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The Correlation between Exposure to Idealized Body Content
on TikTok and Body Dissatisfaction among Male Users Aged
18-30 Years

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ABSTRACT

Gegenstand dieser Forschungsarbeit ist die Körperunzufriedenheit bei männlichen Nutzern im Alter von 18 bis 30 Jahren, die als eine Personengruppe identifiziert wurden, die hinsichtlich der Körperunzufriedenheit erheblich von TikTok beeinflusst wird. Die Studie konzentriert sich auf den Zusammenhang zwischen dem Ausmaß, in dem junge Männer im Alter von 18 bis 30 Jahren auf TikTok Inhalten mit idealisierten männlichen Körperbildern ausgesetzt sind, und dem Grad ihrer Unzufriedenheit mit dem eigenen Körper. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit gilt der Art und Weise, wie der TikTok Algorithmus solche Inhalte automatisch personalisiert und wiederholt im Videofeed der Nutzer ausspielt. Diese Dynamik unterscheidet TikTok von anderen Plattformen wie Instagram oder Facebook, auf denen die Nutzer selbst mehr Kontrolle darüber haben, welchen Inhalten sie folgen möchten. Die Daten wurden mithilfe einer Onlinebefragung über TikTok von 156 aktiven TikTok Nutzern der Zielgruppe erhoben. Dabei wurden zwei Instrumente verwendet: ein validiertes Instrument zur Messung der Körperunzufriedenheit (BSQ 8D) sowie eine eigens entwickelte Skala zur Erfassung der Häufigkeit und Intensität der Exposition gegenüber fitnessbezogenen Inhalten auf TikTok, insbesondere innerhalb der For You Page der Teilnehmenden. Die Rekrutierung erfolgte ausschließlich über TikTok, wodurch sichergestellt wurde, dass die Stichprobe tatsächliche Nutzer der Plattform widerspiegelt. Das wichtigste Ergebnis ist hochsignifikant: Es wurde ein starker, statistisch belegter positiver Zusammenhang zwischen der Exposition gegenüber idealisierten Fitnessinhalten auf TikTok und dem Ausmaß der Körperunzufriedenheit festgestellt. Konkret können etwa 42 Prozent der Varianz der Körperunzufriedenheit durch den Grad der Exposition gegenüber diesen Inhalten erklärt werden. Dieses Ergebnis kann mithilfe der Theorie des sozialen Vergleichs interpretiert werden, die davon ausgeht, dass sich Vergleiche mit Personen, die als überlegen wahrgenommen werden, negativ auf die Selbstbewertung und die allgemeine Zufriedenheit mit sich selbst auswirken können. Die Forschenden weisen auf die besonderen strukturellen Merkmale von TikTok hin, nämlich den personalisierten und kontinuierlich aktualisierten Feed sowie die schnelle Abfolge kurzer Videoinhalte, die als potenzieller Faktor diese negativen Auswirkungen auf das Körperbild junger Männer zusätzlich verstärken könnten. Darüber hinaus kann die stark visuelle und idealisierte Natur fitnessbezogener Inhalte auf TikTok, die häufig stark bearbeitete oder gefilterte

Darstellungen des männlichen Körpers zeigen, zur Entstehung unrealistischer Körperideale beitragen, die für den durchschnittlichen jungen Mann nur schwer erreichbar sind. Dies ist besonders bemerkenswert, da diese Bevölkerungsgruppe in der bisherigen Forschung zum Körperbild historisch unterrepräsentiert war. Während sich der Großteil der bestehenden Literatur zu sozialen Medien und Körperbild auf Frauen und Mädchen konzentriert hat, trägt die vorliegende Studie zu einer wachsenden Anzahl von Erkenntnissen bei, die darauf hindeuten, dass junge Männer gleichermaßen anfällig für die psychologischen Folgen idealisierter Körperdarstellungen in digitalen Umgebungen sind. Die Studie weist jedoch einige Einschränkungen auf. Aufgrund des querschnittlichen Forschungsdesigns können keine eindeutigen kausalen Aussagen getroffen werden. Anstatt nachzuweisen, dass die Exposition Körperunzufriedenheit verursacht, kann lediglich bestätigt werden, dass ein Zusammenhang besteht. Darüber hinaus können die Verwendung von Selbstauskünften und die Rekrutierungsmethode zu Verzerrungen führen. Für zukünftige Forschung empfiehlt der Autor die Verwendung longitudinaler und experimenteller Forschungsdesigns, eine weitere Validierung der Skala zur Messung der TikTok Exposition sowie die Untersuchung zusätzlicher Variablen wie die Internalisierung von Körperidealen und individuelle Tendenzen zum sozialen Vergleich, die diesen Zusammenhang moderieren oder mediieren könnten. Die Ergebnisse der Studie haben praktische Implikationen für die Gestaltung digitaler Plattformen, die Förderung von Medienkompetenz und die klinische Praxis mit dem übergeordneten Ziel, ein gesünderes Körperbild und bessere psychische Gesundheit bei jungen Männern zu fördern.

ABSTRACT

The subject of this research is body dissatisfaction among male users aged 18-30 years old, which have been identified as individuals who are significantly affected by TikTok in terms of body dissatisfaction. The study focuses on the relationship between the extent to which young men (aged 18 to 30) are exposed to content featuring idealized male body types on TikTok, and the degree to which they experience dissatisfaction with their own bodies. Particular attention is given to the way in which TikTok's algorithm automatically personalizes and repeatedly serves such content within users' video feeds - a dynamic that distinguishes TikTok from other platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, where users themselves have greater control over what content they choose to follow. Data were collected through an online (TikTok) survey from 156 active TikTok users within the target demographic, using two instruments: a validated measure of body dissatisfaction (BSQ-8D) and a purpose-built scale developed to assess the frequency and intensity of exposure to fitness-related content on TikTok, specifically within participants' For You Page feeds. Recruitment was conducted exclusively through TikTok, ensuring that the sample closely reflects genuine users of the platform. The primary finding is highly significant: a strong, statistically supported positive association was identified between exposure to idealized fitness content on TikTok and levels of body dissatisfaction. Specifically, approximately 42% of the variance in body dissatisfaction can be accounted for by participants' degree of exposure to such content. This result can be interpreted through the lens of Social Comparison Theory, which holds that when individuals compare themselves to others they perceive as superior, this process can negatively affect their self-evaluations and overall satisfaction with themselves. The researchers draw attention to TikTok's distinctive structural features - its personalized, continuously refreshed feed and rapid succession of short-form videos - as a potential factor that may further amplify these negative effects on body image among young men. Furthermore, the highly visual and aspirational nature of fitness content on TikTok, often featuring heavily edited or filtered depictions of the male body, may contribute to the formation of unrealistic body ideals that are difficult for the average young man to attain. This is particularly noteworthy given that this demographic group has historically been underrepresented in body image research. Indeed, while the majority of existing literature on social media and body image has concentrated on women and girls, the present study contributes to a

growing body of evidence suggesting that young men are equally vulnerable to the psychological consequences of idealized body imagery in digital environments. The study does, however, carry certain limitations. As a cross-sectional design, it does not permit definitive causal claims; rather than establishing that exposure causes body dissatisfaction, it can only confirm that an association exists. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data and the method of recruitment may introduce sources of bias. For future research, the author recommend the use of longitudinal and experimental designs, further validation of the TikTok exposure measurement scale, and the examination of additional variables - such as the internalization of body ideals and individual tendencies toward social comparison - that may moderate or mediate this relationship. The study's findings carry practical implications for digital platform design, media literacy promotion, and clinical practice, with the overarching goal of supporting healthier body image and better mental health outcomes among young men.

Key words: body dissatisfaction, TikTok, young men, Social Comparison Theory, algorithm-driven exposure, fitness content, body image

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1. INTRODUCTION

Body dissatisfaction has emerged as a growing public health issue among young men, characterized by a negative self-perception regarding physical appearance and a tendency to compare oneself to idealized body standards. Research indicates that this problem is escalating, with young men increasingly feeling pressured to attain a muscular and defined physique, which is often portrayed as the ideal (Fatt et al., 2019). Unlike traditional media, which was predominant in the past, modern social media platforms provide constant access to content showcasing idealized bodies, thereby intensifying exposure to these unrealistic standards. Alarming, this issue is frequently overlooked, as research predominantly focuses on body dissatisfaction among women, leaving young men as an underrecognized and understudied demographic (Griffiths et al., 2018).

TikTok, in particular, plays a significant role in this issue due to its unique platform architecture, which fundamentally differs from other social networks. The algorithm employed by TikTok continuously personalizes the content that users encounter based on their previous interactions, leading to repetitive exposure to similar content that users may not have actively chosen to follow (Hamzah et al, 2025). This aggressive algorithmic approach means that if a young man shows even a fleeting interest in fitness-related content or briefly views a video featuring an ideal body, the algorithm will subsequently present him with an increasing amount of similar content. This creates a cycle in which he is perpetually exposed to unrealistic body standards. In contrast to platforms like Instagram or Facebook, where users consciously select whom to follow, TikTok's algorithm makes these decisions for the user, resulting in a more intense and less controllable exposure (Scherr & Wang, 2021). While numerous studies have linked social media use to body dissatisfaction, the majority have concentrated on female users and platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Research focusing on TikTok and its effects on body perception has largely targeted female populations or younger adolescents (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Studies that do include male populations often fail to differentiate between platforms and overlook the specific characteristics of algorithm-driven content unique to TikTok (Dane & Bhatia, 2023). Furthermore, existing literature rarely delves deeply into the role of social comparison as a psychological mechanism through which algorithmic exposure influences body dissatisfaction. Instead, it primarily measures time spent on the platform and general usage indicators (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

This thesis seeks to fill existing research gaps by concentrating specifically on how algorithm-driven exposure to idealized body content on TikTok influences body dissatisfaction among male users aged 18 to 30. This particular age range is chosen due to its significance as a critical period for identity formation and intense social comparison, making young men especially vulnerable to external pressures related to body image. Despite being among the most active users of TikTok, men in this demographic have been largely overlooked in scholarly studies investigating the psychological effects of social media use.

