

PURPLE BARBIE: SOCIAL MEDIA, SOCIAL CONTAGION, AND FEMALE TCU
STUDENTS' CO-CONSTRUCTION OF EXTREME BEAUTY IDEALS AND PRACTICES

by

Alyssa Claire Turner

Bachelor of Science, 2023
Bachelor of Arts, 2023
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Bob Schieffer College of Communication
Texas Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science



Spring
2025



BOB SCHIEFFER
COLLEGE of COMMUNICATION

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THESIS APPROVED:

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4/22/2025

COMMITTEE CHAIR

DATE

Handwritten signature of Amos Hinderaker in black ink.

4/22/2025

COMMITTEE MEMBER

DATE

Handwritten signature of Andrew M. Leath in black ink.

4/22/2025

COMMITTEE MEMBER

DATE

Handwritten signature of Julie O'Neil in black ink.

05/01/2025

ASSOCIATE DEAN

DATE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to thank the Lord for guiding me through the most incredible academic journey, including my time at TCU, and this thesis project. Communication Studies was never in my plan, but I am so grateful it was in His. I took my first communication class almost 6 years ago, and I am still in awe of the world it opened my mind to. Additionally, I am so thankful I did not get any of the jobs I applied for when I was graduating from undergrad, and instead, received this opportunity to extend my education and mind in the department that has become a second home.

To my family, and more specifically my parents Randy and Teresa, thank you for all of your unwavering support and love that has led me here. You both sacrificed enormously to give the boys and me every opportunity we could dream of. This is certainly the dream and more. All of accomplishments are also yours. Thank you. To my fiancé and soon to be husband Anthony, thank you for your gracious support throughout these two years and stressful time period. Your optimism and support have meant the world to me.

To Carrie Moore, Dr. Johny Garner, and Dr. Debi Iba, I can't thank you all enough. Each of you inspired a deep love and amazement of communication in me that is unforgettable. I truly had an exceptional undergraduate experience through each of your classes and teaching. Most of all, I would not be in this program without each of you, your support, and effort. Thank you. Thank you especially to Carrie Moore, for mentoring me and insisting I apply to this program.

Lastly, I want to thank my incredible thesis advisor, Dr. Amorette Hinderaker, and thesis committee members Dr. Andrew Ledbetter and Dr. Kristen Carr. Amorette, thank you for taking me on and entertaining a wild interest and idea. Thank you for working tirelessly and expanding my mind. Thank you Dr. Ledbetter and Dr. Carr for consistently pushing me to think more deeply and critically. I'm so honored to have your names on my thesis.

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ABSTRACT

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Alyssa Claire Turner

Communication Studies Master of Science, 2025, Texas Christian University

Thesis advisor, Dr. Amorette Hinderaker, Associate Professor Communication Studies

This study aimed to expand on previous research linking women's experience on social media with an emphasis on the modern landscape of extreme beauty trends. Specifically, this study focused on what was defined as "extreme beauty behaviors". Through five semi-structured focus groups, 21 TCU female-identifying college students were interviewed. This research and data were open coded, and schemas were collapsed into identifiable categories to be included in primary and second-cycle coding (Tracy, 2013). Several themes were yielded from the focus groups, which warranted in-depth discussion as they shed insights on future theoretical and practical advancement. These implications included: updating research on Two-Step Flow Theory to include the modern landscape of social media, focusing future research to understand the role of social contagion in the CMM process, and universities, and their affiliated clubs and organizations, more consistently address mental health and eating disorder support for female students.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I was standing in an Ulta checkout line when I realized the extent of beauty and aesthetic culture on TikTok and Instagram far exceeded influence on my generation of young adult women. While I was checking out and counting my change with the cashier, I noticed a tapping sound behind me. I turned to find two young girls behind me in the checkout line. Upon listening to their conversation, I discovered they were fourth graders, pulling their allowances to buy Drunk Elephant Skincare^[1] products. One stood impatiently clutching her Lululemon crossbody bag and tapping her foot, which was dressed in the newest Adidas Sambas. I stood wondering what my responsibility was in this situation as a young woman— should I have pleaded with them not to use products on their perfect, young faces? Should I have encouraged them to spend money on beauty regiments when they were older? Was I myself a poor influence just by being in line? I stood speechless while the other fourth grade girl pulled out her newly released iPhone and opened up a TikTok video they were using as their reference for their purchase. I realized at that moment it didn't matter what I said to them. They had been influenced.

This experience is put into perspective when realizing these two fourth graders are a part of a much larger statistic of adolescent girls and emerging-adult women that simultaneously co-construct and experience a culture that defines what feminine beauty is and the viable means by which to accomplish it. Social media is a major contributor to this culture, with content found on TikTok and Instagram steadily gaining traction with young Americans over the course of the past five years and in particular, gaining popularity with young women. As of July 2024, 54.8% of TikTok users worldwide identify as female (Duarte, 2024) however, in the U.S., women between the ages of 16 and 24 make up 60% of the app's users and American emerging adults between

the ages of 18 and 24 make up half of all content creators (Doyle, 2024) with 113 minutes a day on TikTok alone (Shepard, 2024). American children are also being started comparatively young with the average child starting social media use at age 12 and some starting as young as 8 years old (Howard, 2018). Social media usage is exacerbated as adolescents age with 68% of American preteens participating on social media (Dixon, 2023) and 90% of American teens being actively involved on social media sites (AACAP, 2018). Among these age groups and demographics, teen girls use social media at a higher rate and are more likely to use them over time as opposed to teen boys (Vogels, 2023). These teens, and teen girls in particular, eventually transition from watching these influencers as children to watching the same content or even producing it as emerging adults. The “beauty and lifestyle” category on TikTok specifically is a significant contributor to the app’s content and female engagement with “#beauty” accumulating over 100,000,000,000 views (Izea, 2024). These statistics are pertinent as female emerging adults, or college-aged students between ages 18 and 22, enter a new and formative phase in which they suddenly have the agency to perform online viewed behaviors alongside their peers with none of the parental supervision or guidance. These young ladies are living and socializing in tight proximity with other girls who introduce or reaffirm beauty ideals and expectations through exposure to social media influencers or social processes such as sorority rush, parties, and gamedays.

With such high exposure to beauty-focused content online and rhetoric in their day-to-day lives, the effect on emerging-adult women’s self-esteem and concept of beauty must be considered. In years past, scholars have conducted extensive research evaluating the relationship between female media consumption and body and weight image. This study seeks to expand on previous research linking women’s experience on social media with an emphasis on the modern landscape of extreme beauty trends. Research has long established and uncovered ideals of

weight and thinness for women, which have relatively remained the same over time; however, with the growing social media presence and influence in young women’s lives, the standards of beauty have also grown exponentially. Simply put, being thin is no longer enough. As a result, this study will focus on what will be defined as “extreme beauty behaviors”. These behaviors are defined as any permanent or semi-permanent alterations that require significant monetary investment and/or medical attention. The most popular and socially relevant behaviors are as follows, but are not limited to: hair extensions and dying/bleaching hair, eyelash extensions, microblading and eyebrow threading, nose alterations, lip fillers, Botox, breast implants, hip dip fillers, faux nails, self-tanning and UV tanning, and veneer implants. Essentially, anything that doesn’t wash off at the end of a woman’s day. These are behaviors exemplified and even advertised by a variety of “beauty and lifestyle” influencers, especially within the top influencers found on TikTok and Instagram. The following table illustrates some of the top influencers in this genre of content and leaders in both establishing beauty standards and endorsing viable extreme beauty behaviors to accomplish them.

Table 1: Top TikTok and Instagram Influencers

Influencer ▲	TikTok Following	TikTok Likes	Instagram Following	Age
Addison Rae	88.7 million	5.2 billion	34.4 million	24
Alix Earle	7.1 million	1.1 billion	3.7 million	23
Campbell Puckett	1.4 million	86.5 million	1.2 million	32
Charli D'amelio	155.7 million	11.8 billion	43 million	20
Dixie D'amelio	55.5 million	3.3 billion	20.3 million	23
Dome Lipa	76.6 million	4.9 billion	23.9 million	23
Kaeli Mae	14.6 million	655.1 million	1.2 million	24
Kylie Jenner	56.7 million	1.5 billion	395 million	27
Madison Beer	20.3 million	315.9 million	39.2 million	25
Taylor Watts	5.1 million	300.2 million	1 million	21

Consistently, scholars have found that media consumption, across various mediums throughout time, has been a contributing factor in negative weight and body image for girls

ranging from grade school age to adulthood. This negative and potentially harmful relationship has been a contributing factor in key health fads and choices for women, including eating disorders and extreme exercise. Studies as early as 2006 found these themes, stating this harmful relationship can begin for girls as young as 8 years old through consuming television programs and magazines (Harrison et al., 2006). This relationship has been retested and strengthened as media and technology have evolved. Scholars testing adolescent girl participation on Instagram again found a direct link to lower self-esteem when engaging with altered pictures of women (Kleemans et al., 2016). Moreover, we additionally now know social and peer norms play a critical role in reaffirming these negative body images and the adverse effects they can have for young women (Kreemar et al., 2008).

While previous studies provide a solid foundation for our understanding on these subjects, they no longer accurately capture the magnitude and gravity of content, norms, and culture experienced by emerging adult women. Emerging adult college-aged women live, study, and work close together, constantly surrounded by their peers in a way that younger or older women are not. As a result, these college women are in cycles of co-constructing meaning, such as beauty together both online and in person. This study, therefore, rather aims to expand on previous findings as it applies to the current media landscape and understand how emerging-adult women communally co-construct meaning and standards of beauty on social media platforms including TikTok and in-person contexts in college life. Given the new features offered through social media such as TikTok, the standards of beauty and “aesthetic” lifestyle for women, and young women in particular, have intensified and now reach far beyond what existed in years past. This has subsequently driven consumerism, strict perceptions of ideal image, and adverse beauty practices in young women. Face and lip fillers that were once used to combat aging are now used to perfect their image before college move-in day. Influencer videos that

once illustrated fashion trends now focus on advertising veneers at the age of 21 and the benefits of forever perfect teeth. Both of these pressurizing influences complicate and exacerbate how these standards are performed as beauty and lifestyle influencers attend college on campus and enter student life. As viewable in Table 1, the top beauty influencers are dominantly young women in their early twenties on an app that is majority 18- to 24-year-old women with “beauty and lifestyle” as the top content genre (Doyle, 2024). Furthermore, TCU female students are particularly involved in beauty standards as they have been, again, voted as the number one college campus with the most attractive female student body (Dallas News, 2024).

Study Design: College Women and the Co-Construction of Extreme Beauty Practices

Emerging adult women in college are at the focus of this issue as they represent the dominant demographic of users who co-create these beauty standards and then must negotiate or perform them within their day-to-day life with little to no supervision from parents. College-age women co-create what it means to be attractive online and in-person as they repeatedly share spaces and tight quarters with other young women both online and in person. As a result, college-age women rely on one another to construct and perform perceptions and understanding of important issues such as beauty.

Several theories provide a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon and how it is consistently reified with greater and greater intensity. Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), Two-Step Flow Theory, and Social Contagion Theory (SCT) specifically provide useful frameworks for understanding the almost hypnotic social dynamics at play, how these women communally co-construct these meanings and norms and how information regarding achieving co-constructed beauty ideals spreads amongst online and in-person contexts. Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) offers a useful framework in understanding how videos and interactions in which beauty practices are discussed, or even alluded to, ignite into larger themes,

patterns, and standards over time for this group in particular. Additionally, it offers a lens through which the rules experienced by those in these groups can be viewed and understood. Two-Step Flow Theory, in coordination with CMM, offers a model to understand how information regarding co-constructed beauty rules and constructions are spread from network leaders to the masses. Lastly, Social Contagion works in conjunction with CMM by offering explanation to how TikToks and commentary on beauty behaviors specifically blow up and gain traction across college-aged women. It offers insight to how these young women participate, subconsciously or consciously with these standards and inadvertently further perpetuate them.

With this theoretical frame in mind, this study will explore how emerging adult college women communally co-construct ideals of beauty and how these developed norms affect online and in-person trends that ignite and spread beauty practices. Furthermore, this study will also assess the moderating effect of college communal living with other women, as it pertains to understanding and performing individual beauty ideals in day-to-day life. With this in mind, this study will focus on focus groups to examine the co-construction of meaning among young women in a group context.

Researcher Position

Researchers must be aware of their own personal and potential biases and their current positionality as it applies to the area of research given that we are conducting qualitative research. Self-reflexivity involves a detailed examination of the researcher's past experiences, perspectives, and roles that may influence their interpretation of the data (Tracy, 2013). I was an undergraduate at the TCU campus and experienced external pressure from other women and on social media. Having attended TCU as an 18- to 22-year-old girl, I can attest to the seemingly high-stakes culture that heavily values and emphasizes aesthetic perfection for women and drives the extreme beauty decisions made by them on campus. During this time period as an

undergraduate on campus, I also found very little counterbalance to this pronounced culture in TCU student life. Instead, I witnessed how TCU women's culture became an echo chamber for larger-scale extreme beauty practices presented and endorsed on social media platforms and influencers. Now that I have graduated and work as a graduate teaching assistant, I have aged out of this system on campus. These far-reaching beauty standards of "the TCU girl" are no longer an implicit expectation I must consider. Rather, I now watch first-year TCU female students enter this system as I teach majority underclassmen students. I am in a unique position as I understand this culture and what it looks like without having any personal stake or bias in being a part of it anymore. This offers a valuable opportunity as a researcher to develop an understanding of how this culture communicatively unfolded and how "the TCU girl" ended up here.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Coordinated Management of Meaning

Coordinated Management of Meaning reflects the idea that our social groups are continuously socially constructed and sustained, as a result of how members communicate and act with one another. This can be applied to various constructed groups, such as emerging-adult women on sites such as Instagram, TikTok, and in-person groups of this demographic.

CMM identifies both the process and interrelationships that social groups produce through the lens of a game all members are actively defining and playing. Just as each sports game is uniquely determined, so are the specific rules, episodes, and players to each group, meaning that there are no identical games, episodes, or teams. The nature of each of these components is a direct result of each group's developed "hierarchies of meanings" or the "materials of communication logics," which vary significantly across social media platforms, groups, and genres or content (Cronen et al., 1979, pg. 25; Pearce, 2000). CMM is an appropriate lens to understand how this demographic, college-aged women from 18-22 in differing generations, have all co-constructed and organized the meaning of beauty differently over time. Specific to this group or generation of college-aged women is the emergence of social media and influencers, which have vastly shaped the hierarchies of meanings such as beauty, and communication logics, which justify extreme beauty behaviors for this group of women. This framework is reified as learned online values and logics take hold in everyday life through the participation of extreme beauty behaviors and discourse surrounding them. This co-constructed process is directly visible within the social media world of emerging-adult women defining and enacting constructs of beauty through viewing content, following influencers, in-person discourse and participation, and consistent monetary investment in extreme behaviors.

This five-tiered process begins with raw sensory data in the form of nonverbal and verbal communication. Raw sensory data is produced and developed into the hierarchy process by those established within the network or group, meaning those participating in discourse or participation in these extreme beauty behaviors establish themselves within the network that defines the rest of the process that normalizes and supports extreme beauty behaviors. Given each member produces their own sensory data, the valence of the hierarchal processes is significantly formed by those allowed within a network. This essentially means that those within this network define whether extreme beauty behaviors, like nose jobs, veneers, breast implants, and others are simply behaviors or are rather defining beauty behaviors that will enhance self-love and create belonging with other beautiful women also willing to take such action.

Scholars have established links between health practices and perceptions of body image. Bruss et al. (2005), for example, evaluated minor nutritional practices, exercise habits, and familial discourse on weight found that network constructs determined the reality of health practice hierarchy for children. Specific raw sensory data, in studies such as this, produced constructs that created the meanings of food, exercise practices, and ideals of “thinness” and obesity for children and contributed to their health practices over time (Bruss et al., 2005). Similarly, constructs of “beauty” have been renegotiated and intensified over time with beauty being far more complicated and specific than ever due to the emergence of social media, influencers, and their popularity with this demographic specifically. Constructs are then contextualized by the first and higher level defined as “constructions”. Given the affordances of social media platforms, these constructions often come in the form of videos, graphics, comments, captions, and reactions revolving around beauty ideals and how these beauty behaviors are viable, gratifying, and justifiable in practice. “Constructions” are defined as the “Cognitive process by which individuals organize and interpret the world as perceived” (Cronen

et al., 1979, pg. 25; Pearce, 2000). Influencers, viewers, and peers organize and make sense of viable extreme beauty behaviors and their valence through the presented constructs of beauty, which in this case, are unattainable or unrealistic beauty standards. Constructions within this context look like the ideas presented on social media that nose jobs, lip fillers, and Botox should be destigmatized for women at young ages and these methods of beauty are normal, ensure beauty, and are positive as it pertains to self-esteem. These constructions that emphasize to young women how extreme beauty behaviors are entirely positive vastly shape other constructions in their lives, including their understanding and organization of self-esteem, consumerism, and what beauty is not.

