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## The Representation of the Body in new media, TikTok

Satya Raj Joshi

Lecturer Bishwa Shanti Chiran Milan Campus,  
 Kathmandu

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**Corresponding Author:** Satya Raj Joshi **E-mail:** [joshisatyaraj226@gmail.com](mailto:joshisatyaraj226@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

The representation of the body in new media appears to be focused on navigating gendered norms of the body image, particularly those of masculinity and femininity, and perceived ideals of beauty as a sign of sexual attraction. The goal of this study is to examine how social networks contribute to the development of stereotypes that rely on body visibility. TikTok is one of the most current social networking applications (SNAs) that allow users to create, modify, and share short form films. The research technique offers a self-representation focused content analysis of sample videos. Such analysis examines the impact SNAs have on the formation and expression of users' notions of beauty and gender through their digital representations of the body.

**Keywords:** The body, stereotypes, gender, digital representation

### Introduction

The body has long been viewed at the heart of contention between public and private spheres. Due to such tension between the natural individuality of the body and its societal public visibility, ownership of the body and its visibility intersect, leading to issues of self-representation. Sexuality and gender, already linked in more ways than one to the body and how it is performed, have also become linked to social media networks and new digital platforms that accelerate and accentuate the performativity of the body

With the potential of sharing images and videos of a given user's body, each user falls under the pressure of performing their body knowing it is watched by other users, as well as in comparison to other performances seen in other shared images and videos. As a result of all these elements, the body is constantly a key player in an individual's self-representation.

This research problematizes digital platforms' societal impact by inquiring whether digital representations of the body in short video apps can be visibly impacted by sexualized notions of gender and beauty. The paper tries to answer the research question; how does TikTok as an example of new digital media illustrate the normalization of stereotyped body images of beauty and gender?

The following report is divided into six parts. Following this introduction, relevant literature is reviewed to emphasize some theoretical features of the issue, including previous studies on social media consumption and body image as well as the role social comparison can play. Following that, an explanation of the research method utilized to answer the research question is provided. Afterwards, the results will be presented. Section five discusses the findings as well as the research in general, and section six concludes with some possible conclusions based on this research.

### **Literature review**

The current research analyzes videos posted on TikTok in order to examine its role in performing aspects of gender and beauty. Through this analysis, the study focuses, based on the nature of the app, on the age groups normally impacted by the app. The videos are categorized to cover various aspects of gender and beauty that can be addressed by the functionality of the features of the app, thus highlighting the significance of the short video app specifically for issues of gender and sexualized beauty for the generation it attracts.

The study is motivated by observations of the rapidly rising potential of social media in not only reflecting, but also shaping sexualized notions such as beauty and gender. Since social media itself is evolving with new apps and new uses, the potential only deepens and broadens. More notions can be impacted by new social media. The significance of this study is that it can help draw attention to the versatility of new digital social media and its growing impact on performativity and self-representation.

## Theoretical framework

Social media and body image To begin with, body image can be described as the perception, thoughts and feelings people have about their physical self (Grogan, 2008), which includes body shape, size and appearance (Cash et al., 1997). Thompson and van den Berg (2002) propose a four component model to define the multidimensional concept of body image. The first dimension, called the affective dimension, refers to the feelings and emotions one has towards their body. The second dimension, which is the cognitive dimension, includes the beliefs people hold about their own body. The third is the behavioral dimension referring to actions people might engage in which are related to the perception of their body, which can include dieting or disordered eating. Lastly, there is the subjective satisfaction dimension, which refers to “one’s global satisfaction with their appearance and body” (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019, p. 260). Research suggests that it is important to consider all dimensions of body image separately, as a previous study by Grabe and colleagues (2008) revealed that traditional media influenced each dimension of body image separately. Hence, a similar effect can be expected for social media. The effects of social media on body image have been widely explored in previous scientific studies. The findings are mixed as some researchers propose that social media usage can be related to a positive body image and others seem to find that there is no connection at all between the two variables (Cohen et al., 2017). However, Saiphoo and Vahedi (2019) state in their meta-analysis including sixty-three independent samples of studies on the relationship between social media use and body image disturbance that social media can be linked to a more negative body image. Among many reasons, this effect is caused by the unrealistic beauty standards presented on social media. As most social media websites like Instagram or Facebook are mainly appearance-based, the main focus is on posting and viewing pictures (Shafie et al., 2012). Thus, many people present themselves on social media in the most flattering way possible, leaving out the negative sides (Kross et al., 2013) and sometimes highly edit their content to look better (Rodgers, 2016). This leads to the creation of highly idealized body standards, which increase a negative body image (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Liu (2021) reports similar developments on TikTok, as she describes certain popular trends on the platform, which feature unrealistic body standards.



