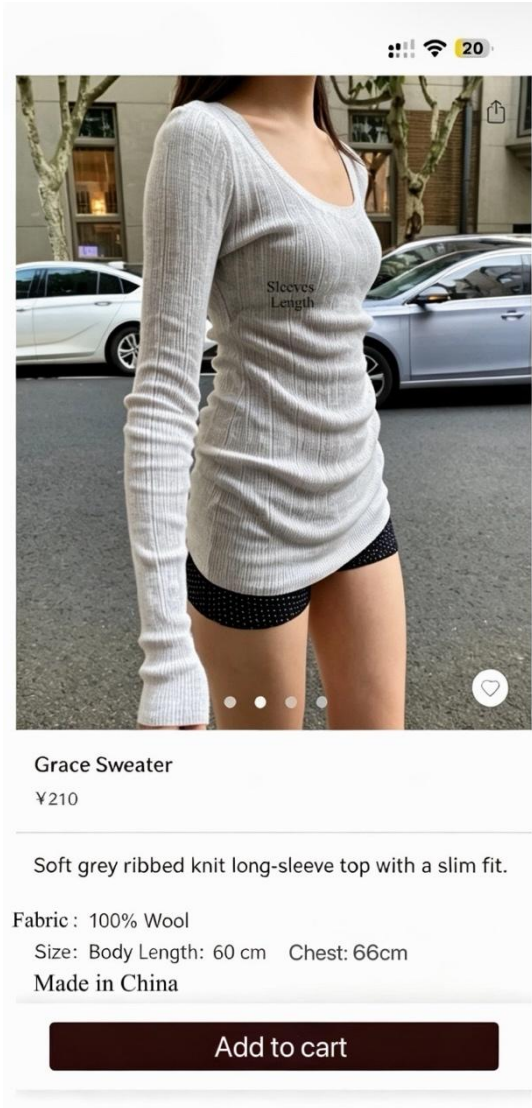


Figure 5. Brandy Melville APP (Mainland China) Figure 6. Hollister APP (Mainland China)

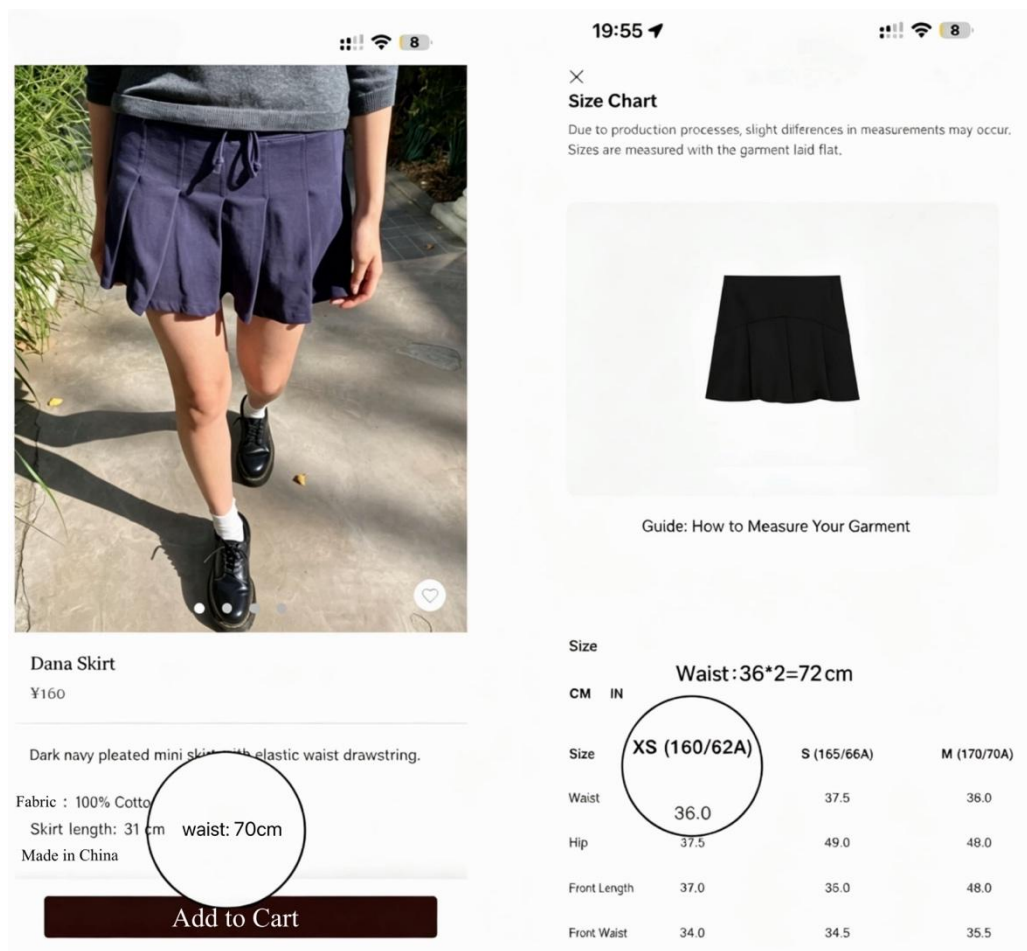


Figure 7. Brandy Melville APP (Mainland China) **Figure 8.** Hollister APP (Mainland China)