Furthermore, through the window of social media, there is both a wider array of exposure to constructions in addition to a more complex coordination of them, given the possible number of members is typically open to a vast array of users. Given that the individual member's construction of meaning in this stage is defined by the "creative capacity to represent the environment not merely respond to it" (Cronen et al., 1979, pg. 25; Pearce, 2000), there can be a wide variety of both breadth and depth of constructions amongst an entire group. Given the time and traction both TikTok and Instagram have received, there is no lack of breadth or depth on constructions within the emerging adult women demographic. Given the content saturation of these sites, discourse on beauty is no longer simple in nature, but is multi-faceted and complicated. Beauty no longer means being thin; it means checking more specific boxes to a greater extent and on a longer checklist. Furthermore, with such a volume of users, videos, and thus constructs, this process not only very specifically defines what beauty is, but it also informs members of this demographic what beauty is not. With this changing landscape, beauty trends and the acts promoted to achieve desired looks have become more extreme, pushing women to engage in increasingly expensive, long-term and often painful treatments. While four years ago,

TikTok influencers were raving of teeth whitening and pulling products and how these products would ensure beautiful teeth, this endorsement today is, by and large, nonexistent. Rather, veneer implants, as described by micro and full-time influencers, are the viable option for not just white teeth, but perfect teeth for a perfect smile. Similarly, contour makeup which was once the source of media content for its ability to seemingly reshape a nose is not real beauty. Rather, real beauty is enacted when you actually have a slender, symmetrical nose, which is often and understandably so, only accomplished through a nose job. These never-ending online constructs of beauty, which create constructions of beauty behaviors not only assert the rules of being beautiful, they invalidate any other beauty standards and deny any other attempts at “beauty”.

Secondly, Cronen et al., (1979) terms the beliefs and purposes produced by first-level constructs as “construction systems”, which are organized by members as the next hierarchical step in this process. These are then organized by members into clusters, which are also ranked hierarchy according to particular beliefs. This level hinges on three member-related principles. 1. How individuals differ in the complexity (the number of constructs and extent to which all are related) with which they represent or even perceive various domains of experience. 2. How each member differs in how they define and choose which attributes are clustered together and 3. the complexity of each group’s construction system is due to the complexity of role-taking abilities. Within the context of emerging adult females, domains of experience, the attributes clustered together, and the group’s construction of the system are complex as members of this group can, and do often, take on multiple roles as both online influencers and viewers, as well as in-person embodiments and observers of created beliefs within the system. Additionally, women who do exhibit participation in extreme beauty behaviors take on a degree of hierarchy in the system with the assumption that their participation in extreme beauty behaviors is a reflection of the beauty ideals established by the group. Simply put, influencers that regularly and openly

communicate, verbally or nonverbally, that they have participated in beauty behaviors earn a degree of credibility and experience to viewers because they not only visibly illustrate the co-constructed ideals of beauty, but they often communicate principles and beliefs, such as the idea that beauty accomplished by such extreme behaviors will deliver a degree of self-esteem and joy.

Thirdly, “Speech Acts” marks where meanings and communication become action from one member to another in this co-construction process. Speech acts are defined as “things” one person does to another by saying something. These can often be seen as declarations, whose meanings are acts rather than referents. This process is defined by both stage principles as well as context principles. 1. These spoken messages have both a relational and content meaning, which can be presented by members overtly or with tact. 2. Additionally, the purpose of, or response to, a message may be as much a function of the relational act performed as that of the content itself. 3. Various speech communities have developed different episodes as well as different sequences of actions in particular episodes. 4. Members differ in their “temporal extension”, or in terms of this sports lens, their game tact, and understanding of how one act can subsequently affect the entire system of speech acts. A prime example of this can be found in social media influencers endorsing extreme beauty procedures and simultaneously presenting viewers with discount codes or incentives to participate in the extreme behavior as well. Presenting these behaviors as a way of looking out for or helping viewers appear more attractive establishes a relation with them as peers and simultaneously implicitly encourages viewers to participate in such behaviors to meet established beauty ideals. This move not only serves as a masterful move for influencers to ensure prominence in the system and its co-construction process, but it also ensures the capacity for future influence as monetary compensation allows for more extreme beauty behaviors to be possible, and as a result, more perceived credibility and experience amongst viewers.

Lastly, Cronen et al., (1979) terms the fifth and final level of the system as “life scripts” or how these episodes become patterned through comprising expectations of the kinds of communicative events that can and most likely will occur. While this grand coordination seems complicated, it has been proven to occur online through previous research on communities on Facebook (Wiese, 2009). Within this context, Facebook walls are interpreted through its general structure, including timing, form of speech, and author; however, it is also understood that within these expressions that make up the episode, interactants fit into the overarching narrative and unspoken rules of the Facebook wall (Wiese, 2009). This repetitive cohesiveness of episodes becomes patterned and results in life scripts across various groups and walls on Facebook, all with their own naturally occurring and organized purpose and coordinated management of meaning (Cronen et al., 1979, pgs. 25-29; Pearce, 2000). Essentially, as this study reflected, to stay in the group, one must fall in line with the co-created system and how it functions. This takes the form of videos and content that have not only normalized certain extreme beauty behaviors but routinized it. Videos that bring viewers along for routine lip filler and eyelash extension appointments serve as “life scripts” for viewers or representations of how these behaviors become a part of everyday life like grocery shopping. Commentary on this content also comes with a script as social expectations indicate that, since it is a part of everyday life and they are in fact “beautiful”, it is destigmatized. Furthermore, since the values surrounding it, life self-love and making oneself happy, are positive, commentary on such content must be as well. This is reflected online to a greater degree through duetted videos or commentary on beauty videos that act as testaments or affirmations that certain beauty behaviors not only work but produce all that was claimed they would.

Furthermore, this process is guided by rules rather than norms. The rules, in either of the two defined types and individually formed, are what guide how meanings of beauty are

organized within this group context. The first type of rule, constitutive, occurs at each level and is how meaning at one level of abstraction may count as meaningful at another level. For example, if the constitutive rule for beautiful lips is that they must be beautiful, and at the construct level, beautiful lips can only be big lips, at the episode level, getting lip filler regularly is the rule reenacted and made consistent. Secondly, regulative rules, guide sequential action and thus only exist at the levels of speech acts, episodes, and life scripts. Within these rules, are the elements of “oughtness” or “expectedness”, established through social action regularities, which guide members' perception of their lack of agency or freedom to act any way else. As reflected in a previous study that assessed the role and nature of rules within an organization, rules associated with an organization contextualizes how they adapt to their environment as a collective whole (Rose, 1985, pg. 337). As this study illustrates, regulatory rules ensure not only that the standard is being met, but it is being met through the correct means. For example, regulatory rules enforce that since big lips are beautiful, small lips violate standards, and extreme beauty behaviors, such as fillers, must be consistently accomplished to never have small lips. This in turn shapes how they collectively adapt to the environment, meaning that lip fillers which were largely unused by this demographic before, are now used at unprecedented levels by this demographic.

While these rules in practice seem extreme or even alienating, they are imperative to the function of co-constructed systems. In fact, without them, these groups crumble in chaos. This is represented in other online groups, such as a previous study (Moore, et al., 2009), which tested user satisfaction and personal agency when interacting with online chatgroups with and without both rule types. The results revealed that users who personally identified with the group's explicit or implicit rules felt more belonging within the group than those who were confused or in disagreement on the chat rules. Secondly, without the chat box rules, discussion and cohesion amongst the group were chaotic and devolved. With no rules and no understanding of the shared

meaning behind communication, the discussion was entirely unproductive and devolved into bullying (Moore, et al., 2009). While rules are socially constructed and typically produced by a society, they are not immutable in a member's experience nor common across differing social media groups. Each group's unique set of rules holds up group values, beliefs, meaning, and even purpose.

Moreover, rules additionally differ in structure, exhibiting differing degrees of sensitivity to content and relational meaning. Overall, logic within the developed communication system is dependent on the meshing and coordination of all rules across members. When rules and standards are understood by group members, they understand to essentially, fall in line. This is illustrated through the creation of beauty trends, which reflect the idea that with one woman's actions, the same demographic in great numbers reflect the same action and thus create uniformity. While these actions often seem irrational, unreasonable, or illustrate groupthink, the idea of these norms is what establishes ideas of normalcy and cohesion for online groups such as beautiful emerging-adult women. This is how the one specific and strict perception of what a "beautiful" college-aged woman is formed. It is also why every college-aged girl who does not look identical to it, viciously compares herself and senses a feeling of "otherness" or separation from the group.

These ideas are reflected by scholars who researched adolescent girls' body image and the understood coordinated meaning and rules of physical attractiveness. Researchers found that when young girls do not reach the standards and rules of being young, attractive, women, group chaos ensues and perceived self-image is destroyed (Harrison & Hefner, 2006). While rules may be socially shared, they do not need to be explicitly shared amongst members. Typically, they are implicitly established and reiterated. More importantly, members need to be aware of the rules other members are employing and how they all interlock (Cronen, et al., 1979, pg. 34; Pearce,

2000). Rather, for the sake of system salience and cohesion, rules amongst members must be understood to perform coordinated values, practices, and trends in the form of “episodes” and “scripts”. Without rules, like those found in constructing beauty ideals on social media, systems cannot function, roles cannot be performed, and perceived identification amongst groups cannot form.

Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) and Two-Step Flow Theory

Two-Step Flow Theory serves as a model that explains the process of mass media information being passed through leaders who diffuse and reiterate information to the masses (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). In this study, Two-Step Flow Theory, regarding extreme beauty behaviors emerges from mass media and is passed through opinion leaders to other masses or group members. Additionally, using this theory, and its connection with CMM, will aid in identifying how this five-tiered process occurs both on TikTok and Instagram platforms and in day-to-day college life for these young women. Furthermore, Two-Step Flow Theory serves to identify how more influential and active members at the top control the flow of information for the masses (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), which are eventually formed into constructs and thus episodes. This engaging process between opinion leaders and the masses not only reflects the setup of the current social media landscape and previous research, it exemplifies the co-created process found in Coordinated Management of Meaning, which highlights that these beauty standards are cemented through the participation and rule-following of all members of the group online and in person.

As described in Two-Step Flow Theory, “opinion leaders” hold a significant role in the spread of information on any given topic. These leaders are trusted as knowledgeable and credible sources to speak on topic information to the masses who do not engage with mass media figures or outlets (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). This is evident in the case of micro and full-time

influencers, who take emerging beauty standards from pop culture icons that are less engaged with and pass that information along to viewers, who would have otherwise been unfamiliar with such topics like extreme beauty standards. Furthermore, these influencers hold this distinct role of beauty opinion leader for a variety of reasons that perpetuate this cycle.

First, as described by the model, they are the first to encounter information, receiving it in greater quantities and before any other interpretation. This allows them to create videos on emerging extreme beauty standards and present the extreme mechanisms to accomplish them, which instills a sense of greater knowledge and being informed than the set of information followers currently possess. Secondly, through presenting new information, as the system also describes, followers flock in greater numbers to these opinion leaders as the source of both raw data and building constructs. In turn, as followers watch and follow these influencers in greater numbers, it reestablishes the influencer in the group and their hierarchical position as an opinion leader. This is simple in practice as full-time influencers have a greater following and greater income on sites such as Instagram and TikTok, and as a result, reappear on these sites in greater numbers. This in turn spreads their reach and prominence in influencing the content and constructs produced by micro-influencers. Furthermore, through this support and monetary gain, the cycle starts over as full-time influencers are able to participate in extreme beauty through behaviors that require significant time and monetary investment, which nonverbally indicate their knowledge and accomplishment of meeting extreme beauty standards co-constructed by young women.

This idea that influencers are now the emerging leaders of social media is reflected in previous research on consumerism, which finds that there is an emerging and more dynamic relationship emerging between influencers and followers (Uzunoğlu, 2014). These findings illustrate that in the emerging age of online forums, dating back to blogging, the masses

participate in information dissemination with opinion leaders, establishing what feels as a connection, and thus greater trust with influencers. Researchers reflect this stating, “Due to technological advancement, consumers are currently more information savvy, sophisticated, and well informed, and can no longer be easily controlled or manipulated by organizations... they desire to communicate in a participatory way. In addition, instead of simply accepting packaged brand messages, they tend to place more trust in the opinions of those who appear to be similar to themselves” (Uzunoglu, 2014). Both beauty ideals and consumerism, which are heavily linked online and in-person, are no longer in the hands of bigger corporations, but are rather in the hands of influencers who have earned the trust of followers who perceive a relationship with them.

This emerging relationship and subsequent bond of trust is found in fashion research on older demographic influencers in China, specifically, Zhang (2024) found “...whether it is affinity or feeling very close, the generation of these types of parasocial interaction is one of the unique advantages of... fashion influencers. And before gaining a better understanding of a product’s functions and features, followers must have an interest in the product, which stems from the premise of building parasocial interactions with silver-haired fashion influencers” (Zhang, 2024). As reflected in this article, influencers play key roles of both perceived friends and opinion leaders as they inform and influence followers and the masses of certain products. This is a key aspect of the current system that hinges on influencers connecting with their followers personally, in order to make this information a pattern that results in co-constructed reality. Moreover, the more influencers reflect the characteristics followers wish to embody, the more attention and relationship strengthening they as influencers will receive. This is further affected when influencers post attention catching videos and content of themselves actively participating in extreme beauty behaviors that produce extreme beauty results. This is found to

be true in previous research between influencers and consumers' online brand-related activities (COBRAs) which found, “creativity and design quality are necessary conditions for, and significant predictors of, parasocial relationships and wishful identification (Cheung et al., 2022). Influencers’ popularity and allure is dependent of posting content that is aesthetic, appealing, and representative of follower aspirations, like in the case of meeting such extreme beauty standards.

However, as described in Hazard and Klapper (1962), the influence of peers and friends play a prominent role in mediating the influence of information presented by influencers, as well as further developing the co-construction process by incidentally presenting new information. This effect that further developed Two-Step Theory known as “limited effects paradigm” (Hazard & Klapper, 1962) illustrates how this co-creation process of extreme beauty ideals and the extreme mechanisms used to achieve them can be seen as an ecosystem between social media and campus life for college aged women. College aged women continuously exist with and receive information on extreme beauty standards and behaviors online and with their peers on college campus.

Peers, friends, and roommates act as a further information filter and cement perceived pertinent information and rules of how to enact the current extreme beauty landscape. This has been found in previous studies assessing friends shared content on Facebook saying, “Given what we know about the public's growing distrust for the media (see Gronke & Cook, 2007), compared to receiving a Facebook post directly from a traditional news source, individuals may be more likely to perceive information as trustworthy if it is shared through a Facebook friend. Following the patterns noted in two-step flow, if the user considers the friend to be an expert and honest opinion leader, the user may then be more likely to judge the linked news content of the post as being trustworthy” (Turcotte et al., 2015). As illustrated in this study, friends serve a mediated role where they can strengthen trust in online opinion leaders for peers, or become ones

themselves within their own peer group, if they are seen as knowledgeable and credible through meeting extreme beauty standards and having experience with extreme beauty behaviors that align with online information.

Furthermore, friends and peers can also serve the role of informing constructs and rules when they expose others within their co-created group to content they wouldn't have otherwise viewed. By this occurrence, exposure to constructs may be incidental, but is nonetheless impactful and influential. Given the saturation of content on social media sites, ensuring cohesion of rules needed for CMM to form requires for content shares and spreading, even if it is incidental from the receiver's end. Given the convenience and commonality of this practice, it has been found in other contexts through studies such as Bergström and Belfrage (2018), which states this as a common way of encountering new information online stating, "A more predominant reason, though, is that their friends share news items: 'I get a lot from friends who have liked or written comments, mainly incidentally, but every day, many times... my consumption is incidental, it's always someone who shares, or likes or comments. I see a lot even if I haven't made a choice'" (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). Through the merging of online forums with peer groups on college campus, it is evident how these co-created constructs online reiterate and cement themselves in person through a continual cycle of opinion leaders interacting with the masses and diffused information.

Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) and Social Contagion Theory (SCT)

Social Contagion Theory identifies the unconscious and almost hypnotic spread of affect, attitudes, and behaviors from initiators to recipients (Levy & Nail, 1993). Through this lens, this study will identify how extreme beauty behaviors, presented by content influencers, are ignited amongst followers/recipients and continuously reaffirm unrealistic beauty ideals through participation and discourse surrounding participation. Evaluating extreme beauty behaviors and

participant commentary through this lens, and its connection to Coordinated Management of meaning, will aid in identifying how constructs of beauty ideals and standards, which manifest into speech acts involving such behaviors create social contagion amongst women to achieve the specific, hyper-perfected looks achieved through extreme beauty behaviors. Additionally, using this theory, and its connection with CMM, will aid in identifying both the level of conscious awareness experienced by users when participating in extreme beauty behaviors in addition to the level of awareness participants experience with constructs of beauty ideals and beliefs. Within this refined identification and explanation of social contagion presented by Levy and Nail, (1993), three types of contagion characterize and explain the processes experienced on social media and within campus peer groups by emerging-adult women as it pertains to extreme beauty behaviors.

