THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA at CHAPEL HILL

Parasocial Paternalism and Embodied Advice Among TikTok Cosmetic Interventionists
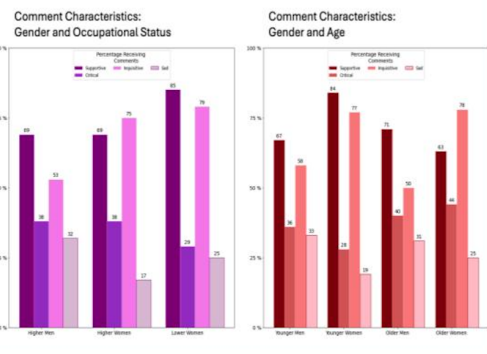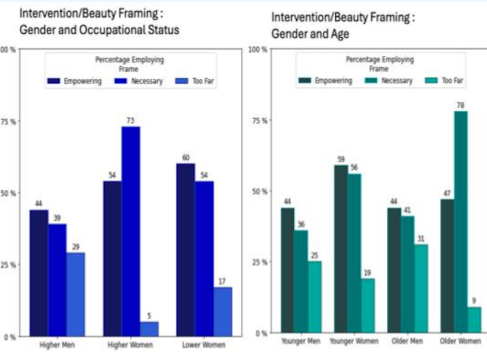
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MOTIVATION

- Occupational *credentials* maintain hierarchies provide authority. Credentials are central in medicine, including among medical practitioners providing cosmetic procedures.

- Licensed and unlicensed, medical and nonmedical professionals offer cosmetic interventions. Cosmetic interventionists with varied credentials promote their services compete for clients on the video sharing app TikTok, where viewers respond in a digital public forum.

- Cosmetic interventionist TikTok creators might rely on traditional authority signals or attempt to foster *parasocial* relationships, sharing personal, informal parts of their lives to build imagined, intimate bonds with viewers.
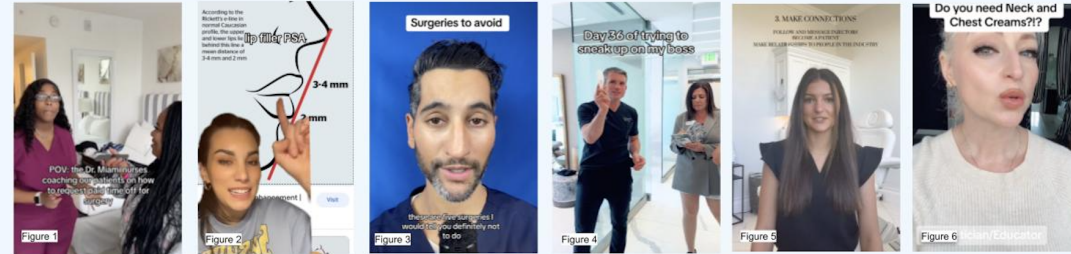
METHODS

- To understand how cosmetic interventionist TikTok creators positioned themselves, the interventions they offer, and the notion of beauty itself to their audiences, we categorically coded 200 TikToks produced by 50 cosmetic interventionists (including plastic surgeons, cosmetic dentists/orthodontists, dermatologists, aesthetic nurses, estheticians, and more).

- To understand how audiences responded to creators, we additionally analyzed the top twenty comments under each of these TikToks.

- We continually revised and improved our coding guide. We also employed in-depth, qualitative note-taking to understand framing of both the creators and the beauty interventions they presented through their videos.

RESULTS

Categorical Coding Results.

Category	Subcategory	Frequency / Percentage
Intervention//Beauty Framing	**Empowering OVERALL**	**101 (51 %)**
	Empowering-Overt	31 (16 %)
	Empowering-Implied	70 (35 %)
	Necessary OVERALL	**102 (51 %)**
	Necessary-Overt	27 (14 %)
	Necessary-Implied	75 (38 %)
	Too Far OVERALL	**45 (23 %)**
	Too Far-Sympathy	21 (11 %)
	Too Far-Mocking	20 (10 %)
	Too Far-Implied	9 (5 %)
	Too Far-General	3 (2 %)
	Other	10 (5 %)
	None	21 (11 %)
Memes/References	Audio Meme/Reference	96 (48 %)
	Visual Meme/Reference	10 (5 %)
	Other Meme/Reference	48 (19 %)
	No Reference	76 (38 %)
Top-Level Comment Characteristics	Supportive	146 (73 %)
	Inquisitive	129 (65 %)
	Critical	72 (36 %)
	Sad	53 (27 %)
	Other	49 (25 %)
	No Comments	12 (6 %)
Creator Response Characteristics	Positive	72 (36 %)
	Advice	52 (26 %)
	Negative	5 (3 %)
	Other	5 (3 %)
	Creator Doesn't Respond	98 (49 %)

Intervention/Beauty Framing: Gender and Occupational Status

Intervention/Beauty Framing: Gender and Age

Comment Characteristics: Gender and Occupational Status

Comment Characteristics: Gender and Age

Empowerment: @realdrmiami's nurse coaches patients to self-advocate.

Necessary: @thefacialplanner uses measurements to insist filler is needed.

Too far: @drpremtripathi discusses five surgeries to avoid.

Parasociality: @barrettplasticsurgery pulls pranks with staff.

Embodied Advice: @breanne.andersonn undergoes procedures as an aesthetic nurse.

Alternative Authority: @beautyjunkymonkey asserts her status as an educator.

Interventions were framed as empowering, necessary, or as going "too far." **Empowerment** framing construed interventions as providing agency and power. In Figure 1, a woman nurse working for @realdrmiami coaches patients to advocate for undergoing procedures. Interventions were also framed as **necessary** to be beautiful. In Figure 2, @thefacialplanner emphasizes "objectively" ideal facial measurements that can be achieved with filler. Interventions could be framed as having gone "**too far**." Figure 3 shows @drpremtripathi discussing five surgeries to avoid, each of which he frames as being unnecessary or resulting in the patient "not looking good."

Doctors and surgeons, especially men, attempted to come off as playful or relatable to foster **parasocial** relationships with viewers. In Figure 4, @barrettplasticsurgery pulls pranks with his staff.

Women with fewer credentials employed **alternative forms of authority,** including taking part in cosmetic interventions themselves. In Figure 5, @breanne.andersonn spoke about how one "must" take part in cosmetic interventions to become an aesthetic nurse, exemplifying **embodied advice**. In Figure 6, @beautyjunkymonkey gained trust with viewers by labeling herself an "expert", "educator", and "actual professional.".

- Nearly all videos frame interventions as empowering, necessary, going "too far," or some combination of the three
- Most videos employ memes or references
- Most videos receive supportive and inquisitive comments from viewers
- When creators respond, they are often positive or provide advice

DISCUSSION

- Cosmetic interventionist TikTok creators possessing high-status occupational credentials attempted to foster lighthearted, parasocial relationships with their viewers. In contrast, creators without these high-status credentials signaled alternative forms of authority, while still building audience trust through embodying their cosmetic advice.
  - These divergent frames illustrate how norms and cultures of online platforms interact with and transform how credentials are employed to signal authority.

- Women with high-status *and* low-status occupational credentials relied on embodied advice to signal alternative authority, illustrating how reliance on embodying cosmetic advice is strongly gendered.
  - Differences in commenters' responses to older and younger women creators indicate gendered double standards in how older creators are perceived when promoting cosmetic interventions.

Supervised by Katherine Furl