

The Discursive Construction of Beauty Ideals among Chinese Female Influencers on 小红书 *Xiaohongshu*: A Semiotic and Critical Discourse Analysis

Siriporn Bunprakob¹  and Unaree Taladngoen^{2*} 

¹Division of Languages and Communication (Chinese), Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts,
Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna Phitsanulok, Thailand

^{2*}Division of Languages and Communication (English), Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts,
Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna Phitsanulok, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: As a combination of social media and e-commerce platforms, *Xiaohongshu* serves as an online social venue for Chinese women to produce, reproduce, consume, and circulate beauty-related information, knowledge, and experiences. This interaction may contribute to the discursive construction of beauty ideals among female audiences, normalizing socially accepted beauty standards. Consequently, the present study examines the discursive construction of beauty ideals among Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* through the lenses of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), semiotic analysis, and social identity theory.

Methodology: The present study employed a qualitative research method, supplemented by descriptive statistics to provide quantitative support, specifically in terms of frequencies and percentages. The samples were 355 hashtags, accompanied by photographs, short video clips, and captions, collected from 70 popular beauty-related posts published by Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* between January 1st and July 31st, 2025. These hashtags were purposively selected from posts with a minimum popularity threshold of 10,000 likes. The data were analyzed based on the conceptual frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), semiotic analysis, and social identity theory. Additionally, the accompanying photos, short video clips, and captions were used to supplement the textual analysis.

Main Results: The findings revealed three dominant beauty discourses: transformative beauty journeys, technical aesthetics and beauty practices, and idealized beauty norms. These discourses were shaped by interconnected factors, including Chinese female influencers, consumers, platform mechanisms, and contemporary beauty ideals. This process occurred at three interconnected levels: the textual level, through the repetitive use of popular hashtags; the discursive practice level, through accumulated views, likes, and shares; and the social practice level, through the construction and normalization of socially

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 November 2025

Revised 18 August 2026

Accepted 20 August 2026

Keywords:

Beauty norms,
Chinese digital culture,
Feminism,
Gender equality,
Self-transformation

accepted beauty standards. This discursive construction of beauty ideals was associated with practices of voluntary self-governance, self-care, and self-transformation as a means of maintaining socially accepted beauty standards.

Discussions: This research demonstrates how *Xiaohongshu* influences the discursive construction of beauty ideals of Chinese female influencers in contemporary Chinese society. The findings, presented through an analysis of beauty discourses and linguistic signs, show that beauty is portrayed not as an inherent quality but as a socially constructed entity. Such construction can be achieved through practices of self-governance, self-care, and self-transformation. While *Xiaohongshu* promotes Chinese female influencers' engagement in the discursive construction of beauty ideals, it also restricts the concept of beauty to socially accepted beauty standards of a fair complexion, youthful looks, and a slim figure. Consequently, a critical understanding of beauty discourses may contribute to promoting beauty diversity and equality and enabling Chinese women to navigate this social pressure.

Conclusions: The beauty discourses and the discursive construction of beauty ideals found on *Xiaohongshu* exemplify complex social, cultural, and economic dynamics in contemporary Chinese society. These discourses reflect existing beauty ideals and reinforce social and professional expectations, prompting women to voluntarily govern and transform themselves to achieve socially accepted beauty norms. While this engagement seems voluntary, it appears to carry significant social pressure. Thus, future research should examine the relevance of positive body image and media literacy for maintaining well-being and emotional stability.

*Corresponding author

E-mail address: unaree@rmutl.ac.th

Introduction

In the context of contemporary Chinese society, the concept of beauty is not confined to an individual's appearance. Rather, it reflects broader social structures, cultural values, power relations, and ideologies that have long been embedded in people's lives. This is particularly evident among women, who are often subject to strict social norms regarding their appearance and appropriate behavior. Within this context, beauty is not only a source of personal satisfaction but it has also become a form of social capital that potentially brings economic opportunities, higher socioeconomic status, and social advancement (Anýžová & Matějů, 2018; Bourdieu, 1986).

Self-care has gradually transitioned from a personal activity to a social phenomenon, reflecting a shift in social perceptions of the values and meanings of beauty. For women, this shift has also involved the negotiation of power and status in daily life (Ma, 2025). This dynamic is closely connected to the rise of digital media platforms, where cultural algorithms directly influence the visibility, rankings, and audience engagement. As a result, a significant number of individuals are increasingly engaged in self-formation as a mediated process involving the production of creative content, the accumulation of followers, and the conversion of symbolic capital into economic returns (Verwiebe & Hagemann, 2025).

This dynamic is also evident on *Xiaohongshu*, a well-known Chinese digital platform, often compared to *Instagram* and *TikTok*. According to Zhang (2024), *Xiaohongshu* is an e-commerce social media platform that plays a significant role in creating spaces for young Chinese women to exchange ideas regarding beauty, fashion, and lifestyle. Within this digital environment, women's images are not merely personal self-representations but also communicative resources shaped by social norms and public expectations. The circulation of images, narratives, and linguistic signs on such social media tends to transform beauty into a symbolic practice that reflects broader social values and power relations (Luan, 2006). In this regard, *Xiaohongshu* not only serves as an online platform for sharing and exchanging beauty-related information but also functions as a site where women learn to construct representative images and negotiate beauty-related meanings in contemporary Chinese society.

Traditional Chinese beauty standards often emphasized modesty, natural appearance, and fuller body figures (Jung, 2018), whereas in contemporary digital spaces such as *Xiaohongshu*, these beauty ideals have shifted toward idealized beauty standards that emphasize fair skin, youthfulness, and slimness. This emphasis suggests a reconfiguration of beauty norms shaped by both local cultural values and media influences. The discursive construction of beauty ideals on *Xiaohongshu* is illustrated by the repetitive use of hashtags and user-generated content that highlights dominant beauty ideologies. For instance, popular hashtags such as 白幼瘦 (white, youthful, thin), 变美日记 (a beauty transformation diary), 逆袭女神 (ordinary-to-goddess transformation), and 自律变美 (becoming beautiful through self-discipline) foreground ideals of whiteness, youthfulness, slimness, self-discipline, and continuous self-improvement. These discursive practices not only highlight the social value attached to beauty but also contribute to the formation and reproduction of beauty ideals within a digitally mediated space influenced by social, economic, and technological structures (Dorčić et al., 2023).

Recent studies (e.g., Song et al., 2025; Zhu, 2023) have investigated the relationship between body image and social media in contemporary Chinese society with an emphasis primarily placed on user behavior, usage patterns, or the influences of Western beauty ideals. Nonetheless, research remains limited regarding the role of local online platforms in shaping beauty ideals through semiotic and discursive processes (Zhang & Riley, 2025). Additionally, existing studies often lack in-depth analysis of how beauty meanings are produced, circulated, and negotiated through linguistic signs and visual elements in digital user-generated content. Thus, these gaps call for closer attention to a holistic examination of the mechanisms underlying the discursive construction of beauty ideals and their negotiation in the Chinese digital context.