The first type of contagion, disinhibitory, identifies how individuals in an approach-avoidance conflict experience a reduction in restraints because of observing an initiator perform the desired act. In plain terms, this type of contagion identifies the process in which a person or viewer who wants to do something but feels unable, either due to a perceived lack of social support or actual ability, watches another person online like an influencer who acts as an initiator, who successfully performs the behavior and achieves a specific physical appearance.

Given the current type of content presented by influencers, and the perceived credibility of influencers from viewers as a result, disinhibitory contagion accurately depicts how social media influencers can and do serve as examples and enablers of extreme beauty behavior amongst followers. The far-reaching impact influencers are capable of has been reflected in previous work, such as in Mirlahi et al., (2024). Scholars in this study found that influencers on social networking sites do carry significant amounts of influence for users both in their mental state and decisions. Moreover, influencers with high views and followings determine several

factors of online social alignment, which in turn determine the social networks and constructs viewers become a part of (Mirlohi et al., 2024). This contagion type is essential in the process of perpetuating beauty ideals because it presents followers with beauty constructs, exemplifies the steps or extreme beauty behaviors taken to accomplish them, and leaves followers with a sense that they too can be just as beautiful. Moreover, more active influencers, or “opinion leaders” have a greater impact to a greater extent on followers. This is compounded when influencers exhibit behavioral consistency, resulting in greater social contagion experienced by followers (Mirlohi et al., 2024). Given the high demands of current beauty standards, influencers consistently participating in extreme beauty behaviors accomplish several feats simultaneously. They not only produce more beauty success for themselves by consistently participating in extreme beauty behaviors, but they additionally ensure they remain “opinion leaders” with significant influence within the system and as a result, determine the constructions that manifest into speech acts and life scripts for viewers and populations. Furthermore, within this contagion type, the consciousness levels of the participant are relatively high, meaning they have a relative understanding of the role the influencer is taking in their life and an understanding of personal agency as it pertains to performing those behaviors. This is reflected in duets, video stitches, and comments that reflect appreciation towards the influencer or owing their current beauty to the example set before them by the influencer.

Contrastingly, while disinhibitory reflects how influencers can enable hesitant viewers, echo contagion describes how influencers can sway viewers more quickly and in greater numbers due to a lack of inhibition and the presence of emotions and spontaneity. The emotional appeal intrinsic to this pattern from influencer to viewer is clear and prominent. There is a degree of emotional and personal satisfaction alluded to by influencers that accurately follow the group’s regulative rules of beauty and the life scripts ritualizing the extreme beauty behaviors

used. This is visible through discourse in videos that not only destigmatize extreme beauty behaviors but present them as a viable means to a beautiful, self-loving, and confident end. As a result, an ideology and contagion form claiming that participating in extreme beauty behaviors like said influencers will result in accomplishing the hyper-perfect look that is the beauty construct. This is believed to also produce feelings of confidence, a greater sense of self-love, and being amongst the few completely beautiful. Additionally, unlike disinhibitory, viewers experience relatively low consciousness during this contagion. This means that, while they are participating in extreme beauty behaviors presented by a stranger online, they are unaware of the beauty standard contagion they have, emotionally and financially, bought into. This is reflected in previous studies assessing echo contagion in mediated spaces. As discussed in Thompson and Nadler, (2002), echo contagion can be rather reactionary and emotional. In this study, researchers focused on email communication and identified the reactionary aspect of echo contagion is magnified in online contexts, specifically email, because of the mediated nature of this online communication. This behavioral chameleon effect is especially pertinent to stranger interaction (Thompson & Nadler, 2002, pgs. 112-113).

Additionally, the lower level of cognitive processing experienced by recipients characterizing this contagion has already been found on social media through previous research. Specifically, Sciara et al., (2021), tested the effect of gratitude on Facebook and the benefits of exposure to others' grateful interactions as an uninvolved third party on the site. Researchers found the "witnessing effect", which identifies how observers on Facebook could be not only driven to experience more affiliative feelings but also be influenced in their own tendency to express gratitude (Sciara et al., 2021). As the name of this contagion subtype alludes, and this previous study illustrates, recipients act as the initiator's behavioral echo, almost playing a game of behavioral monkey-see, monkey-do with initiators or influencers who achieve

attractive/desirable beauty constructs. In short, viewers are learning the constitutive rules and performing them accordingly. This is especially valuable as we understand that influencer content portraying inaccurate or harmful information on extreme beauty behaviors can directly affect both the emotions and physical reality of viewers. Roberts et al., (2023) tested social-media-driven misinformation and its powerful effect on content consumers. As stated by the researchers in their findings, social media can transform a person's view of reality which leads to detrimental human action. Moreover, social media can also take the role of "reality reinforcement", which explains how people incorrectly interpret misinformation found on social media due to their view of reality being reinforced (Roberts et al., 2023). As reflected in this study, influencers play a prominent role in the emotional experience and bodily decisions made by viewers.

These studies reflect the frenzy-like feelings that consume viewers who feel the need to also experience such satisfaction in their physical appearance presented by influencers that have what they do not both physically and emotionally. These young women then not only internalize the co-constructed meanings and communities they have joined, but they have additionally become addicted to the appeal of beauty presented in them.

Furthermore, hysterical contagion is characterized by a viewer experiencing internal conflict, like disinhibitory contagion, but with low-level cognition for recipients like that in echo contagion. The underlying explanation for symptom manifestation in this way parallels that of what was previously identified as "classic conversion hysteria". Even more so, while other subtypes are viewed through one-on-one influencer and viewer interactions, hysterical contagion is conceptualized as a group conversion reaction. Through this contagion, the conversion of this entire co-constructed group participating in extreme beauty behaviors presented by influencers can be evaluated. This subtype specifically involves the spread of physical symptoms from an

initiator to a conflicted recipient with no identifiable pathogen. For example, viewers experiencing abnormal emotional behavior, beliefs, and physical symptoms like emotional attachment to constructs, extreme beliefs surrounding constructs, and extreme behavior participation illustrate this contagion. This contagion identifies how five years ago plumping lip gloss on TikTok satisfied women's co-constructed beliefs of beautiful lips but have now turned to lip fillers for feelings of satisfaction with the appearance of their lips. Even more so, it identifies how young women who can't afford fillers and can only use gloss can experience intense feelings of anxiety, self-discontent, and a lack of belonging because they are not acting by the group's co-construction of beauty.

While these symptoms seem rather dramatic and rare in practice, researchers have found how group hysteria, confusion, and dissent produce strong negative emotions experienced on group scales online. As Yang et al., (2021) describe, "... collective anxiety is induced due to lack of credibility" and the amount of conflicting information shared by different people places the group in a "state of flux". Online communities with more influencers may be more likely to experience anxiety polarization, bringing forth the issues of layered information and group inequality (Yang et al., 201). Given the vast number of influencers in this group of young women online, layered information and group inequality are more likely to form and often do.

Considering the extreme looks that are accomplished through extreme behaviors are a result of significant monetary investment, these life scripts and regulative rules deem young women who are financially unable to participate as existing outside the co-created meaning of beautiful. Even more so, young influencers who neglect to inform viewers how they achieved the beauty standard can leave viewers confused and searching through other influencers for the means to accomplish similar results.

This is significant when considering sites such as TikTok and Instagram have thousands of influencers that form content genres, such as “beauty and lifestyle” for women, with each influencer bringing different subsets of knowledge, standards, and practices on beauty for women. Moreover, with the accessibility of creating content, influencers with no credibility or factual knowledge can significantly influence young women at pivotal ages in emotional and physical development. This subtype differs because the initiator, or influencer, acts neither attractively nor desirably to the recipient(s). This is viewable through influencer nose job follow-up videos that often depict influencers wrapped in bandages, bruised, and experiencing pain. Additionally, on the other end of the spectrum, this is also viewable through influencers reacting to other women's videos negatively and reasserting the constitutive and regulative beauty rules co-constructed by the group. Often times erratic and negative online behavior ignites on social media, as reflected by findings produced by Stieglitz et al., (2011) and in Stieglitz et al., (2012). In both studies assessing political German tweets, researchers found that posts containing words that reflect emotions tend to be more tweeted than those that don't. All emotions presented by initiators online create a “triggering effect”, determining the valence of sentiment portrayed in commentary and retweeting (Stieglitz et al., 2011; Stieglitz et al., 2012). These studies reflect that beauty and lifestyles influencers set the tone of online discourse and radically shape how topics are discussed. Given this reality, this is significant when realizing a considerable amount of information young women have on important constructs such as beauty are from the influencers, they are entrusting to help them fit in and guide their personal decisions (Levy & Nail, 1993).

Altogether, CMM and Two-Step Flow Theory work together to explain the process of how beauty ideals and standards are initiated with prominent groups leaders, both online and perpetuated on campus. Additionally, it identifies how information of these beauty standards and the behaviors necessary to accomplish them is spread in both contexts from leaders to the masses

that reinforce the co-construction process. Furthermore, CMM and Social Contagion work together to explain how college women in this particular TCU campus, under such tremendous pressure to reproduce extreme beauty standards, co-construct what beauty means and the hypnotic allure of accomplishing such extreme beauty standards. This study, therefore, asks:

RQ1: How do college-aged women co-construct extreme beauty rules online and reify them in person?

RQ2: How do emerging adult women perceive their participation in extreme beauty behaviors and trends?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval (Texas Christian University Institutional Review Board, IRB Study #2024-180), participants were recruited through snowball sampling, contacting on-campus departments to share a recruitment email to students, posting flyers around campus, posting on social media, and contacting students within the Communication Studies department.

Participants in this study included individuals on TCU's campus who identified with the female gender, were between the ages of 18-22 years old, and were enrolled as full-time students. Transfer students were eligible to participate so long as they still met the above qualifications. Eligible participants were scheduled for a focus group discussion and completed an open-ended questionnaire, prior to the focus group, to elicit demographic information and allow any information they may not want shared with the group to be voiced. Participant demographics included an age range 18-22 years old with an average age of 19. All participants (n=21) identified as female gender. Ethnicities ranged from white participants (18), Hispanic/Latin(x) participant (2), Asian or Pacific Islander participant (1). All participants were fully enrolled TCU students with 100% dwelling with other TCU college students and 0% living with others or alone during data collection.

Because this study focuses on understanding how collegiate women that are emerging adults communally co-construct meaning and standards of beauty on social media, focus group interviews were used to allow women's experiences to be shared and examine how the communication was co-constructed in real time organically. Focus group interviews allowed this environment due to their nature of question-and-answer procedures, guided-group discussion, and interaction between participants (Tracy, 2013). Using focus groups rather than other methods allowed the primary researcher to actively see how this process of created meaning and

management happens on a micro level and view how students feel and perceive this phenomenon alongside their peers in a low-stakes environment. There is a reason for participants to be interacting together in this research process, and through this and the qualitative nature, much deeper meaning was derived than if other methodology was used. Qualitative, semi-structured focus groups were appropriate and effective form of data collection, given the specific matters discussed and the depth of conversation that developed as a direct result of participant discussion. This inviting nature of meeting with researchers in person, along with other participants, created a relaxed environment that allowed for organic conversation to occur.

Focus group interviews were conducted of 21 individuals between 5 focus groups. Focus group discussions averaged 33 minutes ranging from 17 to 48 minutes and were recorded on a digital recording device. For each focus group, the primary researcher facilitated the focus group while recording the group discussion with an audio device in addition to writing physical notes.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data of these focus group interviews will be analyzed and interpreted to gain a deeper understanding of the way undergraduate women on campus co-construct their shared communication and meaning of aesthetic, lifestyle, and beauty standards. The data were open coded, and schemas were collapsed into identifiable categories to be included in primary and second-cycle coding (Tracy, 2013).

The iterative approach to qualitative analysis involves a flexible and cyclical research process. It begins with data collection guided by initial research questions, followed by the iterative three cycles of coding, and comparison to theory and existing literature. The process continues until data saturation is achieved, where new data no longer substantially contributes to the emerging understanding. Member checking is employed to validate findings with participants, ensuring authenticity. The coding approach allows for continuous refinement,

adaptation, and deepening of insights, acknowledging the dynamic nature of qualitative research and contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon (Tracy, 2013). This project will be coded in three steps, consistent with Tracy's iterative approach. The first coding step will involve primary coding, reading for impressions and recording emic themes that emerge. The second coding step will involve the developing of coding schemas from the themes developed in step one. Lastly, second-cycle coding will result in coding lines of data into the schema and recording all into a coding log. Throughout and after these steps, coding memos and notes will be kept throughout to engage in constant comparison (Tracy, 2013).

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study focused on how emerging-adult women communally co-construct meaning and standards of beauty through social media platforms such as TikTok and in-person contexts in college life. Primary and secondary coding of five focus groups totaling 21 participants, yielded nine total themes and three main categories that organize them. These overarching three categories include The Cocreation of Beauty and the Means to Achieving it, The Spread and Circulation of Information and organized and the Infectious Nature of the Never-Ending Ideal. In each focus group, participants were assigned a letter, ranging from A to E, to ensure anonymity. To organize and accurately retell each focus group, participants are also numbered in these accounts to demonstrate which focus group, ranging from #1-#5, they were in. Thus, each participant is labeled with their letter and number, depending on which focus group they participated in.

The Cocreation of Beauty and the Means to Achieving it

These three salient themes are categorized and characterized by participants co-constructing these concepts together during focus groups. Specifically, all 21 participants contributed in co-constructing themes including the idea of high-stakes versus low-stakes beauty behaviors, the belief their generation is less judgmental and deceitful than past generations, and what it aesthetically means to be a TCU girl. Focus groups created the opportunity to observe these co-construction processes in real time. Co-construction occurred through participants answering interviewer questions with their own experiences, responding to each other's commentary, and starting their own conversations on those topics. These conversations amongst participants gave insight to their experiences as young women both on social media and on the TCU campus and gave the opportunity to ask follow-up questions as the interviewer. Moreover, the participants in focus groups often offered each other social support when discussing difficult

topics, like extreme beauty expectations, which in turn led to more self-disclosure and greater depth of conversation. Study participants discussed their understanding of semi-permanent versus permanent effects of their beauty choices and how their decision to participate in certain extreme beauty behaviors could directly affect their ability or health over time. Additionally, participants discussed the larger picture of beauty culture by describing the culture and stigmatization of extreme beauty behaviors inherited by past generations of women. Conversely, participants then identified how their understanding and participation of extreme beauty behaviors have changed over their time as a TCU student, specifically.

Some Beauty Behaviors are Like Brushing Your Teeth... Others Are Forever

Throughout participants discussing specific extreme beauty behaviors, there was a clear understanding that some extreme beauty behaviors are now considered to be every day, routine practices that are now intrinsic to being a girl, while other extreme beauty behaviors were a permanent decision that could not be reversed and could affect ability or health later in life. This theme reflects the idea that even within extreme beauty behaviors, there are some that are routine and even expected within performing their gender, while others are understood as a personal choice and more significant investment. For example, participants described behaviors they believed to be so routinized that they have become the equivalent to hygiene acts and are an everyday expectation of other women. For instance, Participant 3B described this saying, “It’s like, almost routine for all girls now, like it’s like, get your nails done, your eyebrows done, your eyelashes done and self-tan like that’s like basically the same thing as like brushing your teeth and taking a shower.”

This quotation represents the belief that some semi-permanent beauty behaviors are so routinized and normalized, they have become the fabric and standard of everyday self-presentation. This is reaffirmed again in the same focus group with the idea that these routinized

beauty behaviors are now so normal they are intrinsic to being a girl in the modern age. While participants from focus group #3 discussed beauty behaviors such as eyelash extensions, spray-tanning, and getting their nails done, Participant 3D claimed, "I think it's just like part of being a girl that way, like I feel like [sic] like as a root thing like as a girl."

This quotation from focus group #3 affirms the idea they believe other women understand completing these behaviors to be intrinsic expectations in performing their gender. Furthermore, there was a clear understanding that with less permanent beauty behaviors such as these, there were also permanent extreme beauty behaviors that were still desirable but could be made more desirable with the creation of semi-permanent versions or options. For example, in focus group #1, participant 1B described her understanding that conventional nose jobs could result in permanent, disappointing results. Participant 1C spoke to this idea saying, "Like a nose job you can't really like take that back, but you might not like it when you get there. So, it's kind of like it's, I mean, it's a personal decision if you're gaining anything."