The theoretical underpinning of the thesis is Social Comparison Theory, developed by Leon Festinger. This theory posits that individuals have an inherent motivation to assess their own abilities and qualities by comparing themselves to others. Applied to body image, it explains how repeated exposure to idealized male physiques on TikTok may provoke upward social comparisons - where users compare themselves to those they perceive as physically superior. Such ongoing comparisons can gradually undermine self-esteem and generate a persistent feeling of bodily inadequacy.

TikTok's relevance in this context goes beyond simply hosting idealized content; it lies in the platform's algorithm that repeatedly delivers such content with increasing intensity. This mechanism limits users' control over the media they consume, creating an environment where exposure is not random but driven by algorithmic repetition. Recognizing this, the thesis prioritizes algorithm-driven exposure as a central variable, moving beyond generic measures of social media usage. This approach aims for a more detailed and ecologically valid understanding of how TikTok's unique media environment shapes young men's perceptions and evaluations of their own bodies.

The thesis is systematically organized into seven chapters, each delving into a specific facet of the topic:

Chapter 2 lays the theoretical and empirical groundwork. It begins by defining core concepts like body image and body dissatisfaction and then traces the historical and cultural evolution of male body ideals. It introduces Social Comparison Theory and reviews its application in body image research. The chapter concludes by summarizing empirical findings that link social media use to body dissatisfaction, setting the stage for subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 focuses exclusively on TikTok as a distinct media platform. It starts with an overview of TikTok's unique features, followed by an in-depth analysis of its recommendation algorithm. This chapter explores how the algorithmic repetition can normalize idealized body standards and discusses how these dynamics specifically affect male users. It finishes by proposing an integrated theoretical model that connects TikTok exposure to male body dissatisfaction, which serves as the conceptual foundation for the empirical study.

Chapter 4 details the research methodology. It describes the chosen research design and rationale, clearly states research objectives, and specifies the target population and eligibility criteria. It outlines sampling procedures and instruments for measuring key variables: body dissatisfaction (using an adapted male version of the Body Shape Questionnaire) and exposure to TikTok fitness content (using a researcher-developed scale). The chapter also explains data collection procedures - survey platform, structure, recruitment methods, and timeline - and concludes by outlining the statistical analysis strategy.

Chapter 5 presents the study results. It begins by describing the final sample and assessing measurement reliability. Descriptive statistics for the main variables are provided, followed by normality tests and the principal hypothesis test conducted using Pearson correlation analysis. The chapter ends with a precise evaluation of the research hypothesis.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to existing literature and the theoretical framework. It interprets the observed correlation between TikTok exposure and body dissatisfaction, reflects on descriptive data patterns, and highlights theoretical and practical implications. Limitations of the study are acknowledged, along with suggestions for future research directions.

Chapter 7 offers the thesis conclusion, summarizing key findings, discussing their broader significance, and providing final thoughts on the study's contributions to the field.

In sum, this thesis offers a focused and comprehensive examination of how TikTok's algorithmically driven content exposure may contribute to body dissatisfaction among young men, grounding the inquiry in well-established theory and carefully designed empirical research.

2. BODY IMAGE, SOCIAL COMPARISON, AND MEDIA INFLUENCE

2.1 Defining Body Image and Body Dissatisfaction

Body image is defined as a complex, multidimensional psychological construct that involves how individuals perceive, think about, feel toward, and behave concerning their own physical appearance. This concept is dynamic rather than fixed, shaped continuously by the interplay of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 4). Historically, initial research on body image primarily concentrated on women and their concerns with thinness. However, more recent scholarship has demonstrated that men are just as vulnerable to body image disturbances, though the nature and expression of these concerns differ from those typically observed in women (Cafri et al., 2005, p. 215).

A central element of negative body image is body dissatisfaction, which involves a subjective negative assessment of one's own body when compared to an internalized cultural ideal (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 10). For women, this internalized ideal has traditionally promoted thinness. In contrast, the male body ideal is culturally associated with muscularity, leanness, and physical strength (McCreary & Sasse, 2000, p. 297). This difference is significant because tools and theoretical models originally designed around female body image concerns require modification or supplementation to appropriately address male experiences.

Body dissatisfaction is a complex psychological phenomenon that manifests through negative evaluations of one's physical appearance, preoccupation with body weight and shape, and constant concern about how others perceive our bodies. This issue is not new, but its intensity and prevalence have significantly increased over the past few decades, especially among the younger population. Research conducted during the 1990s and early 2000s has shown that body dissatisfaction is not exclusively a female problem; young men also experience significant pressure related to physical appearance (Bryson, 2003). While women have traditionally been subjected to pressure to be thin, men face the imperative to achieve a muscular and athletic physique, leading to the emergence of muscular dysmorphia, a condition in which an individual believes their body is underdeveloped despite objective evidence to the contrary (Olivardia et al., 2000). This shift in the perception of the male body ideal has resulted in an increasing number of young men expressing

dissatisfaction with their bodies, using supplements, exercising excessively, and contemplating the use of anabolic steroids to achieve their desired appearance.

Media has always played a crucial role in shaping beauty standards and promoting body ideals that are often unattainable for the average person. During the 1980s and 1990s, researchers documented how exposure to media content depicting idealized bodies leads to increased concern about one's appearance and lower self-esteem (Stice et al., 1994). Traditional media such as magazines, television, and films portrayed men with increasingly pronounced musculature, influencing young men to internalize this standard as something they must achieve (Leit et al., 2001). Content analysis of popular men's magazines showed a dramatic increase in the representation of muscular bodies and content focused on body transformation, with covers increasingly depicting extremely defined muscles as the norm rather than the exception (Law & Labre, 2002). This constant exposure to idealized bodies has led to a process of internalization, where individuals accept these standards as personal goals and begin to measure their self-worth based on how closely they align with these ideals. The theoretical framework explaining how media exposure affects body dissatisfaction relies on concepts such as the internalization of body ideals and social comparison. Internalization refers to the process by which an individual accepts socially promoted beauty standards as their own and begins to judge themselves based on those standards (Thompson et al., 1999). When a young man sees photographs or videos of muscular bodies, he does not merely passively observe them; he begins to believe that he should look like that and will be valued according to how closely he approaches that ideal. This process of internalization is particularly powerful during adolescence and young adulthood, a period when identity is just forming and peer acceptance and social validation are especially important (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004). Studies have shown that the higher the level of internalization of the muscular ideal, the greater the body dissatisfaction and the higher the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors such as the use of supplements or extreme dieting (Karazsia & Crowther, 2009).

The issue of body dissatisfaction in men carries substantial consequences. Studies have connected it to various negative psychological and behavioral outcomes, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, compulsive exercise habits, and the use of performance-enhancing drugs (Cafri et al., 2005, p. 216). A particularly severe form of male body dissatisfaction is muscle dysmorphia. Documented by Olivardia et al. (2000, p. 1291), this condition is characterized by a distorted self-

perception where individuals view themselves as insufficiently muscular despite clear evidence to the contrary. Sometimes known as “reverse anorexia,” muscle dysmorphia illustrates the extreme psychological impact that body dissatisfaction can have among men.

Moreover, body dissatisfaction is intricately linked to how deeply appearance-related ideals are internalized. Individuals who are aware of cultural standards of attractiveness and actually adopt these as personal criteria to evaluate themselves become especially prone to chronic negative self-assessments (Stice et al., 1994, p. 836). To address this complexity, Ricciardelli and McCabe (2004, p. 179) developed a biopsychosocial model of body image specifically for adolescent boys. This model integrates psychological factors such as self-esteem and the internalization of ideals, biological influences, and sociocultural pressures - including media exposure, peer relationships, and family dynamics. The model underscores the multifaceted nature of male body dissatisfaction and the need for nuanced analytical approaches.

Understanding body dissatisfaction involves not only recognizing the content of societal body ideals but also comprehending the mechanisms through which these ideals are transmitted and internalized. These processes increasingly occur through digital platforms, making the study of contemporary media environments like TikTok especially pertinent for current body image research.

2.2 The Male Body Ideal: Historical and Cultural Perspectives

The concept of the ideal male body has not remained fixed over time; instead, it has been continuously reshaped by cultural forces, including media, commerce, and changing social norms. An in-depth review of this development shows a clear pattern: the ideal male physique has progressively moved toward being more muscular and lean, a trend that carries significant psychological consequences for men (Leit et al., 2001, p. 90).

Leit et al. (2001, p. 91) conducted a pivotal study analyzing Playgirl centerfolds published from 1973 to 1997. Their research revealed that male models in these images had become increasingly muscular throughout the years, with a marked rise in fat-free mass over successive decades. This finding highlights that media portrayals of male bodies do not simply mirror the average man's physique but instead present highly idealized versions that set challenging aspirational standards

far removed from typical male bodies. Similarly, Law and Labre (2002, p. 697) investigated the portrayal of men in magazines over a thirty-year span and concluded that the display of muscularity in mainstream media has intensified markedly since the 1970s.