Screenshot taken <https://www.youtube.com/watch?a8GHahR8YY&t=80s> (fig.1)

This video carries male's voice and their choice through this song "perfect body with perfect smile". In this song you ladies are presenting their appropriated body with this song. In the song male's real voice but presented body is females. Here, body image can be described as the perception, thoughts and feelings people have about their physical self, which includes body shape, size and appearance. As Mulvey contends that women are "the bearer of meaning and not the maker of meaning," which means that they aren't given roles in which they can direct a scene but are only positioned for objectified observation. She also thinks that since this style of cinema viewing is never changed, men are always the ones who are seen in this way. This disparity upholds the archaic and outmoded notion that "men do the looking, and women are to be looked a(p 70)."

### Social comparison theory

A possible underlying reason why social media might harm body image is social comparison. Previous research implies that frequent social media usage can lead to appearance-based social comparison (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Social comparison theory as proposed by Festinger (1954), describes two social phenomena occurring among humans. First, individuals measure their own opinions and abilities by contrasting them to others' opinions and abilities. The second phenomenon states that to do so, individuals compare themselves to those who are similar to them (Goethals & Darley, 1986). Hence, it is argued that social comparison cannot only happen offline but also online. A reason

for this is that internet applications such as social media websites provide individuals with comparative information as well (Vogel et al., 2015). Social comparison can be either upwards – comparing oneself with people who seem superior to them to improve themselves - or downwards, which is comparing oneself with people who are perceived inferior to feel better about themselves (Yang, 2016).

Due to the confrontation with unrealistic body standards on social media (Rodgers & Melioli, 2016), many users seemingly engage in constant upward social comparison resulting in a more negative body image . This effect can be especially strong among the younger generation on social media, as they are highly attuned to peer evaluation of their physical appearance . Peer comparison is based on the fact that people are most likely to compare themselves to others, who they perceive as similar to themselves . Hence, it can be regarded as the most influential type of social comparison . Social media platforms allow their users a lot of possibilities for peer comparison, as they cannot only compare themselves to celebrities and models, but also to images of people they perceive as peers (Lewis & Currie, 2009). Thus, social media offers a great amount of content for social comparison, especially peer comparison, which influences the body image of adolescents.

### **Gender**

Most previous research related to the influence of social media on body image is conducted with female samples (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). In general, social media websites tend to present a thin-ideal for girls, causing ‘thinness fantasies’ which can often lead to dieting or even disordered eating (McLean et al., 2015). An example can be found in the study of Kleemans and colleagues (2016), who investigated the effect of manipulated Instagram photos on the body image of adolescent girls. Kleemans and colleagues provided evidence that girls who have a higher tendency for social comparison had a significantly lower body image after being exposed to the manipulated Instagram content. McLean and colleagues add that this effect cannot only be provoked when viewing pictures. Subsequently, they state that girls who share pictures of themselves on social media regularly, tend to have a greater than-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction, as they are more attuned to the appearance and shape of their body . A reason for mainly researching the effects on body image for women can be that females

generally have a lower level of body appreciation compared to men (He et al., 2020) and seem to process appearance-based content more deeply compared to men.