Similarly, participants in focus group #5 discussed the difference in semi-permanent versus permanent nose jobs and various semi-permanent liposuction and face filler options. Specifically, participants 5D and 5E openly discussed their fellow TCU student and sorority sister's recovery from her permanent nose job. After doing so, they discussed new nose job options that require less recovery and commitment. Participant 5D explained this new semi-permanent nose altering alternative stating, "There's some girls that like don't get the permanent one because you could do Botox on the bridge, you know, so it won't be as permanent. And then there's others that do like okay, we're scraping the bone, you know and that one's permanent."

Participant 5A followed this statement by describing her own experience with alternative means, identifying less invasive lip filler options that involve less physical filler and more subtle results that still achieve the same look. She described her experience saying,

I got a lip flip when I turned 16, because I really like... I forgot her name, but I really like the way her lips look. And she was like, I just get a lip flip because I don't want permanent filler. So, when I turned 16, I got a lip flip... It's just Botox that on your upper lip that kind of brings it up instead of putting like a syringe in your lip, which I'm not against either. I just was scared, and I already have good lips. I don't want to make them crazy, but I like the little like Cupids like bow thing it does.

It is clear through these accounts presented by Participant 5D and 5A, participants both understood the permanence of some procedures and preferred semi-permanent alternatives that achieve similar results. Furthermore, participants also understood that their bodies can serve differing purposes and contain abilities, which can be negatively affected by their extreme beauty behavior choices. For example, in focus group #1, participants spoke in depth regarding the long-term ramifications of lip filler, breast implants, gastric bands, and tanning. Participants would disclose how they approach extreme beauty ideals with their specific preferred means of achieving them and why they prefer them over other methods used by women. Fellow participants would expand on these ideas, discussing other behaviors they find to be concerning and how they were unwilling to sacrifice their health, future ability, and time by participating in them. This occurred through multiple focus groups with participants discussing the means they use instead to achieve extreme beauty standards. Participant 1B spoke to these ideas, specifically on lip filler and breast implants saying,

Especially with lip fillers, like people that get it like they have to readjust every couple of years to make sure, like the filler doesn't move or whatever, and it's like you have to constantly be doing that unless you like get them dissolved, which, like I don't even know if that fully gets rid of it like it just is.

It's a long process, and like with a boob job like. I guess you probably wouldn't be able to have like kids like and have them breastfeed. And like that's kind of a big decision. And like people just make sort of rash decisions sometimes. And like, don't really think about how it's going to affect like the long term.

Participant 1D responded to this quote from Participant 1B and built upon the ideas as it pertains to other procedure and their long-term health affects claiming,

I feel like eventually people are going to realize that what they're doing isn't temporary, as far as like if you're getting a boob job and you don't have children later on. It's going to be more difficult for you to breastfeed, and I feel like even trends from let's say, like 20 years ago, like a gastric band people have started getting them removed because they have had bad consequences. Later down the road, when they're like aging, and the tissue builds over it, and it just like permanently damages your stomach.

Participant concern for their health when choosing to participate in extreme beauty behaviors also extended to those more routine practices and normalized standards like being tan. The value of being tan was an implicit and understood extreme beauty ideal focus group #1, amongst others, discussed. However, one participant disclosed the methods she used and her reasoning behind them for the sake of her health. This opened the door for other participants to discuss extreme beauty methods they would not use and the methods they use instead. They discussed what was concerning about certain extreme methods, the idea of permanence, limited ability, and possible future health concerns as a result. This created a group consensus of concern and co-constructed not the extreme beauty ideal, but rather, what defined an appropriate extreme beauty behavior to achieve those extreme beauty standards. Participants across all focus groups discussed these ideas in differing contexts and co-constructed what it meant for an extreme

beauty behavior to be risky and high stakes. Concern for health didn't appear to deter participants from achieving lower-stakes standards, rather it affected the methods they chose to use. For example, Participant 1B stated that, "The reason that I, personally would rather like get a fake tan is because, like, I've seen a lot of new stuff on like sun damage and like how that affects down the road."

Other participants during quotations like this, responded in support of these concerns, often agreeing and building on these ideas as they applied to other extreme beauty behaviors. In this quote, Participant 1B illustrated the ideal many participants had, which is that while there are both low-stake and high-stake beauty behaviors, less permanent and invasive means are consistently preferred over permanent means previously used that have negative health and ability consequences. Furthermore, participants built on this idea of health and personal ability, emphasizing that differing physical needs may mean that bodies look different from woman to woman and that is objectively reasonable, despite some previously constructed beauty standards. This occurred specifically in focus group #1, with one participant presenting ability as an important construct when co-constructing viable beauty methods. Through this participant expressing her beliefs on this, the focus group shifted the conversation to reaffirm her ideas, then discussing the importance of both health and future ability together. Participant 1A gave specific examples of this idea saying,

And like you're healthy, might like the way you look healthy might be different than someone else looks healthy if that makes sense. Like Ilona Maher¹, the U.S. like rugby player. How like she has to look a certain way to like play her sport, and it's also the way her body was made. But it's like not

¹ Ilona Maher is a female American rugby union player and women's rugby advocate, who won bronze with the United States in rugby sevens at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

necessarily like. If she looked like me maybe she wouldn't be performing as well in her sport, or be as healthy for her body, if that makes sense.

Participant 1A rounded out this idea that while extreme beauty behaviors and standards alike exist, they may not all be practical with differing physical needs and ability from woman to woman. Additionally, the idea of being "healthy" also may very well vary from woman to woman.

We're Better Than Our Mother's Generation... Kind of

Throughout all five focus groups, a clear theme regarding the modern culture of beauty and treatment of other women as it pertains to beauty was apparent. This theme reflects the co-constructed belief several focus groups came to, which is that extreme beauty procures, like liposuction, Botox, and breast implants, are more widely accepted because their generation has evolved past judgement and deceit with other women. Participants co-constructed this belief by attributing the considerable uptick in permanent procedures to be because modern society and women are more accepting and less judgmental when it comes to the actions of other women. This idea was co-constructed through accounts of how celebrities, like the Kardashians, were treated in the early 2000s and how social media has afforded less judgmental spaces. They compared themselves against their mothers' generations, attributing acceptance and honesty as qualities that characterize their generation of young women after growing up with such harsh judgment. Additionally, they believe this move to more acceptance has also resulted in less deceit on how women achieve extreme beauty ideals, and more openness of the methods used to achieve certain looks. This appeared to be a point of pride and was a co-constructed theme that unified focus groups with other participants proudly agreeing with comments of acceptance in regard to other women's procedural choices.

Participants repeatedly discussed how their generation differs significantly from previous generations of women that were judgmental towards other women's beauty choices and were accepting of the common deceit behind achieving beauty standards. However, this notion becomes a paradox as participants not only admitted to judging their female peers' choices but also acknowledged their role in perpetuating deceitful beauty standards with their online practices. In all, there was a clear appreciation for vulnerability, honesty, and acceptance when observing online beauty content or engaging in in person beauty discussions. The general consensus was that as long as other women are honest about how they achieved the look, any means used to achieve it is fine by them, and in some cases, earned them admiration. Contrastingly, on a personal level, participants were far more concerned with being found out for their deceitful social media beauty practices as they post themselves. The fear of being "cancelled" seemed to be far more influential in guiding their online behavior and choices than their claimed cultural prioritization of vulnerability, honesty, and acceptance. While participants claimed that the new generation has finally evolved past our archaic feminine ways of judgement and dishonesty, it is evident through these statements these practices have simply been reinvented.

While there were a variety of women that were negatively discussed for their deceit, there was one influencer in particular that was consistently praised for her honesty and authenticity online and how it has changed connotations of extreme beauty behaviors, like breast implants and Botox, as a result. Participants discussed beauty and lifestyle influencers content they all consumed on social media at length and described specific influencers roles as opinion leaders on all things regarding beauty, aesthetic, and lifestyle. These opinion leaders, the social media influencers, set the tone and lead the co-construction process in regard to both extreme beauty

ideals and behaviors, as well as expectations of honesty and acceptance on them. In focus group #1, Participant 1D stated,

I was thinking, Alix Earle². I just feel like she's really open about like getting a ton of Botox and like remember. What is it that she's always talking about? She got her breasts done, and she's always talking about it. Every other video is about getting them done, and how happy she is. I feel like it makes people feel more comfortable with the idea of getting it done.

In focus group #5, Participant 5A also spoke to this idea by juxtaposing other influencers approach to Alix's, claiming that her success and acceptance is largely due to her transparency on participating in extreme beauty behaviors. This quote was one of many that co-created the idea of Alix Earle as a more accepted opinion leader because she is perceived as honest and transparent. That then sets up this expectation that their peers and other smaller influencers at least be honest, not deceptive, about their beauty procedures. Participants again accredited influencers as their group leaders, with transparent group leaders being seen as the most credible and enjoyable individuals to engage with. Participant 5A illustrated this tendency when she stated,

Yeah, it just kind of annoys me. Because why are you putting. Pushing out that narrative out there that like this is all natural, like, I was just blessed like this when it's coming out that they're getting like Botox and like a nose job. And like, I feel like we've seen that people aren't dragging Alix Earle because she's being honest. And you have those people that are hiding.

² Alix Earle is a social media influencer and lifestyle personality who became popular for her "Get Ready with Me" videos on TikTok.

Through this quote, it is visible that participants understand that their cocreated meaning of beauty, primarily constructed online is filled with a disproportionate amount of deceit. There are multiple forms in which this deceit occurs, including denial and editing photos. It also becomes clear that participants believed that as consumers of social media content, they are owed an admittance if extreme beauty behaviors were used in achieving beauty standards and felt they are owed this honesty. Participants clearly co-constructed a sense of superiority linked to perceived transparency. Any and all extreme beauty behaviors are accepted as long as women are honest to viewers and their peers about them. While discussing extreme beauty behaviors like nose jobs and Botox, Participant 4A spoke to these ideas saying,

Well. First, I feel like people shouldn't try and hide it, because first of all, it was an investment, and you wanted to make yourself feel better and I feel like, maybe people think there's a lot more of a negative connotation to it than there really is, because. I mean, of course, with anything you want someone to admit something, you know, if it's true, but I feel like it's also a lot of pressure if you do get asked because. Maybe people shouldn't be asking in the first place.

Through Participant 4A, the complicated layers of transparency and privacy are visible amidst balancing honesty and concerns of judgement surrounding participation in extreme beauty behaviors. While there was understanding amongst participants that juggling these aspects can be difficult, there was still frustration with deceit and an expectation for women who hold online influence to be honest. Participants remembered and discussed female figures that were deceitful at length across all focus groups. This is illustrated in focus group #5 with participants 5A and 5D discussing influencers saying,

Participant A: "I think I remember, like Madison Beer³, saying that she never got any like lip, like Botox or filler. And then she was seen walking out of like a Botox place like looking down like had her head down. It was kind of funny. But yeah."

Participant D: "Or I think, didn't Kylie Jenner⁴, she was like, I get no lip filler like years ago, when she first came out with her lipstick. Like no uh, I think you did."

Through this discussion, the expectation of transparency when participating in extreme beauty behaviors is visible, especially for those who produce content on a larger scale like social media beauty and lifestyle influencers. It should be noted that participants never spoke negatively of influencers receiving work done on themselves, as long as the influencers were honest about their procedures and discussed it in their content. In fact, influencers seemed to be more credible to participants if they both maintained extreme beauty ideals and were honest about how they achieved extreme beauty ideals. Conversely, influencers who had minimal work done, but were dishonest about it, received less respect from the participants and were not accredited as a group leader for them in their pursuit of achieving extreme beauty standards. This expectation goes beyond admitting to having extreme beauty behaviors done and also applies to deceitfully editing photos online, giving the appearance of perceived physical perfection. This idea was reflected in a conversation that took place in focus group #1 with participants 1B and 1C saying,

Participant B: "Another thing is like an example would be, um,

³ Madison Beer is a singer, songwriter, and social media influencer.

⁴ Kylie Jenner is socialite, social media influencer, and businesswoman. She is most recently known for her line of lip cosmetics named Kylie Cosmetics.

like Livvy Dunne⁵. How it's been very obvious she edits a lot of her photos! So, like all this stuff, you see, is like, not natural, and people are trying to get surgeries to get like the type of body that she has, or like whatever the hair she has. And it's like... like it's not even real for her. So, like how is it supposed to be real for anybody else?"

Participant C: "Yeah, like photographers, since she's a gymnast. Photographers will like release the photos they took of her, and then she'll post on Instagram, and people put them side by side, and she made her waist smaller and her hair more voluminous. I don't know but it's just kinda like you can like social media like tracks back, and you're like they'll find it eventually, if you edit it."

Participants 1B and 1C depict how editing photos is perceived as being dishonest, and is more importantly, traceable by other users who will cancel you for the act. Additionally, through these conversations, participants illustrate the understood power influencers have with their platforms and discredit those who negatively use it. Such dishonesty is what separates influencers they know of and see scrolling online and the influencers focus group participants praised and described as group leaders in co-constructing modern beauty. As a result, participants resort to other means of perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards online as they post content of themselves on social media platforms. However, participants acknowledged that while they don't edit photos for fear of being canceled, they undoubtedly perpetuate this cycle of beauty deceit on social media through other means. Specifically, participants understood that social media is a collection of users highlight reels, both on influencer accounts as well as their

⁵ Livvy Dunne is a current gymnast for LSU, social media influencer, model, and brand ambassador.

own. This means that users consuming other women's social media content only see the best pictures, videos, and reels of other women. In turn, social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram become museums of perfect looking women, living perfect looking lives. In focus group #1, Participant 1A described this process saying,

I feel like it's like, at least for me and my friends. It's less like 'Oh, I need to edit my photo'. It's more like, 'Oh, I just don't look good in the way I'm posed in that'. If that makes sense or like the angle of the camera looks really weird, it's like, don't post anything like that, because now, like my forehead looks too big or like I don't know like I look bigger in that picture like stuff like that rather than like, 'Oh, let me edit my photo' because, like now, I feel like since social media tracks back like everyone's like showing like side by sides of pictures and stuff like that. So, it just seems more fake I guess. I feel like my friends are just like not, or like stopped like editing their pictures, and more just like, 'Oh I don't like the way I posed, so I'm not going to post that'.

Participant 1A then goes on later in the focus group to reflect on her own social media account and rationalizes this pattern and said,

Sometimes I even look at myself like my Instagram feed, are the best pictures of me. There are really awful pictures of me in my camera roll that like I'm not posting because, like, I don't look good in it, if that makes sense. So, it's kind of the same thing for me. It's just like oh like maybe I was crying when I posted this, but then, like I feel better, because, like I looked good in the picture. If that makes sense so like you kind of have to remind yourself like... you're like a lot of the time you do the exact same thing that these people are like doing... but also taking a step back and realizing you're buying into it, too. And like okay

they, they're doing the exact same thing I'm doing. So, like everyone is like, kind of real in that way. I don't know if that makes sense.

Through Participant 1A's personal reflections, it is clear how even on a micro-scale participants understood their participation in exclusively posting their perfect pictures is still deceitful. Moreover, they acknowledged that even though they no longer edit their photos, they are still participating in negative behaviors equal to those of other women who use various dishonest means to present perfectly online. Specifically, participants defined online deceit as individuals, especially influencers, claiming to have not had work done and accredit their extreme beauty looks to genetics or luck. Additionally, deceit could also take the form of editing photos to give the appearance of physical perfection to viewers and followers. Focus groups co-constructed this definition through presenting influencers who had been deceitful or who had been honest and explaining their disdain or admiration for them. These explanations revealed their disrespect for perpetuating unrealistic beauty ideals amongst women without being honest about the means necessary to produce such extreme looks. Essentially, participants were fine with heightened beauty standards and were very open to participating in them. However, participants want other women to acknowledge that such looks do not come naturally, and other women should be honest about how they achieved extreme beauty ideals, so they can feel better about their natural selves and have the knowledge to achieve the same results.

Lastly, and most interestingly, this participant's statement illustrated the paradox of how the cocreated meaning of beauty should be presented on social media. While judgment is a claimed thing of the past, it is consistently experienced by women who do not disclose their participation in extreme beauty behaviors online to the degree users feel they are entitled to. Their rationalization of their own deceitful means while condemning others highlights how

judgement and deceit both still play a prominent role in the cocreated meaning of beauty and communication surrounding it for young women.

To be a TCU Girl

Throughout all five focus groups, there was a general feeling of heightened beauty expectations as a TCU female student. This theme highlights the understood and experienced pressure experienced by female TCU students to match up to surrounding beauty stereotypes of TCU female students. There has been a long-standing stereotype surrounding TCU for having the most attractive female student body, perpetuated on online spaces, which have been upheld largely through subtle or nonverbal cues in their day-to-day lives on campus. This physical stereotype has strict parameters and was described by participants as being blonde, thin, tan, tall, and embodying physical perfection. These cues include everything from peers and roommates instructing each other on what kind of self-tan to use to Greek organizations pushing discounts for Botox and fat-dissolving procedures on students. This theme was entirely presented and co-constructed with participants through focus group members sharing stories and personal experiences, often informing the interviewer of communicative practices and specific procedures surrounding extreme beauty ideals. Participants began these conversations as details they found to be interesting and eventually became a space for participants to compare practices and stories in their sororities and share gossip.