This study therefore addresses these gaps by examining the discursive construction of beauty ideals among Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu*. It contributes to the existing literature by paying attention to a local Chinese platform rather than Western social media, and by

focusing on how beauty meanings are constructed through semiotic and discursive processes. Drawing upon social identity theory, the present study examines how individuals define themselves in relation to social recognition and acceptance. These meanings are further explored through semiotic analysis to understand how images and beauty-related discourses generate meaning. Additionally, Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed to examine the relationships between language, power, and ideology embedded in the production and consumption of beauty-related content. The integration of these frameworks enables a multi-level analysis of the discursive construction of beauty ideals at the semiotic, discursive, and social structure levels. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What dominant beauty discourses are constructed in online beauty-related content published by Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu*?
2. How do linguistic signs, accompanied by visual elements, in online beauty-related content contribute to the discursive construction of beauty ideals and social ideologies among Chinese female influencers?

Review of Literature

***Xiaohongshu* and Chinese Beauty Culture**

Xiaohongshu, as a hybrid digital platform, combines social networking and e-commerce and functions as a key communication channel, enabling its users to share beauty-related experiences through text, images, and videos (Mei, 2024). The platform also serves as a discursive space that shapes perceptions of desirable beauty in contemporary Chinese society, particularly through content produced and circulated by influencers, whose practices are often positioned as skilled and authoritative rather than merely personal (Abidin, 2016). Hence, these beauty-related discourses are widely accepted, internalized, and reproduced among followers.

The widespread production of user-generated content on online platforms enables users to become prosumers, meaning that they produce and consume content simultaneously. Female users on *Xiaohongshu*, for instance, commonly create content related to skincare routines, makeup techniques, diet control, and beauty transformation. This content production process promotes disciplinary beauty, emphasizing self-governance and continuous self-improvement to conform to socially accepted standards (Sun & Wu, 2025). Such practices can be further understood through Foucault's (1988) concept of technologies of the self, whereby women actively regulate and transform their bodies and appearances to achieve self-satisfaction, accumulate social capital, and meet social expectations through the construction of an idealized self-image.

Semiotics

Barthes (1957/1972) proposes a framework for decoding underlying meanings in media by conceptualizing everyday objects and representations as signs operating at two distinct levels of meaning: denotation, which refers to the direct and literal meaning of a sign, and connotation, which encompasses its associated social, cultural, and ideological values. Building on this framework, Barthes introduces the concept of myth to describe ideological narratives that become naturalized through social practice and performativity. Media not only reflect reality but

also function as a powerful mechanism for reproducing myths and reinforcing dominant social ideals.

Within the context of *Xiaohongshu*, linguistic signs (e.g., hashtags and captions, such as 白幼瘦 white, youthful, thin) and visual elements (e.g., photographs and short video clips) operate as semiotic resources that normalize certain beauty standards. These signs collectively form an idealized feminine image that places implicit pressure on Chinese women to align their appearances with prevailing beauty norms (Yuan, 2025). Such repeated exposure influences women's perceptions of their bodies and selves, thereby shaping the process of the discursive construction of beauty ideals in contemporary Chinese society (Zhu, 2023). This discursive construction may extend beyond mere representation, potentially shaping how women perceive, regulate, and pursue their beauty ideals in everyday digital practices.

Social Identity

Hall (1996) defines identity as a product of discourse and cultural interpretation, where individuals adopt roles within socially accepted meaning structures. On online platforms, such as *Xiaohongshu*, many female users construct their beauty ideals through the presentation of their appearances in ways that align with social ideals. This process usually involves the use of photo-editing applications and other visual editing techniques to reflect socially accepted beauty standards (Song et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2024). This performative aspect of identity is consistent with Butler's (1990) theory that gender identity is a product of performativity rather than an inherent quality. Thus, femininity is not a fixed state but is repeatedly constructed through certain behaviors, such as applying makeup, managing diet (Butler, 1990; Xu et al., 2024), and using soft-spoken speech (Yu & Starr, 2025).

Similarly, Foucault (1977) argues that beauty has become a tool of disciplinary power through discourses of health, discipline, and technological expertise. Sharing skincare routines, reviewing products, and tracking weight have become technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988), which women use to govern their bodies and accumulate social capital.

In sum, theories of identity performativity suggest that the discursive construction of beauty ideals among Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* may be understood through three interconnected processes: the selection of signs to represent meaning and identity (Hall, 1996), the performative construction of gender through repeated discourse (Butler, 1990), and the acceptance of disciplinary control through beauty-related self-governance (Foucault, 1977, 1988). These processes frame beauty not as a fixed state but as a malleable aspect dependent on contexts, discourse, and social pressure. Likewise, digital platforms such as *Xiaohongshu* serve as shared spaces in which beauty ideals are negotiated in the digital era.

Critical Discourse Analysis

According to Fairclough (1995), discourse is not merely communicative speech but a mechanism that links language to power and ideology, framing and producing knowledge, reality, and social identity within power relationships. Thus, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) involves a thorough examination of three interconnected levels. First, the textual analysis level examines language use and relevant signs. For example, hashtags like 逆袭女神 (ordinary-to-goddess transformation) or 白幼瘦 (white, youthful, thin) highlight specific beauty ideals and ideological identity frameworks. Second, the discursive practice level considers the production, reproduction, consumption, circulation, and interpretation of texts and linguistic signs. This level

encompasses content creators, consumers, and platform mechanisms. Finally, the social practice level analyzes social, cultural, and economic contexts that reinforce beauty discourse, transforming it into a tool of body control, such as through concepts of self-development via discipline, the celebration of appearance transformations, and the evaluation of women's worth based on their appearances. CDA enables a clear understanding of the beauty ideals presented by Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu*, which are produced through repeated discursive performativity, semiotic communication, and social pressure. This reflects the broader rhetorical power that beauty and femininity discourses hold in Chinese women's daily lives in the digital era (Sun & Wu, 2025).

These four reviewed conceptual frameworks enable a thorough and holistic analysis of the discursive construction of beauty ideals of Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu*. First, Barthes' (1957/1972) semiotic analysis helps decode the connotative meanings embedded in hashtags, captions, photographs, and short video clips. Then, the findings are analyzed based on Butler's (1990) and Hall's (1996) social identity frameworks to explain how Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* adopt roles and repeatedly perform their beauty ideals through online content. Simultaneously, Foucault's (1977, 1988) concept of disciplinary power is used to understand how these Chinese female influencers transform beauty into technologies of the self, shedding light on their voluntary self-governance and personal transformation. Finally, the application of CDA (Fairclough, 1995) serves as a macro framework that links the textual analysis of signs to discursive practices of content production and consumption in beauty ideal construction and to the broader social practices that highlight beauty ideals and power structures in contemporary Chinese society. In this study, repeated hashtags are treated as key linguistic features for analysis. Their repetition across the beauty-related posts among popular Chinese female influencers represents linguistic use and discursive practice in a digitally mediated channel. The examination of such hashtags demonstrates how certain beauty standards are emphasized, normalized, consumed, and circulated among users of *Xiaohongshu*. This theoretical integration holistically explains the discursive construction of beauty ideals on *Xiaohongshu* from its semiotic aspects to complex social structures.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative method based on Critical Discourse Analysis, semiotic analysis, and social identity theory. The samples consisted of 355 hashtags, accompanied by photographs, short video clips, and captions, drawn from 70 popular beauty-related posts published by Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu*. Procedures for sample selection, data collection, and data analysis are as follows:

Sample Selection and Collection

The samples included 355 hashtags collected from 70 beauty-related posts, along with their accompanying photographs, short video clips, and captions, published by Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* between January 1st and July 31st, 2025. In this study, influencers are operationally defined as individuals who regularly produce and publish beauty-related content that receives a high level of audience engagement. The selection criteria focused on posts with content relevant to beauty, appealing appearances, and self-transformation.