However, research shows that men also experience body dissatisfaction (StriegelMooere et al., 2009). Studies, such as the study by Haferkamp and Kramer (2011), related to the exposure to attractive Facebook profiles found similar negative effects on body image for both genders. Nevertheless, research is still dominated by female examples related to negative body image outcomes. Although specific research about the influence of social media on the body image of young adult males is still lacking, there are some studies related to exposure to traditional media. These studies claim that movies, commercials or magazines increasingly present muscular male bodies, which again create an unattainable standard for young men. In line with this, Barlett and colleagues present that when men are constantly exposed to these muscular ideals, this can lead to lower levels of body satisfaction. Thus, there might be similar effects for boys compared to girls when being exposed to muscular images on social media.

## **Discussion**

### **Content and Creator**

The content, which is consumed by the participants, differs a lot. However, it can be noted that participants often do not specifically look for the content they consume on TikTok but they rather browse their ‘for you page’ which is an exploring page that provides the user with TikToks based on their previous liking and viewing behaviour. Hence, not all participants actively followed certain creators, but if they did they often knew the person from other social media platforms like YouTube or Instagram. In general, many participants indicated that they especially like to watch comedy videos of people who, in their opinion, have relatable humor. Moreover, many participants mentioned that they use TikTok as an inspiration, for example for recipes or travelling. Additionally, some participants mentioned that they also watch news on TikTok in order to stay up to date. The female participants in the study especially mentioned that they enjoy watching makeup and fashion videos and that they like to follow certain trends on the platform which can be dances or new music. The male participants mostly preferred videos related to sports or fitness, which were either workout tutorials or videos related to football.

### **Subject of comparison**

In general, the participants stated that they mostly compare themselves to people that they know in real life. This mostly involved family members like siblings, or their close friends. Moreover, some participants mentioned that in general they compare themselves to people who have similar characteristics like them, for example age or outward appearance: “I would say I compare myself to people that are similar to me, so also blonde and tall”. Only a few participants mentioned that they compare themselves to people they see on social media, as the most agreed that they think that people on social media platform are too fake to compare to: “I also watch a lot of TikToks were they show that it’s fake, where they show the reality without beauty filters”.

### **Influence of TikTok usage on Body Image**

In general, most participants believe that there is a connection between TikTok consumption and body image, and that the likelihood to engage in social comparison does also play a role.

### **Negative influence**

Participants who experienced a negative influence of TikTok consumption on their Body Image especially related this effect to the content they consume. The negatively associated content featured videos in which ideal bodies were presented. One participant mentioned that he mainly consumes fitness content, which negatively influences his body image: “If you look at what creators I mainly watch, e.g., body builders, you often get sucked into this and wish you could also be like this.” This participant also mentioned that he perceives TikTok as a platform that especially pushes ‘ideal bodies’: “The app works like this, that videos that are received well are also recommended to more people. And especially videos of people with the ideal body are often perceived as better and have more likes, more shares and are pushed by the algorithm. Because of this you get to see these ideals even more and this can really have a negative influence on body image”.

### **Positive Influence**

Despite the expected negative influence of TikTok consumption on body Image, some participants reported a positive influence. Especially female participants reported a positive effect on their body image, as they perceive TikTok as a more realistic social

media platform compared to Instagram as a participant claims “If I compare it to Instagram you only have pictures of for example models or influencers that post pictures of themselves and everyone thinks they are beautiful. On TikTok, however, there is more appreciation for the body, more than just mere presentation. (...) I think this is more profound than just pictures. (...) and this actually helped me to accept my body how it is”. The participants who experienced a positive influence state that they associate it with body positivity content, which often features videos of people presenting ‘realistic’ bodies with imperfections like stretch marks or body fat.

