Deconstructing Beauty Ideals:

Presentation of Beauty on Douyin and Young Chinese Women's Perspectives

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Abstract

As social media platforms increasingly shape beauty ideals, this study investigates how beauty is portrayed on Douyin, China's leading short-video platform, and how young women negotiate their body image perceptions through interactions with Douyin content. A thematic analysis of the 50 most-liked "Meinu" (beautiful woman) videos identified four prominent themes: 1) the thin ideal, 2) sexualization and objectification, 3) homogenization of physical appearance, and 4) the cultivation of a desirable "vibe." In-depth interviews with 6 female Douyin users aged 18-25 revealed that while participants acknowledged the singular, stereotypical beauty standard as the dominant cultural understanding, they expressed a preference for more diverse and healthy body types. Nonetheless, participants experienced body anxiety and pressure to conform to conventional beauty norms, exacerbated by family influences. Notably, most participants used Douyin primarily for entertainment and actively avoided beauty-related content. This study elucidates the tensions between internalized beauty ideals, personal body image perceptions, and social media consumption patterns among young Chinese women. Overall, the findings highlight the need for more inclusive and body-positive representations on influential social media platforms.

Keywords: social media influencers, beauty ideals, female and beauty, body image

1. Introduction

Beauty is a complex and culturally significant social construct, deeply woven into the fabric of our societies. Historically, beauty standards in China have been deeply influenced by shifting sociopolitical landscapes—from the ancient Confucian emphasis on inner virtue and modesty to the revolutionary socialist valorization of physical robustness and proletariat simplicity. These changes in beauty norms reflected the broader socio-economic transformations and political ideologies of their times. In recent years, the rise of global connectivity and cultural exchange has resulted in a fusion of Eastern and Western aesthetic values, where traditional Chinese features intertwine with Western beauty norms to create a new, diversified standard that is uniquely Chinese yet globally informed. Recognizing beauty as a dynamic artifact that is constantly shaped and redefined by the collective perceptions and values of individuals, this research aims to examine the dominant beauty standards in the context of Chinese TikTok, known as Douyin, particularly focusing on women in China.

Amidst this cultural syncretism, social media platforms such as Douyin—the Chinese counterpart of TikTok—have become one of main grounds for the representation and dissemination of beauty ideals. These digital arenas not only reflect existing standards but also actively participate in the crafting and propagation of new ideals. On one hand, social media is oftentimes blamed for creating unrealistic beauty standards by featuring people with impeccable physical appearance and favorable charisma (Mingoia et al., 2017). On the other hand, social media provides a potential avenue to challenge mainstream definitions of beauty and femininity by embracing body diversity and body positivity (Cohen, 2021). The digital age has transformed the dynamics of self-presentation, with individuals consciously shaping their online identities to meet or confront societal expectations. Although it has been widely established that exposure to

idealized images in media can negatively affect self-perception, this study has taken a step back and explores what are the dominant beauty ideals on Douyin in relation to cultural expectations of beauty in Chinese society.

Douyin is a free video-sharing application where users can engage in various forms of performances, such as lip-syncing videos, dance routines, hashtag challenges, etc. According to the Business of Apps (2020), Douyin became the most downloaded non-gaming app on the Apple Store in the first quarter of 2020. With the emergence of advertising agencies and professionalized wanghong incubators (Internet celebrity) devoted to monetizing TikTok content, the platform has become increasingly commercialized and industrialized (Han, 2020). The rising popularity of Douyin has given new forms of Internet economy, where the role of influencers as opinion leaders can significantly affect consumer perspectives (Van den Bulte & Joshi, 2007). Previous studies have delved into how beauty is portrayed on diverse platforms such as women's magazines, advertisements, soap operas and on social media which often present women in ideal beauty standards. According to Carrotte et al. (2017), the study found that fitspiration content on social media often portrays female subjects as young, thin, and sexualized, while depicting male subjects as muscular, highlighting gender-specific body ideals and potential objectification.

Nevertheless, most research has investigated how perceptions of beauty are conveyed through the singular modes of either text or images. Therefore, the current study aims to bridge the gap in existing studies by uncovering the audience's reactions to the prevailing beauty norms under the multimodal context of short video platforms on Douyin. By offering a nuanced understanding of beauty standards in the digital age, the thesis contributes to discussions on the interplay of culture, technology, and societal values in shaping contemporary ideals of beauty. Grounded in Erving Goffman's seminal work on the presentation of self and social comparison

theory, the current research not only examines how cotemporary beauty standards are reflected through Douyin but is also interesting in exploring responses of people to these perceived standards. Specifically, this paper addresses the following two questions:

(1) What are the prevailing beauty standards on Douyin, and to what extent do they exhibit variations or similarities compared to cultural expectations?

(2) How do people respond to these prominent beauty ideals in relation to their own bodies?

The rest of the paper is going to address these topics in detail and hopefully offer a valuable perspective on the interplay of culture, technology, and societal values in shaping contemporary ideals of beauty, with implications that extend beyond the boundary of just one social media platform.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Presentation of Self

Self-presentation refers to the conscious or unconscious way in which people attempt to control how they are perceived by others (Goffman, 1956). In the digital environment, content creators often engage in careful impression management by selectively presenting personal information to create a suitable front image. Gofftman's theory of presentation of self (1956) has been widely used to guide studies about online self-presentation. His dramaturgical approach is a metaphorical technique that is used to explain how people present an idealized rather authentic version of themselves. He argues that life is like a dichotomy of the front stage and backstage where individuals engage in performances on stage and set aside their roles backstage. Different from the traditional model, the digital environment gradually leads to the conflation of the

backstage with the front stage as individuals express increasing willingness to share their private spaces and "authentic self" openly online.

In today's social media context, as an actor performs onstage for an audience, Internet celebrities create performances and upload content to be viewed at a later date by others as a representation of their identity. Moreover, when the individual presents himself before others, his or her performance tends to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society (Goffman, 1956). Goffman's theory of presentation not only emphasizes the performative nature of social interactions but also highlights how these performances are "socially modified" to fit into the existing understanding and expectation of the society in which it is presented. Applying the presentation of idealized and socialized performances to the digital context, the study aims to explore whether careful construction of images on Douyin leads to reinforcement of the existing cultural norms.

Social media sites and other digital media allow people to control the presentation of self more carefully than face-to-face communication (Choi & Toma, 2014). Focusing on Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, the hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996) takes a closer look at the presentation of self under the computer-mediated context and suggests that online interactions are empowered by technological possibilities that enable communicators to selectively present themselves. For example, selfies and videos particularly benefit from such technology of instant beautifying apps and filters, because the user can strategically edit his or her self-presentation, which allows for a nuanced and optimized presentation of the self to the audience. Scholars like Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) noted that when people use SNSs as a channel to articulate their identities, they tend to present a "highly selective version of themselves" (p. 4).

According to the hyperpersonal model, there are four components of online

communications: sender, receiver, channel, and feedback. Senders benefit from CMC by carefully crafting and controlling their messages before sending them to present an idealized or enhanced version of themselves (Walther & Ramirez, 2009). Influencers on social media create a persona with an attractive appearance and identity construction through the use of lighting, music, filters, and beautifying technologies. Without the presence of nonverbal cues, receivers tend to compensate for minimal cues in a digital context by "filling in the gaps" with positive interpretations, further confirming positive self-construction of one another (Parks, 2017). The channel in the hyperpersonal model emphasizes the asynchronous nature of the medium platform that frees people from time constraints, thereby promoting more active social interactions with increasing self-independence. The last component feedback elucidates that CMC senders and receivers reciprocate, through feedback, idealized images of one another, reinforcing positive and confirming positive self-optimization.

The idea of "presentation of self" provides a theoretical framework for the current study by pointing out the mechanism through which a computer-mediated environment enables influencers or bloggers to engage in selective self-presentation to build idealized images of themselves. It also highlights the two-way process of online communication in which the sender influences the receiver, and feedback received from the receiver helps shape subsequent communications. This reciprocal process contributes to the construction and reinforcement of carefully curated online personas, which can have significant implications for self-perception, social interactions, and the formation of parasocial relationships within digital spaces.

