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The Impact of Body Image, Social Comparison, and Academic Pressure on Mental Health Among Chinese Art Students in Beijing: The Mediating Role of Self-Esteem

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Abstract: Mental health problems among university students in China have become an increasingly urgent concern, particularly in large urban centers where academic competition, social visibility, and career uncertainty are pronounced. Within this broader population, art students represent a particularly vulnerable group because they operate in educational environments characterized by subjective assessment, public critique, visual self-presentation, and intense pressure to demonstrate originality. This study examines how body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure affect mental health outcomes among Chinese art students in Beijing, with self-esteem tested as a mediating mechanism. Using a quantitative design, data were collected from 300 students enrolled in art and design programs in Beijing universities and analyzed through structural equation modeling. The findings show that body dissatisfaction, media exposure, perceived importance of appearance, social comparison, parental expectations, and institutional demands all significantly increase stress and anxiety. Among these predictors, body dissatisfaction and institutional demands show the strongest direct effects. The results further indicate that self-esteem partially mediates the relationship between all six predictors and mental health outcomes, confirming that reduced self-worth is one of the principal pathways through which psychosocial and academic stressors undermine student well-being. The study contributes to the literature by focusing on a neglected subgroup within Chinese higher education and by integrating appearance-based, relational, and academic pressures into one explanatory model. The findings suggest that universities should adopt discipline-specific mental health interventions that strengthen self-esteem, reduce toxic comparison, improve media literacy, and reform critique and assessment cultures in art education.

Keywords: Mental health, art students, body image, social comparison, academic pressure

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1. Introduction

Mental health has emerged as one of the most pressing concerns in contemporary higher education, with rising levels of stress, anxiety, and psychological distress reported among university students worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). University students are required to navigate multiple developmental and contextual challenges simultaneously, including academic demands, identity formation, social integration, and career uncertainty (Arnett, 2023). In China, these pressures are further intensified by strong parental expectations, a highly competitive educational system, and increasing exposure to social comparison through digital media (Liu, 2026; Xie & Zhong, 2026; Zhang et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). Within this broader context, art students represent a particularly vulnerable subgroup. Unlike students in more structured disciplines, art students operate in environments characterized by subjective evaluation, public critique, and continuous aesthetic judgment. Their educational experience is closely tied to visibility, self-expression, and performance, making them more susceptible to external evaluation and internalized pressure (Chan, 2023; Fantoni, 2024). As a result, they may experience heightened sensitivity to body image concerns, peer comparison, and perceived academic inadequacy. In Beijing, the cultural and educational hub of China, these challenges are further amplified. Art students are expected not only to achieve academic success but also to demonstrate originality, develop competitive portfolios, and establish a distinctive creative identity within highly competitive and visually oriented environments. Such conditions increase exposure to appearance-related pressures, intensify peer comparison, and reinforce performance anxiety. Emerging evidence suggests that these stressors are not isolated but interconnected, collectively contributing to elevated levels of stress and anxiety among students (Chen et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2025; Mahmood et al., 2026). Despite the growing body of research on student mental health in China, relatively limited attention has been given to art students as a distinct population. This gap is significant because art education differs fundamentally from other academic disciplines. Its pedagogical practices such as public critique, subjective assessment, and emotional investment in creative output may amplify psychological vulnerability (Courtney et al., 2017; Grogan, 2021; Grogan et al., 2018; Merino et al., 2024). Moreover, existing studies often examine factors such as body image, social comparison, and academic pressure in isolation, rather than considering their combined effects. To address these limitations, the present study investigates the impact of body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure on the mental health of Chinese art students in Beijing. Importantly, it examines self-esteem as a mediating mechanism through which these factors influence stress and anxiety. By integrating multiple psychosocial and academic variables into a single analytical framework, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of mental health in creative education contexts and offers insights for targeted interventions. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the

study, which examines the relationships between body image concerns, social comparison, academic pressure, self-esteem, and mental health outcomes among Chinese art students. The model proposes that six independent variables body dissatisfaction, media exposure, perceived importance of appearance, social comparison, parental expectations, and institutional demands have direct effects on mental health outcomes, operationalized as stress and anxiety. These variables represent three major domains of influence: body image concerns (body dissatisfaction, media exposure, appearance importance), social factors (social comparison), and academic pressure (parental expectations and institutional demands). In addition to their direct effects, the model incorporates self-esteem as a mediating variable. This means that the six predictors are also hypothesized to influence mental health indirectly through their impact on self-esteem. Specifically, higher levels of body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure are expected to negatively affect self-esteem, which in turn leads to increased stress and anxiety. The arrows in the model indicate the direction of these relationships. The horizontal arrows from the independent variables to mental health represent direct effects, while the vertical arrows leading to self-esteem and then to mental health represent indirect (mediated) effects. This structure reflects a dual-path mechanism in which external stressors influence mental health both directly and indirectly through psychological processes. Overall, the framework suggests that mental health among art students is shaped by a combination of external pressures and internal psychological resources, highlighting the critical role of self-esteem as both a protective and vulnerability factor.