Bryson (2003, p. 255) observed that this cultural obsession with male physical perfection has contributed to what some researchers term the "Adonis Complex." This complex represents a widespread but often hidden crisis linked to male body obsession. It manifests through behaviors such as compulsive gym workouts and anabolic steroid use. The Adonis Complex reflects a cultural phase in which male bodies are increasingly objectified and judged against hyper-idealized standards. While this parallels the well-explored objectification of female bodies, it has received comparatively less academic examination.

The shift toward emphasizing muscularity is not limited to adult men. McCreary and Sasse (2000, p. 298) documented the presence of a "drive for muscularity," describing it as a motivation to develop a more muscular body, among adolescent boys. This suggests that exposure to muscular ideals influences body image concerns from a young age. This drive is further supported by a wide range of cultural sources including action figures, video games, sports media, and advertising, which frequently showcase hyper-muscular male forms (Cafri et al., 2005, p. 217).

The ways these cultural ideals are transmitted have transformed significantly with the rise of digital media. While earlier generations encountered idealized male bodies mainly through print magazines and television, modern young men face a continuous, algorithmically tailored flow of body-related content on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. This shift has not only sped up the dissemination of existing ideals but altered the nature of exposure itself, making it more personalized, omnipresent, interactive, and self-reinforcing (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016, p. 1).

2.3 Social Comparison Theory and Its Application to Body Image

The most central theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between media exposure and body dissatisfaction is Leon Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. Festinger argued that humans have an inherent drive to evaluate their own opinions and abilities. When objective standards are absent, people do this by comparing themselves to others. This drive to compare is

purposeful - individuals typically select comparison targets similar to themselves to gain meaningful and valid evaluations of their own status (Festinger, 1954, p. 117).

Later research has expanded and refined Festinger's original framework. Wood (1989, p. 231) introduced a more detailed typology of comparison processes, distinguishing between comparisons aimed at self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement. Wills (1981, p. 245) introduced the concept of downward social comparison, where people compare themselves to others worse off as a way to protect their self-esteem and improve subjective well-being. Conversely, upward social comparison, which involves comparing oneself to perceived superior others, tends to cause negative self-assessments and emotional distress, especially when the dimension of comparison is central to one's self-concept (Wood, 1989, p. 234).

In relation to body image, appearance-based social comparisons are a well-established mechanism linking media exposure to body dissatisfaction. When individuals view media images that represent cultural ideals of attractiveness, they naturally compare their own bodies to these idealized standards (Strahan et al., 2006, p. 211). Because these ideals are highly aspirational and often unattainable for most people, upward appearance comparisons tend to consistently lead to negative feelings about one's body (Vartanian & Dey, 2013, p. 495).

Social comparison is a significant mechanism through which media exposure contributes to body dissatisfaction. According to Leon Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, individuals have an inherent need to evaluate themselves, and in the absence of objective criteria, they do so by comparing themselves to others. There are two primary types of social comparison: downward comparison, where individuals compare themselves to those perceived as worse off, which can enhance self-esteem, and upward comparison, where individuals compare themselves to those perceived as better off, often resulting in negative emotions and diminished self-esteem (Wills, 1981). When young men consume media that showcases idealized bodies, they typically engage in upward social comparison because these bodies are depicted as superior to their own (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995). Research indicates that frequent engagement in upward social comparison regarding physical appearance correlates with increased body dissatisfaction, negative emotions, and lower self-perceived attractiveness (Strahan et al., 2006). This inclination towards upward comparison is not uniform among individuals; it varies as a personality trait, with those more prone

to social comparison being particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of media exposure (Vogel et al., 2014).

The issue of body dissatisfaction in young men is further complicated by the existence of various forms of body dissatisfaction that can occur simultaneously. Some men may wish to lose weight due to feeling overweight, while others may desire to gain muscle mass because they view themselves as underdeveloped (McCreary & Sasse, 2000). This duality in male body dissatisfaction necessitates specific measurement tools that can capture both dimensions, as traditional scales often focus solely on the desire to be thin. Research has shown that young men who internalize the muscular ideal are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as excessive protein and supplement use, compulsive exercise, and, in extreme cases, the use of anabolic steroids to hasten muscle development (Cafri et al., 2005). These behaviors can lead to serious health consequences and reflect deeper psychological issues related to self-perception and the value placed on physical appearance.

The growing concern about body dissatisfaction among young men has prompted an increase in research aimed at identifying both risk and protective factors that can moderate this relationship. Studies have demonstrated that media literacy - the ability to critically analyze media messages - can serve as a protective factor that mitigates the negative effects of exposure to idealized bodies (Yager et al., 2013). Men trained to recognize manipulative media techniques, such as Photoshop, professional lighting, and selective presentation, report lower levels of internalization and body dissatisfaction after being exposed to such content (Halliwell et al., 2011). Additionally, high self-esteem and positive social support can act as buffers, protecting young men from the detrimental effects of upward social comparison (Vartanian & Dey, 2013). However, despite the presence of these protective factors, the intensity and frequency of media exposure often surpass their protective capabilities, particularly in the digital communication era where access to content is nearly limitless.

The rise of social networks over the past decade has dramatically altered the nature of media exposure. Unlike traditional media, where exposure was limited to specific instances of consuming a magazine or watching television, social networks offer continuous and nearly unlimited access to content featuring idealized bodies (Perloff, 2014). Platforms like Instagram and Facebook allow users to follow influencers, athletes, and fitness enthusiasts who regularly share images and videos

of their bodies, workouts, and dietary habits. Research from the mid-2000s indicated that increased use of social networks correlates with higher levels of body dissatisfaction across genders, with particularly pronounced effects among individuals who follow profiles focused on physical appearance (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). This new form of media exposure is interactive, personalized, and often perceived as more authentic because it originates from real people rather than unattainable celebrities or models, which paradoxically exacerbates social comparison, as standards are perceived to be more achievable than they truly are (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015).

A specific issue that arises within social networks is the phenomenon of fitspiration, which refers to seemingly motivational content that showcases physical appearance, exercise, and nutrition with the intent to inspire healthier and more active lifestyles. Although the intent behind fitspiration content is positive, research has shown that exposure to such material often leads to increased body dissatisfaction, internalization of the muscular ideal, and heightened upward social comparison (Prichard et al., 2018). Young men who frequently engage with fitspiration content express greater concern about their musculature, engage in more comparisons with others, and report higher levels of body dissatisfaction compared to those who do not consume such content (Robinson et al., 2017). The issue with fitspiration lies in its presentation of a highly selective reality, where only the best versions of bodies - often achieved through extensive preparation, optimal lighting, and digital editing - are showcased, yet it is framed as something normal and attainable with sufficient dedication and discipline.

Existing research clearly establishes a strong connection between exposure to idealized bodies in media and body dissatisfaction among young men, with social comparison and internalization identified as key mechanisms through which this exposure results in negative psychological outcomes. However, much of this research predates or was conducted during the early stages of the latest social platforms and does not account for the specifics of their operation, particularly the role of algorithmic personalization, which fundamentally alters the nature of exposure. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for developing effective interventions to mitigate the negative effects of social network use and for informing discussions about the responsibility of tech companies in safeguarding the mental health of their users.

Heinberg and Thompson (1995, p. 325) provided early experimental evidence showing that exposure to idealized media images triggers appearance-based social comparisons, which in turn

lead to body dissatisfaction. This demonstrated a causal link that many subsequent studies have replicated. Stice et al. (1994, p. 836) proposed a sequential model where media exposure leads to internalization of societal beauty ideals, which then promotes social comparison, ultimately causing body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. This model has been influential in guiding further empirical research.

Fardouly and Vartanian (2015, p. 82) extended social comparison theory to the context of social media. They found that Facebook use was associated with body image concerns through the mechanism of negative appearance comparisons. Specifically, users with higher engagement reported more frequent negative comparisons about their own appearance, and these comparisons statistically mediated the association between Facebook use and body dissatisfaction. This finding established social comparison as a key mechanism linking social media use to negative body image outcomes, a relationship later explored across various other platforms and populations.

Karazsia and Crowther (2009, p. 105) applied social comparison theory specifically to male body image, studying how social body comparisons and internalization predict muscularity-oriented body dissatisfaction in men. Their results showed that men who frequently engaged in social comparisons about their bodies, especially regarding muscularity, experienced higher body dissatisfaction. This relationship was mediated by internalization of the muscular ideal. Their work highlights the importance of social comparison in male body dissatisfaction and identifies muscularity - not thinness - as the primary content relevant to male populations.

Perloff (2014, p. 363) further theorized that social media platforms are especially powerful drivers of social comparison processes because they provide constant access to curated, idealized self-presentations from peers and celebrities. Unlike traditional media, which presents one-way images from typically unattainable figures, social media includes images from people within one's own social network, making comparisons feel more personally relevant and psychologically impactful (Perloff, 2014, p. 365). This personalization intensifies the psychological effects of appearance-based comparisons in digital spaces.

The tripartite influence model of body image (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 105) synthesizes social comparison theory with broader sociocultural perspectives. It identifies three primary sociocultural influences on body image - peers, parents, and media - and argues that these influences act through two psychological mechanisms: internalization of cultural ideals and appearance-based social

comparison. This model provides a coherent framework to understand how platforms like TikTok, as media environments, can influence body dissatisfaction among male users.

2.4 Social Media and Body Image: Empirical Evidence

A considerable body of empirical research has documented consistent associations between social media use and body image concerns across various populations and platforms. Holland and Tiggemann (2016, p. 100) performed a systematic review of studies investigating how social networking site use impacts body image and disordered eating outcomes. Their conclusion emphasized that the bulk of evidence supports a negative relationship between social networking site use and body image. They identified appearance-related social comparison as a key mediating mechanism driving this link.