The comparison results show this difference clearly. In the checked examples, the chest circumference of the one-size sweater of Brandy Melville is about 66 centimeters, which is smaller than the selected size S product of Hollister. At the same time, the waist circumference of the chosen Brandy Melville skirt is about 70 centimeters, and the waist circumference of the size XS product of Hollister is 72 centimeters.

These comparisons play an important role, because they show that the narrow sizing of the brand is not just a neutral technical decision. By defining what kind of body types are easier to meet the requirements of mass-produced clothing, Volonté (2021) pointed out that fashion sizing can help to standardize body types [6]. The garment size becomes an indirect way to measure the body when people treat the smallest clothing size as the ideal standard.

In this background, the algorithmic environment makes the meaning of the size system bigger. The pictures of slender bodies wearing BM clothing repeatedly link the brand with a special physical appearance. Also, the image of slender bodies wearing Brandy Melville clothing repeatedly connects the brand with a specific body type. Therefore, the body types that can fit into these clothes also become a part of the brand's aesthetic identity.

This brings about a circular relationship:

narrow sizing → specific body type → repeated visual representation → algorithmic visibility → normalization of narrow sizing.

The clothing not only responds to an existing ideal, but also plays an important role in reproducing it.

4.2 Aesthetic Labour and the Reproduction of the “Brandy Girl”

The visual image of Brandy Melville is also reproduced by people. Roller (2023) records the way that the brand uses employees, customers and models on social media. When selecting employees,

appearance is one of the reasons, and the recognizable ‘Brandy Girl’ is constructed with the help of this [10].



Figure 9. Redbook, Guanxiaodai (2023)

From the angle of aesthetic labor, we can understand this. Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) pointed out that according to the expectations of the organization, aesthetic labor is the management and commodification of the appearance, behaviour and bodies of workers [11]. Because young and thin employees are shown repeatedly, the connection between the brand and a specific ideal body is made stronger for Brandy Melville.



Figure 10. Official Instagram



Figure 11. Official Instagram

Not only does this process happen in the workplace, but the brand image on social media is often built with the help of a visual language that is very casual and daily. Therefore, employees and consumers do not just act as commercial models, but serve as ordinary young people, which shows the lifestyle of the brand naturally. Because people feel they can get this kind of aesthetics by participating in daily fashion, it is much more convincing.

Aesthetic labor has been transferred from employees to consumers. When consumers realize that participating in a specific fashion culture requires a specific appearance, body management becomes a part of fashion consumption. Volonté (2021) pointed out that fashion participation is closely related to social expectations surrounding bodies [6]. In this case, the body becomes one of the necessary conditions for participating in the brand's visual culture.

4.3 From Brand Strategy to the Wider Chinese Fashion Market

The impact of this model is not limited to Brandy Melville. The same visual logic is also reflected in the broader Chinese fashion market.