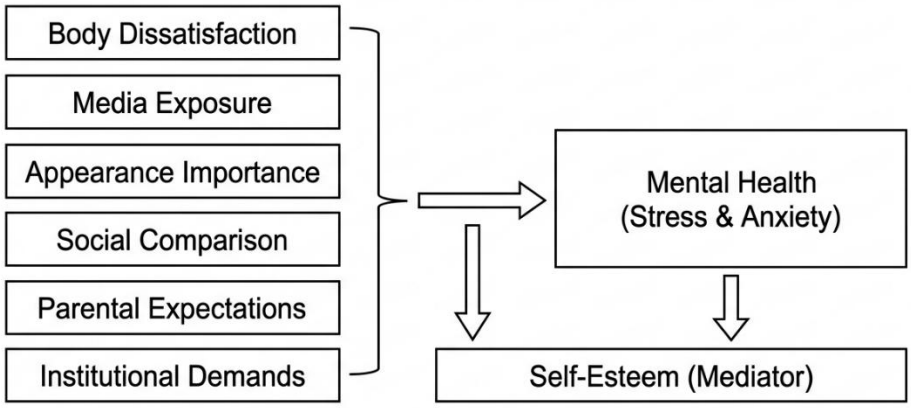

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1 Body Image Concerns and Mental Health

Body image concerns refer to individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and emotional responses toward their physical appearance (Cash & Fleming, 2002; Cash & Grant, 1996; Cash & Smolak, 2011). Within university populations, body dissatisfaction has been consistently

associated with a range of adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety, low self-esteem, and emotional distress (Eck et al., 2022; Grogan, 2021; Hockey, 2021; Milton et al., 2021). In recent years, these concerns have intensified due to the increasing influence of digital media and globalized beauty standards, particularly among young adults in urban environments (House et al., 2023; Nadeem & Asad, 2025; Panta, 2024).

For art students, body image concerns are especially salient. Unlike students in other disciplines, art and design students operate within highly visual and aesthetic contexts where appearance, presentation, and visual identity are often embedded in both academic and social interactions. Exposure to aesthetic standards occurs not only through media but also through coursework, peer critique, exhibitions, and professional expectations, thereby reinforcing appearance-related self-evaluation (Ali, 2022; Grogan et al., 2016; Grogan, 2021; Nazworth, 2022). This study conceptualizes body image concerns through three interrelated dimensions: body dissatisfaction, media exposure, and perceived importance of appearance. Body dissatisfaction refers to negative evaluations of one's physical appearance (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Media exposure captures the extent to which individuals engage with platforms that promote idealized and often unattainable beauty standards (Kwon, 2020; Levine & Kelly, 2012; Levine & Murnen, 2015). The perceived importance of appearance reflects the degree to which individuals base their self-worth on physical attractiveness (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Together, these dimensions form a critical set of psychosocial stressors that may significantly undermine mental health, particularly in environments where visual representation is central to identity and performance.

2.2 Social Comparison and Peer Evaluation

Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals evaluate their abilities, appearance, and achievements by comparing themselves to others, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty or competition (Matthews & Kelemen, 2025; Suls & Wheeler, 2012; Wood, 1989). In higher education, and especially within creative disciplines, such comparison processes are both frequent and structurally embedded. In art education, peer comparison is not incidental but integral to the learning process. Students regularly evaluate their work against that of peers through critiques, exhibitions, and collaborative projects. This continuous exposure to others' creative outputs fosters both upward and downward comparisons, with upward comparison comparing oneself to more successful or talented peers being particularly associated with negative psychological outcomes (Amiot, 2024; Or, 2024). The rise of social media has further intensified social comparison processes. Platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu provide curated representations of artistic success, physical attractiveness, and lifestyle achievements, often exaggerating ideal standards and creating unrealistic benchmarks (Gu, 2023; Liu, 2024). mpirical evidence suggests that frequent engagement in upward social comparison is strongly

linked to increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced self-esteem (Jin et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025).

For art students, whose academic performance and personal identity are closely intertwined with creative output, these comparisons can be particularly detrimental. When students perceive themselves as less talented, less attractive, or less successful than their peers, they are more likely to internalize feelings of inadequacy. In such contexts, social comparison becomes not merely a motivational mechanism but a source of psychological vulnerability.