Additionally, each of the selected posts reached at least 10,000 likes, as engagement metrics such as likes serve as established indicators of content popularity and social influence on social media platforms (Sabate et al., 2014). In addition, hashtags function as linguistic and semiotic resources that recur across posts over time, enabling users to search, affiliate, and repeatedly draw on shared meanings rather than generating novel expressions for each post (Zappavigna, 2015). Thus, beauty-related hashtags on *Xiaohongshu* appeared conventionalized and recurrent rather than tied to specific time periods. Therefore, the seven-month data collection period was considered sufficient to capture the platform's dominant beauty discourses and the discursive construction of beauty ideals.

Given the genre-specific nature of hashtags that usually employ short, conventionalized linguistic units, recurring within a narrowly defined content domain, the sample of 355 beauty-related hashtags was considered sufficient for qualitative analysis. This homogeneity, together with the study's narrow aim, purposively selected data, and grounding in established theoretical frameworks, provided high information power for in-depth semiotic and discursive examination rather than broad cross-case comparison (Malterud et al., 2016). Accordingly, in this study, saturation was reached when additional hashtags yielded no new discourse categories.

Following the anonymity convention, each collected post was assigned a unique identification code consisting of the term "Post," a number, and the publication date enclosed in brackets. Hashtags and captions were then referenced according to the code of the post in which they appeared. For example, the code "(Post-01, January 1st, 2025)" refers to the first collected post, published on January 1st, 2025. Any hashtag or caption drawn from that post is identified accordingly.

Data Coding

A researcher-constructed data coding sheet was used to collect and sort samples. The sheet allowed the researchers to organize the collected samples based on the influencers' names, publication dates, types of posts (photographs or short video clips), beauty discourse categories, captions, hashtags, number of likes, number of comments, and semiotic explanations. The data coding sheet helped ensure systematic and consistent analysis across samples.

In the present study, the three beauty discourses were deductively categorized based on beauty ideals and practices identified in existing literature related to body image and beauty culture in contemporary Chinese society (e.g., Song et al., 2025; Zhang, 2024). To ensure that each beauty discourse category was grounded in the dataset, the categories were refined through comparison against the collected hashtags and captions. Hashtags were assigned to a category when their explicit or connotative meaning aligned with the category's defining characteristics. These three beauty discourses were considered dominant based on their consistent recurrence across the collected linguistic signs of hashtags and captions, and no other discourse category emerged with comparable consistency. Table 1 presents the outline for beauty discourse categorization.

Table 1

Categorization of Beauty Discourses, Descriptions, and Example Hashtags

Beauty Discourses	Descriptions	Example Hashtags
Idealized Beauty Norms	- A beauty discourse highlighting aspirational female identities - Serving as target beauty practices - Functioning as a reference for other ideal categories	#白幼瘦 (White, youthful, thin)
Transformative Beauty Journeys	- A beauty discourse emphasizing the processes of personal transformation through self-discipline, self-governance, and self-improvement to overcome limitations and achieve socially accepted appearances	#变美日记 (A beauty transformation diary) #逆袭女神 (Ordinary-to-goddess transformation) #自律变美 (Becoming beautiful through self-discipline)
Technical Aesthetics and Beauty Practices	- A beauty discourse emphasizing the technical aspects of beauty presented through instructional content, which highlights the belief that beauty is not a talent but a skill acquirable through consistent learning and application	#护肤教程 (Skincare tutorials) #美妆教程 (Makeup tutorials) #头像感 (A profile-picture aesthetic)

In addition, hashtags associated with the posts were subjected to semiotic analysis, following Barthes' (1957/1972) framework, to extract beauty ideals and understand their roles in the discursive construction of beauty ideals of Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu*. These meanings were then linked to social and cultural contexts.

Data Analysis

The samples were qualitatively analyzed based on the frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), semiotics, and social identity to decode embedded meanings and ideals. First, the 355 hashtags were analyzed and categorized into three dominant beauty discourses: transformative beauty journeys, technical aesthetics and beauty practices, and idealized beauty norms. These categories were interpreted through Hall's (1996) and Butler's (1990) identity frameworks and Foucault's (1977, 1988) concepts of disciplinary power and technologies of the self to explain how beauty ideals are performed and self-governed. Second, following Barthes' (1957/1972) framework, semiotic coding was conducted on linguistic features of the 355 hashtags and captions in the 70 selected posts, to interpret each sign unit at the denotative and connotative levels. Photographs and short video clips were not independently sampled or coded

but served to inform and corroborate the interpretation of the hashtags and captions, consistent with the hashtags' role as the primary unit of analysis. Third, the textual and discursive patterns were mapped onto Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model, linking signs to the discursive practices of content production and consumption and to broader social practices in contemporary Chinese society. The identified beauty discourse categories were also quantitatively analyzed using descriptive statistics for frequency and percentage to provide an overview of distribution patterns rather than to support inferential claims. The findings were then presented descriptively.

Following Jamieson et al.'s (2023) guidelines for reflexivity in qualitative research, researcher reflexivity was employed throughout the process to ensure validity and reliability of the analysis. Empirical evidence was used to ensure that the findings were accurate and grounded in the adopted conceptual frameworks. Additionally, an expert in Chinese language and linguistics crosschecked the findings. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved before reaching the final conclusions.

Findings

This section presents the findings based on the established research questions. The dominant beauty discourses on *Xiaohongshu* were first presented, followed by an analysis of how these beauty discourses, shaped primarily by linguistic signs and supplemented by visual elements, contribute to the discursive construction of beauty ideals and social ideologies among Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu*.

Dominant Beauty Discourses on *Xiaohongshu*

The analysis of the 355 beauty-related hashtags, accompanied by photographs, short video clips, and captions, drawn from 70 popular posts published by Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* revealed three dominant beauty discourses: idealized beauty norms, transformative beauty journeys, and technical aesthetics and beauty practices. Each post was categorized based on its dominant beauty discourse. Posts featuring hashtags associated with transformative beauty journeys were most common, appearing in 36 posts (51.43%). Posts featuring hashtags associated with technical aesthetics and beauty practices were the second most common, occurring in 25 posts (35.71%). Posts featuring hashtags associated with idealized beauty norms were the least common, appearing in nine posts (12.86%). Table 2 presents the three dominant beauty discourses, their frequencies, and representative example hashtags.

