

Literature Review the Effect Body Image on Vietnamese Youths' Buying Behaviors in TikTok



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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the influence of body image on Vietnamese Youths' buying behavior in Tiktok. With the growing popularity of social media, particularly TikTok, body image concerns have become more pronounced, particularly among younger audiences. This study investigates how TikTok's beauty trends, influencer culture, and social comparison impact consumer behaviors, including purchasing decisions related to beauty, fashion, and fitness. The research highlights key insights from global studies, as well as the specific context of Vietnam, where social media and its commercial aspects are rapidly evolving. Despite the growing body of literature on social media's influence on body image, there remains a significant gap in quantitative research within the Vietnamese context, particularly on TikTok.

1. INTRODUCTION

TikTok has emerged as one of the fastest-growing social media platforms since its launch in 2016, reaching over 1.5 billion monthly active users by 2024 (Dixon, 2024b). In Vietnam, TikTok is particularly popular among Gen Z users (ages 18–24) due to its user-friendly interface and creative features such as filters, background music, duet, and stitch tools (TikTok, n.d.). This environment enables users not only to consume content but also to actively participate in content creation, creating a digital ecosystem in which body image becomes central to self-representation and social interaction.

In this context, body image—defined as an individual's perception, emotions, and thoughts about their own physical appearance (Grogan, 2008)—has become a significant factor influencing consumer behavior. Numerous studies have demonstrated that social media platforms, especially image-centric ones like Instagram and TikTok, amplify appearance-based social comparisons, which in turn contribute to increased body dissatisfaction and impulsive consumption behaviors (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Harriger et al., 2023).

TikTok's personalized content algorithms and rapid video delivery expose users repeatedly to idealized beauty standards. This repeated exposure reinforces social norms of attractiveness and may influence users' shopping behaviors, especially those related to fashion, beauty, and fitness products (Mink & Szymanski, 2022). Within such environments, content from influencers, peers, or even strangers can trigger social comparison and instant desires, often resulting in impulsive buying—defined as sudden, emotionally driven, and unplanned purchases (Rook, 1987; Stern, 1962).

Although international studies have explored the influence of social media on body image, there is a lack of systematic reviews and empirical research addressing the relationship between body image perception and impulsive buying behavior among Vietnamese adolescents on TikTok. Most existing research in Vietnam has focused primarily on digital or media factors, without examining the emotional and psychological dimensions of body image as intermediaries in consumption behavior on short-form video platforms.

This study is conducted with three main objectives:

- (1) To identify and synthesize academic literature related to body image, consumer behavior, and TikTok as a digital environment influencing youth;
- (2) To explore the psychological mechanism through which body image influences impulsive buying behavior, particularly through the application of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and Stern's impulse buying typology (Stern, 1962). According to these frameworks, stimuli such as visually appealing content, influencer endorsements, visual effects, and flash sales may trigger emotional reactions (e.g., excitement, desire, FOMO), leading to impulsive purchase decisions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kotler, 2009);

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- (3) To identify gaps in the Vietnamese context and propose future research directions that enhance understanding of youth consumer behavior in the digital age, while offering practical implications for social commerce businesses in designing emotionally resonant and visually engaging marketing strategies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Body Image: Concepts and Components

Body image is a multidimensional construct that refers to individuals' perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their physical appearance (Grogan, 2008). It encompasses four major components: perceptual, affective, cognitive, and behavioral (NEDC, 2018). The perceptual aspect involves how individuals visually perceive their bodies, which may not always reflect reality. The affective component refers to emotional responses—such as satisfaction or dissatisfaction—with body parts or overall appearance. Cognitive body image includes beliefs and thoughts about body shape and weight, often manifested through self-criticism and rumination. Lastly, behavioral body image relates to actions such as body checking, avoidance, or excessive grooming driven by concerns about appearance (NEDC, 2018).