2.3 Academic Pressure in Art Education

Academic pressure is widely recognized as a major determinant of student mental health, particularly within the Chinese higher education system, which is characterized by high expectations, intense competition, and strong cultural emphasis on academic success (Hang & Zhang, 2023; Wang & Chen, 2025; S. Zhang et al., 2026; Zhuang & Liu, 2022). However, art students experience a distinct form of academic pressure that differs from that of students in more structured disciplines. In art education, students are required not only to meet formal academic requirements but also to produce original, innovative, and aesthetically compelling work. This dual expectation creates a complex and demanding learning environment. The present study conceptualizes academic pressure through two key dimensions: parental expectations and institutional demands. Parental expectations play a significant role in shaping student stress in collectivist societies such as China, where educational achievement is often linked to family honor and future socioeconomic mobility (Guo et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024; Xie & Zhong, 2026). For art students, these expectations may be particularly burdensome when creative career paths are perceived as uncertain or less prestigious, leading to conflict between personal aspirations and familial expectations. Institutional demands include workload intensity, project-based assessments, portfolio development, public exhibitions, and critique-based evaluation systems. Unlike traditional academic disciplines, where performance is often measured through objective criteria, art education relies heavily on subjective judgment. This lack of clear evaluation standards introduces uncertainty and ambiguity, which can significantly amplify stress levels (Liang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Moreover, art students are frequently required to present their work publicly and defend their creative choices, exposing them to continuous scrutiny and evaluation. The combination of high expectations, subjective assessment, and public visibility creates a high-pressure environment that may contribute to burnout, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion.

2.4 Self-Esteem as a Mediating Mechanism

Self-esteem, defined as an individual's overall sense of self-worth or personal value (AlHarbi, 2022; Lönnqvist et al., 2009; Rosenberg et al., 1995), plays a critical role in psychological functioning and emotional regulation. It influences how individuals

interpret, respond to, and cope with external stressors. In the context of this study, self-esteem is conceptualized as a mediating mechanism that explains how body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure translate into mental health outcomes. Students with high self-esteem are more likely to adopt adaptive coping strategies, interpret challenges as manageable, and maintain emotional stability in the face of criticism or failure (Bondarchuk et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2025; Lu, 2024; Mahmood et al., 2026). In contrast, students with low self-esteem are more likely to internalize negative experiences, perceive stressors as overwhelming, and develop anxiety-related symptoms.

Empirical research supports the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between psychosocial stressors and mental health outcomes. Studies have shown that self-esteem significantly buffers the negative effects of body dissatisfaction, social comparison, and academic pressure, reducing their impact on stress and anxiety (Hu et al., 2025; Kovan et al., 2025; Shang & Bao, 2025; W. Zhang et al., 2026). The theoretical foundation of this study integrates Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), Stress-Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1984), and self-esteem frameworks (Rosenberg, 1965). Together, these perspectives suggest that mental health outcomes are shaped not only by external pressures but also by how these pressures are cognitively appraised and psychologically internalized. This integrative approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex mechanisms underlying mental health among art students.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationships among body image concerns, social comparison, academic pressure, self-esteem, and mental health outcomes among Chinese art students. A quantitative approach is appropriate for this study as it enables the systematic measurement of variables and the testing of hypothesized relationships using statistical techniques (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Harrison et al., 2020; Mohajan, 2020).

3.1 Research Design and Sample

Data were collected באמצעות a structured online questionnaire administered to undergraduate students enrolled in art and design programs at universities in Beijing. A total of 300 valid responses were obtained, which is considered adequate for structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis (Hair et al., 2021; Wang & Wang, 2024; Zhai, 2024). The sample represents a typical university-age population, with the majority of respondents aged between 19 and 24 years. Female students constituted a larger proportion of the sample, reflecting the gender distribution commonly observed in art-related disciplines.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that all participants met the inclusion criteria, namely being currently enrolled in an art-related program in Beijing.

This sampling approach is appropriate for studies focusing on specific populations with defined characteristics (Etikan et al., 2016).

3.2 Measures and Instrumentation

The study measured six independent variables: body dissatisfaction, media exposure, perceived importance of appearance, social comparison, parental expectations, and institutional demands. These constructs were operationalized using established measurement scales adapted from prior studies to ensure content validity and reliability (Thompson & Stice, 2001; Levine & Murnen, 2009; Zhang et al., 2021).

Table 1. Summary of Variables and Measurement Scales

Construct	Dimension	No. of Items	Sample Item	Scale	Source
Body Image Concerns	Body Dissatisfaction	4	"I am dissatisfied with my body shape."	5-point Likert	Thompson & Stice (2001)
	Media Exposure	4	"I frequently view appearance-related content on social media."	5-point Likert	Levine & Murnen (2009)
	Importance of Appearance	3	"My appearance plays an important role in how I value myself."	5-point Likert	Cash & Smolak (2011)
Social Comparison	Peer Comparison	4	"I often compare my appearance or work with others."	5-point Likert	Festinger (1954); Liu et al. (2023)
Academic Pressure	Parental Expectations	3	"My parents expect me to achieve high academic success."	5-point Likert	Zhang et al. (2021)
	Institutional Demands	4	"I feel pressure due to academic workload and deadlines."	5-point Likert	Wang et al. (2022)
Self-Esteem (Mediator)	Global Self-Esteem	5	"I feel that I have a number of good qualities."	5-point Likert	Rosenberg (1965)
Mental Health Outcomes	Stress & Anxiety	5	"I feel anxious due to academic and social pressures."	5-point Likert	WHO (2023)

The measurement of constructs in this study was based on established and validated scales drawn from prior research to ensure reliability and content validity. As summarized in Table 1, body image concerns were operationalized through three dimensions: body dissatisfaction, media exposure, and perceived importance of appearance. These dimensions capture both perceptual and sociocultural aspects of body image, reflecting individuals' evaluations of their physical appearance as well as their exposure to and internalization of appearance-related standards (Thompson & Stice,

2001; Levine & Murnen, 2009; Cash & Smolak, 2011). Social comparison was measured using items assessing peer comparison behaviors, particularly in relation to appearance and creative output, consistent with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). Academic pressure was conceptualized through parental expectations and institutional demands, capturing both familial and educational sources of stress commonly observed in the Chinese higher education context (Zhang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Self-esteem was measured as a global construct using items adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), reflecting individuals' overall sense of self-worth. Mental health outcomes were operationalized through stress and anxiety, which are widely recognized indicators of psychological distress among university students (WHO, 2023).