Table 2

Three Dominant Beauty Discourses, Their Frequencies, and Representative Example Hashtags

Categories of Beauty Discourse	Frequencies (%)	Representative Example Hashtags
Transformative Beauty Journeys	36 (51.43%)	#变美日记 (A beauty transformation diary) #我的变美过程 (My beauty transformation process) #懒人变美大作战 (Lazy girl's beauty transformation mission)

Table 2*(Cont.)*

Categories of Beauty Discourse		Frequencies (%)	Representative Example Hashtags
			#逆袭女神 (Ordinary-to-goddess transformation) #爆改 (Radical makeover) #素人大改造 (Makeover for ordinary people) #自律变美 (Becoming beautiful through self-discipline) #自律打卡 (Self-discipline check-in) #每天四组 (Four sets a day)
Technical Aesthetics and Beauty Practices		25 (35.71%)	#护肤教程 (Skincare tutorials) #白成反光板 (White like a reflector board) #美白攻略 (Whitening strategy) #居家护肤 (At-home skincare) #懒人护肤法 (Lazy skincare method) #美妆教程 (Makeup tutorials) #化妆技巧 (Makeup techniques) #素颜妆 (Natural no-makeup look) #妆容分享 (Makeup style sharing) #新手化妆 (Makeup for beginners) #头像感自拍 (Selfie with a profile picture aesthetic) #氛围感 (Atmospheric vibe)
Idealized Norms	Beauty	9 (12.86%)	#白幼瘦 (White, youthful, thin) #减肥 (Lose weight) #瘦腿 (Slim legs) #瘦手臂 (Slim arms) #漫画腿 (Cartoon-style legs) #初恋脸 (A first-love face)
Total		70 (100%)	

It was also found that a combination of discourse types occurred in a single post. For example, a Chinese female influencer included the following caption in her post.

女生自律清单 用半年时间彻底改变脱胎换骨

(Self-discipline checklist for women: in six months, (you) can be completely reborn)

(Post-33, May 22nd, 2025)

This caption consists of two beauty discourses. The phrases 彻底改变 (complete transformation) and 脱胎换骨 (reborn) signify a journey of complete self-transformation, which is part of the discourse on transformative beauty journeys. In addition, the phrase 清单

(checklist) implies systematic procedures of achieving beauty goals, making beauty a plannable and practicable project. Consequently, the three dominant beauty discourses do not exist in isolation but are interconnected, forming a network of mutually reinforced ideas. They construct beauty as an entity that can be produced, cultivated, and aspired to. This network, shaped by contemporary ideologies through digital media, plays a significant role in defining beauty and women's roles in contemporary Chinese society.

The Discursive Construction of Beauty Ideals among Chinese Female Influencers on Xiaohongshu

To address the second research question, this section presents how linguistic signs, supplemented by visual elements, shape Chinese female influencers' beauty ideals and social ideologies on *Xiaohongshu*. First, the process of semiotic meaning formation is demonstrated, followed by the processes of constructing beauty ideals and social ideologies.

Process of Semiotic Meaning Formation

Semiotic analysis revealed that the beauty presented by Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* involved both physical appearances and constructed discourses within social, cultural, and technological contexts. These presentations are connected to the three dominant beauty discourses, each of which is illustrated below through representative examples.

Semiotically, the discourse of transformative beauty journeys frames beauty as a self-improvement project, as evidenced by hashtags like 变美日记 (a beauty transformation diary), 逆袭女神 (ordinary-to-goddess transformation), and 自律变美 (becoming beautiful through self-discipline). Beauty is viewed as a constructable and transformable characteristic through personal effort, time, knowledge, and self-discipline. Many Chinese female influencers share their experiences through before-and-after narratives, highlighting the transformation from an ordinary appearance into one that is publicly accepted and attractive. Examples (a) to (c) present the three most popular posts that incorporated linguistic signs with the transformative beauty journeys discourse.

- (a) 美美逆袭！好的体态真的比长相重要
(Beautiful glow-up! Good posture is truly more important than facial features)
(Post-03, January 15th, 2025)
- (b) 女生自律清单 用半年时间彻底改变脱胎换骨
(Self-discipline checklist for women: in six months, (you) can be completely reborn)
(Post-33, May 22nd, 2025)
- (c) 两个月带你见证自律的杀伤力, 所有出镜素材皆本人!! 非盗图! 非抄袭! 请勿误判。
(In two months, you witness the destructive power of self-discipline. All photos and videos are mine. They aren't stolen or copied. Don't misunderstand.)
(Post-32, May 21st, 2025)

These exemplified posts highlight the use of linguistic signs (i.e., 逆袭 comeback; 彻底改变 complete transformation; 脱胎换骨 reborn; 自律的杀伤力 the destructive power of self-

discipline; and 好的体态 good posture) to signify transformative beauty journeys, as they not only narrate an individual's appearance transformation but also reinforce the contemporary belief that beauty is the direct result of personal effort rather than a matter of luck. Thus, a new appearance becomes evidence of women's determination and self-discipline and serves as a tool of self-value accumulation in the digital space. Interestingly, Example (c) also includes the linguistic signs that assert authenticity (i.e., 所有出镜素材皆本人 all photos and videos are mine; 非盗图 not stolen images; 非抄袭 not copied), indicating that women must not only perform self-transformation but also prove its truthfulness. Table 3 presents a semiotic analysis of the transformative beauty journeys discourse.

Table 3

A Semiotic Analysis of the Transformative Beauty Journeys Discourse

Examples of Beauty Discourse	Key Signifiers	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
美美逆袭！好的体态真的比长相重要 <i>(Beautiful glow-up! Good posture is truly more important than facial features)</i>	逆袭	Comeback	This signifies determination, effort, and achievements of self-transformation to reach accepted beauty standards.	Every woman can achieve self-transformation with sufficient effort.
(Post-03, January 15th, 2025; 588,000 likes; 1,378 comments)	好的体态	Good posture	This signifies that quality beauty dominates good facial features. A new beauty measure is also introduced, highlighting that beauty is not an inherent quality, but something that can be developed.	A good-looking woman is not only beautiful but also has a personality that demonstrates self-discipline to control her own body.
女生自律清单 用半年时间彻底改变脱胎换骨 <i>(Self-discipline checklist for women: in six months, (you))</i>	自律清单	Self-discipline checklist	This signifies a pressure that drives women to strictly control themselves to achieve beauty goals or idealized success.	Beauty is a result of self-discipline. A woman who lacks discipline does not have the right to success or social acceptance.

Table 3

(Cont.)

Examples of Beauty Discourse	Key Signifiers	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
<i>can be completely reborn)</i> (Post-33, May 22nd, 2025; 453,000 likes; 1,313 comments)	彻底改变	A complete transformation	This implies that one's old self is not good enough and that women should embrace a radical transformation to become a person who is worthy.	The erasure of one's old self to construct a new, socially accepted one ties this transformation to beauty values and success in a performance-oriented digital world.
	脱胎换骨	Reborn	This embeds the concept that a real transformation involves uprooting one's old self and constructing a new one aligning with social standards.	Rebirth through beauty demonstrates that beauty is a path to salvation and to reclaiming one's value in society.
两个月带你见证自律的杀伤力, 所有出镜素材皆本人!! 非盗图! 非抄袭! 请勿误判。 (In two months, you witness the destructive power of self-discipline. All photos and videos are of me. They aren't stolen or copied.	自律的杀伤力	The destructive power of self-discipline	Discipline is viewed as a powerful force that breaks down various barriers and limitations to push one's life toward a quick and clear improvement.	Strict discipline is the key to success and true beauty.
	所有出镜素材皆本人	All photos and videos are of myself.	The beauty and the results are genuine, not illusions or fabrications.	Real beauty must be provable and confirmable through clear evidence.