2.2 Self-Construal and Social Comparison

While the presentation of self highlights how computer-mediated communication empowers influencers to create idealized persona on social media, which in turn contributes to

the construction of cultural norms, social comparison theory focuses on the response of the audience exposed to these carefully crafted images of others. As explained by social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), people tend to compare themselves to others to determine their self-worth and abilities. Because self-presentation theories suggest that social media profiles enable people to present themselves in a favorable light (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012), seeing pictures of idealized images on social media puts a distorted lens on appearance and reality for users. It is important, therefore, to highlight how influencers and audience differ in their power dynamics; while influencers are actively contributing to the social comparison by establishing models for others to compare to, the general audience is passively looking at good pictures of others, thereby passively comparing themselves to the established paradigm.

Accordingly, if people choose to selectively self-present the positive aspects of their lives, young adults are easily trapped in constant comparisons with these seemingly ideal other lives, which can lead to feelings of envy and anxiety. As a result, such feelings of envy can become malicious and resentful and lead to depression (Lin & Utz, 2015). Past research suggested that exposure to TikTok Videos may contribute to feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-image as a result of social comparison processes (Mink & Szymanski, 2022; Pryde & Prichard, 2022). Through interviews, this study is not just concerned about whether people compare or not to the appearance of those popular influencers, but also to what extent these ideals translate into one's sense of self.

2.3 Beauty ideals in China:

2.3.1 Historical Background

Chinese ideals of female beauty have changed dramatically over the past few decades. Confucius's ideology has put great emphasis on both inner and outer beauty, which has

influenced the creation of Chinese beauty ideals. In ancient China, beauty standards are deeply

rooted in culture and tradition. Through various dynasties, some of the most prominent beauty

ideals put emphasis on the obliquity and slimness of the eye. The famous eighteenth-century

Chinese novel The Dream of the Red Chamber (Cao, 1971) described beautiful women as having

"phoenix eyes" and "willow-leaf eyebrows." The narrative has changed since the founding of the

People's Republic of China in 1949 when women were encouraged to leave the house and

participate in social construction for the socialist state. During this time, the state promoted the

image of "Iron Women" which refers to a new idealized group of working women who were

strong and independent to perform heavy labor. The communist ideology aimed to reduce gender

differences, sacrificing individual and feminine characteristics for collective interests

(Johansson, 2019). However, the trend of defeminization changed after the economic reforms of

Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s when beauty started to function as sexual capital (Johansson, 2019).

Beautiful, good-looking women increasingly appear in TV commercials, magazines, and huge

billboards.

However, following the economic reopening, Chinese women were increasingly exposed

to Western beauty standards as White, westernized faces and tall, thin bodies began to dominate

China's television and magazines (Croll, 1995). Many women began to develop a preference for

tall and skinny Western models with a straight nose and light skin. Beauty is traditionally

associated with women and femininity, and skin tone has been an important sexual attribute of

women (Frost, 2005). In Eastern Asia, women prefer lighter or fair skin and use products that

would whiten or brighten their yellow-toned skin. Asian cultures, such as the Japanese, Chinese,

and Indian favor a fair or light complexion (Johansson, 1998). In many contemporary Western

societies, tanned and bronzed skin tone is linked to health, status, and beauty (Garvin & Wilson,

1999). In contrast, in China, people with darker skin are often associated with lower socio-economic status or manual labor ((Johansson, 1998). In classic Chinese poems, the skin of beautiful women was often compared to "snow", "ice", or "jade" to indicate the qualities of transparency, delicacy, smoothness, and whiteness.

2.3.2 Influence of Pop Culture

With the prevalence of Korean and Japanese pop culture around the world, Korean dressing style and makeup style have a great influence on girls who are big fans of KPOP to emulate their styles. Several studies have examined the impact of "K-beauty" in constructing new beauty standards, especially in Asia. For instance, the study by Noor Khairin and Wok (2020) explores the effects of the Korean wave on Malay Muslim women and concludes that Malay women are influenced to wear makeup similar to their Korean idols in order to obtain a similar complexion as these celebrities. Moreover, the rise of K-beauty and Japanese beauty trends has influenced the use of products like double eyelid tape and facial masks in China. Researchers looking into cosmetic procedures discovered that women in East Asia had a strong preference for double-eyelid procedures (Kim, 2005; W. Luo, 2013). Because huge eyes with double eyelids are trendy and can appeal to the aesthetic taste of young Asian men, young women desired to remodel their long, narrow, almond-shaped eyes with single-fold eyelids (Blum, 2003). Wen (2013) noted that whitening injections and products have been heavily advertised in China. A 2018 survey conducted by the Great British Academy of Aesthetic Medicine concluded that Chinese beauty culture prioritizes an oval face shape, a pointed, narrow chin, plump lips, well-defined Cupid's bows, and obtuse jaw angle (Wu & Samizadeh, 2018).

Pop culture not only reflects existing beauty ideals but actively creates and reinforces them. The widespread admiration for K-pop stars and Japanese fashion icons presents an

archetype of beauty that is continuously evolving and being replicated across the globe. This emulation is not just about aesthetic preference but is tied to deeper cultural currents that flow through the realms of social media and entertainment. Beauty trends set by these icons are disseminated rapidly due to the global reach of platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The visual nature of these platforms allows for a rapid convergence of fashion, makeup, and even lifestyle choices, with fans eager to incorporate elements of their idols' distinctive looks into their own lives. The influence of pop culture is not limited to personal style but extends to consumer habits, driving demand for beauty products and cosmetic procedures designed to replicate the looks of popular figures. The research (Cui & Lee, 2015) found that product placement in Korean TV dramas significantly influences Chinese consumers' purchase intentions, mediated by their perceptions of product quality and trust. The shifts in beauty paradigms highlight an ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity, where pop culture serves as a mediator, continually redefining the standards of beauty.

2.4 Social Media Construction of Beauty Ideals

2.4.1 Social Media Aesthetics

The impact of social media on constructing new beauty norms is certainly significant as social media has revolutionized the way we communicate and interact with others. It has become a powerful tool for self-expression, connection, and influence. With billions of users worldwide, platforms like Instagram and TikTok have created a global community where trends, ideas, and beauty standards can spread rapidly. The constant stream of content on these platforms exposes users to a wide range of images and videos that often depict a certain ideal of beauty. One of the key ways in which social media influences beauty standards is through the promotion of "perfect" or flawless images. Filters, in particular, have become a staple feature across platforms

like Instagram and Snapchat, offering a quick fix for enhancing facial features, changing skin tone, or adding a touch of glamour. Prior studies have demonstrated that the utilization of filters on Instagram and Snapchat has altered perceptions of beauty, creating a false impression of highly fair and blemish-free skin, as well as more slender facial features and noses (Siddiqui, 2021).

Another way that social media can shape beauty perceptions is through the creation of beauty trends. One of the most popular Chinese styles is "chunyu" which is an entire aesthetic in itself that is "chun" - innocent and cute - but also "yu" - sexy and alluring. The aesthetic started on the Chinese social media platform Weibo in the mid-2010s by an Internet celebrity named "Banzangsenlin" and later was widely accepted by Chinese females as a prevalent aesthetic. The concept of "Chunyu" embodies a contradiction, expecting women to simultaneously exhibit naivete and allure, blending hypersexuality and infantilization (Sun, 2023). "Chunyu" is often attached to the old Chinese saying, "Angel face and devil body", which refers to the purity of the face and seductiveness of the figure. To achieve a flawless chunyu look, a woman must style herself to look beautiful, but without it seeming as if she is trying to be beautiful.