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scaling approach is commonly used in social science research to capture subjective perceptions and attitudes while ensuring comparability across constructs. The use of validated instruments enhances the robustness of the measurement model and supports the reliability of subsequent statistical analyses.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a two-stage approach. First, SPSS was used to perform descriptive statistics and reliability analysis, including Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency. Second, SmartPLS 4 was employed to conduct structural equation modeling (SEM), including measurement model evaluation, structural model testing, and mediation analysis. SEM was selected as the primary analytical technique because it allows for the simultaneous examination of multiple relationships between observed and latent variables, including both direct and indirect effects (Hair et al., 2021). This approach is particularly suitable for the present study, which aims to test a comprehensive conceptual model linking psychosocial and academic stressors to mental health outcomes through self-esteem. The measurement model was evaluated in terms of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, while the structural model was assessed using path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), and significance levels. Mediation analysis was conducted to determine the indirect effects of the independent variables on mental health outcomes via self-esteem, following established procedures in SEM research (Hao & Zhang, 2025; Hayes & Preacher, 2013; Hayes et al., 2011; Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Rice et al., 1998; Rippon et al., 2024).

4. Results

4.1 Structural Model Results

The results of the structural model analysis provide strong support for the proposed conceptual framework. All hypothesized direct relationships between the six independent variables body dissatisfaction, media exposure, perceived importance of

appearance, social comparison, parental expectations, and institutional demands and mental health outcomes were found to be statistically significant (see Table 5 and Figure 2). Specifically, all predictors showed positive relationships with stress and anxiety, indicating that higher levels of these stressors are associated with poorer mental health among Chinese art students.

Among the predictors, body dissatisfaction exhibited the strongest direct effect on mental health outcomes ($\beta = 0.278$, $p < 0.001$), followed by institutional demands ($\beta = 0.269$, $p < 0.001$) and social comparison ($\beta = 0.221$, $p < 0.001$). Media exposure ($\beta = 0.198$, $p < 0.01$), parental expectations ($\beta = 0.187$, $p < 0.01$), and perceived importance of appearance ($\beta = 0.165$, $p < 0.05$) also demonstrated significant positive effects. These findings suggest that mental health among art students is most strongly influenced by dissatisfaction with physical appearance, academic workload and expectations, and frequent comparison with peers.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 300)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	120	40.0
	Female	180	60.0
Age	18–20 years	95	31.7
	21–23 years	145	48.3
	24 years and above	60	20.0
Year of Study	Year 1	80	26.7
	Year 2	90	30.0
	Year 3	75	25.0
	Year 4	55	18.3
Field of Study	Fine Arts	110	36.7
	Design (Graphic/Fashion/Interior)	140	46.7
	Other Art-related Programs	50	16.6

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents included in this study. A total of 300 valid responses were analyzed. The sample consisted of 60.0% female and 40.0% male participants, reflecting the gender distribution commonly observed in art and design programs. In terms of age, the majority of respondents were between 21 and 23 years old (48.3%), followed by those aged 18 to 20 (31.7%), while 20.0% were aged 24 years and above. This indicates that the sample primarily represents students in the typical university age range. Regarding academic level, students from all years of study were included, with the largest proportion from Year 2 (30.0%), followed by Year 1 (26.7%), Year 3 (25.0%), and Year 4 (18.3%). This distribution suggests a balanced representation across different stages of academic progression.

In terms of field of study, the majority of respondents were enrolled in design-related programs (46.7%), followed by fine arts (36.7%) and other art-related disciplines (16.6%).

This diversity enhances the generalizability of the findings within the context of art education. The demographic profile indicates that the sample is appropriate for examining mental health issues among art students in Beijing, as it captures a diverse range of students across gender, age, academic level, and artistic specialization. This pattern reflects the unique characteristics of art education environments, where aesthetic self-awareness, competitive peer evaluation, and institutional performance pressures are deeply intertwined. The prominence of body dissatisfaction further highlights the central role of appearance-related concerns in shaping psychological well-being within visually oriented disciplines.