The idea that TCU has the prettiest girls and that is a standard to live up to is a common ideal that influenced participants and circulated campus, especially within female groups. Focus group #2 spoke to this experience and its negative effects at length. Specifically, Participant 2B and 2D discussed this together stating,

Participant 2B: "I feel like I should look a certain way like look different.

Um. Yeah, I think my self-image has like declined from being here a

little bit. It was like everybody says TCU has, like the most gorgeous girls like in the world, and like you can like. I saw a ranking one time. It was like on TikTok. It was like colleges with the best-looking people, and TCU is number one. And I was like, thank you."

Participant 2D: "It's just like a sad statistic, and I don't know if it's necessarily true, but my religion teacher told us that TCU is ranked like either like one or two in eating disorders. But it almost like didn't surprise me at all because I was like. I don't know, just like the beauty standards here feels so like pressuring early on."

While the pressure to fit into the co-constructed TCU girl stereotype was felt and discussed by all focus groups, it was clear this pressure was much more intense for participants who were aware that they physically did not embody the perceived expectation. This immense pressure, while participants were aware they felt it, still wanted to conform and were heavily affected by it emotionally. This co-created and strict perception of what it means to physically embody a TCU girl left many of these participants feeling left out and lesser-than. This affected participant mental health and in extreme cases, led to more dire consequences and attempts, like disordered eating. Participants openly discussed unhealthy or extreme food and workout practices, often sharing their personal experiences or the experiences of their close friends and roommates. These growing practices are reflected in university statistics as a growing issue and culture amongst the female student body. Participant 2B: "I feel like it's a negative pressure, because that I'm like. I feel I'm not good enough like I need to do something about the way I look, like I need to change like because all of the other girls don't look like me or I don't look like them. I guess."

This pressure to physically embody the TCU girl beauty standard was exemplified through this conversation and illustrates the negative emotional toll stepping into these stereotypes presented for some students. Even more so, participants described how heightened these standards are when first coming to TCU, especially within the Greek sorority rush process. TCU Greek sororities serve as significant organizations on campus with 53% of female undergraduate students belonging to a sorority and over 1,200 female first-year students registering for sorority rush every year (Scogin, 2021). This influence was reflected in the focus groups and participants with 19 of the 21 interviewed participants being a member of a Greek sorority on campus. Moreover, with this experience, participants often discussed the highly competitive and superficial experience of undergoing sorority rush. Sorority rush is a multi-step, five-day process with three rounds, each ending with “potential new members”, or applicants, being “dropped” or rejected, from various houses they applied to join. This is reflected as a highly competitive process on the TCU campus with a number of sororities dropping 70% of their potential new members after the very first round (Rubenbristian, 2025). Participants describe how this process was often superficial and competitive in a socioeconomic and physical sense with attention and focus being given to the luxury brands and items other potential new members were wearing. Participant 5D gives a personal account of this theme stating,

I feel like especially during rush and like recruitment, and all of that stuff like it was really all about what you were wearing, what you looked like, what makeup you had, what jewelry you had, all this stuff. And that kind of set a precedent for like the rest of the semester, at least for me. And I think my friends here too agree that like maybe it's gotten. Like their self-image has gotten worse since they've been here, and I would agree. I think mine has too. And even though my hometown there was a lot of that. I think there's just

more of that here.

As this statement depicts, the degree to which participants were willing to fit this beauty standard by participating in extreme beauty behaviors had a direct effect on the friends they gained and organizations they joined when first coming to TCU. Meaning, participant willingness to participate in this co-constructed beauty culture that defines the TCU girl, was, for participants, a defining feature in their interpersonal relationships– particularly with other women. This idea was defined specifically as it pertains to Greek like with Participant 2C claiming,

I also think, like what you're talking about during recruitment, like recognizing like people that only care about brands and stuff that they're wearing. It also makes you find the people that don't care about that, and like care more about like your personality.

As described by participant 2C and her experience, essentially, female students self-organized into groups that reflected their own beliefs on topics like branding and values. This idea was also pertinent in focus group #1, specifically as it pertained to participating in extreme beauty standards and the extreme behaviors used to achieve them. While discussing the influence friend groups have on participant willingness to participate in extreme beauty behaviors like lip filler and dangerous weight loss methods, Participant 1A said,

If you already think that's great, then maybe you'll hang out with people that also think that's great, or if you don't think it's awesome, then you will probably will be hanging out with people that also don't think it's awesome. And like will find other ways to help you be more confident in yourself, or like to find healthier solutions than just like I don't know. Doing or getting a random, procedure to like temporarily feel better about yourself.

This idea of self-organization seemed to possibly impact how women perceived these pressures over time. While students initially felt a significant amount of pressure to conform to beauty ideals when first coming to TCU, primarily through the sorority rush process, this pressure to conform seemed to wane over time. As a result, participants became more relaxed in their beauty practices over the course of their time at TCU. This idea was reflected in focus group #3 with Participant 3B stating,

I think when I first got here I felt more pressure to like fit in like the whole. I bought like skirts and I brought dresses, and I bought them, but I don't wear them, so I guess as I've gone here and I like settled down. I literally bought so much, spent so much money on so many things to like fit in with the beauty standards here, or what I thought and then. I dropped them later on and stopped.

A similar experience was reflected in focus group #4 with Participant 3C stating,

When I was coming here I was like. I had visited and seen the campus already and I knew specifically like my sorority that I was getting into um... had a lot of blondes. And I was like, okay well, obviously, like I have very dark features. I'm not going to be a blonde, but I need my hair to be light. It needs to be straight all the time, like I don't think my hair was curly one-time sophomore year at all, which is like a lot of work, and it sucked. But like, I just had all these expectations. And then I also just wanted to feel like I fit in and like, there's a lot of blondes in my sorority like. I don't really see anyone with like curly hair on campus at TCU. Um. And so, then that's also another reason I was like always brushing it out, or like just putting it back all the time, and then honestly, like. By junior year I just got lazy, and then, just honestly didn't care anymore. I went darker at the end of sophomore year and now um... I'm like, at my natural color and my natural hair.

As illustrated by this participant, both the heightened beauty expectations at TCU and the extreme efforts to comply with them may have yielded alternative beliefs and practices over time as they progressed in their undergraduate lives.

The Spread and Circulation of Information

Throughout data analysis, the process of how participants are exposed to information became clear. This category identifies how participants encountered information on extreme beauty standards and how they were introduced to the methods to achieve them. This category illustrates the influence of social media and in-person influences participants experienced that have co-created what it means for this demographic to be beautiful today. Specifically, this category identifies themes of socioeconomic status that affected participants access and understanding of extreme beauty procedures, the influence of watching prominent figures on social media from a young age to today, and the other women who have aided in co-creating the shared meaning of beauty. Additionally, this category explains the greater landscape of how information regarding extreme beauty ideals and extreme beauty behaviors are constructed and are passed down from subject “experts” to the masses became visible. Participants consistently accredited the same main sources for how they learned about extreme beauty ideals and the extreme behaviors popularly used to accomplish them.

Discussions throughout the focus groups gave insight to how the spread of information works on social media, and more specifically on TikTok and Instagram with the help of friends and peer groups. In focus group #1, Participant 1C explains how she typically becomes familiar with beauty influencers and their content stating,

I don't know, like everyone has their different feeds on social media. And so, like Alix Earle for example, like was not the first person to pop up on my feed when she was doing like she went to Miami and was like partying like it

Wasn't, but like some of my friends started talking about it. I was like, I have no idea who that was just from one viral video that I didn't see. So, then I did look into her, and it's just like influencers like that. Or, I mean you'll see people like people will mention little things, and you just kind of look into it for curiosity.

Participant 1C's experience demonstrates a common theme, which was that information on topics of extreme beauty ideals or practices are not spread through in-depth peer or friend conversation. Rather, discussions on extreme beauty topics occurred with information breadcrumbing from the sender to the receiver that required the receiver to find the information themselves. In order for receivers to feel in the loop with their peers on such topics, they took brief mentions and took to their social media accounts in order to understand mentioned references and information. In the same focus group, Participant 1B described this process explaining,

I feel like more... it's like mentions of people rather than like talking specifically about somebody like I didn't know who James Charles was until like... I don't know 4 years ago, and he was big like a while ago. So, when people would say 'James Charles', I'd be like, 'Who is that?'. And then have to like research. And I feel like it's the same with every new wave or influencers like if you hear somebody say their name you're like, 'I don't know who that is', and then you go on your own and like research them and look at their page. So, maybe not necessarily just like talking about them, and like deep-diving into every single fact about like their page. But kind of like knowing them in general.

Given the current saturation of beauty and lifestyle influencers and their content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, it would only make sense that there is a mismatching of influencer and content exposure from participant to participant. In fact, this appeared to work in

favor for select influencers and the platforms participants are on as a whole. While there were popular and common names, like Alix Earle, who was mentioned over 11 times throughout data collection, not every participant had passively found her content and page like some of their peers on social media. Instead, as described by Participant 1C, these brief mentioning's by friends, seem to strike a curiosity in participants and motivated them to become more knowledgeable on the landscape and current events of beauty influencing and content.

Furthermore, there was a general understanding that while participants may not view the same exact content as other participants in the room or even their friend groups, extreme beauty ideals, trends, and practices remain significantly similar and consistent across platforms. In a separate focus group, Participant 2C spoke to this idea saying,

I feel like it's [beauty influencing] the same, because I feel like at the end of the day, like people like our age, like, we kind of all watch the same stuff... like, even though we all come from different backgrounds like our like our For You Pages, and like our reels on Instagram, they're probably like majority the same stuff.

Participant 2C's quote represents two understandings gathered from discussions on influencers and extreme beauty information on social media. The first understanding is that social media influencers, specifically within the beauty and lifestyle category, have been relatively organized in how they have defined current extreme beauty ideals and the extreme beauty behaviors they have normalized to achieve them. They are who primarily defines beauty and they by and large are a united front in influencing the masses, who were represented by the participants. With both these extreme beauty standards and the common practices used to achieve them remaining relatively consistent, social media has in turn become an echo chamber for participants of what beauty is and what it looks like. The second gathered understanding of this process is that while the participants were not all watching or performing the same extreme

beauty ideals, they were all consistent in their understandings of what beauty was and where they go to stay informed on it. Essentially, while every participant was not on the same page, they were all reading out of the same handbook and they were aware of it.

Moreover, with this trickle-down effect of information starting with influencers at the top, there were three common sources of beauty information continuously discussed with participants at the masses level. The first source was TCU, and more specifically, Greek sororities on campus and their peers within them. Similar to the communication amongst peers discussing influencers or content, sororities communicated ideals in very round-about ways that subtly suggested certain extreme behaviors, while never outright stating that members should participate. The two specific examples often mentioned were group discounts on filler, Botox, and spray tans for sorority members. Participants discussed that while sorority leadership and administration have never outright instructed them to participate in extreme beauty behaviors, they do consistently and routinely inform sorority members of specific discounts and raffle give-a-ways they can use for various companies that provide services from spray tans and cycling classes to Botox and fat-dissolving procedures. Moreover, they are also invited to parties held by sorority members that are focused on having specific work done like filler or Botox, often referred to as a "Botox party." This is significant when considering the longstanding TCU girl stereotype of extreme physical and beauty ideals and the pressure female students already feel to embody such standards. These nudges by sorority organizations reinforce and arguably encourage this stereotype and conforming to it, while TCU as a university has been attempting to address the growing issue of female student mental health and physical practices on campus. In focus group #1, while discussing how these ideals are communicated, Participant 1B said, "I mean, like, not necessarily discussions, but like our sorority, for example, has like a spray tan discount. And it's like. I guess that's a form of communication."

While spray tans are semi-permanent and rather minor physical and monetary investments, participants revealed that sororities have pushed more extreme beauty practices as well. Two other focus groups mentioned this common practice. Participant 3A in focus group #3 spoke to this stating,

And within, like my smaller friend groups, I'm not seeing it, but in certain sororities I have seem, like events being held where it is like a lot of beauty placed, where it's like, oh Like I forgot. What is that place called? But they do [sic] do like lip filler, and like stuff like that. I know one of the sororities had like an event held about that.

This experience was echoed in focus group #5, where three participants from two different TCU sororities explained their personal experiences with filler and Botox opportunities presented by their sororities and sisters within their sorority. From these excerpts, the way in which these behaviors are presented and suggested for participants in their TCU sororities becomes clear. Even more so, these experiences reflect the influence TCU organizations hold in constructing these participants perceptions of performing extreme beauty ideals and the means to achieving them. This was reflected specifically in focus group #5 in the conversation that follows:

Participant 5A: "My sorority does like this giveaway where they give away like there's the Liquid Frog⁶ here, and they give away like discounts to like a syringe, or something like that, like filler or Botox, or like a lip flip. So, it's like like a raffle, kinda and everyone gets really excited, and they just give it out."

⁶ Liquid Frog is a wellness center in Fort Worth that offers IV Hydration and Therapy, cosmetic filler, Botox, and hangover cures.

This quotation by Participant 5A allowed observation of the process of communicative shared meanings and sparked conversation within the focus group specifically on the influence of sororities in the co-construction process as they define and understand viable and appropriate extreme beauty behaviors for themselves. The following conversation is in response to the above quotation in focus group #5:

Interviewer: "What's Liquid Frog?"

Participant 5A: "It's like a cause like a Botox place, but they also do like IV's as well. "

Participant 5D: "A lot of people get Botox. I come into college. I was like, Wait, that's actually real? Like people our age are getting that? I haven't gotten any, personally."

Participant 5E: "We were invited to that party."

Participant 5D: "Oh, yeah, we were."

Participant 5D and 5E: "Botox party."

Interviewer: "A Botox party?"

Participant 5D: "I was like I'm gonna come back, thank you."

Interviewer: "Was that through your sorority or friend group?"

Participant 5D: "Um, both?"

Participant 5E: "It was our sorority. But our friend group like it wasn't like through the sorority, but it was like in the sorority, like, I don't know how to explain."

Lastly, while participants accredited both influencers and TCU organizations to their understanding of beauty now as an undergraduate student, there were discussed influences and experiences during their adolescence that impacted their beauty ideals and practices. There was a

pattern amongst participants to disclose certain extracurriculars they participated in as an adolescent before explaining their understanding of certain beauty ideals. Specifically, participants often mentioned being a part of dance or drill team that influenced their participation or need to reach certain beauty looks. Additionally, participants also disclosed whether they grew up with sisters or not, asserting that having an older sister entailed having built-in direction and help with said, or general, beauty needs. In focus group #1, participant 1C spoke to this dynamic saying,

I've done spray tans and self-tan, but that's also because, like a Southern Texas school, and that's just like, and I was on like a drill team. So, it's just like that's just kinda how it was normalized. And like. I have an older sister. So. I kinda. It was kind of also followed behind her of like, 'Oh she did', and she was like, "You should definitely do it, like you're looking a little pale". I was like, 'Okay, great. So, it's just something that's become like more normalized like before formals.

While some participants, like Participant 1C, had an older sister to fill these perceived beauty gaps, other participants did not have a sister and disclosed feeling the need to supplement this lack of guidance in order to perform beauty to the degree expected by their dance or drill team. Some participants accredited their participation in dance teams and lack of older sister guidance as their reasoning for looking to influencers for guidance at a young age as a result. An example of this could be found in focus group #4. Early in this focus group, Participant 4B began her participation in the focus group by saying,

I'm like no sisters or anything so like growing up in dance I did like do stage makeup. Oh, my God! I had no idea what I was doing. So, it was like YouTube at first, and then I went to TikTok. And so honestly, I found like, the best makeup tricks

that like I still use to this day. And then I also found stuff that like techniques that work really well with my facial structure and stuff like that.

As illustrated by Participant 4B, focus group members described using social media and influencer content as a tool to gain knowledge on procedures and products that help achieve the extreme beauty ideals they see in their day-to-day lives as well as on online platforms. Influencers and their content serve as the group leader and subject experts that can help fill their knowledge gaps to help them ultimately achieve their beauty goals. In this focus group, participants continued to introduce themselves to the group and give context to their social media habits by explaining whether or not they had sisters. Namely, Participant 4E gave her first commentary by stating,

I do see products that I like [sic] like I don't have any sisters, and so like I feel like I did learn how to do makeup from like honestly TikTok, and like social media stuff. But then also, it's kind of annoying when you're literally just seeing the best parts of someone's day and like, just like, constantly you're like, 'Okay well, what am I doing?'.

After this commentary, participants went onto discuss the influencers they watch, namely, Alix Earle. Participant 4A, who also doesn't have a sister, then explained,

And she [Alix Earle] doesn't try to make her life look glamorous. Like she shows you all the [sic] the really bad parts, like the throw up dress in her closet that she forgot to clean at an after party and stuff like that. And so, I think it kind of made me respect her a little bit more, and trust her opinion as more, maybe like an older sister rather than an influencer.