Positive body image involves self-acceptance and respect for one's body, even in the presence of perceived imperfections (Tiggemann, 2020). In contrast, body dissatisfaction refers to negative evaluations of one's body and is often driven by perceived discrepancies between one's actual and ideal appearance (Grogan, 2008). This dissatisfaction is prevalent among adolescents and young adults, particularly among females (Ata et al., 2007; Tiller et al., 2021). Persistent dissatisfaction can result in various negative outcomes, including low self-esteem, disordered eating, and depressive symptoms (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

2.2 Social Comparison Theory & Self-Discrepancy Theory

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that individuals have an innate drive to evaluate themselves by comparing with others. In the absence of objective standards, people engage in upward comparisons (to those perceived as superior) or downward comparisons (to those perceived as inferior) (Myers et al., 2012). Upward appearance-related comparisons—especially on social media—are linked to negative body image and dissatisfaction (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). On platforms like TikTok, users are constantly exposed to idealized images of influencers and peers, heightening opportunities for harmful comparisons (Harriger, Thompson, & Tiggemann, 2023).

Moreover, self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) explains that distress arises from discrepancies between the actual self and the ideal or ought self. For instance, when individuals perceive a gap between their current appearance and societal beauty ideals, it can lead to shame, disappointment, and diminished self-worth (Fardouly et al., 2015). Thus, social media exposure can trigger both social comparison and self-discrepancy, jointly undermining body satisfaction.

2.3 Consumer Behavior Among Youths

Youth consumer behavior is significantly influenced by psychological, emotional, and social factors. According to Solomon et al. (2012), self-concept and identity expression play a critical role in purchasing decisions among adolescents. Young consumers often buy products that align with their ideal self-image or help them fit into desired social groups. Peer pressure is another powerful motivator, especially in collectivist cultures, where conformity to group norms and trends is emphasized (Chan, 2010). Emotional triggers—such as anxiety, excitement, or self-doubt—can lead to impulsive buying, particularly when reinforced by appealing visual stimuli or influencer endorsements (Pang et al., 2022).

Social media platforms amplify these factors. The visibility of product usage by peers and influencers, the desire for social approval, and fear of missing out (FOMO) are known to drive purchase behavior (Vrontis et al., 2021). For Gen Z, who are highly visual and digitally native, aesthetic appeal and authenticity are crucial in shaping consumer attitudes and decisions (Blakley, 2020).

2.4 TikTok and Visual Consumption

TikTok, launched in 2016, has become one of the most influential platforms globally, especially among Gen Z users (Ceci, 2024a). With its short-form video format, TikTok fosters visual storytelling that is fast-paced, emotionally engaging, and often appearance-driven. The "For You" algorithm continuously feeds users personalized content, making it easy to encounter idealized representations of beauty, lifestyle, and success (Muliadi, 2020).

Unique features such as beautifying filters, viral dance challenges, and influencer-generated content make TikTok a hub for visual consumption. Users are encouraged to participate in trends and emulate popular creators, which can reinforce beauty norms and intensify self-monitoring or "body surveillance"—a concept that refers to the habitual monitoring of one's appearance from an observer's perspective (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). This phenomenon is linked to objectification theory, suggesting that constant exposure to appearance-based content leads individuals—particularly women—to internalize an outsider's gaze, impacting their body satisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

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The emergence of TikTok Shop further integrates commerce into the content ecosystem. Influencers can now directly promote products, blurring the line between entertainment and marketing. For youth, this fosters a form of "aesthetic consumption" where purchasing decisions are driven by visual appeal and identity alignment rather than functional value (Pang et al., 2022). Influencers, viewed as relatable yet aspirational figures, serve as both idealized comparison targets and persuasive commercial agents (Vrontis et al., 2021).

In this visual culture, idealized beauty standards—often Eurocentric or hyper-fit—become normalized and sought after, increasing the likelihood of body dissatisfaction through repeated upward comparisons (Mink & Szymanski, 2022). However, new counter-movements such as "body neutrality" have emerged, promoting acceptance over idealization (Seekis & Lawrence, 2023), suggesting that the platform may also provide opportunities for body-positive engagement if curated mindfully.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature search for this study was conducted systematically to ensure comprehensive coverage of research related to the topics of "body image," "TikTok," and "consumer behavior" among Vietnamese youth in the context of social media and social commerce. The primary keywords used in the search included: "body image", "buying behavior", "TikTok", "Vietnamese youth", "social commerce", "appearance comparison", "influencer marketing", and "Gen Z". These keywords were combined flexibly using Boolean operators (AND, OR) to expand or narrow the search scope.