4.2 Model Explanatory Power

The structural model demonstrated substantial explanatory power. The six independent variables collectively explained 61.4% of the variance in mental health outcomes (R^2 = 0.614), indicating a strong model fit. Additionally, the model accounted for 48.7% of the variance in self-esteem (R^2 = 0.487), suggesting that the selected predictors effectively capture key determinants of students' self-evaluative processes.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Body Dissatisfaction	1.00	5.00	3.78	0.82
Media Exposure	1.20	5.00	4.02	0.75
Importance of Appearance	1.00	5.00	3.65	0.88
Social Comparison	1.25	5.00	3.91	0.80
Parental Expectations	1.00	5.00	3.72	0.85
Institutional Demands	1.50	5.00	4.10	0.78
Self-Esteem	1.20	5.00	3.20	0.90
Stress & Anxiety	1.40	5.00	4.05	0.77

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of the key variables examined in this study, including their minimum and maximum values, means, and standard deviations. Overall, the results indicate moderate to high levels of psychosocial and academic stressors among the respondents.

Among the independent variables, institutional demands recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.10, SD = 0.78), suggesting that academic workload, deadlines, and performance expectations are major sources of pressure for art students. This is followed closely by media exposure (M = 4.02, SD = 0.75) and social comparison (M = 3.91, SD = 0.80), indicating that students are frequently engaged with social media content and comparison processes.

Body dissatisfaction (M = 3.78, SD = 0.82) and parental expectations (M = 3.72, SD = 0.85) also show relatively high mean values, reflecting the combined influence of appearance-related concerns and familial pressure. The perceived importance of appearance (M =

3.65, SD = 0.88) suggests that physical appearance plays a meaningful role in students' self-evaluation.

In contrast, self-esteem demonstrated a comparatively lower mean score (M = 3.20, SD = 0.90), indicating moderate levels of self-worth among respondents. Notably, mental health outcomes, measured through stress and anxiety, exhibited a high mean value (M = 4.05, SD = 0.77), suggesting that a substantial proportion of students experience elevated psychological distress.

These descriptive findings provide preliminary evidence supporting the presence of significant stressors among Chinese art students and justify further analysis of the relationships among the study variables. These results indicate that the proposed model provides a robust explanation of the psychological factors influencing stress and anxiety among art students. The relatively high R^2 values further support the adequacy of the model in capturing both direct and indirect pathways affecting mental health.

4.3 Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis revealed that self-esteem plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between the independent variables and mental health outcomes (see Table 6 and Figure 3). All six predictors were found to have significant negative effects on self-esteem, which in turn significantly predicted stress and anxiety.

Specifically, body dissatisfaction, media exposure, perceived importance of appearance, social comparison, parental expectations, and institutional demands all exerted indirect effects on mental health through self-esteem. This indicates that these stressors not only have direct impacts on psychological distress but also contribute indirectly by reducing students' sense of self-worth.

Table 4. Reliability and Validity Results

Construct	**Cronbach's Alpha**	Composite Reliability (CR)	**Average Variance Extracted (AVE)**
Body Dissatisfaction	0.88	0.91	0.66
Media Exposure	0.86	0.90	0.64
Importance of Appearance	0.85	0.89	0.62
Social Comparison	0.87	0.91	0.68
Parental Expectations	0.84	0.88	0.60
Institutional Demands	0.89	0.92	0.69
Self-Esteem	0.88	0.91	0.67
Mental Health (Stress & Anxiety)	0.90	0.93	0.72

Table 4 presents the results of the reliability and validity assessment of the measurement model. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). As shown in the table, all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 for both Cronbach's alpha and CR, indicating satisfactory internal consistency (Hair et al., 2021).

Convergent validity was assessed using the average variance extracted (AVE). All constructs demonstrated AVE values above the recommended threshold of 0.50, confirming that the indicators sufficiently explain the variance of their respective constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Among the constructs, mental health (stress and anxiety) exhibited the highest AVE (0.72), indicating strong convergent validity, followed by institutional demands (0.69) and social comparison (0.68). Overall, these results confirm that the measurement model demonstrates adequate reliability and convergent validity, supporting the suitability of the constructs for subsequent structural model analysis. The findings are consistent with established guidelines for partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) (Hair et al., 2021). Importantly, the mediation effects were partial rather than full. While self-esteem significantly mediated all relationships, the direct effects of the independent variables on mental health remained significant. This suggests that self-esteem functions as a key psychological mechanism but does not fully account for the relationship between external stressors and mental health outcomes.

4.4 Structural Model Results

Figure 2 illustrates the structural model along with the standardized path coefficients, while Table 5 summarizes the results of hypothesis testing. The analysis reveals that all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant, providing strong support for the proposed model.