Through these accounts, it becomes clear why these participants sought out beauty information on social media to begin with and how influencers have become the trusted experts

to guide emerging-adult women. Furthermore, while sisters appeared to take a natural guiding role for participants, parents, and particularly moms, were discussed for their influence at length. participating in extreme beauty behaviors during adolescents due to the involvement of their peers' parents. It should be noted that while participants described the TCU girl as a co-constructed beauty expectation to aspire to, participants did describe how this look was significant and applied geographically as well. While extreme beauty ideals and standards were described by participants as significant no matter their geographic upbringing, the specific look and expectations were described to also be significant in terms of being Southern and of high socioeconomic class. This specification began in focus group #1 with Participant 1C stating,

From like my community, I'm from Highland Park. So sometimes, yeah, it depends on the like what I wrote about on like the second question [of the study questionnaire]. I wrote about like different, like different beauty products or like weight loss things nowadays like Ozempic's really big. And I know, like girls from my school whose parents were buying it for them or um stuff like I don't know. I also gave like Bloom Nutrition. That's like another thing that's like all over media. So just stuff like that, like sometimes parents get involved, too, just at least where I'm from.

When asked specifically about the parent involvement, Participant 1C followed her statement by saying,

Um, I think it depends on the person. I try not to get too involved in it, because there's nothing you can really change. And it's not always someone I'm super close with. It's also one of those things you hear. It goes around the school. But I don't know. I mean, you're not like with Ozempic. I think there's like an age you are like allowed to buy it. I'm not sure what it is, but I think it

might be 18, and like, I know, girls that are not 18 that are on it. So, it's like, it's kind of a given that their parents bought it for them.

After this, Participant 1D followed this experience by disclosing her own and speaking with another participant stating,

Participant 1D: “Not with TCU, but in high school there was this girl who rode her horses. So, she had, like more of a big build like a little bit on the bigger side. And her mom was really like on her, and she had to go on a really strict diet towards the end of senior year, and got a personal trainer and everything, and she completely changed her like entirely like dyed her hair and everything.”

Participant 1B: “Because of like her mom, like her mom made her do it?”

Participant 1D: “Yeah!”

Furthermore, while parents were not always reported to be pushing these extreme behaviors, in other instances, they were accredited to enabling such extreme beauty behaviors. Given the age range of participants, parental involvement was often a result of needing financial support to invest in such extreme beauty behaviors. While many participants reported having parents that were unwilling to support extreme beauty behaviors like breast implants or nose jobs, many parents could be convinced or were even who encouraged their daughters to have work done in the first place. It was evident through observing stories told on grade school peers having work done and telling their roommates' experiences, parents played a significant role across all participants and their co-constructed reality of what was age-appropriate and even needed. Parents were significant in co-creating ideas of extreme beauty ideals participants should strive for, or shouldn't attempt, what behaviors are to be considered viable and age-appropriate

and financially enabling participation in extreme behaviors. In one specific instance, this theme was discussed at length with participants even comparing these parents to their own. This occurred in focus group #5 and was as follows:

Participant 5B: "I think also, with that, like Alix Earle like. I have a friend from home, like she got a boob job for her birthday and it was because of Alix Earle like that was her original influence to do that."

Interviewer: "Yeah, if you don't mind me asking, what birthday was it? What was that experience like?"

Participant 5B: "It was her eighteenth birthday, and that was just. Like I hadn't talked to her in a while, told me about it and it was kind of like a crazy thing like I grew up in like an area where that's pretty common people getting cosmetic surgeries pretty young, but it was still like I was kind of shocked at first about it. It was just kind of interesting to see. I hadn't really seen her since she was 16 so."

Interviewer: "Yeah, I see, you guys' kind of nodding?"

Participant 5A: "Yeah I had friends that like got like nose jobs in high school."

Participant 5D: "Same, yeah."

Participant 5E: "I know a lot of girls that like their graduation present to come to TCU in particular was a boob job. Like a lot of girls."

Interviewer: "Very interesting. I see there are some thoughts. What are the conversations with that like?"

Participant 5D: "I mean, go for them. I mean, good for them."

Participant 5A: "Yeah, honestly, like, I'm kind of get jealous, like, yeah,

my parents are like, we're not paying for your boobs. I'm like, yeah, whatever.”

Participant 5D: “That's what they say about my nose, too.”

Participant 5A: “I'm like ugh, and they're like ‘Well, we're not going to pay for your boobs like that's inappropriate’, like. ‘If you make your own money, you can go do what you want.’”

Through these accounts, it becomes evident that while other sources have influenced the understanding of extreme beauty standards and behaviors, parents have served a different role with differing communication. Whether it be forcibly dyeing their daughter's hair, or paying for their breast implants as they start their TCU journey, parents, and especially moms, have played an indicate role in the participation of extreme beauty behaviors and dismantling, or perpetuating, the cycle of extreme beauty ideals.

You're not Ugly, You're Just Poor

No matter where participants came from, their year, or adolescent experiences, participants understood and had experienced communication on extreme beauty standards and behaviors. However, participants experiences and exposure to both extreme beauty ideals and practices did vary due to socioeconomic and geographic factors. Where participants grew up, attended university previously, and the socioeconomic class behind both, influenced their understanding and perspective of extreme beauty standards. Several participants referenced their hometowns to contextualize what they considered to be “normal” beauty behaviors. An example of this occurred in some form in every focus group. One instance of this came from Participant 2C in focus group #2. While participants discussed heightened beauty expectations at TCU, she stated,

Yeah, like Fort Worth reminds me of a lot of like the outskirts that reminds

me a lot of like exactly where I'm from, because I'm from like right outside of Nashville. So, it's kind of like the same like suburb of like a big city, but like a nice suburb, if that makes sense.

In another focus group, Participant 1C also referenced her geographic, and socioeconomic background, as it pertained to her extreme beauty experiences disclosing,

From like my community, I'm from Highland Park⁷. So sometimes, yeah, it depends on the like what I wrote about on like the second question [of the study questionnaire]. I wrote about like different, like different beauty products or like weight loss things nowadays like Ozempic's really big. And I know, like girls from my school whose parents were buying it for them or um stuff like I don't know.

By the same token, participants who were not from such affluent areas disclosed this about themselves, often citing it as the reason behind TCU being a major beauty culture shock for them. In focus group #2, Participant 2B disclosed this while talking about the extreme beauty standards at TCU saying,

Coming here [TCU] was kind of like a culture shock, because, like, I'm from, like a tiny little town in Texas like, it's 2,000 people I graduated with 54 people in my class, so like [sic] like no one there would like was like... they are here. So, I'm kind of like. Wow, people are different like people at my hometown would have never like done something to try to like be something else if that makes

⁷ Highland Park is an affluent suburb of Dallas Texas with the averaging property being appraised at \$1.68M as of 2022 and is voted one of the best places to live in Texas (Data USA, 2022).

sense?

This quote by Participant 2B demonstrates the underlying privilege associated with the ability to participate in extreme beauty behaviors, which are typically expensive and require repetitive monetary investment. Additionally, while extreme beauty behaviors typically permeate higher socioeconomic areas in general, there is variance in extreme beauty ideals and practices based on geographic location. Many of the participants held a unique perspective on this theme because they moved states to attend TCU or attended other universities before coming to TCU. A particular account of this comes from focus group #3, where Participant 3D and 3A discussed these ideas saying,

Participant 3D: “Yeah, I feel like this other part of me. I went to like a different school before TCU and I went to Arizona [University] and like that atmosphere is I could go on and on about how different it is compared to TCU. So, I think TCU is definitely a lot more like the beauty standards, I don't think are as um upheld as to they were at my other school, and I think it kind of depends on like I guess where you go to school, to like who you're around. I don't know. Private school, public school– I don't know if that plays a role in it, but definitely like, think the beauty standards here aren't as extreme as they were at my other school.”

Participant 3A: “I think it goes back and forth here cause like... different. Like... obviously, I'm not saying this, speaking for everyone. But different sororities have like different values and like opinions and I know, like there's such thing as like Southern girls and like Western girls, and like that sort of thing.”

As demonstrated by these participants conversations, geographic location plays a role in the development and participation of beauty ideals and standards in addition to high

socioeconomic class or disposable income to invest in such procedures or behaviors.

Participants understood that attaining the extreme beauty ideal that is now considered to be what beauty looks like is a serious financial investment and is a privilege not everyone can afford.

This was reflected in focus group #4 with the University of Arizona being mentioned again for having unrealistically high beauty expectations and prioritization. Participant 4D asks

Participant 4C who previously attended the University of Arizona about her experience there.

The conversation went as follows,

Participant 4D: “I just wanted to ask you like, because I. My roommates from Arizona. And she's like told me so much, and I was like had friends that have gone to U of A [University of Arizona], and like I've always heard so much about the Arizona effect like so much, and how like all the girls there like dress a certain way they all look like supermodels like... you need to like this like, would you say it's true?”

Participant 4C: “My roommate. So, I'm from Orange County, California, and my roommate she's from, or my old roommate, she was from Newport Beach, and I loved her. She was, I don't know if you guys know Newport Beach. Okay, it's just like [sic] like, I don't even know how to describe it. But like it's just like the richest, bougiest area you can live in in Orange County, and um... she was from there. And so, I was really scared because I was like, okay, she's from Newport Beach like that's kind of scary. But I ended up meeting her, and we got along super [sic] super well, and she was in like the top house at U of A she was a DG [member of Delta Gamma Greek sorority] or whatever, and all her friends literally they looked like they were like 30 years old, because they all were just like

drop dead gorgeous, like beautiful girls. And she was not like them, but she was also friends with them. And so, it's like my little sister goes to U of A, and I kind of like told her about that, and she loves it, so I think it just depends on like if you can handle it or not."

This conversation in focus group #4 illustrates how costly participants understand these extreme beauty lifestyles to be and the differing expectations based on geographic location. To this point, participants also understood that influencers, and their embodiment of such high beauty standards, is the result of being able to routinely financially invest in extreme beauty behaviors. Participant 1B spoke to this in focus group #1 when she said, "Yeah, like, influencers often have the money to like, keep adjusting and like keep making themselves perfect, whereas, like everyday people is like you do it once and like it costs a lot. So, you can't necessarily do that all the time, you know."

As demonstrated by this comment, participants understood the nature of influencers creating content on their extreme beauty practices and the money required to have them done. Moreover, they understand that earning money from creating content on extreme beauty behaviors creates the opportunity for influencers to afford more extreme beauty behaviors and subsequent content on them. This cyclical nature was acknowledged by participants and was a source of skepticism for some of them. The involvement of monetary gain for influencers was a consideration with some participants having personal experience with beauty influencers. Specifically, in focus group #1, Participant 1B stated,

I know this girl from my she was in my sister's grade, but she like promotes these weight loss pills like on um her story. She talked to my sister. She doesn't use them. She just promotes them to make money because she's just trying to pay for college, but it's just like everyone thinks she does. So, then they kind of like look

at it. They're like, 'Oh, she's so pretty like maybe I should try them', even though they're like totally fake. But she makes money from it and like looking at influencers, they can make all these deals and like, maybe if they promote like, this certain like doctor that use they can get like a discount for next time. So, it's kind of. I mean, it depends on the person, but it also is like the money side of it. They could make some money out of it.

This experience, as well as the previous quotes, exemplify how money, and having it, cyclically keep the online and in-person continuation of extreme beauty standards and behaviors in motion. Additionally, they highlight the subtle but distinct difference in beauty ideals based on geographic location and experiences, as well as socioeconomic background.

Influencers Are Like Us... But Better

A prevalent and significant theme throughout data collection was the significant and unique role social media influencers played as public figures and sources of information for beauty, trends, and lifestyle. During focus groups, participants identified the various reasons they trust, admire, and aspire to be like the beauty influencers they watch on Instagram and TikTok. Lastly, participants identified how influencing has changed the landscape of celebrities and concepts of age for users, making extreme beauty behaviors more prevalent at earlier ages.

One of the primary reasons participants identified for following and enjoying influencers was their relatability and vulnerability depicted in their content. Alix Earle was praised repeatedly in all five focus groups for her vulnerability and her relatability as a result. Specifically in focus group #3, Participant 3E and 3B explained how this humanizes influencers stating,

Participant 3E: "I think I appreciate, like certain vulnerability, because it's like so much of social media is so fake, and it's easy for someone to pretend

like they aren't like curating their content to like... suggest that their life is only one way. And so, I feel like I like, appreciate an influencer, or like someone's content more when they're like real about the fact that it's not always as it seems. That makes it a little more relatable. Um. But yeah.”

Participant B: “I agree. I think, that one, I think influencers now are trying to be more like you said vulnerable and open like I know. I think it's Alix Earle or someone posted, or will post when they're like breaking out pimples everywhere, and they'll have the beauty filter off. Like ‘This is like what I look like when I'm not wearing makeup’ like it's not always as great as we're making it seem because I– I know that people will just get caught up in the fact that it's always that way... but it's not always that way or anyone.”

Next, when asked how this changes the perception of beauty and influencers on social media, Participant 3B and 3D responded,

Participant 3B: “I think it makes it seem more real, makes them that then seem more like relatable when they're being that way. I don't think it like will change like the way like the people thinking like, I want that, or I want to wear that or want to look like that. But I think that helps people understand that there's bad days for them, too, you know, like that kind of thing..”

Participant 3D: “Yeah, like, they're also not perfect. They don't have like the most perfect life ever either.”

This participant conversation illustrates one half of the paradox that began when discussing the allure of beauty influencers. As discussed in this conversation, participants clung to the idea of vulnerability and relatability when following beauty influencers. However, in this focus group, as well as others, there was a perceived separation between their lives as users and

the lives influencers that was heavily discussed. It was as if influencers were one of them, only better, and this appeared to be a more serious source of allure for participants. Participants seemed to be mesmerized by the unattainability and perceived perfection experienced only by social media influencers, both in their appearance and in their lifestyle. This was first described in focus group #3 with Participant 3D saying,

I also feel like they're super successful in a way where, like they can do a lot of things on the on their own, and like they [sic] they always have like something entertaining where, like, in a way, it's like celebrity like I like, I feel like influences in a way, like, yeah, they're celebrities but you kind of look at them like in a different way than like, a different kind of celebrity. You kind of look up to them in more way, like [sic] like. I feel like I know, Alix Earle, but I don't know Alix Earle. Like, I know, 'Oh, my God, I know she did this last night', or like 'I know she's has a boyfriend, and he's like', I don't know like you feel like you know them on a more personal level. And I think um, wait. I forgot where I was going with this, like [sic] like their- their videos are like more of like an entertaining like, 'Oh, they're going here tonight like, I'm gonna see what she's gonna wear because, like, I know, I can't afford that'. But like, if I could like, I want to see like I don't know like things like that.

Participant 3D exhibits a common sentiment that was built on in following focus groups.

More specifically, focus group #4 discussed how perfection presented by beauty influencers not only creates the cycle of views and followership but is alluring, even as an aware user. More to this point, this quotation illustrates how deeply entrenched this process, specifically with online influence like influencers and their content, is in social contagion.

Despite participants being aware that content is largely fake and unrealistic, participants will

still strive to embody what they see on screen and look to influencers as beauty idols. No matter their awareness of deceit or unattainability, and even subsequent frustration with it, the extreme beauty ideals presented are an itch they must scratch. Furthermore, this is an obsession that relies and feeds on individual viewer obsession to recirculate content on social media and further grab other viewers and members of their demographic. This thus creates a system in which the obsession becomes a group experience. Participants 4B and 4E illustrate these ideas well stating,

Participant 4B: "I mean, like one of the big appeals is like the more unattainable it looks, the more attention it gets, because, like you know, it's so hard to strive for that like people are gonna like... it, just like catches their attention. And they're intrigued."

Participant 4E: "Whoever said like the more unattainable it is the more we want it. I feel like that's so true. Cause whenever. I feel like when I see someone that's like perfect body and everything like all the comments are like, 'Oh, like, God too their time on you' or like things like that."

Through this conversation, it becomes clear how platforms like TikTok and Instagram, due to beauty influencers, have become a heightened state of unrealistic beauty standards and extreme beauty practices. One participant in particular, Participant 4D, summed up this belief during focus group #4 saying,

Yeah, I saw something. There's like guys. I mean, like everyone's on TikTok, like it was something he said, something like, 'You see more girls that are a 10 out of 10 in like 20 minutes of scrolling on TikTok than you will in like your entire life', like you don't just see people out like that all the time. Yeah.

Furthermore, while participants perceived these influencers to represent an unattainable beauty standards and lifestyle, they also accredited them to a higher social role, and thus greater responsibility. Beauty influencers that were deceitful or promoted unhealthy practices in the name of beauty were heavily criticized because of their large following and thus greater perceived credibility and influence. Participant 3D described how earning such influence and credibility works in focus group #3 saying,

I think when someone thinks that like you're a part of a trend, I think you look more like, 'Oh, she's already on that trend already, like wow! She started that' like something like in that aspect where it's like you, if you're like on top of trends. I feel like you're seen as somebody who like has like a higher oh, social role? I don't know. Maybe.