Saiphoo and Vahedi (2019, p. 259) conducted a meta-analytic review synthesizing results from 38 studies focused on social media use and body image disturbance. Their analysis revealed a statistically significant positive association between social media use and body image disturbance, with effect sizes comparable to those identified for traditional media exposure. Importantly, their meta-analysis highlighted that the strength of this relationship varied depending on the nature of social media activity: passive consumption of appearance-related content yielded stronger effects on body image disturbance than active social engagement (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019, p. 265).

The concept of "fitspiration" - a genre of social media content that showcases images of fit, athletic bodies, accompanied by motivational messages promoting exercise and healthy living - has drawn special scholarly attention recently. Although fitspiration appears to promote positive health ideals, empirical studies have consistently found that exposure to fitspiration content is linked to increased body dissatisfaction, social comparison, and negative affect (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 65; Prichard et al., 2018, p. 789). Furthermore, Griffiths et al. (2018, p. 187) explored the relationship between exposure to fitspiration content and eating disorder symptomatology, finding that frequent exposure corresponded with greater symptom severity.

Fatt et al. (2019, p. 1311) specifically analyzed the impact of male-oriented fitspiration content, which they termed "#malefitspo," on men's body image. Their findings showed that viewing male fitspiration posts was associated with elevated muscular-ideal internalization, more frequent

appearance comparisons, lower body satisfaction, and higher intrinsic motivation for exercise among men. These findings are particularly relevant for current research contexts, given TikTok's rise as a prominent platform for distributing fitspiration-style content aimed at male audiences.

More recently, Dane and Bhatia (2023, p. e0001091) conducted a scoping review examining social media, body image, and eating disorders among young people. They concluded that the evidence consistently supports an association between social media use and negative body image outcomes. Their review underscored the role of algorithmic content curation in amplifying these effects by repeatedly exposing users who engage with body-related content to similar material, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of exposure and dissatisfaction.

Rounsefell et al. (2020, p. 19) carried out a mixed methods systematic review on social media, body image, and food choices in healthy young adults. Their review found convergent evidence from both qualitative and quantitative studies linking social media use with negative body image and disordered eating behaviors. The authors identified idealized body imagery as a principal driver of these outcomes and advocated for platform-level interventions aimed at reducing exposure to harmful content.

Yunani et al. (2025, p. 35) specifically examined TikTok's impact on adolescents' body image and self-esteem. Their study demonstrated that higher levels of TikTok use were associated with more negative body image and lower self-esteem. This provides direct empirical support for the premise underlying the current investigation, indicating that TikTok is not merely a conduit for the same processes observed on other platforms, but represents a uniquely potent environment for body image effects due to its distinctive algorithmic architecture and the predominance of video content emphasizing physical appearance.

Burnell et al. (2020, p. 585518) investigated psychological effects from browsing different Instagram profiles. They found that browsing appearance-focused profiles correlated with lower psychological well-being compared to browsing profiles not focused on appearance. This supports the content-specificity hypothesis: psychological outcomes are not determined solely by the amount of social media use, but critically depend on the nature of the content encountered.

3. TIKTOK'S ALGORITHM AND THE AMPLIFICATION OF BODY IMAGE EXPOSURE

3.1 TikTok as a Media Platform: Overview and Unique Characteristics

TikTok has rapidly established itself as one of the fastest-growing and most widely used social media platforms worldwide, especially popular among young adults. Recent estimates report over 1.5 billion active users globally (Sprout Social, 2026). TikTok introduces a fundamentally new type of social media environment, distinguished by short-form video content, a notably powerful recommendation algorithm, and a user experience engineered to maximize engagement through continuous and immersive scrolling. These unique traits have important implications for body image research, which have only recently started to be thoroughly examined.

Unlike earlier platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, which primarily organized content around users' known social networks, TikTok's user interface centers on the "For You Page" (FYP). This page presents an algorithmically curated feed that features content from accounts the user does not follow, based on an analysis of inferred preferences and patterns of engagement (Klug et al., 2021, p. 84). This structure disrupts the traditional boundary between passive browsing and active content searching - on TikTok, users receive content rather than actively selecting it themselves. As a result, users have diminished capacity to deliberately manage their exposure to potentially harmful materials.

In his analysis of user-generated short videos on TikTok, Shutsko (2020, p. 108) identified key features that set the platform apart from earlier social media formats. These include the brevity and visual density of the content, the simplicity of content creation and sharing, the viral mechanisms that can quickly propel individual videos to massive audiences, and TikTok's success in fostering a sense of community and active participation among users. Each of these features contributes to the platform's unusually strong influence on users' attitudes and self-perceptions, including aspects of body image.

Scherr and Wang (2021, p. 106893) explored why users engage with TikTok and found that the platform fulfills several gratifications, such as entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, and information-seeking. Critically, passive consumption - scrolling through the FYP without

deliberately choosing specific content - was among the most common ways users interacted with the app. This mode of engagement has particular significance for exposure to body-related content, as users may encounter large volumes of idealized body images without actively searching for them, positioning the algorithm's design as a key factor shaping body image exposure. There is empirical insights into the psychological effects of TikTok use, highlighting that the platform's design elements - especially infinite scrolling, autoplay features, and highly personalized recommendations - lead to increased use intensity and reduced user control over consumption habits. These traits mirror broader concerns about the addictive potential of algorithm-driven media and create particular risks of involuntary exposure to appearance-focused content among vulnerable individuals. Bilali et al. (2025, p. 34) investigated the links between TikTok use and mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and sleepiness in adolescents. They found significant positive associations between heavy TikTok use and these negative psychological states. Although the study did not directly address body image, its findings underscore the wider psychological impacts of TikTok usage and help contextualize the platform's possible role in fostering body dissatisfaction.

TikTok's distinct algorithmic feed, content style, and usage patterns create a unique environment that deeply influences users' body image and broader mental health, as highlighted by multiple scholarly sources.

3.2 The TikTok Algorithm: Mechanisms of Content Recommendation

The algorithmic system driving TikTok's content recommendations is recognized as one of the most advanced and behaviorally influential within the social media landscape. Although TikTok has shared some general insights about how its recommendation system operates, the complete technical specifics remain proprietary and undisclosed. Available evidence indicates that the For You Page (FYP) algorithm primarily relies on user engagement signals - such as watch time, video replays, likes, comments, shares, and follows - to build highly individualized content feeds. These feeds are continuously refined and adapted based on the user's ongoing interactions (Klug et al., 2021, p. 85).

Klug et al. (2021, p. 86) conducted a mixed-methods study exploring users' assumptions about TikTok's algorithm. They found that users had developed a certain intuitive understanding of how

algorithmic personalization works, recognizing that their own engagement behaviors directly influence the content they receive. Importantly, participants reported experiencing what they termed a "rabbit hole" effect: as they engaged with a particular type of content, their feed increasingly became saturated with similar material. This dynamic has significant implications for exposure to idealized body imagery. For example, users who watched or liked fitness-related videos, workout demonstrations, or body transformation posts found their feeds progressively dominated by such content.

Hamzah et al. (2025, p. 144) examined the behavioral impact of TikTok's algorithmic recommendations on user engagement and self-persuasion. Their findings indicated that algorithm-recommended content substantially shapes users' attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, repeated exposure to similar content intensifies persuasive effects through a process of normalization. This concept - the normalization of idealized body standards via repeated algorithmic exposure - is critically relevant to understanding how the TikTok algorithm functions, as it suggests the algorithm does more than just reflect existing user interests; it actively shapes and reinforces the standards against which users evaluate themselves.

The ideas of "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" are pertinent in this context. While originally theorized in political and informational domains, their application to aesthetic and body-related content introduces a somewhat novel dimension. When a TikTok user engages with videos depicting idealized muscular male bodies, the algorithm interprets this interaction as a clear preference signal and responds by surfacing more content of a similar nature. Over time, this process creates a highly personalized media environment in which exposure to idealized body representations is disproportionately amplified, while content showcasing body diversity is relatively excluded (Hamzah et al., 2025, p. 150).

This algorithmic amplification effectively transforms what might be occasional, incidental encounters with idealized imagery into systematic, frequent exposure. From the standpoint of social comparison theory, this shift is deeply significant. Since the frequency and salience of upward appearance comparisons are key predictors of body dissatisfaction (Festinger, 1954, p. 120), an algorithm that maximizes exposure to idealized body content inherently increases the risk of intensifying body dissatisfaction among users whose content feeds become dominated by such images.

TikTok's video-centric format intensifies the psychological impact of exposure to idealized bodies compared to platforms reliant on static images. Video content showing muscular men performing workouts, showcasing body transformations, or engaging in appearance-focused activities presents these idealized bodies in dynamic, three-dimensional detail, complete with sound, movement, and performance elements. This immersive format potentially engages viewers more deeply than static photographs, thereby producing stronger effects related to appearance comparison (Yunani et al., 2025, p. 40).

3.3 Algorithm-Driven Repetition and the Normalization of Ideal Bodies

A key psychological aspect of TikTok's algorithmic design is its ability to repeatedly present similar content over numerous viewing sessions, resulting in exposure patterns that are both intense and cumulative. This repetition in content delivery through the algorithm significantly impacts body image via interconnected psychological mechanisms: normalization, internalization, and desensitization to body diversity.