Among the predictors, body dissatisfaction demonstrated the strongest effect on mental health outcomes ($\beta = 0.278$, $p < 0.001$), followed closely by institutional demands ($\beta = 0.269$, $p < 0.001$) and social comparison ($\beta = 0.221$, $p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that both appearance-related concerns and academic pressures play a central role in shaping students' psychological well-being. Media exposure ($\beta = 0.198$, $p < 0.01$), parental expectations ($\beta = 0.187$, $p < 0.01$), and perceived importance of appearance ($\beta = 0.165$, $p < 0.05$) also exhibited significant positive relationships with stress and anxiety.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Body Dissatisfaction → Mental Health	0.278	5.432	<0.001	Supported

H2	Media Exposure → Mental Health	0.198	3.876	<0.01	Supported
H3	Appearance Importance → Mental Health	0.165	2.945	<0.05	Supported
H4	Social Comparison → Mental Health	0.221	4.512	<0.001	Supported
H5	Parental Expectations → Mental Health	0.187	3.654	<0.01	Supported
H6	Institutional Demands → Mental Health	0.269	5.210	<0.001	Supported

The results suggest that higher levels of these psychosocial and academic stressors are associated with increased psychological distress among Chinese art students. Notably, the relatively strong effects of body dissatisfaction and institutional demands highlight the dual influence of personal and structural factors in determining mental health outcomes.

In addition, the model demonstrates substantial explanatory power, with the independent variables accounting for 61.4% of the variance in mental health outcomes ($R^2 = 0.614$). This indicates that the proposed model provides a robust explanation of the key determinants of stress and anxiety in this population. Overall, the findings confirm that body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure are significant predictors of mental health, supporting the theoretical framework underlying this study.

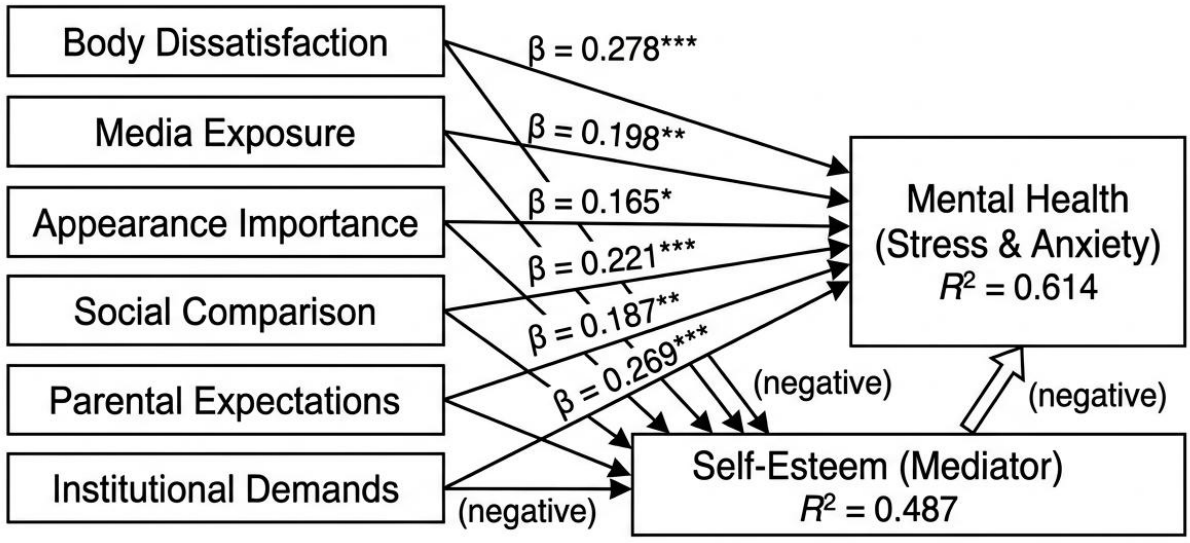

Figure 2. Structural model showing standardized path coefficients and explained variance (R^2 values).

4.5 Mediation Analysis

Table 6 presents the results of the mediation analysis examining the indirect effects of body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure on mental health

outcomes through self-esteem. The findings indicate that self-esteem significantly mediates all hypothesized relationships.

Specifically, all independent variables demonstrated significant indirect effects on mental health via self-esteem. Among these, body dissatisfaction showed the strongest indirect effect ($\beta = 0.112$, $p < 0.001$), followed by institutional demands ($\beta = 0.110$, $p < 0.001$) and social comparison ($\beta = 0.101$, $p < 0.001$). Media exposure ($\beta = 0.085$, $p < 0.01$), parental expectations ($\beta = 0.079$, $p < 0.01$), and perceived importance of appearance ($\beta = 0.074$, $p < 0.05$) also exhibited significant indirect effects.

Table 6. Mediation Analysis Results

Path	Direct Effect (β)	Indirect Effect (β)	Total Effect (β)	t-value	p-value	Mediation Type
Body Dissatisfaction → MH	0.278	0.112	0.390	4.982	<0.001	Partial
Media Exposure → MH	0.198	0.085	0.283	3.765	<0.01	Partial
Appearance Importance → MH	0.165	0.074	0.239	2.854	<0.05	Partial
Social Comparison → MH	0.221	0.101	0.322	4.213	<0.001	Partial
Parental Expectations → MH	0.187	0.079	0.266	3.542	<0.01	Partial
Institutional Demands → MH	0.269	0.110	0.379	4.756	<0.001	Partial