The search was conducted across reputable academic databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and ProQuest, to ensure the quality and credibility of the sources. Additionally, reports from relevant organizations related to youth behavior, consumer behavior, and social media communication (e.g., Pew Research, Influencer Marketing Hub) were also reviewed to provide practical perspectives on the research context in Vietnam.

To ensure the relevance and timeliness of the literature, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. Inclusion criteria for selecting studies were:

- Studies published between 2018 and 2024 to ensure the data is up-to-date and reflects current trends in digital media.
- Research focused on topics related to body image, TikTok, and consumer behavior, especially within the context of youth or Gen Z.
- Studies addressing social media or social commerce, particularly on short-form video platforms like TikTok.

On the other hand, exclusion criteria included:

- Studies that were unrelated to social media (e.g., focusing on traditional media or offline platforms).
- Research that did not discuss consumer behavior (i.e., only addressing body image or psychological aspects).
- Studies that were medical, biological, or clinical in nature, which did not align with the sociological and communication focus of this research.

After gathering and screening the literature, a thematic analysis approach was employed to organize and synthesize the data. The analysis was conducted through manual coding, identifying recurring themes related to the research questions.

The main themes were grouped along three primary axes:

- Indirect vs. Direct Influence: This theme differentiates between the direct impact of TikTok on body image and consumer behavior (e.g., through advertisements, direct content) and indirect influences through social comparison, self-expectations, or the formation of beauty standards.
- Role of Influencers: This theme focused on the role of influencers on TikTok—both macro and micro influencers—examining how they shape body image perceptions and purchasing behaviors, especially within the social commerce ecosystem on TikTok Shop.
- Gender-Based Influence: This theme explored the differences in the degree and type of influence between male and female youth, particularly in terms of body image comparison and impulse buying behavior.

This thematic grouping was intended to clarify the relationship between body image, visual media environments, and consumer behavior in a digital ecosystem where TikTok plays a central role.

4. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

4.1. General Studies on Body Image and Consumerism

The relationship between body image and consumerism has been widely studied in global research, highlighting how dissatisfaction with one's appearance and the cultural ideal of beauty can influence purchasing behavior. Research suggests that body dissatisfaction is a significant driver behind consumer choices, especially in categories like clothing, cosmetics, fitness, and wellness products (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). According to Grogan (2016), the modern beauty ideal, shaped by social media and media portrayals, is a pervasive force that drives individuals to purchase products to "improve" their appearance, leading to a cycle of consumption where individuals invest in items they believe will help them achieve the ideal body or appearance. This phenomenon is evident across various markets, from fast fashion to cosmetic surgery (Dittmar, 2009).

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Consumerism, in this sense, is intricately tied to appearance management, where individuals, particularly women, seek products that promise enhancement of physical features. Studies have shown that the desire for a "flawless" look is a key motivator in the consumption of beauty and fitness products, creating a demand for solutions ranging from skincare and makeup to gym memberships and dietary supplements. The role of advertisements and media representations of the ideal body serves to exacerbate these desires, reinforcing the idea that one's worth is linked to physical attractiveness (Cash, 2004). The connection between body image and consumerism is deeply entrenched in societies where visual aesthetics are highly valued.

4.2. Role of Social Media (Especially TikTok) in Shaping Body Image

Social media, particularly platforms like TikTok, has become a powerful tool in shaping contemporary perceptions of body image. TikTok, with its emphasis on viral trends, visual culture, and short-form videos, has further intensified the prominence of certain beauty ideals. The platform facilitates the rapid dissemination of beauty trends, including makeup tutorials, skincare routines, and fitness transformations. TikTok users frequently engage with content that showcases transformations, often filtered and edited to create the appearance of flawless skin, toned bodies, or perfectly styled hair.