Normalization involves the process where frequent exposure to a certain stimulus or representation leads individuals to see it as usual, expected, or natural. When TikTok users consistently encounter images of highly muscular, lean male bodies, these images become the standard by which users judge their own bodies (Hamzah et al., 2025, p. 152). Research on media effects has long demonstrated that heavy media consumption alters perceptions of what is considered a "normal" or "ideal" body (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995, p. 327). TikTok's algorithm intensifies and expedites normalization by ensuring that these idealized physiques are not rarely but continuously visible within users' media feeds.

Internalization is a related psychological process where external cultural norms are adopted as personal standards of evaluation. Thompson et al. (1999, p. 95) defined thin-ideal internalization in women as the degree to which individuals accept cultural beauty ideals and integrate them into their self-concept; similarly, men undergo internalization of muscular ideals (Cafri et al., 2005, p. 220). Repeated viewing of idealized body imagery on TikTok likely accelerates this internalization among male users by persistently reinforcing the cultural message that lean, muscular physiques are desirable, attractive, and socially esteemed.

Moreover, the social reinforcement mechanism on TikTok - via likes, comments, shares, and follower counts - adds another layer to the internalization process. Videos showcasing idealized bodies generally receive high engagement, which signals to viewers that these bodies are socially valued and admired (Fatt et al., 2019, p. 1316). This form of social validation of the muscular ideal may be especially impactful for young men, for whom peer approval and social standing are critical motivators (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004, p. 185).

Repeated exposure to idealized body images can foster desensitization toward body diversity - a gradual diminishing of users' appreciation and comfort with bodies that deviate from the ideal, including their own. When the user's algorithmically tailored media environment is dominated by hyper-muscular, lean male bodies, their frame of reference for the natural variety of human physiques fades, causing them to view their own ordinary bodies as lacking in comparison (Strahan et al., 2006, p. 215). This perceptual distortion functions as a cognitive mechanism by which algorithmic repetition translates into body dissatisfaction.

Stice et al. (1994, p. 840) proposed a pathway model connecting media exposure to body dissatisfaction, involving internalization and social comparison as sequential mediators. Within TikTok's context, this model can be expanded by including algorithmic amplification as an antecedent: the algorithm controls how often and what content users see, which facilitates internalization of muscular ideals, promotes upward social comparison, and ultimately leads to body dissatisfaction. This extended framework forms the theoretical foundation guiding the research design of the present study.

3.4 Male-Specific Body Image Concerns in the TikTok Environment

Body image research has traditionally concentrated on women, but the environment on TikTok creates unique conditions that make male body image concerns particularly relevant. This is because TikTok's fitness, gym, and body transformation communities are predominantly made up of male content creators. The idealized body images that circulate within these groups are specifically tailored to male audiences and male aesthetic standards (Fatt et al., 2019, p. 1313). The most commonly promoted male body ideal on TikTok's fitness scene is characterized by extreme muscularity combined with very low body fat, a physique researchers describe as the "mesomorphic ideal" or the "hyper-muscular lean ideal" (Cafri et al., 2005, p. 218).

This ideal is embodied and disseminated by a specific group of social media influencers, often called "gymfluencers" or "fitfluencers," who attract large followings by sharing workout routines, nutritional tips, body transformation journeys, and lifestyle content. These influencers serve as highly visible and aspirational figures against whom male followers tend to compare themselves.

Leit et al. (2001, p. 92) documented that the muscular ideal has historically escalated in mass media; however, TikTok signifies a qualitative acceleration of this trend. The extensive quantity of idealized male bodies available to users through the "For You Page" (FYP) on TikTok far surpasses what was accessible via traditional media. Additionally, TikTok's interactive features - such as comments, duets, and stitches - allow users to actively engage with idealized male bodies instead of just observing them passively, which may intensify the psychological effects of such exposure.

Olivardia et al. (2000, p. 1294) observed an association between frequent exposure to idealized male bodies in media and muscle dysmorphia, a pathological obsession with not being muscular enough. While muscle dysmorphia is a more extreme manifestation, it exists on a spectrum that includes more normative body dissatisfaction, which is likely widespread among young male TikTok users. Exploring how TikTok exposure relates to this continuum of male body dissatisfaction is a key focus of the current research.

Murray et al. (2017) have argued that sociocultural pressures causing male body dissatisfaction are increasingly similar in structure and intensity to those traditionally documented in females. Social media has become a primary vehicle for transmitting these pressures. This convergence suggests that theoretical models commonly used to understand female body dissatisfaction - such as social comparison theory, the tripartite influence model, and other sociocultural frameworks - are becoming more relevant for understanding male body dissatisfaction, although modifications are necessary to reflect male-specific body ideals.

These pressures are especially intense among men aged 18–30, a developmental period where individuals form their identity, compare themselves with peers, and establish intimate relationships, processes in which physical appearance holds significant cultural importance (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004, p. 183). TikTok's algorithmically tailored exposure to idealized male physiques intersects with these developmental vulnerabilities, potentially increasing the risk of body dissatisfaction substantially.

3.5 Towards an Integrated Model of TikTok Exposure and Male Body Dissatisfaction

This chapter integrates theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence to propose a comprehensive conceptual model explaining the relationship between young men's exposure to idealized body content on TikTok and their body dissatisfaction. The model identifies three core components: algorithmic content delivery as the key environmental mechanism, social comparison processes as the primary psychological mechanism, and muscular-ideal internalization as the crucial mediating factor connecting exposure to dissatisfaction.

At the environmental level, TikTok's recommendation algorithm plays a pivotal role by controlling how frequently, how intensely, and how consistently users encounter idealized body content. When users interact with fitness, gym, or body-related content - whether intentionally searching for it or coming across it incidentally - the algorithm responds by reinforcing and amplifying this exposure. This creates a feedback loop that increasingly saturates the For You Page (FYP) with such material, as detailed by Klug et al. (2021, p. 87) and Hamzah et al. (2025, p. 148). Consequently, what might begin as occasional contact with idealized body images intensifies into systematic, high-volume exposure due to this algorithmic amplification.

Psychologically, this repeated exposure triggers social comparison processes, a concept originally proposed by Festinger (1954, p. 120) and further applied in body image research by Karazsia and Crowther (2009, p. 106). Users begin evaluating their own physiques against the muscular and lean ideals portrayed by TikTok fitness influencers and content creators. These upward comparisons - where the comparison target is perceived as superior - tend to be unfavorable for viewers because the idealized bodies are often extreme and artificially enhanced. TikTok's interactive social features, such as the ability to follow, comment, and engage directly with creators, increase the personal relevance of these comparisons, effectively blurring the line between aspirational figures and social peers.

Over time, the cumulative effect of these repeated upward appearance comparisons, intensified by the algorithm's persistent content delivery, leads to the internalization of the muscular ideal and a gradual decline in satisfaction with one's own body. This gradual process involves many small

negative impacts from individual exposures that accumulate to create significant body dissatisfaction over prolonged TikTok use, as supported by Cafri et al. (2005, p. 221) and Fatt et al. (2019, p. 1318).

Responding to Fardouly and Vartanian's (2016, p. 3) call for research focusing on content-specific exposure and the mechanisms through which different types of social media content influence body image outcomes, this study hones in on male users' exposure to ideal-body content on TikTok. It particularly examines how algorithmic amplification and social comparison theory jointly explain the relationship to body dissatisfaction.

This integrated conceptual framework leads to the study's central hypothesis: young men aged 18 to 30 who experience greater exposure to idealized body content on TikTok - especially given the algorithm's tendency to continuously promote such content - will report higher levels of body dissatisfaction. This hypothesis is grounded in established social comparison theory, corroborated by broader empirical literature on social media and body image, and specifically contextualized within TikTok's unique platform characteristics and algorithmic mechanisms.

3.6. Negative self-perception among adolescents

A study by Yunani and colleagues in 2025, titled "The Influence of TikTok Media Exposure on Body Image and Self-Esteem in Adolescents," investigates how TikTok affects young users' psychological well-being. Conducted at Taruna Gajah Mada high school in Indonesia, the research involved 172 TikTok-using students aged 15 to 18. The team utilized multivariate linear regression analysis to explore the impact of TikTok exposure on body image and self-esteem (Yunani et al, 2025).

Preliminary interviews with female students revealed dissatisfaction with their bodies and a tendency to use filters to hide perceived flaws. This led to feelings of inferiority and stress. The results showed significant effects: TikTok exposure accounted for 31.3% of the variability in body image and self-esteem. Social comparison emerged as a key factor, with idealized body content leading to negative self-perception among adolescents (Yunani et al, 2025).

The study highlighted the dangers of TikTok filters that create unrealistic beauty standards, as users may mistake digitally altered images for reality. Long-term consequences of body dissatisfaction

and low self-esteem can include anxiety and eating disorders, impacting academic and social functioning (Yunani et al, 2025).

Unlike previous studies that focused on single outcomes, this research simultaneously examines body image and self-esteem, emphasizing their interconnection. The authors advocate for improved digital literacy and psychosocial support to help adolescents navigate social media healthily, calling for educational policies that address these digital challenges (Yunani et al, 2025).

3.7. Gaps in existing literature: the need for a focus on young males

A review of the literature shows that there is a significant gap in understanding the impact of TikTok on body perception among young men aged 18 to 30, while the majority of research focuses on adolescents or women. The period between 18 and 30 is crucial for identity formation, and pressures related to physical appearance differ from those experienced during adolescence. Additionally, body dissatisfaction in men often manifests differently than in women, which further complicates the generalization of research findings.

Furthermore, research on TikTok insufficiently includes men, and when they are included, they are often in the minority. Research is needed that would focus on the impact of algorithmically driven content on male body perception, as well as on the role of social comparison. Existing studies often employ simple methodological approaches, so more complex analyses are needed to explore the specific pathways through which TikTok influences body dissatisfaction.