The emphasis on purity reinforces the stereotypical depiction of women as being submissive to men by requiring pure little girls to take the initiative to show both their innocence and sexiness to please the men. "Chunyu" aesthetics has also been accused of distorting perceptions of the body because most popular influencers labeled as "chunyu" tend to have extremely thin body types and light skin to appear innocent and almost childlike. Despite being only one example of aesthetic among many others, the prevalence of "Chunyu" is a fusion of traditional and modern ideals, which embodies the cultural norm of embracing both the innocence associated with traditional values and the allure of modernity. It reflects a cultural

willingness to adapt and integrate diverse influences while adhering to the traditional ideal of female purity. Particularly in the beauty and fashion industry, influencers frequently promote certain beauty standards and body ideals. The constant exposure to these standards can contribute to unrealistic beauty expectations and body image issues among the audience as viewers may feel pressured to conform to these ideals, resulting in body dissatisfaction and unhealthy behaviors.

2.4.2 The Rise of Influencer Culture

The rise of Chinese beauty influencers or "*Wanghong*" on different social media platforms has generated a new wave of trends and practices. Internet celebrities can sometimes have greater impact on our aesthetic procedures and lifestyles than traditional celebrities. According to a survey conducted by Hunter Qualitative Research, participants valued the opinions and recommendations of YouTube and Instagram celebrities more than the classic movie or television star celebrities (Spangler, 2015). The public can relate to them because they have similar characteristics, personality, lifestyle, and demographics, and therefore are perceived to understand and resonate with the followers (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). The same survey found that at least 8 of the top 10 beauty influencers on YouTube confirmed they had been injected with lip filler. As a result, viewers interested in makeup and beauty consistently see influencers with augmented lips. Influencers play important roles in marketing strategies because of their ability to attract attention and cultivate influence through the practice of self-presentation on social media (Khamis et al., 2017; Lou et al., 2019). With oftentimes millions of followers online, Chinese social media influencers have the power to shape what is considered beautiful in contemporary society.

Influencers and celebrities often present themselves as the epitome of beauty, showcasing

flawless skin, perfectly sculpted bodies, and impeccable makeup. These images are heavily

edited and curated to create an illusion of perfection, leading many individuals to compare

themselves unfavorably and strive for unattainable standards. These Wanghongs build their

reputation on hyperfeminine appearances and 'Wanghong Lian,' a buzzword for a stereotypical

internet celebrity face that fueled a nationwide debate on beauty ideals and the surge in cosmetic

surgery. By commodifying their appearance, Wanghongs exemplify the concept of 'beauty as

capital,' linking body image closely with socioeconomic success in the new beauty economy.

Unattainable body ideals portrayed by the media exert great pressure on women and contribute to

a variety of body image concerns. Thus, exposure to idealized media images has been associated

with negative body image, especially among women (Grabe et al., 2008). More time spent on

social media seeing everyone else's seemingly "perfect" self-presentation can make people feel

less confident about their appearance and their own lives (Kross et al., 2013). The inclusion of

the internet celebrity trend in this research provides a deeper insight into the social and economic

conditions that reinforce the ideology of 'beauty as capital' and its comprehensive impact on

women's self-perception and well-being in the digital era."

2.4.3 Everyday Use of Beautifying Filters

Performers begin to alter their appearance as a result in an effort to appear favorable and

appealing. In this sense, photo-editing applications become a useful tool to help users create the

perfect selfies. Launched in 2018, Meitu Xiu Xiu, an image editing software, has received

enormous popularity among Chinese women. Meitu encompasses a variety of features that allow

its users to refine their skin, alter the shape of their faces, and change the size of their eyes and

noses (Tiidenberg, 2018). However, studies have shown that the practice of photo-editing is

negatively associated with self-perceived attractiveness and self-esteem (Ozimek, 2023; Chen et

al., 2019). More specifically, the use of beauty filters that are specific types of photo or video-editing tools has become increasingly popular on social media. Common filters are "the skinny filter" on TikTok, which makes your face look slimmer, and the "perfect face filter" on Instagram, which adjusts facial features according to an ideal ratio. Researchers at the City University of London (Gill, 2021) explore the adverse effects of filters on mental health and show that 90 percent of young women reported using filters or editing their photos. Other research finds that manipulated Instagram photos lead to lower body image among teenage girls (Kleemans et al., 2016) and young people with low self-esteem and poor body image are likelier to use filters (Veldhuis, 2020), which can further reinforce the negative belief that their appearance isn't good enough.

Daily scrolling through such images permits the perception of beauty based on that visualized experience. Prior studies have examined the impact of the use of social media on self-perceptions and body image, but the majority of them predominantly apply the theory under the monomodal context which typically features the use of exclusively one form of communication (e.g., speech, written text, still image, moving image, touch). Previous studies have focused on Instagram and Facebook as major sites of investigation, but this study aims to fill the gap of studies on short video platforms including TikTok and Douyin. The rising popularity of TikTok and Douyin fueled by their unique short-form videos, easy-to-use editing tools, and video descriptions combines multiple modes of communication into one post. The current study aims to examine the multimodal presentation of the self by influencers, including images, audio, and text, as well as to understand how receivers react to or engage with these beauty ideals.

3. Methodology:

For a multi-methodological view of the beauty ideals on Douyin and to understand how people respond to them, a triangulation approach incorporating both thematic analysis and interviews was employed. This two-part methodological design aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of both how beauty is defined and portrayed on social media and how the audience's perceptions of beauty is influenced by certain media portrayal. In this study, the researcher employed the thematic analysis method to qualitatively analyze the patterns underlying the use of photography and technological functions (i.e., filters, sound effects) in the selected videos Douyin and the themes that emerged during the interview process. Thematic analysis, a qualitative method used for recognizing data patterns or themes, was utilized due to the inherently subjective concept of beauty standards that the study is interested in exploring. A semi-structured interview guide was used since the participants were encouraged to talk about specifics and were asked to elaborate on their responses after watching a few top liked Douyin videos related to beauty. Participants were asked to be honest with their opinions and not to give too much thought as to whether their responses are right or wrong. They were also informed that an audio recorder would be used to record their responses. By integrating textual analysis and interviews through triangulation, the goal of the study is to provide a holistic understanding of beauty standards on Douyin, shedding light on both the media representations and the lived experiences of the potential audience.

3.1 Thematic Analysis of Top 50 Most-Liked Douyin Videos:

3.1.1 Sampling and data collection:

To collect the data, by searching the "beautiful girl" or "Meinu" in Chinese, a list of 100 most-liked videos on Douyin were scraped by using the programming tool PyCharm to ensure a representative sample of the platform's popular content. Python code was written by researcher

to select the top 100 most-liked videos based on the like metric and time range, but given the time constraint of the study, only a half of videos were finally analyzed. The "like" metric was chosen as firstly it reflects audience engagement and preference that can be seen as a miniature of societal acceptance; secondly, it ensures the greatest consistency of the resulting videos using one hashtag by minimizing the variations of videos suggested on social media algorithms. The videos were all posted between 2020 and 2023 to ensure the recency of the beauty norms featured by the videos. Videos that did not contain any human objects were excluded since the study only concerns human-involved presentations.

Due to platform restrictions, it was not possible to scrape a larger number of data and extract additional metadata such as viewer demographics. However, the researcher manually looked at each of the top 50 videos and manually wrote down important information about influencers and videos. The manual data collection approach, while more time-consuming, allowed the researcher to closely examine both the visual content and contextual information of each video. This ensured a comprehensive understanding of the dominant beauty norms being showcased on the platform, which is crucial for the subsequent thematic analysis. Overall, the data collection process focused on capturing a snapshot of Douyin's popular beauty-related content, while working within the limitations of the platform's data accessibility. The resulting dataset forms a solid foundation for the thematic analysis of the dominant beauty norms on Douyin.

3.1.2 Thematic Analysis:

Thematic Analysis (TA) is a commonly used method for analyzing qualitative data by searching for recurring themes in a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis (TA) is flexible method for analyzing various data types that can be adapted to the current study where

the data is both visual and textual content from the videos. Since your data will likely consist of various types of content, including spoken words, visual elements, and possibly text, thematic analysis is effective in integrating the multimodal content into a cohesive analysis. Thematic analysis also allows for in-depth exploration of the data by enabling the researcher to delve into the nuances of how beauty ideals are presented, including subtleties in language, imagery, and contextual factors that may influence viewer perceptions.