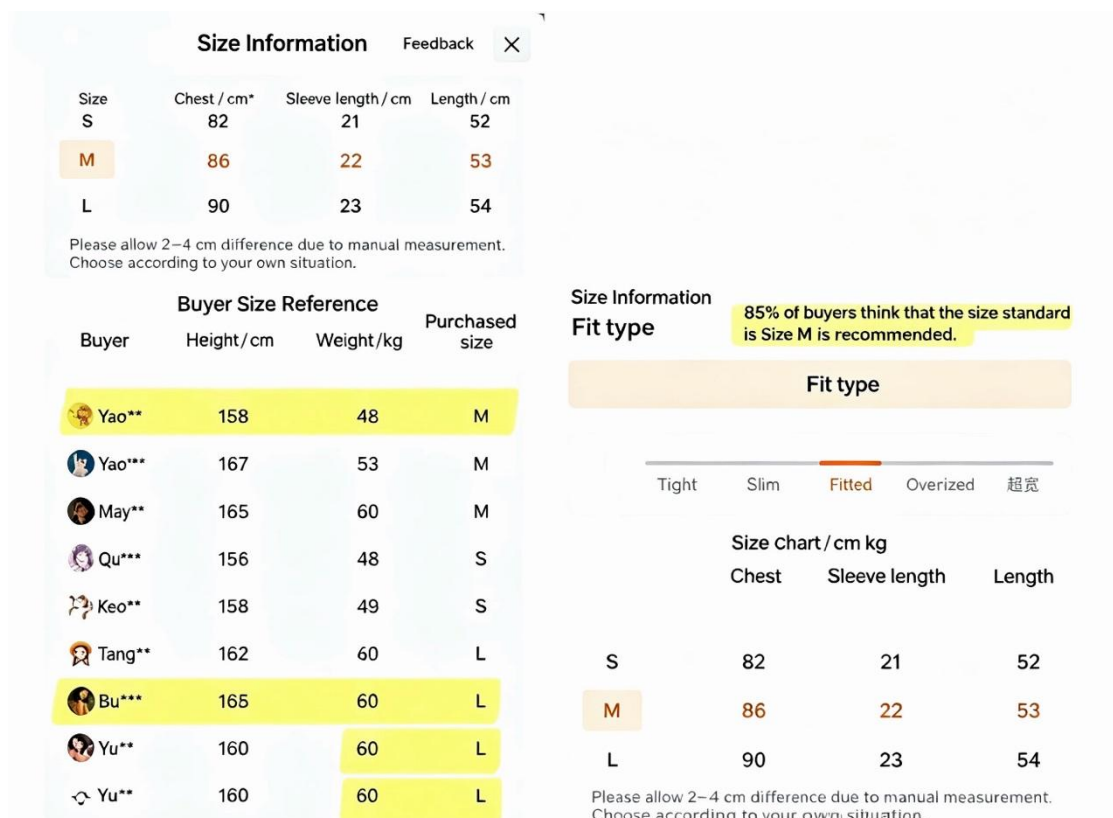


Figure 12. Screenshot from Taobao

Figure 13. Screenshot from Taobao

Observation of womenswear products on Taobao showed a strong consistency in model representation, with many models displaying the ideal characteristics of ‘white, young, and thin’. Meanwhile, the actual measurements of garments labelled as M or L have relatively narrow sizes.

As a result, there is a contradiction between the nominal size diversity and the actual size diversity. A brand might technically provide sizes from XS to XL, but its silhouettes still put focus on a relatively narrow range of body types, and Volonté (2021) also pointed out that plus-size bodies have been marginalized in the fashion systems in history [6].

As a result, the significance of Brandy Melville has exceeded the brand itself, because its commercial model indicates that restrictive sizing can become culturally popular when it is combined with strong visual identity and the visibility of algorithms. It is not necessary for other brands to copy BM directly. Instead, they can meet the same expectation of the market, which means that the highest possibility to be shown belongs to the body type that matches the mainstream visual aesthetics best.

Therefore, the algorithm works together with the commercial logic. Brands make content that can be easily recognized visually, platforms amplify the content with good performance, and consumers repeatedly see the same image and style. In this way, commercial success and algorithmic recommendations reinforce each other, which forms a feedback loop.

5. Negotiating Algorithmic Aesthetics

The great influence of algorithmic aesthetics does not mean that young women just accept the mainstream beauty standards, but users develop different participation methods.

A relatively silent participation is one of the responses. When facing highly similar body types and dressing styles again and again, users who feel their own bodies do not meet the mainstream template may make their visibility lower.



Figure 14. Redbook, Jeanplease (2026)



Figure 15. Redbook, Jeanplease (2026)

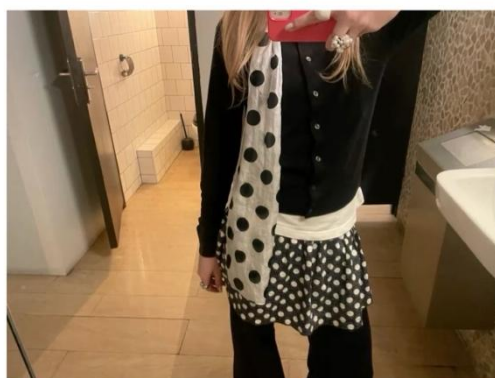


Figure 16. Redbook, Jeanplease (2026)

People can observe this from the partial body display (Figure.14,15,16.). For the users who want to keep visibility, their coping method is strategic participation, which means they may purposely change their display format. Instead of showing the whole body, users focus on the upper body, clothing details or specific poses. This method can not only promote the participation of fashion, but also lower the chance of the body being judged by the mainstream standards.

Through these practices, it can be seen that algorithmic aesthetics are not forced from top to bottom, but are formed by the negotiation in daily behaviors. Brydges and Sjöholm (2018) pointed out that fashion creators work under the relationship among platforms, audiences and commercial structures [12]. Similarly, Butler (2006) considers identity as a thing which is built constantly by repeated performance [13].