All of this points to the need for research that will specifically address young men, exploring how TikTok affects their body dissatisfaction and providing a foundation for the development of interventions that could help this vulnerable group.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design and Rationale

This research is framed within a correlational framework, aiming primarily to explore the statistical link between two continuous variables: exposure to TikTok fitness content and body dissatisfaction among males aged 18 to 30. The study does not intend to prove causality but seeks to quantify how strongly and in which direction these variables are connected, without manipulating any independent variables (Field, 2018, p. 8). A correlational design is thus the most suitable choice, allowing systematic measurement of associations rather than cause-effect relationships.

Experimental or quasi-experimental methods were avoided due to ethical and practical limitations. Manipulating participants' media exposure over long periods, especially with content that may negatively impact psychological wellbeing like body dissatisfaction, raises serious ethical issues. Short-term, lab-based exposure would not accurately reflect the ongoing, cumulative influence of TikTok's personalized algorithm, which is central to this study's theoretical framework. Therefore, a cross-sectional correlational survey was chosen for its ethical soundness, feasibility, and ecological validity, reflecting users' real-world digital experiences.

This study uses a quantitative approach, relying solely on structured online self-report surveys. Quantitative methods fit well here because the goal is to identify, measure, and analyze the relationship statistically between psychological constructs operationalized as numerical composite scores derived from Likert scales - specifically, body dissatisfaction and TikTok exposure. The research follows a post-positivist epistemology, which accepts that objective reality can be approximated via empirical measurements, while acknowledging inherent measurement noise due to self-reporting and emphasizing cautious interpretation of results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.7). The objective is to find replicable patterns, not absolute truths, contributing to evidence-based understanding.

A key, purposeful feature of the study is its exclusive focus on active TikTok users. Unlike studies that broadly examine social media exposure by lumping platforms together, this research isolates TikTok due to its unique technological structure. TikTok's recommendation system, mainly via the For You Page (FYP), offers personalized, algorithmically curated short videos based on prior

user engagement. Both industry sources and academic research highlight how this system generates repetitive and increasingly narrow exposure to categories like fitness and body-related content (Montag et al., 2021, p.2). This architecture potentially exposes users to idealized body images more intensely and frequently than platforms like Instagram or Facebook, where algorithms function differently and users have comparatively more control over content selection.

Limiting the sample to regular TikTok users ensures participants genuinely experience TikTok's algorithm firsthand. Including non-users or infrequent users would dilute validity because such individuals wouldn't have meaningful exposure to TikTok's personalized recommendation algorithm - the hypothesized mechanism linking content to body dissatisfaction. Thus, focusing solely on TikTok users ensures the measured exposure is both valid (measuring what it intends) and meaningful (reflecting shared participant experience).

To enforce this, the survey started with a question verifying TikTok usage. Participants answering "No" were immediately exited from the survey with a message clarifying the study's exclusive focus on TikTok users. This automatic filtering ensured no data from ineligible individuals were collected, maintaining sample integrity.

Survey recruitment was tightly controlled, conducted only on TikTok by posting a series of short videos from the researcher's account inviting eligible male users aged 18–30 to participate. Other platforms like Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, or university mailing lists were not used for promotion. This recruitment method was not just practical but theoretically motivated: it guaranteed participants were drawn directly from the platform under study, meaning their responses pertain to their current TikTok experience. This enhances the ecological validity since respondents comment on their real-time exposure rather than a hypothetically described or past use.

The recruitment approach, however, inherently carries a self-selection bias risk. Those who saw and engaged with the recruitment might differ systematically from the broader male TikTok user base aged 18–30, possibly having stronger interests in body image, academic research, or closer connections to the researcher's social network. This limitation and its implications are thoroughly discussed later in this thesis.

The study's methodology - a cross-sectional, quantitative, correlational survey focused strictly on active TikTok users and recruited within TikTok itself - reflects a coherent, thoughtfully justified set of decisions. These choices balance theoretical alignment, practical feasibility, and ethical responsibility, all serving the overarching goal of collecting valid, reliable, and interpretable data on the relationship between TikTok fitness content exposure and body dissatisfaction in a theoretically relevant and accessible group.

4.2. Objectives

The objective of the master's thesis is to investigate how exposure to content depicting ideal bodies on TikTok correlates with body dissatisfaction among young men, with a particular emphasis on the influence of algorithm-driven repetition and social comparison theory. An online survey will be administered to 250 respondents aged 18 to 30, measuring the frequency of exposure to fitness and body-oriented content on TikTok, the inclination toward upward social comparison, the level of body dissatisfaction, and the perceived personalization of content by the algorithm. The methodology will integrate existing validated instruments for assessing body dissatisfaction and social comparison with new items specifically designed to evaluate the experience of algorithmic exposure, thereby capturing the unique characteristics of the TikTok platform.

This master's thesis aims to contribute to the existing body of literature in several keyways. First, it will focus on young male users (ages 18–30), an often-overlooked demographic in the context of TikTok and body dissatisfaction. The research will thoroughly examine the psychological mechanism of social comparison as a mediator between content exposure and body dissatisfaction, applying Festinger's social comparison theory to the contemporary context of algorithmically curated content. The thesis will explicitly operationalize and measure the role of algorithmic repetition, a relatively novel aspect that has not been adequately explored to date. Ultimately, the findings will provide deeper insights into how the TikTok social network, combined with a psychological predisposition toward social comparison, may contribute to body dissatisfaction among young men, with implications for preventive interventions and the design of social media platforms.

Objective 1: Examining the correlation between exposure to ideal body content on TikTok and body dissatisfaction among young men aged 18-30 years old

The first objective of the study is to determine whether there is a statistically significant correlation between exposure to content depicting ideal bodies on TikTok and the level of body dissatisfaction among young men. This objective will be achieved by collecting data via an online survey that will measure several factors. First, it will assess how often respondents use TikTok, how much time they spend on the platform each day, and the extent of their exposure to specific content that promotes muscular and defined bodies. This includes categories like workouts, body transformations, diet-related content, and fitness advice. In parallel, the survey will incorporate validated instruments designed to measure body dissatisfaction. These instruments will evaluate how satisfied respondents feel with their own physical appearance, the frequency with which they contemplate making changes to their bodies, and their level of concern regarding their outward appearance. The data collected will undergo correlational analysis to ascertain whether a greater exposure to this type of TikTok content is statistically significantly associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction. This analysis aims to provide insights into the fundamental relationship between TikTok usage and psychological outcomes among young men, thereby addressing a notable gap in the existing literature, which has largely concentrated on female users and other social media platforms.

Objective 2: Analyzing the role of upward social comparison and algorithmic repetition as mechanisms that mediate the relationship between content exposure and body dissatisfaction

The second objective of the study is to investigate whether upward social comparison and algorithm-driven content repetition serve as mechanisms that elucidate the relationship between exposure to ideal bodies on TikTok and body dissatisfaction. The survey will feature a scale that measures the tendency toward upward social comparison. This scale will assess how frequently respondents compare their own bodies to those of individuals who they perceive as looking better than themselves and who embody ideals that are challenging to achieve. The survey will include items that specifically evaluate perceived algorithmic personalization. This refers to the degree to which respondents notice that TikTok's algorithm increasingly presents them with similar fitness and ideal-body-related content after they have shown interest in such videos, even if only once. To test whether upward social comparison mediates the relationship between content exposure and body dissatisfaction, and whether algorithmic repetition intensifies both this effect and the exposure itself, mediation analysis will be employed. This comprehensive approach will facilitate

a deeper understanding of not only whether there is a connection between TikTok usage and body dissatisfaction but also how that connection operates through specific psychological and technological mechanisms. This understanding is vital for developing targeted interventions that could mitigate the negative effects associated with platform use.

4.3. Hypothesis

The central hypothesis of this master's thesis derives from Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding how individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others. Festinger (1954) proposed the fundamental assumption that people have an innate need to assess their own abilities and attitudes, and that in the absence of objective standards for self-evaluation, they rely on comparisons with other people. Since its inception, this theory has been applied across numerous domains of psychological research, and it has gained particular relevance in the context of physical appearance and body satisfaction, where objective standards almost never exist because beauty ideals are culturally and media constructed.

A key mechanism within Social Comparison Theory that is relevant to this research is upward social comparison. Upward comparison occurs when an individual compares themselves with others whom they perceive as superior in a particular dimension - in this case, physical appearance. Festinger (1954) initially considered upward comparison potentially motivating; however, later research has shown that in the domain of physical appearance, upward comparison consistently leads to negative psychological outcomes. Wills (1981) expanded the theory by introducing the concept of downward comparison as a strategy for maintaining self-esteem, further emphasizing that upward comparison has the opposite effect - it lowers self-evaluation and increases dissatisfaction. In her comprehensive review of the literature, Wood (1989) confirmed that the direction of comparison - upward versus downward - plays a crucial role in determining the emotional consequences of comparison, with upward comparison consistently leading to negative affect and lower self-esteem.

In the context of physical appearance, Myers and Crowther (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of 156 studies and confirmed a significant association between appearance-focused social comparison and body dissatisfaction. Their results showed that individuals who more frequently engage in upward comparison of their bodies with bodies they perceive as more attractive report significantly

higher levels of body dissatisfaction. This meta-analysis provided strong empirical support for applying Social Comparison Theory to the domain of physical appearance and represents one of the foundations on which the hypothesis of this research is built.