In this study, a six-phase process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to conduct the TA, designed to support the researcher in recognizing and attending to the important elements of a TA, and is a flexible process (Xu and Zammit, 2020). The six phases are as follows: (1) familiarizing with your data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. All of the stages used to identify one the research question: what are the prevailing beauty standards on Douyin, and to what extent do they exhibit variations or similarities compared to cultural expectations? After collecting the data, the researcher watched all the videos and manually noted down the following information for each of the 50 videos:

1. The use of textual information (such as video title, human voices, use of hashtag, etc.)

2. The visual images (brief description of the video content and the individuals)

3. Influencer name and number of likes for recording purposes.

For more detailed capture of visual representation of beauty, the researcher breaks down the vague and abstract standard of "beauty" into specific categories: facial features, body type, skin tone, style, and presentation. In terms of facial features, individuals in the videos were examined based on various descriptive attributes, including eye size, face shape, nose shape, and so on. For instance, different face shapes, such as "round," "oval," and "triangle," were recorded.

Next, influencers' body types in the videos were assessed utilizing line drawing figure scales, such as the Figure Rating Scale (Stunkard scale). The scale employs simple drawings of male and female figures to evaluate thinness and muscularity on a scale of 1 (very thin or minimal visible muscle) to 9 (very overweight or very muscular). Emphasis on specific body parts was determined through visual cues like proximity to the camera, cropping, and captions that drew attention to particular body features. Then, skin tones were coded based on variations in lightness and darkness. Lastly, presentation refers the way influencers craft and convey their public persona and aesthetic through styling, posture, setting, and digital editing, aiming to engage their audience and endorse their personal branding. It focuses not so much on their physical appearance but also the tone, setting, and style of their content, which together create a holistic image of themselves.

3.2 Interviews with Young Chinese Women:

3.2.1 Sample

For the second part of the research, this study applied in-depth interview methodology to extract meanings from young females' narratives. A recruitment message was sent to Chinese Student Groupchat on WeChat, a Chinese a messaging and social media app. The interested participants were asked to fill out a survey and later contacted by the researcher through email. Since the study focuses on the role of Douyin in shaping attitudes and behaviors among young Chinese women towards beauty, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit young females whose ages are between 18 and 25 that actively engaged with Douyin.

During the recruitment, some snowball sampling naturally occurred as it is common for Chinese people, especially students, to do things together because they grow up in a highly collectivist culture. Some women in this study participated because a friend or roommate want to

participate and introduce the study to them. Before meeting with the researcher, a screening

process was used to select potential participants based on their Douyin usage and willingness to

share their experiences. Each participant was asked to fill out a media usage survey that inquires

their frequency of using Douyim. A total of twelve responses were received but five respondents

that reported never used Douyin and one male respondent were eliminated from the study.

Table 1

Name	Year	Major	Frequency of Using Douyin	Favorite Category
Weiwei	Senior	Psychology	Once a day	Entertainment, Dance
Ying	Senior	Communications	A few times a day	Entertainment, Pets, Celebrity
Leah	Junior	Sociology	A few times a day	Entertainment, Beauty, Pets
Dai	Senior	Communications	Once a month	Cooking, Pets, Celebrity
Fei	Senior	Statistics	A few times a day	Entertainment, Fashion, Cooking, Pets
Sia	Graduate	Psychology	A few times a day	Entertainment, Fitness, DIY, Cooking, Pets

Notes. This table demonstrates the basic information of all participants in the study.

A total of six participants participated in the study (Table 1). Participants all came from

University of Michigan and from different school years (Junior =1; Senior= 3; Graduate=1).

Among six of them, five participants fall into the age range between 18-22 and one participant is

between 23-26. A majority of participants (N=4) reported that they use Douyin a few times a day

and two other participant reported using once a day or once a month, which is an indication of

their frequent usage of Douyin in daily lives. A university's institutional review board approved

the interview study. The informed consent was obtained before the interview. The personal

information of the participants, including name and age, is collected but not disclosed to

minimize privacy concerns.

A semi-structured group interview protocol was designed to explore participants' perceptions of beauty standards on Douyin and their engagement with popular content circulating on Douyin. After watching a few of the selected videos on Douyin, the participants were asked a number of open-ended questions about how they felt about these videos and their own definitions of beauty. Some examples of the interview questions asked include: "Do you consider these girls in the videos beautiful?" "What are specific features of a beautiful girl in your mind?" and "Do you feel pressure from media to look a certain way? If yes, why?" In-depth interviews were conducted in the form of focus groups to encourage candid responses. Interviews were conducted and audio-recorded in Chinese. After the data was collected, the researcher transcribed the interview in Chinese, ensuring an accurate representation of participants' voices. The transcription was not entirely translated into English. Instead, the researcher translated part of the comments of the participants that were representative of the themes into English.

3.2.2 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the interview transcripts. The interview transcripts were first coded via open coding with the extraction and isolation of verbatim quotes, and subsequently organized into categories and themes via axial coding and selective coding. Open codes were used to identify data that were subsumed under the broad theoretical frameworks as well as other potentially emerging themes. The initial codes were grouped into separate categories based on similarities and trends. The constant compar- ison method was utilized in analysis to aid in organizing and reorganizing the data in accordance with meaningful dimensions that surfaced (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

4. Findings

4.1 Thematic Analysis of Top 50 Most-Liked Douyin Videos:

Thirty most-liked videos using the hashtags #beauty #beautiful girls were selected to study the dominant beauty norms on Douyin. Based on the textual analysis of the top 50 most-liked videos, four identity categories have been identified: 1) Thin Ideal 2) Sexualization and Objectification 3) Homogenization of Facial Features 4) The Vibe

4.1.1 Thin Ideal:

One of the most dominant beauty norms depicted in the top 50 most-liked Douyin videos is an explicit preference for a slender, thin body type. This "thin ideal" is pervasive across many of the videos analyzed. Many of the videos prominently feature creators with slim, delicate physiques as well as the design of clothing that further emphasizes thinness. For instance, waist-cinching clothing like high-waisted pants and corset-style tops are commonly used to accentuate a narrow waist. One particular aspect of thinness, long slim legs, stands out as one of the prevailing characteristics among those popular videos as the hashtag "long legs" becomes a commonly used hashtag found in the videos. The majority of the legs presented in the videos are not only long but also straight and pale with no clear muscular lines. The emphasis on having beautiful legs appears as a salient characteristic among the girls in the videos. For instance, a video that receives more than a million likes on Douyin features only 12 seconds video of comparing the length of legs between two influencers "My Name is Abiliy" and "Chen Yili" who are both known for their long legs. The use of special filters to elongate the legs is also observable in some of the videos as the length of the legs are excessively long that are violate the basic body proportions (see Figure 1). This highlights that halving slim and long legs is becoming a part of the beauty standard for evaluating one's body shape.

Figure 1. An example of use of filter to elongate the legs

Moreover, leg-focused poses and movements also work to highlight the thinness and length of the creators' legs. For example, one video shows the creator doing a TikTok dance trend that involves flirtatiously shifting her weight from one long, lean leg to the other. Similarly, tight-fitting garments such as leggings and short skirts are utilized to showcase the slender frame of the video's subject. This reinforces the idea that thinness, and the ability to achieve a slim, trim silhouette, is an essential component of feminine beauty and desirability on the platform. Beyond just the physical frame, the videos also tend to depict creators with small, delicate bone structures. Facial features like small pointed chins and high, sharp cheekbones are frequently highlighted, further contributing to an overall aesthetic of fragility and delicateness. Many creators have a youthful, almost doll-like appearance, with large, wide-set eyes and a petite nose.