From this aspect, the participation of fashion becomes a kind of negotiation with algorithmic visibility, so users will learn what kind of body shapes and styles are easier to get attention, and then adjust their own images based on this.

Because imitating others becomes a reasonable strategy to keep visible, trying new things will bring more risks, which leads to the homogenization of aesthetics. Therefore, users are encouraged to copy the styles which have been proved to be successful, rather than exploring the styles that the recommendation system may not recognize easily.

This creates a paradox, because the social media seems to give people more chances to express their personal fashion, but the filtering of algorithm reduces the possible range of visibility. Pham (2015) pointed out that the self-presentation of online fashion includes not only personal expression but also the hope of getting attention from others [14]. Under the background of algorithm environment, the platform systems limit this visibility more and more.

Therefore, the openness of fashion becomes lower, and the proportions of body, poses, styling and the composition of photos gradually become templates that can be repeated. The body which is 'good-looking' becomes a thing that can be recognized and copied visually, not an open class for cultural experiments.

6. Conclusion

Under the background of Chinese social media and fashion culture, this essay discusses how the recommendation of algorithm, brand of fashion and practice of users influence each other in producing the aesthetic of 'white, young, and thin'.

Based on the results of the research, algorithms not only play a role in spreading the existing preferences of fashion. Through repeated exposure and selective visibility, they also make specific body shapes and styles become a normal thing. The situations on Redbook and TikTok show that the ideal image of being slim, young and light-skinned is still very easy to be seen, even if users search for some relatively neutral fashion content at the very beginning.

Because the one-size-fits-small strategy is used by the brand to connect the sizes of clothes with the ideal slim body, Brandy Melville shows how this visual ideal becomes a reality through fashion practice. Meanwhile, this same image is constantly copied by employees, models and consumers through aesthetic labor, and this kind of aesthetics is spread from the brand itself to a wider fashion culture area because of the visibility of algorithms.

From the level of users, young women in China do not just accept or refuse these rules simply. They use selective and strategic participation practices to respond to these rules, taking the cropping of photos, posing, styling and other visual self-management ways as an example, which reveals how people put the algorithmic visibility into their daily decisions of fashion.

In a word, the interaction among technological systems, commercial fashion practices and actual behaviors of users forms the ideal image of 'white, young, and thin', and the meaning of this process is more than the image of body. If a narrow aesthetic gets higher exposure again and again, it will increase the difficulty for fashion itself, so fashion will face the risk of becoming more and more predictable and homogenized. Therefore, we need to think again about the relationship among algorithms, sizes of clothes and body shapes, which plays an important role in understanding how modern fashion keeps diversity, experimentation and creative participation under the background of a visual culture with more and more algorithms.

References

- [1] Entwistle, J. (2023). *The fashioned body*. Polity Press.
- [2] Lichtcsien, K. (2021). *Playing the game of fashion in the digital era: The dynamic relationship between consumers and algorithms* [Master's thesis]. Aalto University. <https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/server/api/core/bitstreams/18800b68-4960-41ce-97e1-8c6b8199ebda/content>
- [3] Gillespie, T. (2014). The relevance of algorithms. In *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society* (pp. 167-194). MIT Press. <https://academic.oup.com/mit-press-scholarship-online/book/14976/chapter-abstract/169333383?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>
- [4] Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- [5] Coleman, L. (2018). *The fashion annual 2018/19*. Bell & Bain Ltd.
- [6] Volonté, P. (2021). *Fat fashion: The thin ideal and the segregation of plus-size bodies*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts.
- [7] Wolf, N. (2002). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. Morrow.
- [8] Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Press.

- [9] Wu, X., Zha, Y., & Li, C. (2021). Brandy Melville's global marketing strategies in China. In Proceedings of the 2021 International Conference on Economic Development and Business Culture (ICEDBC 2021). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/aebmr.k.210712.042>
- [10] Roller, C. (2023). Brandy Melville: An analysis. *Intertext*, 31(1), Article 7. <https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1478&context=intertext>
- [11] Entwistle, J., & Wissinger, E. (2006). Keeping up appearances: Aesthetic labour in the fashion modelling industries of London and New York. *The Sociological Review*, 54(4), 774-794. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00634.x>
- [12] Brydges, T., & Sjöholm, J. (2018). Becoming a personal style blogger: Changing configurations and spatialities of aesthetic labour in the fashion industry. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(1), 119-139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877917752404>
- [13] Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.
- [14] Pham, M.-H. T. (2015). 'I click and post and breathe, waiting for others to see what I see': On #feministselfies, outfit photos, and networked vanity. *Fashion Theory*, 19(2), 221-241. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174115X14168357992436>