The emergence of social media has transformed the way social comparison occurs. Unlike traditional media, where exposure to idealized bodies was limited to advertisements, magazines, and television programs, social media enables constant and personalized access to content that depicts idealized physical standards (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). In their review, Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) showed that social media use intensifies appearance-based social comparison because users are exposed not only to unattainable celebrity ideals, but also to seemingly “ordinary” people who achieve exceptional physical results, further blurring the boundary between attainable and unattainable standards. This is particularly relevant for the male population, where the muscular body ideal is increasingly promoted through fitness and body transformation content (Griffiths et al., 2018).

TikTok stands out in this context as a platform with unique characteristics that amplify the mechanism of upward comparison. Unlike platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, where users consciously choose whom to follow and what content they will be exposed to, TikTok’s algorithm autonomously curates content based on users’ previous interactions, even minimal and short-lived ones (Hamzah et al., 2025). As Scherr and Wang (2021) noted, this algorithmic approach leads to more intensive and less controllable exposure to content, because the user does not actively decide what they watch - the algorithm does so instead. In practical terms, if a young man briefly watches a video featuring fitness content or a body transformation, the algorithm will register that interaction and begin serving him more similar content. This creates a cycle of repetitive exposure to idealized bodies that is difficult to break and systematically increases the frequency of upward comparisons

It is precisely this algorithm-driven repetitive exposure that makes TikTok a particularly suitable context for testing Social Comparison Theory. In their meta-analysis of the relationship between social media use and body image, Saiphoo and Vahedi (2019) confirmed a significant association between time spent on social media and negative perceptions of one’s own body, but emphasized that most research has focused on female populations and platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Dane and Bhatia (2023) further pointed out that studies involving male populations

rarely differentiate between platforms and do not take into account the specific features of algorithm-driven content, representing a significant research gap that this study aims to address.

Social Comparison Theory provides a clear logical structure for formulating the hypothesis of this research. According to the theory, when individuals do not have objective standards for evaluating their bodies, they rely on social information - in this case, the content continuously displayed by TikTok's algorithm. The idealized bodies that appear on the platform are perceived as "something superior" to one's own body, activating the mechanism of upward comparison. According to theoretical predictions, this upward comparison lowers self-evaluation and increases body dissatisfaction. Thus, the theoretical chain can be articulated as follows:

Greater exposure to content featuring idealized bodies on TikTok leads to more frequent upward comparisons.

More frequent upward comparisons lead to a higher level of body dissatisfaction.

Based on the outlined theoretical assumptions, empirical findings, and the logical structure of the social comparison mechanism in the context of an algorithmically personalized platform such as TikTok, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: If young men (18–30 years) are more exposed to content depicting idealized bodies on TikTok, then they will exhibit a higher level of body dissatisfaction.

This hypothesis is grounded in the expectation that the theoretically predicted mechanism of upward comparison will empirically manifest as a positive correlation between the frequency of exposure to fitness- and body-oriented content on TikTok and the level of body dissatisfaction. The relationship between these two variables is expected to be statistically significant and to increase with greater exposure - fully consistent with the predictions of Social Comparison Theory. When the algorithm continuously exposes users to content depicting bodies perceived as superior, users enter a repetitive cycle of upward comparison in which their own bodies are continuously evaluated as inadequate, which in turn leads to increased body dissatisfaction.

4.4. Participants and Sampling Procedure

This part outlines who the study aimed to include and how participants were recruited, screened, and kept for final analysis.

4.4.1 Target Population and Eligibility Criteria

The study focused on male TikTok users aged from 18 to 30 years old. This specific group was chosen for several reasons:

- Age range (18–30): This period covers late adolescence to early adulthood, a stage where individuals are particularly sensitive to social comparisons about appearance and peer judgments. This makes them a critical group for studying body image issues influenced by media (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013, p. 631).
- Gender (male): Although most body image research traditionally centers on women, recent studies show a notable and rising level of body dissatisfaction among men, especially linked to the muscular ideal pushed by online media (Murray et al., 2017, p. 176). Male-specific body image concerns remain less explored, particularly in the TikTok context.
- TikTok usage: Only those who actively use TikTok were included. Non-users were immediately excluded upon indicating non-use because the research specifically targets the platform's unique algorithmic influence.

The criteria for inclusion were thus:

- Male gender identification
- Aged between 18 and 30
- Active use of TikTok

Exclusion criteria included identifying as female or non-binary, being younger than 18 or older than 30, and not using TikTok.

4.4.2 Sampling Method and Recruitment

The sampling approach was purposive and convenience-based. The survey was designed and hosted on SoSciSurvey, a professional online survey tool, and distributed solely via TikTok. The researcher posted multiple videos on TikTok inviting males aged 18 to 30 to participate, explicitly

stating the eligibility requirements. Recruitment did not use any other platforms like Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, or email.

This recruitment method was deliberately chosen to fit the study's theoretical framework: since the research aims to assess the effects of TikTok's unique algorithmic environment, recruiting participants directly within TikTok ensures both methodological consistency and ecological validity. Those who saw the recruitment videos were already situated within TikTok's algorithmic system.

The survey was open from April 30 to May 20, collecting responses continuously during this timeframe.

4.4.3 Sample Size and Filtering

A total of 237 participants started and completed the survey. However, despite clear eligibility instructions in the recruitment video, some respondents did not fit the inclusion criteria - they either did not use TikTok, identified as female, or fell outside the age limits (18–30). These respondents were removed during the data cleaning process performed in R Studio.

After applying all exclusion rules, the final dataset consisted of 156 participants, all male, aged 18 to 30, and active TikTok users. The study's reported results are based solely on this final group of 156.

Additionally, the survey included an initial screening question confirming TikTok usage. Respondents answering "No" were immediately redirected to a disqualification message: "Thank you for your time and participation. This study is intended exclusively for TikTok users, and therefore your responses will not be included in the final sample." This step ensured clarity and upheld ethical standards.

4.5. Measures and Instruments

This research utilized two main measurement tools to define its central variables: body dissatisfaction and exposure to TikTok fitness content. The first tool is a well-recognized, psychometrically validated questionnaire adapted from previous studies; the second is a newly created scale designed by the researcher specifically for this study. Together, these two scales

provided the quantitative foundation for the correlational analysis. They share the same response format to maintain measurement uniformity and allow meaningful comparison between the variables.

4.5.1 Variable 1 – Body Dissatisfaction: Body Shape Questionnaire – 8-Item Version D (BSQ-8D), Male Version

Body dissatisfaction, the dependent variable, was assessed through the Body Shape Questionnaire – 8-Item Version D (BSQ-8D), Male Version (Evans & Dolan, 1993; Mapi Research Trust, 2023). The BSQ-8D is a reliable and shortened form of the original 34-item Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ), which Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, and Fairburn (1987) initially developed as a self-report measure to evaluate body shape concerns experienced in the prior four weeks. The original BSQ became widespread in both research and clinical settings owing to its robust psychometric qualities and its ability to reflect cognitive and emotional aspects of body shape worry - not merely physical signs but subjective experiences of anxiety, preoccupation, and distress caused by one's appearance (Cooper et al., 1987, p. 485).

Because the complete 34-item BSQ can be burdensome in studies involving multiple instruments, Evans and Dolan (1993) performed item analysis to create shortened versions preserving the essential psychometric strengths (high internal consistency, strong correlation with the full BSQ score, sensitivity to clinical body concerns) while easing participant load. This resulted in four 8-item alternatives: BSQ-8A, BSQ-8B, BSQ-8C, and BSQ-8D, each selecting different subsets from the original items (Evans & Dolan, 1993, p. 316). All four versions showed satisfactory to excellent psychometric properties in initial and subsequent validations.

The BSQ-8D was specifically selected over the other short forms and the full BSQ based on multiple considerations. Firstly, its item content was examined for relevance to the male sample under study and specifically to body image issues instigated by digital media. The BSQ-8D items capture cognitive and emotional experiences linked to body shape worry, such as self-consciousness about the body, fear of becoming overweight or unattractive, avoiding situations revealing the body, and constant preoccupation with body shape - elements directly related to the study's focus on how repeated encounters with ideal male bodies on TikTok might increase

appearance anxiety in young men. These items closely reflect the types of body-related thoughts likely involved in social comparison processes triggered by algorithms.

Secondly, the Male Version of BSQ-8D was chosen to ensure appropriate language for male respondents. Unlike the original BSQ developed mainly for females in clinical samples, this version modifies item wording for better comprehension and relevance to men, reducing stigma and social desirability biases, and encouraging honest answers.

Thirdly, practical factors related to the online survey format influenced the preference for an 8-item scale over the lengthy 34-item form. Research on online surveys shows longer questionnaires lower completion rates and increase respondent fatigue and careless responding (Galesic & Bosnjak, 2009, p. 351). Given that this study also included a 10-item TikTok exposure scale plus demographics, keeping body dissatisfaction questions brief was essential to sustain participant engagement and data quality.

The BSQ-8D consists of eight statements describing specific body shape-related thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Participants rated how often they experienced each during the prior four weeks on a 6-point Likert scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Very Often, 6 = Always. The total score is the sum of all items, ranging from 8 (no concern) to 48 (extreme concern), with higher scores indicating greater body dissatisfaction. This additive scoring facilitates its use as a continuous dependent variable in correlational analysis (Evans & Dolan, 1993, p. 316).

Notably, like the original BSQ, the BSQ-8D treats body shape concern as a single-dimensional construct. Factor analyses from derivation studies support this unidimensionality (Evans & Dolan, 1993, p. 317), validating the use of a total summed score as a coherent representation of the construct.