The prevalence of these visual tropes centering thinness is further amplified by the editing techniques used in the videos. Soft lighting, flattering angles, and post-production filters all work to create an idealized, flawless image of the creator's body. In one particularly striking example, the video shows the creator posing in front of a mirror, with the reflection exaggerating the slenderness of her figure. Through these varied visual cues and production

techniques, the top Douyin videos analyzed communicate a clear message that a slender, lithe physique is the dominant beauty standard being promoted and celebrated on the platform. The thin ideal is presented as the pinnacle of female attractiveness, reinforcing narrow societal expectations around the "perfect" body type.

4.1.2 Sexualization and Objectification:

Another dominant theme that emerges from the top Douyin videos is the overt sexualization of the female creators. This is manifested through various visual cues and content choices. Many of the videos feature fashion looks that are revealing or form-fitting, often paired with suggestive poses or dance moves to highlight the body's form. Some of the videos use the tag "#niuyiniu" or "twist twist" in English, which refers to a simple pelvic movement that is meant to be sexually suggestive. For example, one video shows a creator performing this "niuyiniu" dance in a tight, midriff-baring top and short skirt. Different from focusing on the power or skills of dancing, this type of dance videos usually is typically characterized by small and simple dance movements, mainly for expression control. Another commonly used hashtag is #cābiǎn, often translated as "thirst traps," which refers to content deliberately designed to elicit sexual attention, desire, or arousal, often through provocative or suggestive poses, clothing, or behavior. The word "cabian" literally develops from the word "edge ball," which is widely used in sports to describe balls hitting on the boundary lines in a vague position of in-bounds or out-bounds. Under the context of social media, it typically refers females that are being on the edge of breaking the rules of the platform for sexually explicit content, but not completely breaking the rules by showing flesh or showing off to attract viewers. An example of such videos outwardly used this hashtag by doing sexually appealing dance moves and sexually suggestive eyes.

The use of sexualized outfits is commonly featured across the videos. The fashion

choices of the creators often show a clear preference for revealing clothes, such as tight and

small tops paired with shorts or miniskirts. Some of the creators even wear nylon stockings,

adding to the overtly sexualized aesthetic. In one particularly striking example, a creator

dresses up as a "bunny girl" (兔女郎) and slowly dances to music, eliciting comments from

female viewers about "taking away their boyfriends." In another example, one female

influencer (Figure 2.) puts her hand around her waist and pop her hip to accentuate her round

buttocks, slender waist, and large breasts. Performances of this nature typically involve videos

where individuals change outfits to highlight a before-and-after transformation. This

exaggerated form of sexual portrayal is often directed at catering to the desires of a

heterosexual male audience, leveraging sexualized imagery as a strategy to increase their

social media following. The use of a red-hued lighting setup in such videos is deliberate,

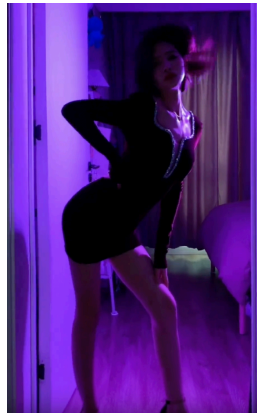aiming to evoke themes of desire and fervor.

Figure 2. An example of sexualized videos

The combination of the "sweet girl" and "hot girl" aesthetics seems to be the most

common type of beauty style on Douyin. This "Chunyu" style features creators with an

innocent or baby-like facial appearance, but who wear revealing clothing to express their

sexual attractiveness. It is also clear that in the videos, females that actively showcase the "chunyu" aesthetics are mainly aimed at attracting male viewers. They are objectified in the sense that their careful design of movements and outfits cater to men's tastes. For instance, in one video, the caption reads, "Are you willing to exchange your brother for this beautiful girl?" This text not only objectifies women by reducing them to mere objects of desire but also reinforces the notion of women as commodities that can be traded or exchanged. Through these various visual cues and content choices, the Douyin videos analyzed demonstrate a clear emphasis on the sexualization of female creators as a dominant beauty norm on the platform. The creators are often presented in ways that objectify and commodify their bodies, reinforcing the notion that female worth and desirability are tied to their sexual appeal.

While the embodiment of the "chunyu" (pure and fresh) aesthetics is prevalent in many of the top-liked videos, it is noteworthy that there is still a considerable representation of diverse styles and appearances. Approximately four to five of the highly popular videos feature girls with distinctly different aesthetics, such as gender-neutral or mature looks. This diversity demonstrates that although the singular "chunyu" aesthetic is prominent on the platform, there is still an appreciation for various styles and appearances. Some videos feature female influencers wearing sport short hairstyles and gender-neutral outfits, deviating from the traditionally feminine "chunyu" image. Their appearances challenge conventional gender norms and appeal to audiences who appreciate a more unconventional or diverse aesthetic. For example, in Figure 3, the girl in the video has short hair, tattoos, and wears a baggy tank top, looking very different from the girls in most of the videos. This diverse range of styles and appearances within the top-liked videos highlights the platform's ability to cater to diverse tastes and preferences. While the "chunyu" aesthetic may be the most prevalent, the presence

of these alternative aesthetics suggests a slight openness to embracing various interpretations

of beauty and self-expression on Douyin.

Figure 3. Example of diverse aesthetics on Douyin

4.1.3 Homogenization of Facial Features

Another prominent theme that emerges from the top Douyin videos is the

homogenization of facial features among the creators. There appears to be a clear preference

for a specific set of physical attributes that are repeatedly showcased across the most popular

content on the platform. Many of the videos place a strong emphasis on particular facial

features, such as hearted face, large, wide-set eyes, small faces with high, defined nose

bridges, and dark, lustrous hair. The creators often have uniform double-eyelid features,

creating an almost doll-like quality to their appearance. Additionally, the faces tend to be

oval-shaped, with delicate, sculpted jawlines and flawless, porcelain-like skin complexions.

These attributes align closely with a widely accepted Asian beauty ideal that is heavily

promoted and valorized across various media and popular culture channels. For instance, as

shown in Figure 5.,one of the top videos analyzed features an AI-generated human character

that bears a striking resemblance to the real-life creators showcased on the platform. This AI-

created character embodies the same idealized attributes seen across numerous other videos, from the large eyes and high nose bridge to the poreless, airbrushed skin.

Figure 5. Example of AI-generated human

This persistent emphasis on a specific set of facial characteristics creates a very narrow and monolithic standard of beauty that is perpetuated across the top Douyin content. The repetitive showcasing of these idealized features serves to reinforce the notion that this is the dominant and desirable look for female creators on the platform. The lack of diversity in facial representations can have exclusionary effects, as creators who do not fit this rigid standard of beauty may feel marginalized or underrepresented within the platform's beauty norms.Overall, the thematic analysis reveals that the top Douyin videos are heavily weighted towards a homogenized conception of female beauty, centered around a specific set of facial characteristics. This homogenization of features suggests that Douyin's beauty norms may be influenced by broader societal preferences and media representations, which often favor a limited range of facial attributes as the epitome of attractiveness and desirability.

4.1.4 The Vibe

Beyond the explicit visual characteristics and sexualized tropes observed in the top Douyin videos, another prominent theme that emerges is the concept of "Fenwei Gan" (氛围

感), or "atmospheric beauty." The idea of "fenwei gan' is unique to certain Eastern cultures, specifically China and Korea as it does not have an equivalent meaning in Western language. This notion encompasses the aesthetic experience that is created through the holistic combination of various cinematic and sensorial elements within the videos. At its core, "Fenwei Gan" is about crafting a particular ambiance or vibe that resonates with viewers on an emotional level, evoking a sense of aspiration, nostalgia, or serenity. It is more than just the visual appeal of the content; it is about cultivating an immersive experience that the audience can connect with.

One of the key ways creators achieve this "Fenwei Gan" is through the strategic use of natural lighting, particularly the soft, warm glow of sunshine. Many of the videos incorporate this golden, luminous quality to highlight the creators' features, create a halo-like effect, or cast gentle, flattering shadows that add depth and texture to the scenes. For example, in one of the video, the female influencer looking at the camera under the big sun. This sunshine-infused aesthetic contributes to an overall feeling of positivity and warmth. In addition. the choice of music is another crucial element in establishing the desired "Fenwei Gan." The videos often feature carefully selected acoustic melodies, light pop soundtracks, or gentle instrumental tracks that complement the visual content and enhance the viewer's emotional response. In the video, the soft love song further adds to the romantic atmosphere of the video. The tempo and energy of the music are typically aligned with the overall mood and pacing of the video, creating a harmonious sensory experience.