One of the most influential aspects of TikTok is its emphasis on the "ideal body" culture, where certain physical attributes are celebrated and elevated as the standard. These beauty ideals, such as slimness, smooth skin, and curvaceous figures, can lead to a heightened sense of body dissatisfaction, especially among younger audiences (Fardouly et al., 2015). The extensive use of filters and digital manipulation tools exacerbates the pressure to conform to these ideals, creating an unrealistic standard that many users, particularly Gen Z, feel compelled to achieve.

Another critical development is the rise of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), micro-influencers, and beauty/gym content creators. These influencers, often with massive followings, play a pivotal role in shaping beauty norms on TikTok. Their content is not only aspirational but also actionable, promoting products that help followers achieve the "ideal" look. Micro-influencers, with their niche and often more relatable content, have also emerged as key players in influencing buying behavior, particularly in beauty and fitness markets. These influencers frequently promote products related to body shaping, fitness regimens, skincare, and makeup, reinforcing the connection between body image and consumerism.

Social media platforms like TikTok thus represent both a source of body image ideals and a driver of consumer behavior, particularly among youth. The influence of influencers and the constant stream of curated content can lead to increased consumption of beauty and fitness-related products, as users try to align their appearance with the trends being set on the platform.

4.3. Body Image and Buying Behavior: Identified Linkages

The link between body image and buying behavior has been well-documented in various studies, particularly in relation to how people purchase products to improve or maintain their appearance. Three primary factors have been identified that influence purchasing decisions in this context:

(a) **Purchasing to Improve Appearance:** The desire to improve one's physical appearance is a major driver of consumer behavior, especially within beauty, fashion, and fitness markets. Consumers often purchase products such as makeup, clothing, and fitness tools in an effort to meet societal beauty standards or to address dissatisfaction with their current appearance (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). This is particularly true in markets that promote body contouring, beauty enhancement, and fitness products, where the primary goal is to achieve a more idealized version of one's physical self.

(b) **Peer Pressure and Trend Conformity:** Another key factor is social comparison, where individuals buy products because they feel a sense of peer pressure or the desire to keep up with trends. Social media, and especially platforms like TikTok, amplify this behavior, where users often seek to replicate what influencers or their peers are doing, from clothing choices to workout routines (Fardouly et al., 2015). This "trend-following" behavior is part of a larger culture of social commerce, where purchasing decisions are heavily influenced by what is popular or seen as desirable within one's social circle or on a global scale.

(c) **Livestream Shopping and "Before-After" Formats:** The introduction of livestream shopping has also contributed to the relationship between body image and buying behavior. On TikTok and other platforms, live streaming has become a popular format where products are promoted in real-time, often with influencers demonstrating the use of products (e.g., makeup application or fitness gear) and showcasing before-and-after results. These formats play on the desire for instant transformation, which is highly appealing to consumers looking for quick and visible improvements in their appearance. The success of livestream shopping highlights the growing trend of impulse buying, often driven by emotional responses triggered by the promise of physical enhancement or conformity to beauty ideals.

4.4. Vietnam-Specific Evidence

Research on body image and consumer behavior in Vietnam remains relatively limited. Most of the available studies focus on broader cultural contexts and general trends rather than specific insights into Vietnamese youth. However, a few studies and market reports provide valuable insights into the local context.

For instance, research by Decision Lab and Q&Me has explored consumer trends in Vietnam, highlighting how younger generations are influenced by global beauty standards and consumer culture. These studies suggest that, like other

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countries, Vietnamese youth are heavily influenced by social media trends, particularly on platforms like TikTok, where beauty ideals are shaped and propagated by influencers and peers. Moreover, TikTok Vietnam has published reports indicating the growing popularity of beauty-related content and the consumption of beauty and fitness products through social commerce.

However, despite these reports, there remains a gap in comprehensive, localized studies on the impact of body image dissatisfaction on buying behavior in Vietnam. A significant issue is the lack of control over content moderation, which has led to concerns about the psychological impact of unrealistic beauty standards. The prevalence of digitally manipulated images and unrealistic portrayals of beauty may exacerbate feelings of inadequacy among youth, influencing their consumption patterns and contributing to unhealthy consumer habits.