Table 3*(Cont.)*

Examples of Beauty Discourse	Key Signifiers	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
<i>Don't misunderstand.)</i>				
(Post-32, May 21st, 2025; 38,000 likes; 328 comments)				

From the perspective of semiotic analysis, the discourse of technical aesthetics and beauty practices involves the formation of beauty into a set of skills that can be learned, transferred, and practiced, as evidenced in the linguistic signs of skincare tutorials (护肤教程), makeup tutorials (美妆教程), and a profile picture aesthetic (头像感). Beauty is not tied to inherent or genetic features. In contrast, technical knowledge, hands-on skills, and strict self-discipline lead to beauty success, highlighting that anyone can be beautiful with sufficient learning and effort. Through this lens, beauty has become a technical space that is manageable within a limited timeframe. Examples (d) to (f) present the three most popular posts that clearly display linguistic signs signifying the technical aesthetics and beauty practices discourse.

(d) 其他照片我不知道 但头像感是我的强项

(I'm not sure about other photos, but my profile-picture aesthetic is the best.)

(Post-07, February 8th, 2025)

(e) 居家做美容院同款项目！白成反光板易如反掌！

(Doing salon treatments at home; white like a reflector board; as easy as turning your palm over)

(Post-36, May 30th, 2025)

(f) 一个化妆的经历过程，从无效化妆慢慢变成有效化妆，再到多变化妆，我这种长相平平的一起学起来咯！

(This is my makeup journey, from ineffective to effective, and finally to creating diverse looks. For those of us with average looks, let's learn together!)

(Post-27, May 10th, 2025)

The exemplified posts highlight the discourse of technical aesthetics and beauty practices, as they not only present beauty techniques but also reinforce the contemporary belief that beauty is a learnable and trainable skill, not an inherent or genetic quality. In this context, self-care and image formation become evidence of determination, technical knowledge, and self-discipline among women. Such linguistic signs as 头像感 (a profile-picture aesthetic), 强项 (my best), 白成反光板 (white like a reflector board), 易如反掌 (as easy as turning your palm over),

从无效化妆 → 有效化妆 → 多变化妆 (from ineffective makeup → to effective makeup → to versatile makeup), and 长相平平 (average-looking), also reflect an embedded pressure for women to continuously improve themselves through technical learning, practice, and self-control in alignment with contemporary beauty norms. Table 4 presents a semiotic analysis of the technical aesthetics and beauty practices discourse.

Table 4

A Semiotic Analysis of the Technical Aesthetics and Beauty Practices Discourse

Examples of Beauty Discourse	Key Signifiers	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
其他照片我不知 道但头像感是我 的强项 <i>I'm not sure about other photos, but my profile-picture aesthetic is the best.</i>	头像感	A profile-picture aesthetic	The ability to control and design oneself through a profile photo is a presentation of the best image selectively to create an impression and a unique identity.	A good profile photo is the key to social success and popularity in the digital era.
(Post-07, February 8th, 2025; 559,000 likes; 2,293 comments)	是我的强项	My best	This signifies confidence and pride in one's image that has been well managed and positioned.	A unique and remarkable strength is required for women to be accepted and successful in the online world.
居家做美容院同 款项目！白成反 光板易如反掌！ <i>Doing salon treatments at home; white like a reflector board; as easy as turning your palm over!</i>	居家做美容院 同款项目	Doing salon treatments at home	Beauty does not require high capital or rely on an expert. Women can do it themselves.	Beauty is accessible for ordinary women, but they need to take action themselves.
	白成反光板	White like a reflector board	Extreme whiteness implies remarkability, cleanness, and extraordinary beauty.	A white complexion is a symbol of value, purity, and perfection in Asian society.

Table 4

(Cont.)

Examples of Beauty Discourse	Key Signifiers	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
(Post-36, May 30th, 2025; 186,000 likes; 3,137 comments)	易如反掌	As easy as turning your palm over	Beauty is not a difficult task. Everyone can become beautiful if they know how.	Beauty is a matter that needs to be done effectively, and self-care is women's duty.
一个化妆的经历过程，从无效化妆慢慢变成有效化妆，再到多变化妆，我这种长相平平的一起学起来咯！	无效化妆 → 有效化妆 → 多变化妆	From ineffective makeup → to effective makeup → to versatile makeup	Modern womanhood is framed as requiring continuous learning, adaptation, and expertise.	Beauty can be practiced, and it must be developed continuously.
<i>This is my makeup journey, from ineffective to effective, and finally to creating diverse looks. For those of us with average looks, let's learn together!</i>	长相平平的一起学起来	For those of us with average looks, let's learn together.	This signifies the creation of space where everyone can access idealized beauty standards.	Although you are an ordinary person, you still have to transform yourself to gain social acceptance.
(Post-27, May 10th, 2025; 90,000 likes; 6,411 comments)				

The discourse of idealized beauty norms highlights the performativity of beauty ideals, as evidenced in the repeated use of linguistic signs in the hashtag 白幼瘦 (white, youthful, thin) on Xiaohongshu. Semiotically, the linguistic sign 白幼瘦 (white, youthful, thin) primarily shapes Chinese female influencers' beauty ideals on contemporary digital media through the presentation of a fair complexion, youthful looks, and a slim body. These appearances are socially accepted as beauty standards worth striving for. Although this linguistic sign presents beauty as a natural, inherent characteristic, social ideologies that support practices for idealized women actually shape desirable beauty. Thus, beauty has become a social duty rather than a

personal choice. Examples (g) and (h) present the two most popular posts that clearly display linguistic signs associated with the idealized beauty norms discourse.

(g) 想变美速进！三招养成女明星初恋脸！

(Act fast if you want to become beautiful. Three techniques to cultivate a female celebrity's first-love face)

(Post-06, January 1st, 2025)

(h) 原来她们是这样减肥的，怪不得都这么瘦！

(So that's how they lose weight. No wonder they're all so thin.)

(Post-67, July 12th, 2025)

The two exemplified posts highlight that the linguistic sign 白幼瘦 (white, youthful, thin) significantly frames the formation of idealized beauty standards as a universal truth. These posts also employ the linguistic signs 速进 (act fast), 三招养成 (three techniques to cultivate), 女明星初恋脸 (a female celebrity's first-love face), and 这么瘦 (so thin), which reinforce urgency, attainability, and a male-oriented beauty ideal, respectively. However, it is actually embedded with power that determines women's role as controllable and well-mannered individuals. In the digital world, beauty has become a form of social capital that significantly shapes social acceptance. Table 5 presents a semiotic analysis of the idealized beauty norms discourse.

Table 5

A Semiotic Analysis of the Idealized Beauty Norms Discourse

Examples of Beauty Discourse	Key Signifiers	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
想变美速进！三招养成女明星初恋脸！	变美	Become beautiful	Beauty is something individuals actively pursue and improve, rather than passively possess.	Women have an unquestioned duty to continuously develop themselves to meet evolving beauty standards.
<i>Act fast if you want to become beautiful. Three techniques to cultivate a female celebrity's first-love face.</i>	速进	Act fast	Beauty is a trend that women have to keep up with.	Women have to upgrade themselves quickly. Otherwise, they will fall behind the beauty trend.

Table 5

(Cont.)