### **No Influence**

On the other hand, some of the participants report that their TikTok consumption does not affect their body image at all. Participants mostly argue that this is because they either do not consume content related to body image or that they are just not sensitive regarding this topic: “I actually don’t think so because I know what is real and what is fake. I mean I would say everyone is a bit influenced by it but I think that I have a good impression of reality and that I can differentiate what is real and that I cannot compare myself to it”. However, some of the participants mention that although they believe in a negative effect, they do not think it applies to them but rather to people who strongly engage in social comparison and also younger people: “I can imagine it for other people, especially younger ones. If there is like a 14-year old girl in the middle of puberty, and she always sees these perfect bodies, I think that could be dangerous, especially if you are still so young you really relate that to yourself”.

### **Role of likelihood to socially compare**

All participants agree that social comparison does play a role in how TikTok consumption influences body image. A higher level to engage in social comparison is associated with a lower body image by the participants, as one mentions:” I think if people use TikTok, who already have problems with always comparing themselves to other people, this can even make it worse. If you then also scroll for 1-2 hours per day you will be even more confronted with these perfect people and that can influence you even more”. Some participants also associate a strong likelihood to socially compare with others with a lower self-esteem: “If you always compare yourself to others, this is in my opinion also a

sign for a lower self-esteem. And if you have a low self-esteem those videos have a direct effect on you. If you are permanently confronted with perfect people your self-esteem will be worse as you will always think: ‘I don’t look like this, I don’t have a flat belly, I don’t have the perfect big but’. There is definitely an effect.” Nevertheless, not all participants who strongly engaged in social comparison did also have low body image. Some of the participants claimed that they only engage in social comparison with people they personally know and that this is often related to academic or athletic performance.

Development perspective on social media use the intensity of the negative effect of social media usage on body image can differ depending on the age of a person, as researchers state that the higher the age of a person the weaker the relationship between the two variables gets . Although social media usage by older adults has increased over the last few years, young adults are still the most frequent users of social media . However, social media usage is not only limited to adults, as almost everyone the age of 13 to 17 has access to a smartphone and almost half of them are using it constantly (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Thus, mainly adolescents are most frequently exposed to the body standards presented on social media. Adolescence can be described as a time in which children first develop a sense of identity and get more autonomous (Erikson, 1968). However, this period in life is sometimes made more difficult by the high prevalence of mental health challenges (Burns et al., 2009), as many mental disorders are first recognized during adolescence (Patel et al., 2007). Furthermore, previous research by O’Reilly and colleagues (2018) indicates that adolescents experience social media as a threat to their mental health. This is making the exposure to unrealistic body standards especially dangerous for a younger audience as a study by Wängqvist and Frisen (2013) states that especially the rising identity development among adolescents is connected to body image. However, there is still an ongoing discussion about what ages the term adolescence is referring to.

### **Methodology**

This study is conducted by taking interview with small-scale with only 16 participants no hypothesis can be formed and be answered in a reliable statistical manner. Nevertheless, based on the previously reviewed literature, different expectations can be made on how TikTok usage will likely affect the body image of adolescents. Thus, these

expectations will be stated and sub-questions, complementary to the research question: “How does the usage of the social media app TikTok influence the body image perception of adolescents?” Based on literature it is expected that age will play a significant role and that the proposed negative effect will be especially visible among younger participants. Hence, this research is especially focused on the effects on adolescents (age 16-21). Moreover, it proposes that there will be differences in body image based on gender and likelihood to engage in social comparison.

Lastly, a research model has been created to visualize the main components of this study. This model proposes that TikTok usage, divided into the time spent on TikTok, which is measured in minutes per day and hours per week, and the content, which is consumed, which can vary from comedy, dancing, fitness or many more, will influence body image. Moreover, it proposes that there will be differences in body image based on gender and likelihood to engage in social comparison, which moderate the effect on body image.

### **Main findings**

This study aimed to uncover in what ways TikTok consumption influences the body image of adolescents of the age 16-21, posing the following research question: How does the usage of the social media app TikTok influence the body image perception of adolescents? As previous literature proposed a negative effect of social media consumption on body image, this study aimed to investigate whether similar effects can be found for TikTok usage. The results served to answer 4 sub-questions, which will now be discussed in greater detail.