The lack of content regulation has also raised concerns about the mental health implications of body image issues, particularly among young people who are highly vulnerable to these influences. This issue is further compounded by the rapid rise of social commerce, where buying decisions are often made impulsively, driven by external pressures such as influencer endorsements or the desire to conform to a particular aesthetic.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Key Insights and Patterns

From the reviewed literature, several key insights and patterns emerge regarding the relationship between body image, consumer behavior, and social media platforms like TikTok. One prominent theme is the influence of social comparison, where individuals often align their appearance with idealized beauty standards presented on social media platforms. According to Tiggemann and Slater (2014), exposure to influencers and trends on platforms like TikTok has a significant impact on consumer choices, particularly in the beauty, fashion, and fitness sectors. The use of filters, beauty trends, and the rise of influencers has notably shaped how consumers perceive their bodies and their purchasing decisions.

Moreover, peer pressure and the desire to conform to social media trends are particularly prevalent among youth, as TikTok continues to expand in popularity. Research by Fardouly et al. (2015) suggests that the desire to conform to these ideals has significant implications for consumer behavior, particularly in relation to livestream shopping and before-and-after content, which drive impulsive buying decisions. Studies have found that body image dissatisfaction often leads to the consumption of products for appearance enhancement, with significant links between body image concerns and social commerce (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

5.2. Research Gaps and Limitations

Despite the growing body of literature on body image and consumer behavior on social media, there are several research gaps, particularly in the Vietnamese context. Most studies are limited in quantitative research on the direct impact of body image on purchasing behavior, especially on TikTok in Vietnam. Existing research is mostly qualitative or global in scope, which may not fully account for cultural differences in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Additionally, there is a lack of segmentation in terms of age, gender, and regional factors. Previous studies often generalize findings across broad demographics without differentiating the influence of age groups (such as Gen Z), gender, or regional factors on body image perceptions and consumer behavior (Cohen & Blaszczynski, 2017).

Furthermore, much of the existing literature overlooks the long-term impact of social media exposure on body image. While short-term effects have been studied, few studies address longitudinal changes in consumer behavior, especially the prolonged effects of engagement with body image content on TikTok over time (Perloff, 2014).

5.3. Implications for Future Research

Future research should integrate qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, along with TikTok data analysis, to understand better how youth engage with body image content and make purchasing decisions. Additionally, modeling consumer behavior based on shifts in body image perceptions could offer valuable insights. Studies should focus on how self-esteem, body satisfaction, and idealized body standards interact with purchasing decisions over time.

It would also be beneficial to conduct comparative studies between social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook to explore platform-specific differences in shaping body image and consumer behavior. Research comparing these platforms could identify the features that make each one uniquely influential in shaping consumer decisions and body image dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Addressing these gaps could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving relationship between body image and consumer behavior in the age of social media, particularly with the rise of TikTok.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, TikTok has emerged as a powerful force in shaping body image and consumer behavior, particularly among Vietnamese youth. The platform's beauty trends, influencer-driven content, and the proliferation of social comparison have significant effects on how young people perceive their bodies and make purchasing decisions. The findings suggest that exposure

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to idealized body types and beauty standards on TikTok leads to increased consumer behavior related to appearance-enhancing products, such as makeup, fashion, and fitness tools. Furthermore, peer influence and the desire to follow trends contribute to impulsive buying decisions, particularly through features like livestream shopping and before-and-after content.

However, there are notable gaps in existing research, especially in the Vietnamese context, where studies on the intersection of body image and consumer behavior on TikTok remain limited. Most research is qualitative, and there is a lack of quantitative data, particularly segmented by factors like age, gender, and region. Additionally, long-term effects and behavioral changes over time have not been sufficiently explored. Future research should address these gaps by incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods to better understand the evolving relationship between social media, body image, and consumer behavior. Studies comparing TikTok with other social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook could further illuminate platform-specific influences. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital media platforms like TikTok are reshaping youth culture and consumption patterns in Vietnam.

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