Examples of Beauty Discourse	Key Signifiers	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
(Post-06, January 1st, 2025; 219,000 likes; 2,557 comments)	三招养成	Three techniques to cultivate	Beauty has a ready-to-use formula. Anyone can be beautiful.	Beauty is not inherent but a result of consistent practice.
	女明星初恋脸	A female celebrity's first-love face	Pure and charming beauty is ultimately required.	This represents a charming woman who is alluring at first sight but not overly seductive, forming an idealized femininity that is perceived as safe and endearing.
原来她们是这样减肥的, 怪不得都这么瘦!	这样减肥	Lose weight this way	Thinness is not a matter of coincidence, but a result of correct knowledge and skills.	Thinness is not a matter of talent, but it is achieved through effort and discipline.
<i>This is how they lose weight. No wonder they're all so thin.</i>	这么瘦	So thin	Thinness deserves compliments and jealousy. Thus, thinness becomes everyone's goal.	Thinness is interpreted as a symbol of success and socially accepted beauty.
(Post-67, July 12th, 2025; 65,000 likes; 309 comments)				

In brief, the concept of beauty on *Xiaohongshu* is constructed as a set of desirable physical appearances through the repetitive use of beauty-related hashtags and linguistic signs. Collectively, these signs constitute the three dominant beauty discourses (i.e., transformative beauty journeys, technical aesthetics and beauty practices, and idealized beauty norms), positioning *Xiaohongshu* as a venue for producing, reproducing, consuming, circulating, and subtly normalizing socially accepted beauty standards among Chinese women.

The Discursive Construction of Beauty Ideals among Chinese Female Influencers on Xiaohongshu

Based on Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the discursive construction of beauty ideals on *Xiaohongshu* operates at three interconnected levels: textual, discursive practice, and social practice.

At the textual level, hashtags and captions create the mythical performativity of beauty. This is evident in linguistic signs, such as 逆袭女神 (ordinary-to-goddess transformation), 初恋脸 (a first-love face), 自律清单 (self-discipline checklist), and 白成反光板 (white like a reflector board). These linguistic signs function as concentrated units through which beauty ideals are naturalized and rendered self-evident.

At the discursive practice level, the production, consumption, and circulation of beauty-related content, as well as the creation of before-and-after narratives, tutorials, and diaries by Chinese female influencers, reflect the audience's acceptance of these discourses through shares, likes, and comments.

At the social practice level, these textual and discursive patterns are reinforced by broader social and economic structures, transforming beauty into a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and a mechanism for elaborate self-governance (Foucault, 1977, 1988). These three discourse levels are demonstrated concretely through the analysis of the three representative posts in Examples (i) through (k).

Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* present their beauty ideals through narratives of personal experiences, before-and-after comparison, diaries, and beauty-related advice. This should be considered not merely innocent experience sharing but also the discursive construction of an accepted beauty ideal framed by beauty discourses on socially accepted beauty standards. Example (i) demonstrates how a Chinese female influencer employs linguistic signs to construct her beauty ideal through the transformative beauty journeys discourse.

(i) 女生自律清单 用半年时间彻底改变脱胎换骨

(Self-discipline checklist for women: in six months, (you) can be completely reborn)

(Post-33, May 22nd, 2025)

The exemplified post uses the primary linguistic signs 自律清单 (self-discipline checklist), 彻底改变 (complete transformation), and 脱胎换骨 (reborn) to highlight the discourse on transformative disciplined beauty. Complete transformation frames one's old self as an inadequate entity and elevates new beauty standards as a representation of success based on socially and culturally accepted beauty ideals.

Furthermore, the post reflects that the construction of beauty ideals is a result of self-discipline. Women are self-regulating agents who manage their behaviors using technical tools—such as a discipline checklist—to oversee their daily beauty routines to achieve identified beauty-related goals. Simultaneously, the signs 彻底改变 (complete transformation) and 脱胎换骨 (reborn) serve as transition rituals from an unaccepted former self to a new, accepted identity. This aligns with the power structures and ideologies of beauty in the digital world. In addition, this transformation is not a result of an individual's personal desire but a response to symbolic pressure and beauty discourses deeply rooted in media and contemporary culture.

Beauty is also viewed as an idealized standard, situating itself as the most desirable beauty goal among women. Example (j) presents the use of linguistic signs in relation to the idealized beauty norms discourse.

(j) 想变美速进！三招养成女明星初恋脸！

(Act fast if you want to become beautiful. Three techniques to cultivate a female celebrity's first-love face)

(Post-06, January 1st, 2025)

This post uses the linguistic signs 变美 (become beautiful), 速进 (act fast), 三招养成 (three techniques to cultivate), and 女明星初恋脸 (a female celebrity's first-love face) to co-create a discourse where beauty is a pressing goal that can be replicated with a ready-to-use formula. Beauty is presented as a quickly transformable entity with correct methods or shortcuts. The linguistic signs 速进 (act fast) and 三招养成 (three techniques to cultivate) signify beauty as a time-sensitive commodity, urging women to grasp it promptly before missing it. Additionally, a reference to the linguistic sign 女明星初恋脸 (a female celebrity's first-love face) reflects a beauty ideal that links the idealized female image to a male-oriented ideal through a gentle, innocent, and vulnerable first-love fantasy. While this type of beauty is elevated as women's most desirable goal, it diminishes women's agency and reduces their role to objects of the gaze rather than a powerful individual capable of self-control.

This presentation aligns with Foucault's (1988) concept of technologies of the self, in which women perform regular beauty routines to create an accepted identity, conforming to digital beauty standards. Similarly, the linguistic sign 速进 (act fast) serves as discursive pressure that pushes women to quickly transform themselves, otherwise they will fall behind contemporary beauty standards. Additionally, the creation of image 女明星初恋脸 (a female celebrity's first-love face) as a universally desired goal is a repeated construction of a single beauty standard, diminishing the diversity of appearances and gender identities.

Furthermore, Example (k) demonstrates how linguistic signs are used to present the technical aesthetics and beauty practices discourse.

(k) 居家做美容院同款项目！白成反光板易如反掌！

(Doing salon treatments at home; white like a reflector board; as easy as turning your palm over)

(Post-36, May 30th, 2025)

The exemplified post incorporates the linguistic signs 居家做美容院同款项目 (Doing salon treatments at home), 白成反光板 (white like a reflector board), and 易如反掌 (as easy as turning your palm over) to create the discourse of technical aesthetics and beauty practices, viewing beauty as a technologized, accessible entity. Through this lens, beauty is no longer a mystery that requires expertise. Rather, it is a process that women can do on their own at home using tools or techniques similar to those used at a beauty salon. The discourse also makes beauty an individualized project, encouraging women to be aware of their beauty routines. The skincare process or self-transformation is repeatedly presented through easy, convenient, and

possible techniques that everyone can do. The use of the linguistic sign 白成反光板 (white like a reflector board) also reflects a myth that a white skin tone is a symbol of success and a desirable social status. Simultaneously, the description of effective beauty using the linguistic sign 易如反掌 (as easy as turning your palm over) highlights an expectation that anyone can be beautiful with sufficient effort. It also serves as discursive pressure, pushing women to realize that not taking good care of themselves is equivalent to a failure. Within the power structure of contemporary beauty discourses, beauty has become a duty that requires consistent action and discipline, even in women's private spaces.