Additionally, participants were deeply frustrated by influencers who they perceive to misuse this power and influence, especially with the involvement of unhealthy practices and younger viewers. In focus group #2, Participant 2B claims,

I've also seen. There's this one social media influencer. I cannot remember her name, but she's like [sic] like trigger warning just in case. She was like promoting like eating disorders like on her page. And I'm like [sic] like just to be skinny. She's like, 'I'm so skinny because this is all I eat'. And I'm like that's wild like [sic] like, there's such a broad audience on social media like with little kids, too. That's like, so it's like so bad. That's so toxic that like, be promoting literal eating disorders on your page that has like a million followers.

To this point, age was a point of conversation when discussing social media both in regard to how early participants started using social media platforms, as well as how social media blurs the concept of what is age appropriate. Participants consistently reported having

access to social media and viewing influencer content at elementary school age. Participant 4D described this early life influence and its effect in focus four two stating,

Because I feel like, okay, our generation like, obviously it's gone to an extreme with like the younger generations and us. But like— like even me, like I think I was kind of on social media from like a young age. I kind of like got it younger than I should have honestly like, but I remember like looking at like pictures of like Kylie Jenner, and stuff like that when I was in like 5th grade.

The long-term effects of young adolescents having access to social media was also discussed with participants describing how concepts of age and what is age-appropriate blurring currently online. Participant 4E speaks to this saying, “Yeah, like, I feel like, since social media has become so much bigger like at some point it became really uncool to be young, and, like everyone all of a sudden, everyone like 12-year-olds are like obsessive with makeup.”

As described in focus group #4, consuming social media beauty content has moved up the age for beauty practices, creating a common culture of extreme beauty behaviors and ideals to begin at early ages as well, like in adolescent or emerging adulthood.

The Infectious Nature of the Never-Ending Ideal

Throughout data collection, the process by which participants learned extreme beauty standards and the behaviors used to achieve them became clear. This category of themes identifies the infectious nature of specific aspects of this process that has created a co-created meaning of beauty for this demographic. This category identifies three primary themes including how participants felt the need to copy the behaviors of other women and influencers, the vicious cycle they are aware they're in and the addictive nature of it, and the hypnotizing idea that confidence can be bought through embodying extreme beauty ideals. Additionally, how this process is organized by subject experts to the masses was discovered and understood. At some

point in each interview though, the why behind it all came to light. At the end of data collection, it was evident how the infectious nature of this cycle influenced their participation and urge to follow such strict definitions of beauty. Participants also described the mesmerizing promises behind achieving such high beauty standards promised by experts and peers. Lastly, participants disclosed their awareness that this cycle of extreme beauty is never-ending game and they are willing to keep playing.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

In the five focus groups, participants disclosed their feelings and personal process discovering extreme beauty ideals and beauty behaviors through other women. During these discussions, the relationship between participants and other women became evident, in addition to participants own relationship with themselves. It was evident that, when it comes to extreme beauty standards and practices, these young women were not always competitive but they were always comparative. This comparison seemed almost contagious, spreading to every aspect of how participants viewed themselves through the example and communication of other women and their own introspection.

Participants described comparing their own beauty and lifestyle to influencers on TikTok and what this process looks like for them. In focus group #4 Participant 4E describes this saying, “I also feel like it’s just kind of when you see someone like pretty on TikTok it’s kind of like your natural instinct to be like, ‘Oh, what do I need to do to look that way?’”

This feeling was a seemingly common theme participants described. In focus group #3, Participant 3B spoke of her own experience saying,

I think they edit their videos and like even like their whole like clean girl aesthetic like, it just looks aesthetic, and it looks nice, and they are obviously like in their best moment of the day, they’re gonna take the video. So, the girls like. I wanna like feel

that way, like, I don't know like there's just TikToks I see where I'm like... they look like... they live the best life. I wanna feel that way, so I'm gonna copy what they do, I guess, you know. Sorry for like. Yeah.

This urge to have what influencers depict on TikTok and Instagram was a feeling many participants related to. In fact, for some participants, this impulsive comparison was the reasoning behind their extreme beauty behaviors. In focus group #5, this was described in a conversation with Participant 5E disclosing,

Participant 5E: "I definitely wouldn't have bleached my hair as long as I did if it wasn't for Alix Earle. I— I think her hair looks so good, so I like just kept going lighter and lighter. And then, whenever she started to get darker stuff in her hair. Then I started getting darker stuff in my hair."

Interviewer: "Were you like aware of it when it was happening?"

Participant 5E: "No, I, not till this. I was like, 'Oh, my gosh! That's totally why I did that.'"

Interviewer: "What did that realization look like for you?"

Participant 5E: "Um. I'm kind of like, I need to go off my phone.

That's like, really sad. I need to be on my own person. Um, yeah."

This experience was described by another participant who attributed viewing influencers on TikTok for being their reason behind participating in extreme beauty behaviors. In the same interview, Participant 5B states,

I have lip filler. And I think I got it like a year and a half ago, or something, and I can tell it's still there, but I like got it, because, you know, I saw girls talking about it on TikTok, and I saw, like... I kind of like wrote down everything that the ones that I did like, because I do think that sometimes it can be a little too

much. And so, like I kind of like did some research about it. And just because it was like. Influencers were getting it, and it looked good on them. So, then I tried it out.

And I loved it.

The participants tendency to compare themselves to beauty influencers was not the only way in which they were looking to other women to define beauty and understand the means to achieving it. Participants also compared themselves to their peers who were actually unhappy with their own appearances. It was as if comparison was never complete and participants had little trust no matter their employed extreme beauty behaviors or personal satisfaction. In focus group #2, Participant 2D described how she experiences comparison saying,

I actually. I would say like if my friends are like, because one time, like my friends and I were talking about like things we'd want done to ourselves like plastic surgery, and all of my friends were like pointing parts of them out that like I never even noticed that they like didn't like about themselves, and, like one of my friends, was like. Oh, I hate my ears like I want to like, make them like, go more back, or like one of my other friends, is like, got another job and like some stuff like that, and I think it does influence me, because then I [sic] I already like, pick myself apart. But then I like pick myself even more apart, and I'm like, oh, like if she thinks her like nose looks weird. She thinks her ears look weird, like maybe mine do too. Like she thinks her lips aren't big enough like maybe mine aren't like, you know?

As illustrated by Participant 2D, comparison permeated even negative spaces for participants, creating a constant practice of participants questioning themselves, their beauty, and their judgement. Furthermore, participants were able to find this comparison, even within themselves. More specifically, participants described the comparison they experience within

themselves, looking at their online presence and how it compares to themselves off screen.

Participant 1B spoke to this in focus group #1 saying,

Sometimes I find myself stalking my own Instagram page. And I'm like...like, why am I here? How did I get here? You know, like I know exactly what I'm looking at, but like it's just so weird like I feel like, even sometimes when I'm comparing myself, I'm comparing to myself, and like just like you were saying, like, everybody has those bad days. Everybody has those good days, and I feel like [sic] like you just have to have that thing in the back of your mind saying, like, none of this is real, even though, like we are just constantly comparing. And that's just, I guess human nature.

As depicted by Participant 1B, participants were able to even find comparison within themselves as they assess their own beauty and the perceived areas in which they lack or do not measure up to their online self. Through the constant comparison between online influencers, peers, and even one's online presence, it becomes clear that participants do not perceive themselves to ever be done working toward extreme beauty ideals. Comparison proved to be a vital and almost contagious aspect of keeping this system of extreme beauty ideals and behaviors moving.

It's a Never-Ending Cycle and We Know That

There was a third and final paradox that ran through all five focus groups. This paradox begins with the acknowledgement by participants that extreme beauty ideals and behaviors alike are temporary and ever changing. Participants were completely aware that the online world that constructs beauty is constantly redefining it and moving the finish line for them. Despite this awareness amongst participants, they often still expressed their participation in permanent beauty behaviors to achieve trendy beauty ideals or they described their desire to participate in such

behaviors to achieve certain looks. This was described in focus group #4 by Participant 4B stating,

Like if you invest in one specific like look, that's like, really popular at that specific time. Okay, like literally, next year it could be so different. And then you're just gonna change everything again like, find what works for. You don't just do it. It's like it'll get you more views on.

This idea of specific looks at specific times online was reiterated in a separate interview when discussing extreme beauty trends. Participant 3E described this in focus group #3 explaining, “I'd say the same like certain [beauty] trends. And people are like obsessed over and like really short bursts until they're like replaced by something else, and just continues. Yeah.”

While this never-ending process described by Participant 3E would seemingly feel frustrating or push participants off of the sites, it appears to have the opposite effect. Through this ever-changing nature, the extreme beauty system becomes almost addictive because participants continuously see the need for it and the new information it possesses. In this way, the system continuously creates a need for itself, keeping influencers relevant and young women, like the participants, striving for what extreme beauty ideal they should embody now.

The other half of the paradox is that while they understand these extreme ideals to be short-term, the perceived need to reach these extreme beauty ideals is an unshakable contagion. Essentially, when a participant, or their peers, feel the need to embody extreme beauty ideals and do so by participating in extreme beauty behaviors, there is no convincing them out of it. Several participants spoke to this idea, relaying their experiences with friends who found physical issues in themselves no one else around them saw. They describe the addictive nature of striving towards these ideals. In focus group #2, when asked what the appeal of participating in extreme beauty behaviors was, participants explained how this often works claiming,

Participant 2C: “They like want to gain confidence.”

Participant 2B: “Yeah, feel better about themselves because they're comparing themselves to people that like look perfect on social media.”

Participant 2D: “Yeah, I think they like see it as a flaw themselves.

And they're like, ‘Well, this is something I really want to change about myself’ and it's almost like you can't even convince like once someone is set on changing something about themselves. It's like really hard to be like. ‘Don't do that like this, whatever’ cause. I've tried that for my friends, and like ‘I don't know like what you're saying like, I think you look beautiful’ all this stuff, and it's like they can't get it out of their head until they just do it. And like they're like, ‘No, I need this surgery. I need this thing done with me, or else I can't be like happy until then, or I can't be confident until then’.”

To these participants point, once they believe in these aspects they hear and see, there's no going back, and they'll keep playing the game no matter the rules changing. As described by the participants in focus group #2, both the extreme beauty system and the popularized extreme beauty standards become contagious amongst members of this demographic for what it falsely promises.

I Can Buy Some Confidence

When discussing the end result of participating in extreme beauty behaviors, participants claimed the same salient theme repeatedly. This theme reflects the co-constructed idea each focus group built together, which is that confidence, while it can come within, can also be bought through extreme beauty procedures/behaviors that achieve extreme beauty looks. As described by participants in various focus groups, achieving these extreme beauty looks undoubtedly provide confidence and thus joy. This theme was co-constructed repeatedly in focus groups

through participants justifying extreme beauty behavior participation for the sake of acquiring confidence. This extended to their own participation in extreme beauty behaviors, as well as defending their peers' behaviors and even social media influencer accounts of participating in extreme beauty procedures. It should be noted there was consistently no negative commentary by the interviewer discussing women participating in extreme beauty behaviors; however, participants consistently defended extreme procedures when talking to the interviewer, all citing confidence as their justification. There was consistent emphasis across participants on the value of confidence and personal satisfaction for every woman. There were three underlying and implicit beliefs participants had that acted as the basis of this co-constructed theme. These beliefs included the assumption that meeting extreme beauty ideals consistently equates confidence and that if a behavior accomplishes confidence, it is undoubtedly viable. Most importantly, every girl should get to be confident, no matter what it takes.

Additionally, participants described the confidence acquired through extreme beauty behaviors as the end goal behind participating in them. It was clear how discussions of participating in extreme beauty behaviors have changed in the era of influencing on TikTok and Instagram and how this has affected beliefs surrounding the results of getting extreme beauty behaviors done. There was a common belief that, despite awareness that extreme beauty ideals are constantly changing, participating in them and reaping the results will produce confidence and personal fulfillment. More to this point, confidence can be bought. In focus group #1, Participant 1A, 1B, and 1C describe how the era of influencing has changed popular belief of extreme beauty behaviors and what they can do for individual self-esteem. They describe this saying,

Participant 1A: “So, I feel like more influencers like again, are like normalizing, like getting stuff done like liposuction, or like plastic surgery

and stuff like that, or like getting like a boob job, or something which, like, I guess, like I feel like it's a lot different from like, even like a few years past, where people would like frown upon like the like Kardashians. And Jenner's like, 'You're being really fake'. But now, like people are saying like, 'Oh, like, it's just to make you feel more confident' or like, be more confident and like they're like helping you fix whatever you feel is flawed, if that makes sense instead of like, 'Oh, you're doing this for someone else'. So, like I feel like the message is kind of like changed. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. But I feel like it's a lot different now."

Participant 1B: "Yeah."

Participant 1C: "I think people are like, spending the money to feel confident, and confidence is really from within, which I mean, it's just like said like, you could probably a lot of people do like nose jobs, for example, they feel more confident like you know they are. There's some girls in my school that did nose jobs, which is like their choice. So, but also I mean, I did notice they'd like a boost of confidence. But they also spent like a lot of money to do it, which not everyone can do for their confidence."

Through this conversation in focus group #1, the changing beliefs surrounding extreme beauty behaviors and what they can do for individuals are evident and go far beyond fulfilling an extreme beauty ideal. Additionally, as Participant 1C demonstrates, participants understand that conflating extreme beauty ideals with confidence is a privilege not every girl can participate in. Several participants described their own experiences with peers who bought into this notion of striving for confidence via extreme beauty behavior. One participant in particular spoke to this idea by sharing her experience with her roommate saying,

I mean one of my roommates wants to get like lip filler really bad and like she is like begging her parents for it for Christmas, and like, I remember, like not like an extreme like lip filler, just like I don't know just like her upper lip or whatever. And she was like, 'Yeah, like, I don't really know if my parents will let me, because, like, they're really like big on, like, your confidence, like comes within'. But like her parents, like apparently like this weekend were like, 'Yeah, like you can. But it can't be extreme. And, like you have to like, give really good justification for why you want it, and why you need it', which I feel like was a good thing. But for her it's just like, 'I would feel more confident if my lips were just a little bit bigger, not like drastic like I need to like look like Kylie Jenner, or whatever I just like, I want to feel more confident, like the way my lips like look' and like for her it's like, 'How I kiss guys' and stuff like that. And like 'For me, just like having a bigger lip would like feel better'. And so, her parents are like [sic] like, 'I guess that makes sense'. But I don't really know. That was just what she told us.

The notion of confidence coming from within was mentioned in more than just Participant 1C's experience with her roommate. However, at the same time, participants often justified the need for doing extreme beauty behaviors, whether they were semi-permanent and lower-stake or significant, permanent decisions. In focus group #3, when asked what is gained through these extreme beauty behaviors, the participants discussed confidence and the feeling of being put together. Participants 3B, 3A, and 3D described these ideas saying,

Participant 3B: "Yeah, I just think it's just confidence and feeling... put together almost."

Interviewer: "Hmm. Is that how I mean if you talk about those things

with your friends is that how it's discussed or?"

Participant 3A, 3B, 3D: "Yeah."

Participant 3A: "Yeah, that's I feel like most girls can say, like they feel better about themselves, like when... when you do these things."

Participant 3B: "Yeah, like when you have your nails done or your hair freshly done or."

Participant 3A: "I think it's not just for like you're doing it for the attention, and like getting compliments for others like you just want to generally feel like more confident in yourself... and you know, if you do these things that it will help."

Participants in focus group #3 illustrate the common conversation participants had surrounding semipermanent extreme beauty behaviors like dyeing hair and having it done, as well as having nails manicured. However, other participants took this idea much further by justifying more extreme beauty behaviors as preventative measures to mental health obstacles. Additionally, they compared extreme beauty behaviors to unhealthy practices, claiming that these extreme beauty behaviors could prevent much worse methods of achieving extreme beauty ideals. Participant 1A represented this idea in focus group #1 claiming,

I think just like more confidence about like the way that you look cause Like. I know, like a lot of people are very insecure about like the way they look, and then that can, like lead into like unhealthy habits, and stuff like that [sic] that are not good for, like their mental health either, and so like, if they like, choose to spend the money on like lip filler, liposuction stuff like that

to make themselves feel more confident, so it doesn't like lead them into like depression, or like eating disorders and stuff like that, then that could be good for them. But I wouldn't say it like should be the message across the board entirely that that's the solution. If that makes sense.

This opinion shared by Participant 1A represents the contagious belief shared by many participants. This belief conflates achieving beauty ideals with confidence and operates on the premise that this belief is not only harmless and intrinsic to being a woman, it is relatively healthy compared to other means of achieving such extreme beauty standards.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do college-aged women co-construct extreme beauty rules online and reify them in person?

