The Construction of Beauty Ideals on Social Media: A Frame Analysis of Chinese Influencers on RED

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Abstract: With the development of technology, social media has become deeply integrated into the daily lives of the majority of people. In China, the rise of social media, and the emerge of "Wanghong economy" leads to the emergence of Internet celebrities, also known as "influencers". While existing research has underscored the impacts of social media on cognitive functions and social interactions, there is a growing concern regarding influencers manipulating societal beauty standards in an un. By using the Chinese social media platform named "RED" as a case study, the research employs frame analysis to understand how did influencers construct beauty standards by videos and posts. Our analysis suggests that three mechanisms of framing are most commonly used by influencers to redefine beauty norm on "RED", including the mechanisms of definition, causal relationship and association. This study delves deeper into this phenomenon, exploring its implications and the social construction of beauty in the Internet age.

Keywords: social media, beauty ideal, beauty norms, influencers

1.   Introduction

With the development of modern technology and prevalence of media, social media now wields a significant influence on the daily behaviors of the public in both positive and negative ways. Quantitative research conducted by Joshua Ebere Chukwuere and Precious Chibuike Chukwuere [1] has highlighted the positive impact of social media on cognitive thinking, interaction, communication and social lifestyle of female students. Correspondingly, influencers on social media actively shape the perception of beauty through the discursive manipulation of their posts, which reconstructs the standard of beauty for the society. This, in turn, has a consequential impact on the eating behavior and body image of individuals. It therefore becomes imperative to investigate the discourses used by influencers in this regard.

Despite the deep and insightful research current available, there is still a huge theoretical gap that needs to be addressed about the influence and use of social media. Social media and influencers played an important role on defining the sense of beauty. Nowadays, beauty ideals are often criticizes for promoting pathologies including unhealthy life style, lack of muscle, and vomiting behaviors. Therefore, a more in-depth investigation into the role of influencers could prove instrumental in reconstructing our sense of beauty.

Currently, there are different social medias that people browse everyday. One of the most popular social media in China, often likened to "Instagram," is known as "RED". According to official reports [2], RED has over 200 million monthly users, mainly from first and second tier cities of China.

The following study will use frame analysis to investigate the question: How do influencers on "RED" construct the standard of beauty of the society?

This study will first provide a comprehensive review of relevant theoretical discussions on the social construction of beauty and the Internet celebrity culture in China. Subsequently, the study will use frame analysis to reveal how influencers on social medias construct beauty norms. Our study suggests that these influencer posts often frame their posts by underplaying certain negative impacts of the prevalent beauty norm. Three primary mechanisms used by them in framing include definition, causal relations and association, which will be elaborated thoroughly in our findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Social Construction of Beauty

In order to investigate this question, there are several relevant literatures about the construction of beauty within the society. Berger and Luckman et al [3] have introduced the concept of the social construction of reality, emphasizing the flexibility and reciprocity of typificatory schemes in daily encounters. This concept suggests that the reality people perceive is not an inherent truth but rather a product shaped by their interactions.

Building on the constructive approach, Entman et al [4] proposes the concept of framing. Framing involves the processes of both selection and salience, whereby certain aspects of reality being perceived will be more salient and presented with greater emphasis. The purposes of framing, according to Entman et al, often involve "promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation for the item being described".

2.2. Beauty Concerns on Social Media

The social construction of beauty has been examined extensively. For instance, in the content analysis from Mills 2018 [5], how beauty was socially constructed through the use of media was being examined. Media and advertisement have often defined beauty in terms of physical attractiveness, projecting it as something designed to attract male gaze. These portrayals also reinforce societal standards and stereotypes of beauty. Additionally, mass media has been a significant source of influence on people's perceptions of beauty through the using of unrealistic figures, from the iconic figure of Barbie to television models. Researchers assert that mass media cannot be solely responsible for triggering body dissatisfaction or eating disorders [5]. Instead, the emphasis of beauty standard is different across different media and platforms, catering to different audience. Researchers have also discovered that there are huge differences between beauty types across advertisements of different products [5].