Figure 6. Example of use of sunlight create the vibe

Color palette is another important aspect of crafting "Fenwei Gan." The videos tend to showcase soft, pastel hues, warm earth tones, or the golden tones of "golden hour" lighting. These soothing, natural color schemes contribute to the calming, pleasant atmosphere that is being cultivated. Additionally, the setting and backdrop of the videos play a significant role in shaping the "Fenwei Gan." Creators may showcase beautifully arranged interior spaces, idyllic outdoor scenes featuring natural elements like flowers or trees, or cozy, intimate corners that invite the viewer into a serene, aspirational space. In essence, "Fenwei Gan" is about creating a holistic sensory experience that goes beyond just the visual components. It is about curating an emotional connection, a sense of aesthetic resonance that allows the viewer to feel a deeper appreciation and appreciation for the beauty being depicted. This theme suggests a shift towards a more experiential understanding of beauty, where the focus is on how beauty feels just as much as how it looks.

4.2 Interviews with Young Chinese Women:

Data analysis revealed two main themes: the Chinese beauty ideals and the path to beauty. The first theme addressed both participants' understanding and reactions to dominant standards of beauty in Chinese society and their own standards of beauty. The second theme

presented participants' collection of their attitudes and behaviors towards their own bodies in

relation to the social pressure they experience.

4.2.1 The Chinese Beauty Ideal:

The "White, Skinny, and Young" aesthetics

With little variance, all participants agreed that limited beauty standard exists for Chinese

women, in which they believe most Chinese people would believe. Throughout the interviews,

participants demonstrated a keen awareness of the prevailing beauty standards in Chinese society,

which they described as centered around an aesthetic of "white, skinny, and young." The concept of

"white, skinny, and young" aesthetics, oftentimes synonymous with "chunyu" aesthetics consists of

three main rhetorical points: white, young and skinny. "White" means that people regard pale skin as

most beautiful. "Young" refers to young and juvenile. The "skinny" in the "white, young and skinny"

aesthetics emphasizes that beautiful women should show the characteristics of slender limbs and flat

abdomens.

Participants also acknowledge how social media such as Douyin influences people's

perceptions of beauty by establishing a paradigm that everyone is expected to follow. The continuous

exposure to idealized beauty standards perpetuates a paradigm of beauty that is both narrow and often

unattainable for the majority of the population. When media consistently presents particular body types

or facial features as the standard of beauty, this image is repeated across different platforms and

contexts, reinforcing the idea that these attributes are universally desirable. One of the participants,

Weiwei noted, "I don't usually like to watch too videos of beautiful girls, but if I put myself into the

viewers' shoes, if I want to get better I feel like that's the way it should be because they're the hottest,

most mainstream aesthetic and also the most popular kind of video, and I feel like it's going to really

affect the aesthetics of their audience." Weiwei's words not only highlight the ways in which social

media can construct beauty norms and influence the ideas of beauty for the target audience but also point to an interesting fact that resonates with other participants: they don't typically watch videos like this neither are they the target audience of those sample videos.

Meanwhile, the participants also acknowledged that this narrow definition of beauty has been heavily shaped and reinforced by cultural influences. As one participant shared, "I can appreciate different types of beauty, like someone who is plumper. But I am heavily influenced by Chinese mainstream beauty." Consumerism almost largely based on limited sizing significantly influences beauty ideals by establishing and reinforcing narrow standards for body shape and size via advertisements, social media, and shopping purchases. The pressure to be thin is further exacerbated by the limited sizing options available, even on China's largest e-commerce platforms like Taobao. As one participant Fei lamented, "When I try to buy clothes online, I become anxious about my body because I could fit into even the biggest size. I know the sizing is just crazy." Another participant particularly noted that the potential source of the prevalence of "pale, skinny, and young" was also tied to consumerism: the introduction of Brandy Melville, a clothing brand famous for its one-size-fits-all sizing policy, into the Chinese market. Ying said:

> I definitely feel that the singular standards of beauty exist in China...I remembered it was between 2018 and 2019 when Brandy Melville entered the Chinese market and started trends of 'White, Skinny, and Young. It was at that time this trend was widely touted by people of our age or even younger."

Participants noted that other forms of media and culture, particularly the burgeoning K-POP industry, heavily influenced their standards of beauty. The K-POP phenomenon, with its meticulously groomed and stylized idols, defined what beauty meant for many fans, who started to emulate the makeup, hairstyles, and fashion choices of their favorite celebrities. As ardent K-POP fans, Sia and Weiwei

admitted to viewing these idols as role models, making concerted efforts to mirror their appearances and mindsets. Weiwei confessed, "If there are photos of my favorite celebrities with a great body, I'll save them and set them as wallpaper, thinking that I'll try to look like that myself." Similarly, Sia emphasized the importance of mirroring not just the physical attributes but also the perceived work ethic of her idol, stating, "If my idol is working so hard to stay in shape, I want to get closer to him and learn from him." This admiration for their idols' perceived dedication and discipline further reinforces the pressure to conform to specific beauty standards. The influence of K-POP and its idolized celebrities on body image and beauty perceptions among fans highlights the persuasive power of media representation and the potential risks of internalizing unrealistic or narrow beauty ideals.

The beauty standard is diversifying, but not really

While the participants all agreed upon the existence of narrow aesthetic calibers in Chinese society, they also expressed that beauty standards in China are beginning to diversify, even if the dominant ideal remains firmly entrenched. Due to growing feminist movements and influencers that advocate for diversity, Chinese standards of beauty are in the process of accepting new ideas, such as plump body shapes, tanner skin tones, and gender-neutral outfits. Nevertheless, the widely accepted beauty standards are still believed to be the "white, skinny, young" aesthetics. For instance, Ying expressed that, "I think the last few years have led to a more diverse aesthetic because of some feminism." However, she acknowledged that this shift towards diversity is still in its nascent stages and faces significant resistance from deeply rooted societal norms and expectations. Mei, another participant, echoed a similar sentiment, stating, "While we see more influencers and public figures embracing different body types and skin tones, the traditional ideals still hold a lot of sway, especially in mainstream media and advertising." This dichotomy between the emergence of diverse

representations and the persistent dominance of conventional beauty standards highlights the ongoing struggle for inclusivity in the realm of beauty perceptions.

Furthermore, the participants noted that even when diverse representations are presented, they are often tokenized or fetishized, rather than being genuinely accepted and normalized. Xiao lamented, "Sometimes it feels like companies are just trying to cash in on the 'diversity trend' without actually challenging the status quo. It's more about appearing progressive than genuinely embracing different forms of beauty." Despite the acknowledgment of progress, the participants' experiences and observations suggest that true diversification of beauty standards in China is still a work in progress, facing resistance from deeply entrenched societal norms and commercial interests. The journey towards a more inclusive and accepting definition of beauty requires sustained efforts from various stakeholders, including media, education, and social movements.

Mixed Reactions

In contrast to the affirmative rejection or acceptance of the beauty standards, the reactions to the dominant beauty ideals among participants are largely mixed and even polarized. Weiwei openly embraces the thin ideals but also knows how society influences and builds her aesthetic views. She noted "I can appreciate different types of beauty, like someone who is more plump. However, I am heavily influenced by Chinese mainstream beauty. If I can choose, I wish I could be very skinny. If I were born in the U.S., my standard of beauty would have been totally different." Leah, on the other hand, communicates clear avoidance of the dominant beauty ideals by saying "My aesthetic is more gender neutral because this mainstream aesthetic creates a kind of reverse psychology. I don't usually wear clothes that are particularly feminine in nature, such as lace or skin-baring highs. I prefer clothes that can be worn by both men and women to reduce stares from the opposite sex."