Although beauty discourses on *Xiaohongshu* are presented as disciplined transformation, an express ready-to-use formula, and accessible techniques, they are framed by the discursive construction of beauty ideals as a project of the self that requires women's consistent effort. Therefore, this discursive construction suggests that women have to incorporate the concept of technologies of the self to govern and improve themselves consistently to align with the socially accepted beauty norms. Consequently, beauty ideals on *Xiaohongshu* are not a fixed state, but an ongoing performativity, shaped by discursive influences and the power mechanisms embedded in contemporary digital culture.

The discursive construction of beauty ideals among Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* does not occur solely from personal desire. Rather, it is a result of a complex relationship among influencers, consumers, platform mechanisms, and beauty discourses in contemporary Chinese society. Therefore, beauty ideals are not inherent, but are discursively constructed, inviting individuals to adopt certain roles (Hall, 1996) within conditioned social acceptance through performativity and symbolic communication (Butler, 1990). Beauty discourses have become normalized, framing the definition of desirable beauty and the identities that such discourses invite women to perform.

Discussion

This study analyzed 355 beauty-related hashtags, accompanied by photographs, short video clips, and captions, drawn from 70 popular posts published by Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu*, each post meeting a minimum threshold of 10,000 likes. The hashtags were collected between January 1st and July 31st, 2025. The analysis focused on the discursive construction of beauty ideals among Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* by employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), semiotic analysis, and social identity theory.

The findings revealed three dominant discourses (i.e., transformative beauty journeys, technical aesthetics and beauty practices, and idealized beauty norms) that frame the discursive construction of meaning, which, in turn, shapes perceptions regarding desirable beauty among Chinese women. Collectively, these beauty discourses operate as a mutually reinforcing system that defines and normalizes beauty standards in contemporary Chinese society.

Semiotically, the myth of 白幼瘦 (white, youthful, thin), as presented through the idealized beauty norms discourse on *Xiaohongshu*, was created as a natural and difficult-to-argue construct. Contemporary Chinese beauty ideals have shifted from traditional Chinese beauty ideals, which valued fuller figures (Jung, 2018), toward whiteness, youthfulness, and thinness. This shift reflects the influence of social media platforms, in which normalized beauty standards are produced, reproduced, consumed, and circulated among Chinese women. In addition, the use of linguistic signs, such as 初恋脸 (a first-love face), similarly evokes the

youthfulness and purity associated with a first love, suggesting the highest beauty standard that women should achieve. Although the discursive construction of these beauty ideals remains totalizing, the coexistence of the three beauty discourses identified in the present study, particularly the more attainable, skill-based framing offered by the technical aesthetics and beauty practices discourse, suggests that women are offered multiple entry points for negotiating their relationship to the dominant beauty standards, rather than a single fixed ideal. This discourse not only creates beauty standards but also significantly frames beauty ideals among Chinese women in the digital era.

The transformative beauty journeys discourse presents beauty as the process of consistent self-development. It uses hashtags, such as 自律清单 (self-discipline checklist), 彻底改变 (complete transformation), and 脱胎换骨 (reborn), to present this idea. These semiotic representations highlight determination and effort, reinforcing the concept that beauty is a matter of intention and action. On the one hand, this discourse positively values beauty, and this value can empower and motivate women. On the other hand, it may create pressure, pushing women to view beauty as a personal responsibility they must fulfill. As Lang and Ye (2024) observe, beauty ideals accelerate the money and time investment of young Chinese women to achieve an idealized body image. This pressure aligns with growing concerns about body image dissatisfaction and its associated health risks documented in the broader social media literature (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020) and among young Chinese women specifically (Lang & Ye, 2024).

The technical aesthetics and beauty practices discourse views beauty as knowledge and a technical skill that can be acquired and transferred, rather than a product of social inequality. For example, the linguistic sign 白成反光板 (white like a reflector board) represents perfect whiteness in Asian society, and this quality can be easily achieved through certain techniques and practices, as seen in the use of the linguistic sign 易如反掌 (as easy as turning your palm over). These types of knowledge and techniques are presented as user-friendly and practical, so followers can easily adopt them to achieve their beauty goals. This concept signifies that social media makes beauty a learnable and practicable object, contrasting Henriques and Patnaik's (2020) broader view that social media has pushed women to get involved in life-threatening activities to conform to socially accepted beauty trends.

The discursive construction of beauty ideals among Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* is not an independent process. Instead, it is shaped by a complex relationship among various factors, including content creators, consumers, social media platform mechanisms, and contemporary beauty ideologies. Based on the conceptual frameworks of Hall (1996) and Butler (1990), Chinese female influencers adopt roles and repeatedly perform beauty ideals in alignment with social norms through publishing photographs and short video clips, showcasing appearance transformation, and presenting hashtags and captions related to detailed self-care. This performativity promotes and reinforces beauty ideals that conform to socially accepted beauty norms.

According to Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self, Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu* voluntarily employ beauty strategies of self-governance and self-transformation. Through a comparison of before-and-after self-transformation, these influencers promote their followers' engagement using a daily check-in activity. This highlights Chinese female influencers' self-imposed practices to improve themselves and build confidence, shaped by contemporary beauty ideologies (Lang & Ye, 2024).

The analysis through the lens of Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals three levels of the discursive construction of beauty ideals among Chinese female influencers on *Xiaohongshu*. First, at the textual level, the performativity of beauty discourse—such as the myth 白幼瘦 (white, youthful, thin) and the signifier 初恋脸 (a first-love face)—naturally presents beauty as a commonly accepted beauty standard. Second, at the discursive practice level, beauty-related content, which presents practical techniques and procedures for self-development, skincare routines, and makeup application, is produced, reproduced, consumed, and circulated, as evidenced through the accumulation of views, likes, and shares. Finally, at the social practice level, beauty ideals, self-governance mechanisms, and the beauty-related behaviors promoted in contemporary Chinese society are reinforced by social pressure, normalizing new beauty standards in the online world.

These findings echo those of Zhang (2024) and Zhang and Riley (2025), in that online platforms significantly influence the discursive construction of beauty ideals and normalization in contemporary Chinese society. They also corroborate a study by Yuan (2025), which argues that social media both promotes and restricts women's beauty ideals at present. This leads to social pressure that is complex and diverse. Through the social dimension, this pressure may create motivation for women's self-development through beauty, but it can also affect women's mental health and emotional stability (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020). Hence, a better understanding of these discourses may inform efforts to promote diversity and equality of beauty standards.

Conclusion

Beauty discourses on *Xiaohongshu* highlight social, cultural, and economic dynamics in contemporary Chinese society, where Chinese women encounter expectations regarding professional and self-care successes. Consequently, beauty discourses become a component of feminist representations, showing modernity and power in society. For instance, the technical aesthetics and beauty practices discourse frames women as capable, knowledgeable agents who can independently master beauty techniques, which were once reserved for professional expertise. This framing positions self-improvement as a form of control and achievement. However, these discourses also reflect social pressure and restrictions, shaped by the concepts of patriarchy and gender inequality. For example, the idealized beauty norms discourse constructs beauty as urgent and time-sensitive through such linguistic signs as 速进 (act fast) and anchors female beauty ideals to a male-oriented fantasy through linguistic signs such as 女明星初恋脸 (a female celebrity's first-love face). This construction construes women as objects of an implied male gaze rather than autonomous subjects.