The construction of definition of beauty among different media and platforms has raised the concerns especially in regards to the perception of body shape and size among young females. In the research done by Perloff 2014 [6], researchers have identified that social media generates the ideal body image for female, particularly when they are accompanied by pictures posted online. These body images often foster the comparison between individuals and depicted body shape, further resulting in body dissatisfaction and eating disorder among individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, it has been noted that female with susceptible characteristics are more likely to seek gratification, thereby amplifying their body dissatisfaction in response to the present standard of beauty on social media. Recognizing the significant role of social media in defining beauty

standards and influencing eating behaviors of people, further research is essential to explore the construction of current standard of beauty.

2.3. Internet Celebrity on Chinese Social Media

The following study will focus on the portrayal of beauty norm from internet celebrity on Chinese social media named as "RED" (xiaohongshu). The platform is mainly catered to females around age 18-34. Active users predominantly engage with content related to five topics, including outfit, dieting, beauty makeup, skin care, and food tutorial, which are all closely linked with current beauty trend [2]. RED is a part of China's wanghong economy, which refers to the growing discussion about beauty trends on social media and its associated commercial value, often accompanied by advertisement [6].

Researchers have also identified "the construction of neoliberal body politics" among mass media, such as the promotion of beauty treatment and tutorials of workout or hairstyles [6]. According with the growing earning and increasing status of internet celebrity (wanghong), researchers has discovered how internet celebrity culture shapes the sense of subjectivity of young Chinese women and further shapes their new disciplinary practices on body image [7].

3. Method

The study conducted a frame analysis to examine how influencers on "RED" construct the standard of beauty. To conduct this frame analysis, a purposive sampling approach was employed in conjunction with keyword searches. The selection began with the choice of four influencers with high influence, such as great amount of fans and views. All of these influencers endorsed the notion that being thin represents the ideal body image.

A total of 20 videos posted by these four influences from July to August of 2023 were gathered. The chosen videos for analysis were recent and had garnered significant viewership, indicating their substantial influence. The videos were analyzed in accordance with four coding units that allow abstract concepts to be extracted and coded concretely, including visual images, narratives, titles and descriptions. The coding frame was devised based on both inductive observation and existing theoretical discussions, with a special focus on the influencers' body images, eating behaviors, and lifestyles. During my trial coding, I adopted Entman [5]'s framework in terms of the purposes of frames, namely definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. However, my trial coding suggested that the framework needed to be amended in my analysis into three main mechanisms: definition, causal interpretation, and association.

4. Findings

Our frame analysis has unveiled a series of frames that prominently emerge throughout the intricate process of socially constructing beauty within the realm of Chinese social media. These frames can be effectively grouped into three distinct mechanisms: the direct definition of beauty, the causal attributions associated with beauty, and the fostering of positive connotations linked to beauty.

Predominantly, the mechanism of directly defining beauty encompasses frames that consistently revolve around factors like body image and youthful appearance. When it comes to the causative aspect of beauty, the frames that being frequently used are eating behaviors and healthy lifestyle. Correspondingly, for the positive connotation of beauty, frames around it often include luxurious and easy lifestyle.

4.1. Direct Definition of Beauty

Currently, people on internet have increasingly learned about the fact that beauty can encompass diverse norms. However, influencers on Chinese social media still predominantly champion the notion of beauty closely associated with being slender and skinny. By directly showcasing the body image and youthful appearance of themselves, influencers successfully establish the standard of beauty as being young and slim.

Based on the analysis of videos from all of the influencers from the previous coding frame, there are frequently demonstration of outfits and selfies, which directly reveal their body image and beauty. Such frames allow influencers to convey the idea that the body image demonstrated by them is the standard of beauty held by the majority of the society. Similarly, their height and weight are directly shown on either tittle or in the description, which is another way to define the standard of beauty within their point of view. For example, in one of the posts, the influencer captured a moment where she stood in front of the mirror, accompanied by captions that read "what does someone with a height of 168cm and a weight of 45kg eat in a day". Instead of explicitly stating that being skinny and lose weight is the standard of beauty, which will probably provoke resistance from the audiences, using direct demonstration allows influencers to convey the idea to audiences without making them annoyed.