Despite these divergent reactions, after viewing the Douyin videos, most participants agreed that the creators featured embodied an overly thin ideal that they would not personally aspire to. Most of the participants commented that the girls in the videos are too slim, and they would prefer a healthier body type. Some participants expressed a preference for body types that were more muscular or physically fit, rather than simply thin. Ying, who actively goes to gym, stated, "I respect the discipline it takes to maintain a slim figure, but personally, I find more muscular, toned physiques more attractive and aspirational." This sentiment was echoed by several other participants who valued physical strength and athleticism as part of their beauty ideals. The participants' responses highlighted the tensions between their own understanding of beauty and socially promoted ideas of beauty, which continue to be heavily influenced by social media and cultural trends.

While signs of diversification are emerging, the preference for a "white, skinny, and young" aesthetic remains a powerful and pervasive force. However, there is also a growing appreciation for body types that reflect an active, healthy lifestyle, challenging the notion that extreme thinness is the only acceptable beauty standard. Dai commented, "I think it's important to celebrate different body types, whether that's slim, muscular, or curvy. What matters most is feeling confident and comfortable in your own skin, and prioritizing overall health and well-being." This perspective underscores the participants' desire for a more holistic and inclusive understanding of beauty, one that values physical and mental well-being over rigid adherence to a singular, narrowly defined ideal.

4.2.2 The Path to Beauty

Body anxiety

In addition to discussing the dominant Chinese beauty ideals, the interviews also shed light on how these standards impact the participants' personal experiences and perceptions of their own bodies. Among all six interviewees, five of them explicitly expressed experiencing

body anxiety, characterized by a deep dissatisfaction with their physical appearance. Most of the participants conveyed a strong desire to be thinner and achieve a more "ideal" body type. As Weiwei said, "I am heavily influenced by Chinese mainstream beauty. If I can choose, I wish I could be very skinny." The high cost of meeting the social expectations of beauty is epitomized by the word "beauty service," which refers to all behaviors that women especially spend on consuming additional resources (time, money, energy, etc.) in order to cater to the aesthetics of social concepts. Adapted from the idea of "military service," the idea of "beauty service" emphasizes on sacrifice that women have to make to conform to the social standards of beauty. Dai specifically elaborated on how she struggles with this concept:

> I would always check to see if I had served beauty service. I would worry if I was not being progressive enough. Everyone talks about getting out of beauty service, so my biggest anxiety is that I would frequently check to see if I get rid of it. For example, if I wanted to get a manicure, I would ask myself if I did the beauty service and if it would really help me. My aesthetic has been shaped by society and I'm going to want a lot of things, but another layer of my anxiety is whether or not I'm not being progressive enough, and whether or not I'm being a bad influence on social progress by doing these things.

Dai's internal struggle highlights the immense psychological toll and self-doubt that can arise from the pressure to conform to rigid beauty standards, even when one is actively trying to reject them. The fear of not being "progressive enough" and potentially hindering social change underscores the deeply ingrained nature of these beauty ideals and the challenges involved in dismantling them on both a personal and societal level. Moreover, her experience exemplifies how the pursuit of conventional beauty practices, even seemingly minor ones like getting a

manicure, can trigger intense self-reflection and anxiety about one's motivations and impact. The constant need to scrutinize one's actions and appearance through the lens of social progress adds an additional layer of emotional burden, making the journey towards self-acceptance and body positivity an ongoing and complex one.

Overall, almost all the participants explicitly expressed a deep-seated anxiety and dissatisfaction with their physical appearance, stemming from the immense pressure to conform to unattainable beauty standards in society. While some feel the pressure of failing to meet these standards, others like Dai are most anxious about how simply following the dominant beauty norms can negatively influence and perpetuate harmful ideals in society. The anxiety of dealing with beauty ideals is not only about not being capable of fulfilling them but also extends to whether or not it is the right thing to do from an ethical and social standpoint. Constant exposure to narrow beauty standards can normalize the relentless pursuit of physical perfection, leading people to believe that spending excessive time and resources on altering one's appearance is not just desirable but also necessary for social acceptance and self-worth.

Social Pressure to Conform

Beyond the role of social media in shaping these beauty ideals, there is also immense social pressure Chinese women face to conform to narrow standards of attractiveness. Most of the interviewees reported facing the greatest pressure from the people closest to them, especially their families and parents. Three of the participants said they often receive criticism from their parents, urging them to lose weight or become even thinner, a phenomenon deeply rooted in cultural norms and expectations. For instance, Fei shared her personal experience:

I have a profound anxiety about beauty because I was told I was fat growing up. So I started losing weight like crazy when I came to America. During that time, I watched

videos on Douyin, for example, I saw people of the same height and weight as me. Why do they look so fit and toned, and why don't I look like that? I wanted to look like that, and if I was thinner, I would be able to wear more nice clothes.

Fei's narrative highlights the compounding effect of familial pressures and social media influences, which can lead to unhealthy behaviors and a distorted perception of one's own body image. The constant comparison to idealized representations, coupled with the deeply ingrained cultural emphasis on thinness, can fuel a vicious cycle of body dissatisfaction and self-criticism. Similarly, Weiwei recounted the constant scrutiny she faced from her parents, who would frequently comment on her weight and appearance, perpetuating the notion that her worth was intrinsically tied to her adherence to conventional beauty standards. The pervasive influence of family, peers, and the fashion industry creates a feedback loop that compounds the participants' body anxiety and reinforces the need to strive toward the dominant beauty ideal. Even those who consciously resist the mainstream aesthetic still grapple with the internalized pressure to conform to societal expectations of female attractiveness, a battle that can take a significant emotional and psychological toll.

Moreover, the social pressure to conform to narrow beauty standards extends beyond close family and peers, as the pervasive presence of idealized body types in public spaces becomes an additional source of anxiety. As Weiwei noted, "They would see a lot of thin girls wearing shorts on the streets. The prevalence of thin girls makes them feel insecure about their own bodies." This constant exposure to a homogenized representation of the beauty ideal in everyday environments can be deeply psychologically damaging, fostering a sense of inadequacy and self-consciousness. The mere act of existing in public spaces becomes a minefield of potential triggers, as individuals are thrown with visual reminders of the standards they are

expected to uphold. Leah shared her experience of feeling scrutinized and judged while simply going about her daily routine, stating, "I dread running errands sometimes because I feel like everyone is staring at me and assessing whether I meet the beauty standards or not. It's exhausting to constantly feel like you're being evaluated based on your appearance."

4.2.3 Consumption of Beauty-Related Content on Douyin

The interviews also shed light on the participants' media consumption habits, particularly in relation to beauty-focused content on social platforms.

Social Media as a means for entertainment

Contrary to the assumption that Douyin users may primarily consume videos featuring attractive women, most of the interview participants reported using social media more for general entertainment purposes rather than seeking out beauty-centric content. The majority of participants said they prefer to watch vlogs or funny videos as a way to relieve stress and enjoy their leisure time, rather than intentionally seeking out videos showcasing the "beautiful girl" aesthetic. Fei expressed a clear preference for actively consuming videos that feature attractive female creators, despite being different from the ones shown to them. Dai, however, shared that she would deliberately avoid such videos, as viewing them made her feel anxious about her own appearance. The rest of the participants did not express a strong preference either way, suggesting that their social media usage is not necessarily driven by a desire to directly engage with beauty-focused content. Ying said, "I have two favorite female influencers both of whom are female. I follow them because I'm just trying to entertain and kill time."

Instead, they would follow appealing influencers mainly not due to their physical appearance but their engaging and entertaining content. Sia mentioned she likes two beautiful influencers on Douyin and she follows them due to their "unusual" content. The consistent

tendency to watch videos of influencers who have a humorous and cordial personality demonstrates that there is a huge emphasis being put on inner beauty. Instead of a good-looking person, people are more attracted to funny or special vloggers or influencers. Videos that emphasize beauty too much on their own will not be very entertaining to watch or even create unpleasant feelings such as anxiety, and as most participants say are mainly designed to attract the male gaze.