This ambivalence resonates with postfeminist media studies, which argue that women's empowerment in media culture is often articulated through consumption, self-discipline, and individual self-transformation (Gill, 2007). In this sense, the beauty discourses on *Xiaohongshu* reflect a postfeminist sensibility in which the language of choice and self-improvement coexists with, and may conceal, continuing structures of gender inequality. The findings further suggest that Chinese female influencers are not completely governed by the socially accepted beauty standards. Rather, they play a significant role in maintaining beauty discourses through daily discursive beauty practices. Such active involvement reflects discursive power through

individuals' acceptance and voluntary selection within a specifically determined social structure.

Beauty discourses on *Xiaohongshu* remain limited to a standardized concept of beauty, primarily highlighting the concept of 白幼瘦 (white, youthful, thin). This limitation restricts the diversity of beauty ideals by ignoring other dimensions (e.g., local cultural beauty or personally unique beauty). Despite this limitation, *Xiaohongshu* permits the creation of alternative discourses that challenge original beauty standards, which should be studied further. Additionally, a study of beauty discourses found on *Douyin* or *Weibo* may reveal a comparative dimension of the discursive construction of beauty ideals and point out the diversity of beauty standards in contemporary Chinese society.

Finally, the dominant beauty discourses identified in the present study appear to encourage voluntary self-governance and self-transformation among users of *Xiaohongshu* to maintain accepted beauty standards and to gain social acceptance. An important implication, though beyond the scope of the present analysis, is the promotion of body image positivity and media literacy to support the well-being and emotional stability of Chinese women who use *Xiaohongshu*. Accordingly, future research could investigate how users of *Xiaohongshu* or other social media platforms respond to, negotiate, or resist these dominant beauty ideals in practice.

Limitations

The present research exhibits some limitations. First, the data for analysis were drawn from a single online Chinese platform, *Xiaohongshu*, making the generalization of consumers' perceptions and experiences limited. Second, as the dataset comprises content published by Chinese female influencers rather than direct accounts from general platform users, the findings reflect the discursive construction of beauty ideals as presented by these influencers and should not be generalized to the lived experiences, interpretations, or practices of a broader group of *Xiaohongshu* users. Additionally, the semiotic analysis and discourse analysis are restricted to public content and lack qualitative data from actual platform users. Hence, these limitations affect the depth and diversity of the discursive construction of beauty ideals. Consequently, future studies should consider incorporating research instruments (e.g., a focus-group interview or a semi-structured interview) to collect qualitative data from platform users to understand their experiences, feelings, and attitudes toward beauty discourses in different contexts.

Author Contributions

SB: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Writing–Original Draft Preparation, and Project Administration.

UT: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Writing–Original Draft Preparation, and Writing–Review and Editing.

Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Claude Sonnet-5 (Anthropic) to assist with language editing and polishing of the draft. The tool was also used to verify in-text citations and references. The authors reviewed and revised the output as necessary, and they take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Research and Development Institute of Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL-IRB 223/2025).

Funding

This study did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Abidin, C. (2016). Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online? Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641342>
- Anýžová, P., & Matějů, P. (2018). Beauty still matters: The role of attractiveness in labour market outcomes. *International Sociology*, 33(3), 269–291. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580918760431>
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). The Noonday Press. (Original work published 1957)
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Dorčić, T. M., Smojver-Ažić, S., Božić, I., & Malkoč, I. (2023). Effects of social media social comparisons and identity processes on body image satisfaction in late adolescence. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 19(2), 220–231. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.9885>
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>
- Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs “identity”? In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1–17). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907.n1>
- Henriques, M., & Patnaik, D. (2020). Social media and its effects on beauty. In M. P. Levine & J. S. Santos (Eds.), *Beauty – Cosmetic science, cultural issues, and creative development* (pp. 1–9). IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.93322>
- Jamieson, M. K., Govaart, G. H., & Pownall, M. (2023). Reflexivity in quantitative research: A rationale and beginner's guide. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 17(4), Article e12735. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12735>
- Jung, J. (2018). Young women's perceptions of traditional and contemporary female beauty ideals in China. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 47(1), 56–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcsr.12273>
- Lang, M., & Ye, Y. (2024). Beauty ideals and body positivity: A qualitative investigation of young women's perspectives on social media content in China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, Article 1389935. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1389935>

- Luan, Y. M. (2006). 媒介形象的研究现状及重新定义 [The current state and redefinition of research on media image]. *Today's Mass Media*, 9, 16–19.
- Ma, H. (2025). Negotiating beauty: Exploring beauty narratives of Chinese women in different life stages. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 34(2), 263–280.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2360488>
- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753–1760.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>
- Mei, X. (2024). The influence of user-generated beauty content on Xiaohongshu on the purchase decisions of generation Z Chinese women. *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences*, 141, 20–27. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/2024.GA18927>
- Sabate, F., Berbegal-Mirabent, J., Cañabate, A., & Lebherz, P. R. (2014). Factors influencing popularity of branded content in Facebook fan pages. *European Management Journal*, 32(6), 1001–1011. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2014.05.001>
- Song, S., Adnan, H. M., & Ibrahim, M. S., (2025). The impact of functionality-focused social media images on positive body image: An experimental study among young Chinese women. *Frontiers in Communication*, 10, Article 1623759.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1623759>
- Sun, H., & Wu, R. (2025). Filters, algorithms, and the “imagination tax”: The dilemma of aesthetic self-objectification among Chinese young women on social media. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1651435. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1651435>
- Verwiebe, R., & Hagemann, S. (2025). Bourdieu revisited: New forms of digital capital – emergence, reproduction, inequality of distribution. *Information, Communication and Society*, 28(11), 1861–1883. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2358170>
- Xu, J., Alivi, M. A., Mustafa, S. E., Dharejo, N., Brony, M., & Khoso, I. A. (2024). Chinese females’ visual sharing obsession: Battling for filtered identity on social media. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 22(1), 3405–3415. <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2024-22.1.00248>
- Yu, Z., & Starr, R. L. (2025). Clip voice: Misogyny and the renegotiation of a gendered vocal style in Chinese digital discourse. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 29(5), 317–388.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12715>
- Yuan, Y. (2025). 美丽假象：社交媒体审美观对女性形象塑造的误导及反思 [The beauty illusion: Misleading social media aesthetics on women’s image building and rethinking it]. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(2), 169–175. <https://doi.org/10.70693/rwsk.v1i2.516>
- Zappavigna, M. (2015). Searchable talk: The linguistic functions of hashtags. *Social Semiotics*, 25(3), 274–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2014.996948>
- Zhang, C. (2024). Body image and social media in China: Examining body image discourses among young Chinese women on the Xiaohongshu platform. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 7(S6), 1193–1200.
<https://jicrcr.com/index.php/jicrcr/article/view/2198>
- Zhang, X., & Riley, S. (2025). Empowering middle-aged women? A discourse analysis of gendered ageing in the Chinese television reality show Sisters Who Make Waves. *Feminist Media Studies*, 25(3), 624–640. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2297170>

Zhu, Y. (2023). The influence of social media on adolescent body image ideals: A study of middle school students in Guangzhou-Foshan, China. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 13, 604–621. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2023.138038>