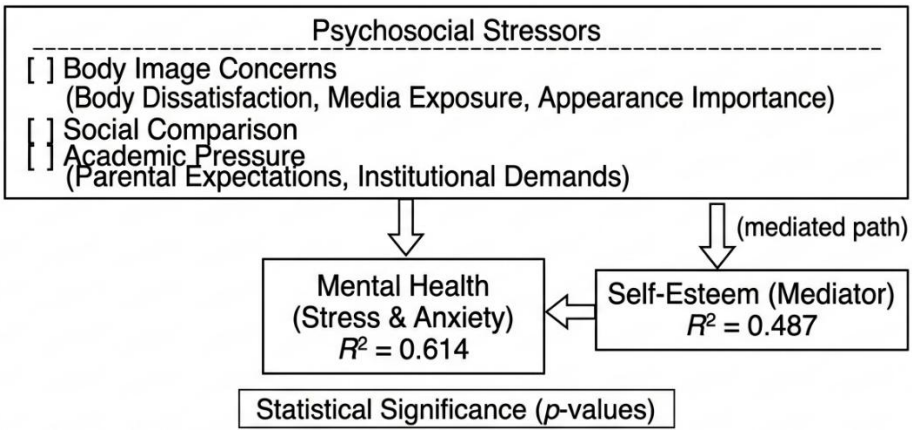

Figure 3. Mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between psychosocial stressors and mental health outcomes.

Importantly, the mediation results indicate partial mediation across all relationships. While self-esteem significantly transmits the effects of the independent variables on mental health outcomes, the direct effects remain statistically significant. This suggests that body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure influence stress and anxiety both directly and indirectly through self-esteem.

These findings highlight the dual role of self-esteem as both a psychological buffer and a vulnerability factor. Students with lower self-esteem are more likely to internalize negative evaluations arising from appearance-related concerns, peer comparison, and academic pressure, thereby experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety. Conversely, higher self-esteem appears to mitigate the adverse impact of these stressors. Overall, the mediation analysis provides strong support for the theoretical framework of this study, confirming that self-esteem is a key mechanism through which external stressors are translated into mental health outcomes. The results further suggest that interventions aimed at improving student well-being should address both external stressors and internal psychological resources.

4.6 Summary of Findings

The findings confirm that mental health among Chinese art students is shaped by a complex interplay of psychosocial and academic factors. Body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure all contribute significantly to stress and anxiety, both directly and indirectly through self-esteem. The partial mediation results further indicate that effective interventions must address both internal psychological resources, such as self-esteem, and external stressors embedded within educational and social environments.

5. Discussion

The present study provides important insights into the complex and cumulative pressures shaping the mental health of Chinese art students in Beijing. By integrating body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure within a unified framework, the findings extend existing literature and highlight the multidimensional nature of psychological distress in creative education contexts.

First, the strong effect of body dissatisfaction underscores the central role of appearance-related concerns in student well-being. Consistent with prior research, body dissatisfaction was found to be a significant predictor of stress and anxiety (Thompson & Stice, 2001; Grogan, 2016). In the context of art education, this relationship is particularly pronounced because the body often functions both as a medium of expression and as an object of evaluation. Students who experience dissatisfaction with their physical appearance are more likely to develop heightened self-consciousness, reduced confidence, and persistent anxiety. These findings align with Body Image Theory, which

posits that negative body perceptions can significantly impair psychological functioning (Cash, 1990). Moreover, the results extend prior studies by demonstrating that body dissatisfaction is not merely a personal concern but a structurally reinforced issue within visually oriented academic environments.

Second, the significant effects of media exposure and perceived importance of appearance highlight the growing influence of digital culture on student mental health. Consistent with existing literature, frequent exposure to idealized images on social media platforms contributes to unrealistic standards of beauty and success, thereby increasing psychological distress (Levine & Murnen, 2009; Chen et al., 2023). For art students, this effect is amplified because social media serves both as a professional tool and a social space. Platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu blur the boundary between artistic self-presentation and social comparison, creating a cycle in which students consume curated content, experience inadequacy, and increasingly rely on external validation. This finding supports Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and highlights the need to consider digital environments as integral components of students' psychological ecosystems.

Third, social comparison emerged as a strong predictor of mental health outcomes, reinforcing its central role in shaping student well-being. This finding is consistent with prior studies demonstrating that upward social comparison is associated with increased anxiety and reduced self-esteem (Liu et al., 2023; Dakanalis et al., 2024). In art education, where peer work is frequently displayed and evaluated, comparison becomes an unavoidable aspect of the learning process. Unlike disciplines with objective performance metrics, artistic success is often subjective and tied to recognition and originality. As a result, students may rely heavily on peer comparison as a benchmark for self-evaluation. When these comparisons are predominantly upward, they are more likely to produce feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, thereby intensifying psychological distress.

Fourth, academic pressure was identified as a major source of strain, with institutional demands exerting one of the strongest direct effects on mental health. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the impact of academic workload, deadlines, and performance expectations on student well-being (Wang et al., 2022). In art education, these pressures are compounded by the subjective nature of evaluation and the requirement for continuous creative output. The prominence of parental expectations further reflects the cultural context of Chinese higher education, where academic success is closely linked to family expectations and social mobility (Zhang et al., 2021). For art students, whose career paths may be perceived as less stable, this pressure can create additional psychological conflict, exacerbating stress and anxiety.