Skill-based beauty influencers

When it came to beauty-related videos, some of the participants mentioned a preference for watching technique-based tutorials from skilled makeup influencers. These participants appreciated watching creators demonstrate sophisticated makeup application skills and techniques, rather than just focusing on physical appearance. This suggests that while the dominant beauty standards are pervasive, at least some of the interview subjects engage with social media in a more diverse and multi-faceted way, seeking out content that aligns with their own interests and values, rather than solely consuming visuals that reinforce narrow ideals of female attractiveness. Leah said she usually follows influencers with astonishing makeup skills and Sia noted she uses Douyin to watch makeup videos, "there's a clear contrast between these influencers going from vegan to full makeup, and their makeup videos are usually long. People are going to learn makeup techniques and how to use all that makeup and cosmetics from their videos."

5. Discussion

The thematic analysis of the top Douyin videos and the insights gleaned from the participant interviews offer valuable insights into how social media platforms like Douyin are constructing and reinforcing beauty norms, as well as how individuals navigate and interact with these

dominant aesthetics. One of the most striking findings is the pervasiveness of the "thin ideal" as a central component of the beauty standards being promoted on Douyin. The videos analyzed frequently featured creators with extremely slender, delicate physiques, often accentuated through the use of cinching waistlines, tight-fitting clothing, and poses that elongated the limbs. This narrow conception of the ideal female form aligns with broader societal preferences for a youthful, fragile body type that has long been valorized in media and popular culture.

The videos also demonstrated a high degree of homogenization when it came to facial features, with creators exhibiting a uniform set of attributes like large eyes, small faces, and flawless skin. This homogeneity suggests that Douyin's beauty norms are heavily influenced by pan-Asian ideals that have been amplified and propagated through digital platforms. The fact that an AI-generated character was almost indistinguishable from the human creators underscores how rigidly constrained these beauty standards have become. Alongside the dominance of the thin, homogenized aesthetic, the videos also showcased a pervasive theme of sexualization. Revealing clothing, suggestive poses, and the objectification of the female body were prevalent, reinforcing the notion that female worth and desirability are inextricably tied to sexual appeal on the platform.

Interestingly, the interview findings reveal a more nuanced and complex relationship that individuals have with these beauty norms. While the participants were acutely aware of the singular standards of beauty promoted in Chinese society, their personal reactions ranged from enthusiastic embrace to active resistance. Most participants expressed a deep dissatisfaction with their own bodies, driven by societal pressure and limited representation of diverse body types. Some consciously opted for a more gender-neutral aesthetic as a form of rebellion against the mainstream. Additionally, the interviews suggested that the participants' social media

consumption was not mainly focused on beauty-centric content; instead, many preferred to use platforms like Douyin for general entertainment and stress relief, rather than actively seeking out videos that showcase idealized feminine beauty. This diversity of engagement does not necessarily diminish the influence of Douyin in constructing beauty standards but challenges the assumption that users are actively seeking for beauty-related content through which beauty norms are disseminated.

The implications of these findings are twofold. On one hand, the dominance of the thin, homogenized, and sexualized aesthetic on Douyin underscores the powerful role that social media platforms play in constructing, amplifying, and propagating narrow beauty standards. The repetitive visual tropes and lack of representational diversity can have detrimental effects on individual self-perception and societal attitudes toward beauty. However, the interviews also suggest that individuals are not simply passive recipients of these norms. They exhibit agency in navigating, resisting, and sometimes redefining the beauty ideals presented to them online. The diversity of personal reactions and media consumption patterns points to the possibility of counter-narratives and alternative conceptualizations of beauty emerging within the digital landscape.

Ultimately, this study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of beauty norms in the social media age. While platforms like Douyin exert significant influence in shaping dominant aesthetics, individuals also possess the capacity to engage with, challenge, and reframe these ideals in ways that reflect their own lived experiences and values. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the exclusionary and potentially harmful effects of the beauty norms perpetuated online. Further research should focus on interventions and educational programs that can empower young women to critically engage with media platforms like

Douyin. It should also explore the role that such platforms can play in promoting a more inclusive and healthy range of beauty standards. As societal views evolve and awareness increases, there is hope for a shift towards more genuine and diverse expressions of beauty that align with healthy self-acceptance and broader cultural acceptance.

6.   Conclusions

The exploration of beauty standards on Douyin reveals a complex interplay between cultural expectations and social media's amplification of certain aesthetics. The prevailing beauty norms identified on Douyin align closely with traditional Chinese beauty ideals, promoting a "thin ideal," youthful appearance, and homogenized facial features. This resonance with cultural expectations points to a reinforcement rather than a reinvention of beauty standards, as the platform becomes an echo chamber for long-standing societal values. The prevalence of slim physiques and particular facial characteristics indicates a strong cultural influence persisting in the digital age, even as the mode of dissemination shifts from traditional media to social platforms. However, variations do exist, especially in the form of the 'Fenwei Gan'—the atmospheric or vibe-centric beauty that captures a holistic, experiential aesthetic. This suggests a nuanced layer to beauty norms that transcends physical attributes, potentially signaling a shift toward valuing emotional engagement and the ability to invoke feelings through content.

In response to these dominant ideals, individuals exhibit a spectrum of reactions, ranging from striving for adherence to these standards to actively rejecting them in favor of a more inclusive definition of beauty. Interviews reveal that while some individuals experience body anxiety and pressure to conform, resulting in a narrowed self-perception, others engage with Douyin content selectively, focusing on entertainment or skill development. The data points to a conscious awareness among users, particularly as they navigate personal identities within a

landscape saturated with idealized images. Influencers who prioritize authenticity, personality, and humor over conventional attractiveness garner positive responses, underscoring a cultural shift toward valuing inner beauty and personal uniqueness.

The study's findings illuminate the continuing evolution of beauty standards in digital spaces. While the "white, skinny, and young" aesthetic remains predominant on Douyin, there is an emerging shift for diversity and authenticity, which suggests that the platform may become a battleground for challenging and reshaping beauty norms. This could foster a more heterogeneous understanding of beauty that embraces a multitude of forms and expressions, encouraging an appreciation of individuality that is not constrained by narrow societal prescriptions. In essence, the reaction to Douyin's beauty ideals reflects a dialogue between cultural retention and progressive change, indicating that the path to redefining beauty standards is being carved out not only through the content creators but also through the everyday choices of viewers as they interact with and respond to these digital representations.

7. Limitations

The first limitation of this study pertains to the thematic analysis of dominant beauty norms on Douyin. With a limited sample size of the 50 most-liked videos, the results may not be generalizable to the wider context of Douyin's vast and diverse content. Beauty standards are inherently subjective, and despite efforts to maintain objectivity, the analysis is inevitably influenced by the researcher's personal interpretation and aesthetic preferences. This subjectivity introduces the potential for bias, as the researcher's own conception of beauty could subtly inform the evaluation of what is deemed the 'ideal' in the content examined. Future research would benefit from a larger sample size and perhaps a more diverse set of researchers to provide a more balanced perspective on beauty norms.

The second limitation arises from the composition of the interview sample. The interviewees were all international students immersed in Western culture, which may distinguish their experiences and perspectives on beauty from those of their counterparts residing in China. Their exposure to and education in Western ideals of beauty may color their responses, providing insights that are not fully indicative of the broader young female Chinese demographic. This demographic homogeneity limits the study's capacity to fully represent the diverse range of views on beauty within the Chinese context. Moreover, with only six participants involved, the sample size for the interview component of the study is notably small, which constrains the breadth and depth of insights that could be obtained.

For future research directions, a comparative analysis between Douyin users and non-users could shed light on the specific impacts of social media on beauty standards. Such a study would benefit from a more heterogeneous participant pool, encompassing varied backgrounds and differing attitudes towards beauty, to enrich the understanding of how Douyin may shape or reflect societal beauty norms. Expanding the participant criteria could also help to mitigate the biases and limitations inherent in a more narrowly defined sample group, offering a broader perspective on the intersection of cultural beauty standards and social media influence.

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