4.2. Causal Relationship Between Beauty and Eating Behavior

In videos and posts from influencers, they consistently show their daily eating routine to audiences. This practice demonstrates the reason why they can achieve the standard of beauty defined by themselves. For example, in every videos posts by "一只白", she discusssd her eating routine and shares her insights on keeping fit and skinny. Content such as these instills the sense that weight can be easily controlled through individual efforts and links it with the value of self-discipline. For instance, in one of her posts, the influencer says that "if the weight cannot be controlled, there is nothing can be controlled". These posts further foster the desire among the audience to attain a slim figure, as it associates being skinny with personal discipline. This, in turn, encourages the audience to adopt the mindset that not being thin signifies a lack of self-discipline.

However, this framing of beauty actually highlights the benefits and intentionally ignores drawbacks and other factors affecting the body image of each individual. Body shape is not simply controlled by eating behaviors. Instead, there are other factors that correspondingly affect the body shape and weight of each individual. One of them is people's economic status. For example, those in the working class are often engaged in activities that require a high level of body strength and physical exertion. As a result, they need high calories to keep their body functioning. Therefore, it is impossible for them to follow the eating routine of influencers online. Similarly, there are other factors affecting body shape of each individuals, including but not limited to genetic makeup, income level, and education level. Ironically, all these factors are being ignored in the consideration of body shape from the videos and posts of influencers. Therefore, it is unreasonable and almost impossible for audience to confirm to the sense of beauty of influencers and follow their eating behaviors. Similarly, the influencers' approach to beauty is unduly restricted to eating behaviors, disregarding the fact that there are other ways of pursue beauty, including workout, high quality sleeping and healthier lifestyle. Such restriction further enhances the anxiety about eating for audience online.

4.3. The Selective Showcase of Beauty

In videos shown from each influencer, viewers are given a direct glimpse into their lifestyle, which are usually depicted as carefree, easy, and luxurious. For example, influencers frequently showcase

their lives of living in lavish homes in top-tier cities in China, travelling in first-class airplane seats, or residing in renowned hotels with narratives such as "this is the most famous hotel". Such lifestyle is hard to achieve for most of the audience online. Therefore, influencers create the perception that losing weight and achieving a skinny figure can lead to the attainment of such lifestyle, further making people believe that being skinny carries no harm but only benefits.

However, it's essential to acknowledge the negative aspects that are often ignored. For instance, female with skinny and feminist body shapes have greater possibility of encounter sexual harassment on the street, and they may be more susceptible to illness, injuries and decreased muscle strength. Therefore, by exclusively emphasizing the benefits of being skinny and beauty, influencers strengthen the idea of being skinny is good, thereby encouraging audiences to lose weight.

5.   Conclusion

According to findings above, framing is one of the techniques that are frequently used by current influencers on social media to achieve their purpose and define the standard of beauty. With the use of biased frames, influencers effectively achieve different purposes, including defining, causal relationship, and association. These allow them to reconstruct the beauty norm in China, which further affect Chinese beauty standard.

With the use of various frames, influencers reveal their life to audience indirectly, while at the same time linking their current life with the idea of being pretty and skinny. This reinforces the idea that possessing a slim and youthful appearance is the definition of beauty to audience. Similarly, the connection between beauty and self-discipline imbues additional value to the beauty norm, thereby conveying the idea that "not being skinny is the sign of laziness" to audiences. Also, negative impacts of following the beauty norm are purposefully ignored, while the positive impact are amplified, which further convey the audience about that there is no harm for being skinny and following the standard of beauty defined by influencers online.

However, there are limitations of the study that need to be further addressed. First, the utilization of purposive sampling may introduce bias into the study since all influencers being analyzed were chosen based on the researcher's discretion. Moreover, the sample size was relatively small, encompassing only four influencers. This limited sample size may not fully represent the vast multitude of influencers across various platforms. Also, these influencers were geographically located close to each other, which could diminish the geographical diversity within the finding and decrease the generalizability of the conclusion.

Despite of the limitation of the study, the study still successfully paves the way for potential avenues of future research. For example, interviews can be conducted to gain insight from audience's perspective, delving deeper into their opinions about the construction of beauty norms from online influencers. Similarly, interviews can be conducted from the perspective of influencers in order to explore whether they genuinely endorse the beauty norm constructed by themselves or do so merely because of their job. Moreover, different types of influencers can be interviewed, such as influencers who promote muscular ideals or those who advocate for the idea that beauty is not defined by specific standards, which could further enrich our understanding of this topic.

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