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the identification of self-esteem as a mediating mechanism. The findings demonstrate that self-esteem plays a critical role

in shaping how students respond to external stressors. Consistent with Stress-Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), students with higher self-esteem are more likely to interpret challenges as manageable and adopt adaptive coping strategies, whereas those with lower self-esteem are more prone to internalizing negative experiences. The partial mediation results suggest that self-esteem functions as a psychological buffer but does not fully eliminate the impact of external pressures. This finding is theoretically important, as it highlights that mental health outcomes are influenced not only by internal psychological resources but also by structural and environmental factors. Taken together, these findings contribute to the literature in several ways. First, they provide empirical support for an integrated model that combines body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure, rather than examining these factors in isolation. Second, they extend existing research by focusing specifically on art students, a population that has received limited attention despite its unique vulnerabilities. Third, they highlight the dual role of self-esteem as both an outcome of external pressures and a mechanism through which these pressures influence mental health.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes several important contributions to the literature on student mental health. First, it advances existing research by integrating body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure into a unified analytical framework. While prior studies have often examined these variables independently, the present findings demonstrate their combined and cumulative effects on mental health outcomes. This integrative approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological challenges faced by students in creative disciplines.

Second, the study highlights the mediating role of self-esteem, offering empirical support for theoretical perspectives such as Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Stress-Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The results confirm that self-esteem functions not only as an outcome of external pressures but also as a key psychological mechanism through which these pressures influence stress and anxiety. This finding contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of internal psychological resources in moderating the effects of environmental stressors.

Third, by focusing on art students, this study extends the scope of mental health research within higher education. It demonstrates that students in creative disciplines face distinct forms of vulnerability linked to aesthetic evaluation, identity expression, and subjective assessment. This underscores the need for more discipline-specific theoretical models in understanding student well-being.

6.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for universities, educators, and mental health practitioners. Given the unique pressures associated with art education, institutions should develop targeted mental health support systems tailored to the needs of art and design students, rather than relying solely on generic counseling services.

First, universities should implement interventions aimed at strengthening self-esteem. Programs focused on self-acceptance, resilience, and adaptive coping strategies can help students better manage criticism, comparison, and performance-related stress. Such interventions may include workshops, peer mentoring programs, and psychological skills training.

Second, media literacy education should be incorporated into academic curricula. Students need to develop critical awareness of how social media constructs idealized representations of beauty and success. Enhancing students' ability to critically evaluate digital content can reduce the internalization of unrealistic standards and mitigate the negative effects of social comparison.

Third, there is a need to re-evaluate critique practices within art education. While critique is an essential component of artistic development, it should be conducted in a manner that is both rigorous and psychologically supportive. Faculty members should be trained to provide constructive feedback that fosters growth without undermining students' self-worth. Establishing clear guidelines for respectful and constructive critique can help create a safer learning environment.

In addition, universities should review academic workload, assessment structures, and expectations related to portfolio development and exhibitions. Reducing excessive pressure and providing clearer evaluation criteria may help alleviate uncertainty and stress among students. Institutions should also promote peer-support initiatives and normalize help-seeking behavior to reduce stigma associated with mental health services.

Finally, given the influence of parental expectations in the Chinese context, universities may consider engaging families through awareness programs or communication strategies. Helping parents understand the unique demands of art education can reduce unrealistic expectations and provide students with a more supportive environment.

6.3 Policy Implications

At the policy level, the findings highlight the need for more targeted mental health strategies within higher education systems. Policymakers should recognize that student populations are not homogeneous and that subgroups such as art students may require specialized support. Policies should encourage the integration of mental health education into curricula, the expansion of counseling services, and the development of preventive interventions tailored to high-risk groups.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the mental health of Chinese art students in Beijing is shaped by a complex interaction of body image concerns, social comparison, and academic pressure. Each of these factors contributes directly to stress and anxiety while also exerting indirect effects through the mediating role of self-esteem. Among these predictors, body dissatisfaction, institutional demands, and social comparison emerged as the most influential determinants of psychological distress. By focusing on art students, this research addresses a critical gap in the literature and highlights the unique vulnerabilities associated with creative education. Art students operate in environments characterized by aesthetic evaluation, public visibility, and subjective judgment, all of which intensify exposure to appearance-related, social, and academic pressures. These findings emphasize that mental health challenges in this population cannot be fully understood through general student models. The study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it validates an integrated model in which self-esteem mediates the relationship between psychosocial and academic stressors and mental health outcomes. Practically, it underscores the need for targeted, context-sensitive interventions that address both individual psychological resources and structural conditions within educational environments. Addressing the mental health challenges of art students requires a holistic approach that combines institutional reform, psychological support, and cultural change. Efforts to promote healthier critique practices, improve media literacy, reduce excessive academic pressure, and strengthen self-esteem are essential for fostering a more supportive and sustainable educational environment. Ultimately, improving the well-being of art students is not only critical for their individual development but also for the long-term vitality of the creative industries they will help shape.

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