The first sub-question regards the different influences TikTok can have on body image. The results of this study show that TikTok consumption can have three different effects on the body image of adolescents: a negative effect, a positive effect or no effect at all. In line with previous literature, this study uncovered that TikTok consumption can negatively influence the body image of adolescents. This negative influence mainly resulted from watching body image-related content, which was mostly fitness related. Previous studies identify that fitness content often displays ‘ideal’ body types sometimes connected to motivational or inspirational quotes and text (Carotte et al., 2017). Exposure

to such content, which is often called ‘fitspiration’ has been found to have a negative influence on body image (Arroyo & Brunner, 2016). These findings are in line with the findings of this study, as participants reported that viewing fitness-related content on TikTok often increased their body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, this content did also influence their sport and eating activities, as some of the participants strived to work out more or diet to achieve the displayed ideal bodies. Although previous literature on social media consumption mostly proposes negative effects on the body image, this study uncovered that there also can be positive effects on the body image. This positive influence was based on the content which was consumed by the participants, which was related to body positivity. Body positive content can be described as content that features more diversity in displaying bodies on social media that differ from the mainstream (Cohen et al., 2019). A previous study by Cohen and colleagues (2019) claims that exposure to body-positive content can be associated with higher body satisfaction. In this study, the positive effect related to body positivity content was only mentioned by female participants, as the male participants did not report being exposed to body-positive content. Lastly, some participants of this study claimed that their TikTok consumption does not influence their body image. The main argument given for this claim was that the participants can separate the ‘fake’ content displayed on TikTok from what is reality. Fake content refers in the cause of this research to content that is manipulated by beauty filters or other editing techniques that serve to enhance the overall attractiveness of a person. Exposure to this manipulated content is often associated with a lower body image (Kleemans et al., 2018), however, some participants in this study were able to spot manipulated content on TikTok and hence, were not influenced by it.

The second sub-question focused on the effect of social comparison on body image. Previous research indicated that social comparison can also take place on social media platforms (e.g. Vogel et al., 2015), this study found out that these findings can also be applied to TikTok. The exploratory correlations showed that participants with a higher tendency to compare themselves to others also showed higher body disturbance. In the interviews, all participants indicated that they expect people with a higher likelihood to engage in social comparison to experience higher body dissatisfaction.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the influences TikTok can have on the body image of adolescents. It started by illustrating the emerging usage of social media, especially among the younger generations. By reviewing relevant literature, it was highlighted that previous findings claim alarming effects of social media consumption on body image. It has been found that this negative effect is mainly provoked by unrealistic beauty standards, which include a thin-ideal for females and a muscular-ideal for males. These negative effects can especially apply to adolescents, who often struggle with mental health challenges and are more attuned to engage in social comparison. Based on these findings a negative influence of TikTok on the body image of adolescents has been expected. After conducting the data analysis, the results of this study revealed that the influence of TikTok consumption on body image is far more complex than expected. On the one hand, this study has found negative effects posed by TikTok, similar to previous studies on Instagram and Facebook, which were often the result of upward social comparison and body image sensitive content. On the other hand, this study could also shed light on the positive influence TikTok consumption can have on body image, based on the increasing spread of body positivity on the platform. Although TikTok still presents a lot of content featuring unrealistic body standards for both genders, there is also a shift noticeable as a substantial part of the participants do think that there is no such thing as the perfect body. Lastly, this study found that there might be differences in body image based on the content which is consumed on TikTok. Thus, further research investigating this topic more experimentally is needed to verify this finding. To conclude, this study was one of the first to explore the influences of the new social media platform TikTok on the body image of adolescents. The study was a good approach to firstly research this field and identify possible similarities and differences to other social networks. As social media is omnipresent and can potentially negatively affect adolescents. Thus, it is of high importance to continue research in this field to protect adolescents from potential harms.

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