RQ2: How do emerging adult women perceive their participation in extreme beauty behaviors and trends?

Data revealed the process by which college-aged women co-construct extreme beauty rules online and solidify them in person and on the TCU campus. Participants illustrated that constructs initially emerge online through beauty and lifestyle social media influencers, who are considered to be opinion leaders. The content produced by influencers these women consume sets up both the constructs and speech acts, the extreme beauty ideals and behaviors used to achieve them, that co-constructs their shared meaning of what it means to be beautiful. Participants described how social media figures have long co-created and influenced their perceptions of beauty, stating that they began consuming beauty and lifestyle content as early as elementary school age. While influencers have long been impacting young women through their content by simply embodying these beauty ideals, there is a growing culture and push to openly discuss not the extreme beauty ideals themselves, but rather, the means used to achieve them. Moreover, these constructs and speech acts become life scripts and culture through a variety of sources both in adolescents as well as their development in college.

This occurs through both subtle and direct verbal communication and instruction given by other women either in adolescents like peers, sisters, or even parents. These early influences are significant as they provide a foundation for their understood meaning of beauty and the viable means they can use to achieving it. The socioeconomic class and geographic location that young women grow up in is also an important factor in the influence of extreme beauty behaviors and their decision to participate in them or not due to the reality of financial investment and opportunity. This upbringing and the communication they consume on the topic is important and impactful as these young women begin their young adult life

and continue to co-construct and understand extreme beauty ideals and viable practices. This carries over into their time at TCU as their parents and influencers continue to influence their shared meanings. However, these constructs and speech acts are solidified and turned into episodes in culture through verbal and nonverbal cues and observing other women on campus. The preexisting beauty constructs these young women have, and their willingness to participate in extreme beauty behaviors, influences their social affiliations with their female peers on campus. This specifically occurs through the friend groups and organizations, like Greek sororities, the young women are a part of. These peer groups, or the masses, serve as solidification of constructs and acts into life scripts, crafting and co-creating a shared meaning of beauty, or rather, extreme beauty.

More to this point, while young women co-construct what it means to be beautiful and the behaviors attached to them, they also co-construct what participating in extreme beauty behaviors and practices achieve. Participants perceived their participation in extreme beauty behaviors as the means to fix personal imperfections, and as a result, acquire more personal satisfaction and confidence. They also perceived their participation to be drawing them closer to embodying the influencers, they learned those behaviors from, despite their understanding that viewed physical perfection is unattainable. Most of all, participants perceived their participation to be underserving of judgement as it is a means to acquire self-esteem. As long as they were honest, both in their verbal communication about their participation in extreme beauty behaviors, and their physical portrayal of themselves online, all extreme beauty behaviors were viable and acceptable.

Participants accounts and discussions of their experiences gave way to understanding the world and system of extreme beauty standards and behaviors. The female-identifying TCU undergraduate students that participated in this study relayed discussed and discovered both their experiences and beliefs through conversations with each other in focus groups.

Among the 21 participants, several paradoxes were discovered in this cocreation process behind defining beauty. First, participants discussed how this era of beauty construction has eradicated the judgement behind participating in extreme beauty behaviors previous generations abided experienced. In

a confusing and hypocritical way, they described both the honesty and deception involved in creating extreme beauty standards and the means to achieving them. While participants claimed that their generation has evolved women's beauty past judgment and deception, there was a clear understanding of how toxic and unreliable current meanings of beauty are. More to this point, the participants differentiated low-stakes extreme beauty behaviors from permanent and life-altering behaviors and how they both contribute to the current extreme beauty look. Furthermore, participants identified how this process of cocreating what it means to be beautiful presents on the TCU campus. Participants described how their understanding of what it means to be beautiful was heavily influenced through extreme beauty values instilled through the TCU Greek sorority rush process and "TCU girl" stereotype.

Participants then explained how information on extreme beauty behaviors spreads through two concrete steps: opportunities presented through high socioeconomic status and the existence of beauty and lifestyle influencers on social media. They identified how socioeconomic factors influence access to information and opportunities to understand and participate in extreme beauty behaviors. They informed how this process works through the established credibility and affluence of beauty influencers on TikTok and Instagram that are viewed as the subject experts and dictated information to the masses. More to this point, participants discussed how ideals of extreme beauty, and the extreme behaviors to achieve them, have developed through cocreating what it means to be beautiful both online and in-person. Participants relayed how extreme beauty ideals are created online through the mere existence of beauty and lifestyle influencers that both nonverbally and verbally represent beauty and perfection. Moreover, participants relayed how this construction process behind modern beauty occurs in person currently by the communication they receive from sources like TCU sororities they are a part of and their peers. Additionally, participants described their experiences in adolescences both with family members like sister and parents and the extracurriculars they participated in, like dance and drill teams, that influenced extreme behaviors and strict beauty ideals they carry with them today. Lastly, participants acknowledged and described the almost hypnotic and contagious aspect behind the entire system and process of developing and participating in extreme beauty ideals. Participants described how they continuously

compare themselves to influencers, their peers on campus, and even themselves online. Participants described the paradox that is the never-ending circle of extreme beauty expectations and their willing participation despite the immense work and emotions behind participating. The participants gave the “why” behind their adherence and commitment to these extreme ideals by describing the allure of what is promised through participation, describing how they earn, or buy, their confidence through fixing just one more flaw.

This study examined how emerging-adult women communally co-construct meaning and standards of beauty through social media platforms, such as TikTok, and in-person contexts in college life. Findings of this study suggest two theoretical implications: updating research on Two-Step Flow Theory to include the modern landscape of social media and focusing future research to understand the role of social contagion in the CMM process.

Theoretical Implications

Social Media, Social Contagion, and Two-Step Flow

This study suggests the need for a more updated view of Two-Step Flow Theory that includes the influence of social media. As described in Two-Step Flow Theory, “opinion leaders” hold a significant role in the spread of information on any given topic. These leaders are trusted as knowledgeable and credible sources to speak on topic information to the masses who do not engage with mass media figures or outlets (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Previous Two-Step Flow literature reflects these ideas that opinion leaders hold significant power in both influencing how information is perceived as well explain how the masses rely on these leaders, often even influencing consumerism and purchasing behaviors (Uzunoğlu, 2014). However, previous literature on Two-Step Flow Theory predates the emergence and significant use of social media in modern society. Two-Step Flow Theory can and should be expanded beyond traditional media and into the platforms that now serve as significant alternative media sources, such as TikTok, Instagram, and other online sites social media sites, like TikTok and Instagram observed in this

study, are designed to be addictive in nature for consumers through dopamine releases in the brain creating habit loops, and social contagion for viewers as a result (Goldman, 2024). Social Contagion Theory identifies the unconscious and almost hypnotic spread of affect, attitudes, and behaviors from initiators to recipients like those depicted by participants in this study (Levy & Nail, 1993). This was reflected in previous social media studies, which found that influencers who exhibited consistent behaviors and attitudes had greater influence and had the potential to create more polarizing beliefs and attitudes on viewers and followers (Mirlohi et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2001). Through social contagion, emergent opinion leaders become solidified in the minds of viewers, and in turn, control both the information and the social contagion further experienced in the content viewers are consuming.

Focus group participants illustrated how Two-Step Flow Theory accurately describes how influencers are opinion leaders who lead the way in constructing extreme beauty ideals and become a focal obsession for participants. As discussed throughout results, influencers posed as a hypnotizing paradox for participants. In the eyes of participants, influencers manage to be approachable, vulnerable, and relatable to the point of appearing as a peer. However, in the same breath, the same participants perceive them to be like them but better, leading more glamorous and even perfect lives, all while appearing to be physically perfect, all of which are ideals they know they can't achieve but will continue to actively strive for. With these ideas in mind, Two-Step Flow Theory should be updated to be applicable to the current media landscape and should be studied in connection with Social Contagion Theory, which characterizes the media sources themselves and the consumer experience.

CMM and Social Contagion

The results and findings of this study suggest a significant role for Social Contagion Theory in Coordinated Management of Meaning. As described in Coordinated Management of

Meaning, constructions are the starting point of shared meaning and represent “Cognitive process by which individuals organize and interpret the world as perceived” (Cronen et al., 1979, pg. 25; Pearce, 2000). These constructions, while basic and subconscious in nature, are what shape entire demographics understandings and beliefs surrounding constructs. Prior CMM research has focused on the importance and need for rules within this process for organizations, stating that in online contexts specifically, a lack of rules for groups creates chaos and disunity (Moore, et al., 2009). However, the results of this study suggest a far more important role of rule valence, particularly in social media contexts where influencers significantly impact co-construction process. Additionally, the role of social contagion with content and influencers may influence shared meanings and their undeniable salience across groups.

Participants described the same paradoxical constructs, like the idea that achieving extreme beauty ideals directly produces confidence and fulfillment, and the same ideas of what it means to aesthetically be “a TCU girl”. However, participants did greatly vary in the influencers they followed/watched, the amount of media they consumed, and the varying on-campus identities and groups they belonged to. Despite these differences in media consumption and influences, there were salient constructs regarding the specific looks expected of them, how to achieve them, and the benefits they perceived to be on the other side of them. Participants were aware of the specific extreme beauty constructs and described them with great importance. They were not only aware of these specific constructs but seriously considered them in making their beauty choices. Additionally, they were aware that other members', or peers, and their commitment to upholding such ideals. These committed group members held significance for participants and were trusted to help fill knowledge gaps on constructs of extreme beauty and the methods needed to achieve them. The clear group salience depicted by participants on extreme beauty constructs, and their obsessive commitment to upholding them, raises questions of the

role social contagion has throughout CMM processes in other groups like college organizations and online spaces.

Practical Implications

Results of this study suggest practical implications for colleges and universities. Specifically, participant experiences indicate that universities, and their affiliated clubs and organizations, should be focused on addressing mental health and eating disorder support for female students. To achieve this, communication should be consistent across educational and social spaces to support a female focus on mental and physical well-being rather than a focus on aesthetic achievement and pursuits. This study took place at Texas Christian University, a mid-size private university, where the current yearly tuition is \$63,500 for full-time students (Cost Estimate, 2025).

Participants of this study discussed at length the many pressures that have created a culture rooted in extreme beauty and aesthetic, often at unhealthy and even detrimental costs for female students. As mentioned by a focus group participant in focus group two, TCU is above the national average for disordered eating and has been this way for over a decade. The “TCU girl” stereotype has been a long-lasting pressure and concept, with reports of TCU female students being above the national average for disordered eating and anorexia beginning in 2012 (Staff, 2012). Despite TCU itself reporting on this issue and creating continuous efforts, such as in and outpatient care for struggling students, this issue persists (Hale, 2024). Additionally, other statistics mentioned by participants were correct. According to a study backed by Tinder analytics, the TCU student body has been ranked among the most attractive college students and statistically receives the greatest number of “right swipes” and dates on platforms like Tinder (TCU, SMU Students, 2019). Moreover, TCU female college students were ranked the most attractive Texas students and among the top in the United States (TCU, SMU Students, 2019).

It would seem these studies have permeated female student life, with participants referencing these statistics as a form of pressure to live up to extreme beauty ideals during focus groups. While the university's stance and efforts on the issue are clear, and have been for years, one could argue that some TCU organizations are still focused on vain efforts that contradict a less appearance-centered focus for students. Organizations like Greek sororities on campus do not to open knowledge, promote disordered eating; however, they do still regularly partner with nearby businesses that promote other extreme measures and beauty standards. These businesses promote and give discounts to TCU students for services such as liquid injections, lip filler, fat-dissolving procedures, and Botox. Given that TCU students are statistically struggling with such stereotypes and statistics mentioned in focus groups, it could be suggested that TCU organizations, and the university itself, should align on stances and efforts related to health for their students. Especially given that TCU owns all Greek life on campus. Perhaps syringe and fat-dissolving discounts could be traded for Chegg and grocery discounts, and female students would not feel such enormous pressure to live up to extreme ideals and take extreme measures as a result.

While this study took place at TCU, female students at all U.S. colleges and universities face similar exposure to pressures presented by both social media and communal living situations. Moreover, while anorexia, bulimia, and eating disorders can occur at any age, these illnesses are particularly prevalent between the ages of 18 and 21. Research reflects the current median age of onset anorexia and bulimia to be 18 in the United States (Michel, 2024). Additionally, several non-surgical and surgical operations are on the rise for 20 to 30 years old women in the United States with social media and body images believed to be two leading and significant contributing factors as to why (Yechivi, 2023). The operations currently most used amongst 20- to 30-year-old women in the United States include: fillers and Botox, Rejuvenations

(used to slow and prevent facial aging), facelifts, eyelifts, rhinoplasties, and breast augmentations (Abm-Editor, 2022). Emerging adult women between the ages of 18 and 22 in the United States are at the intersection of a myriad of external pressures and influences during a critical time in their adult development. Given the rise in extreme and permanent beauty procedures, influence of social media, and high rates of disordered eating and mental health issues for this demographic, universities and their affiliated organizations and clubs should present consistent and positive communication to mitigate such issues and cultures from developing on higher-education campuses.

Limitations and Future Research

This study and its limitations suggest directions for future research. Within this study, there were two primary limitations that can act as direction for future research. This study focused on extreme beauty behaviors and practices. With these results in mind, future research on the role of Social Contagion within the CMM process should be explored. Specifically, future research might explore other socially contagious behaviors on social media and how groups communally co-construct meaning around them. Given the continual production and saturation of social media content, further areas of research could include social media trends themselves, in addition to political beliefs and ideologies, consumerism, and the development of new slang and jargon. In addition to this, other demographic groups, including various ages and genders, could be studied within these contexts to gain a greater diversity of understanding for varying groups.

Moreover, this study was conducted at a single site— on the Texas Christian University campus. Future research on this demographic or college students as a whole might explore a larger sample from different types of universities, including private and public with varying tuition costs and geographic locations. Given the existing demographics of this university,

participant demographics were, by and large, white, southern, and representing high socioeconomic experiences. For further research on this topic, interviews with a greater number of focus groups and participants in a variety of contexts and demographics may serve to make themes more applicable to a wider variety of emerging women and student groups as a whole.

Conclusion

This study observed how emerging adult women received information on extreme beauty ideals and practices and how they communally co-construct meaning and standards of beauty through social media platforms and in-person contexts like college experience. This coordination of the flow of information, co-constructed meaning, and social contagion as theoretical implications for the development of literature focused on social media communication and its real-life implications on communication, personal practices and habits, and belief construction. As participants described their personal experience and practices, they discussed extreme beauty ideals and standards with other focus group members, illustrating the active process of co-constructed management of beauty meaning today. Through this live process, the flow of information between those idolized behind the screen as well as the in-person women in their lives became evident and understandable. Through this discourse, both the level of awareness and obsession participants have on beauty and lifestyle influencer life was clear and illustrated a level of infatuation participants have for influencers, their lifestyle, and beauty appearance.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Minor demographics will be collected at the beginning of focus groups including:

- 1.) Are you between the ages of 18 and 22?
- 2.) What is your age?
- 3.) What race do you identify as?
- 4.) If you're comfortable doing so, are there any influencers or content you have watched recently you would be willing to share or want to discuss?
- 5.) How are beauty trends and influencers talked about amongst your peers, if at all? Do you see influencer beauty trends and practices carried over in your peer or social groups? If so, what are some examples?
- 6.) Have you picked up any practices or trends from influencers on social media? If so, why did you choose to participate? Have you tried beauty trends or tips from social media you might not have done otherwise?
- 7.) What would you say is gained through being aesthetic and doing the beauty norms that you see on social media? What influencers do you find particularly helpful, who/what videos are your favorite?
- 8.) Why do you think these influencing videos of lifestyle or beauty are so persuasive/influential? What is the appeal of influencer life?
- 9.) Do other women introduce you to? What do you learn from other women?

VITA

ALYSSA "CLAIRE" TURNER

Fort Worth, TX 76109 • (817) 964-6590 • aclair.turner19@gmail.com • LinkedIn:
linkedin.com/in/claire-turneract20192025

Education

Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX

Master of Science: Communication Studies, candidate 05/2025

Bachelor of Science: Communication Studies, graduated cum laude 05/2023

Bachelor of Arts: English, graduated cum laude 05/2023

Affiliations

- Member of the National Communication Association
- Member of Sigma Tau Delta International Honor Society for English Scholars
- Lambda Pi Eta Communication Association Honor Society

Experience

Communication Studies Graduate Teaching Assistant, Texas Christian University, May 2023- Present

- Planned and developed learning objectives and student coursework
- Publicly spoken and delivered class lectures
- Collaborated with faculty and other teaching assistants
- Conducted and assisted academic research

Skills

• Formal communication • Public Speaking • Marketing and advertising • Social media content curation • Operations oversight and leadership • Event coordination and completion • Procedure implementation • Growth planning • Technical writing • Copy editing • Research development and publication • Background in Microsoft, Adobe, InDesign, and QuickBooks