The BSQ-8D has shown strong psychometric reliability and validity across diverse samples and contexts. In the original study by Evans and Dolan (1993, p. 317–318), it correlated highly ($r = .97$) with the full BSQ total score while maintaining excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .90$). It has since been widely used in body image research within both clinical and non-clinical populations.

Mapi Research Trust's official scoring guidelines (2023) prescribe that if fewer than 10% of items are missing per respondent (i.e., one item in the 8-item scale), missing responses may be replaced

by the participant's mean score on completed items (prorating). More than one missing item renders the questionnaire invalid for that individual. Since the survey was online and required all BSQ items to be answered, missing data occurrence was minimal, but the prorating protocol was applied as a safeguard during data cleaning in R Studio.

The BSQ-8D is distributed by Mapi Research Trust (Lyon, France), managing the copyright holders' interests (© 2023 Mapi Research Trust; © Melanie Bash and Chris Evans). Its use in this study complied fully with all academic licensing terms.

4.5.2. Variable 2 – TikTok Fitness Content Exposure: Researcher-Constructed Scale

As the independent variable, TikTok fitness content exposure was measured using a 10-item scale specially devised by the researcher for this study. Since no established, psychometrically validated tool existed to measure TikTok-specific fitness content exposure at the time, a new instrument was necessary. Although prior studies assessed body-ideal exposure on social media in general or platforms like Instagram, none captured TikTok's unique features - particularly the For You Page (FYP) algorithm that delivers content often independent of user search behavior. Developing an original scale was thus methodologically justified to operationalize this variable precisely.

This scale's creation reflects the rapidly shifting social media environment where new platforms emerge faster than validated measurement tools can be developed (Twenge & Campbell, 2019, p. 6). TikTok, with over one billion active users worldwide and ranking as one of the most downloaded apps, remains understudied in body image research. By constructing this scale, the researcher addresses this gap within the constraints of a single empirical study.

The 10 scale items were generated systematically, grounded in the study's theoretical framework highlighting Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and the model of algorithm-driven exposure normalization. Items assess frequency and intensity of exposure to fitness and idealized body content on TikTok across distinct but related dimensions:

1. **Passive Algorithmic Exposure:** Items evaluate how often fitness or body-related content appears on users' FYP unsolicited by them. This dimension is crucial as it measures involuntary exposure directly influenced by TikTok's recommendation algorithm.

2. Active Engagement: Other items assess users' active interactions with fitness content - such as following creators, liking or saving workout videos, and deliberately searching for fitness-related content. Active engagement sends behavioral cues to the algorithm to increase similar content delivery, interacting with passive exposure.

3. Perceived Algorithmic Repetition: This captures participant awareness of repetitive, increasing frequency of similar fitness or body content on their FYP, operationalizing the theoretical construct of content repetition linked to normalization of unrealistic standards.

4. Exposure to Idealized Male Physiques: Some items address how often participants encounter content featuring men with idealized muscular or aesthetic bodies, aligning with the study's focus on upward same-sex comparison effects rather than general fitness content exposure.

5. Comparative Self-Evaluation: Items assess participants' recognition of engaging in body-related comparisons when viewing TikTok fitness content. Although bordering on psychological outcome, this is included as part of exposure, as Social Comparison Theory posits comparison as the cognitive mechanism linking exposure to dissatisfaction (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 210).

All 10 items use the same 6-point Likert scale as the BSQ-8D: 1 = Never through 6 = Always. This alignment was deliberate to ensure consistency and avoid measurement artifacts between instruments. The total exposure score sums all responses, ranging from 10 (no exposure) to 60 (very frequent exposure), with higher scores indicating greater TikTok fitness content exposure. This continuous composite score acts as the independent variable for correlation analysis.

It must be noted that this scale is novel and lacks comprehensive psychometric validation beyond internal consistency assessment (Cronbach's $\alpha = .99$ reported in Section 5.1). Formal validation steps such as confirmatory factor analysis, test-retest reliability, convergent/discriminant validity, and studies across different samples remain to be done. Accordingly, this scale should be considered exploratory, created due to an absence of validated alternatives. Future investigations could support its standardization through rigorous validation.

A noteworthy methodological advantage is the parallel design of both tools, sharing a 6-point Likert format, straightforward sum scoring, and theoretically linked constructs. This design suits the primary statistical method employed - Pearson product-moment correlation - which performs

best with continuous interval data (Field, 2018, p. 242). The intentional uniformity thus strengthens the conceptual and statistical integrity of the study's measurement approach.

4.6. Data Collection Procedure

The data gathering process for this research was executed in an organized and methodical way, involving decisions on choosing the survey platform, structuring and ordering the survey components, recruitment tactics, duration of active data gathering, and the ethical guidelines followed during participant interaction. Each part is described comprehensively below.

4.6.1. Survey Platform

The survey was created, hosted, and managed online using SoSciSurvey (www.soscisurvey.de), an advanced academic survey tool developed by LMU Munich, widely applied in social sciences and psychology research across Europe and beyond. SoSciSurvey was chosen due to several key features making it ideal for this study's needs.

Firstly, it provides considerable flexibility in survey logic and conditional flows, crucial for implementing the eligibility screening described in Section 4.4.3. For example, the platform enabled automatic branching so that participants answering negatively to the initial TikTok user screening question were immediately redirected to a disqualification page, preventing access to main survey items. This automated filtering ensured only eligible participants proceeded, maintaining data integrity from the start.

Secondly, SoSciSurvey ensures strong data protection and privacy, featuring encrypted transmission and GDPR compliance - the European regulation on personal data management. Since the survey dealt with sensitive topics like body image, maintaining participant confidentiality and data security was ethically mandatory. SoSciSurvey's compliance offered technical assurance that information was securely stored and processed in line with legal standards.

Thirdly, the platform supports creating a clean, professional, and mobile-friendly survey interface. This was important because the target group - young males aged 18 to 30, active TikTok users - would mostly take the survey on smartphones after clicking the recruitment links on TikTok.

Mobile optimization reduces errors, participant dropout, and careless answers due to poor usability (Couper, 2008, p. 28).

Fourthly, SoSciSurvey provides extensive real-time monitoring of responses, letting the researcher observe rates of participation, completion, and any technical issues throughout data collection. This allowed continuous quality checks and prompt problem detection.

Finally, the platform offers versatile data export options, including CSV and SPSS-compatible formats. This eased importing data into R Studio for analysis without complicated transformations.

4.6.2. Survey Structure and Sequencing

The survey design carefully considered the order and display of questions, following best practices to minimize order effects, reduce fatigue, and improve data quality (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014, p. 88). It comprised five sequential sections detailed below.

Section 1: Informed Consent and Study Description

The survey began with a thorough informed consent page presented before any data collection. This section introduced participants to the study, obtained their voluntary consent, and met ethical requirements for research involving humans. Included were:

- A clear overall study purpose describing an investigation into TikTok use patterns and body image perceptions among young males, deliberately vague to prevent guessing hypotheses yet informative enough for consent.
- A statement highlighting voluntary participation, allowing withdrawal anytime without consequences or explanation.
- Assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, stating no personal identifiers were collected, data was analyzed collectively, and no individual responses would be attributable to participants.
- Information that data would be used solely for academic research, not shared with third parties.
- Researcher contact details for questions or concerns.

Participants had to actively confirm consent by selecting an "I agree to participate" button before moving on. Those who did not consent could not continue, and their partial data was recorded as non-consent.

Section 2: Eligibility Screening Question

Immediately after consent, the key eligibility question was asked:

"Are you a TikTok user?"

This binary yes/no question was placed at the survey's start to quickly identify eligibility. Participants answering No were routed via SoSciSurvey's logic to a disqualification page stating:

"Thank you for your time and participation. This study is intended exclusively for TikTok users, and therefore your responses will not be included in the final sample."

This message was respectfully worded to acknowledge their effort, explain exclusion clearly without stigma, and avoid discouragement. Responses from these participants included only consent and the screening question, logged separately and excluded from analyses.

Those who answered Yes proceeded automatically.

Section 3: Demographic Questions

Once the TikTok criterion was passed, participants answered brief demographic questions to verify full eligibility and describe the sample. These included:

- Age, entered numerically, to confirm they were between 18 and 30 years old. Respondents outside this range were removed during data cleaning in R Studio.
- Gender, with options Male, Female, and Prefer not to say/Other. Only males were retained to focus on male body image experiences.

This section's position - after eligibility but before scales - served two purposes: confirming all inclusion criteria before tasking participants with longer surveys and following standard survey design to minimize bias, since such demographic questions are quick and less likely to prime responses (Dillman et al., 2014, p. 165).

Section 4: TikTok Fitness Content Exposure Scale (10 Items)

The fourth section introduced the researcher-developed TikTok Fitness Content Exposure scale, consisting of 10 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 6 (Always), detailed in Section 4.3.2. Positioned before the body dissatisfaction scale, this order made theoretical sense: it asked participants to consider their TikTok exposure prior to their body-related feelings, reducing bias that might occur if feelings were assessed first.

All 10 items were required for completion to prevent missing responses and ensure full composite scoring without imputation.

Section 5: BSQ-8D Body Shape Questionnaire – 8-Item Version D, Male Version (8 Items)

The final survey section presented the BSQ-8D body dissatisfaction scale with 8 items on the same 6-point Likert scale, as described in Section 4.3.1. Like the exposure scale, all items were mandatory, avoiding incomplete data.

After finishing this, participants saw a thank-you page restating voluntary, anonymous participation, plus contact info. There was no debriefing check as no deception beyond the general description was involved.

4.6.3 Recruitment Mechanism

Recruitment occurred solely through TikTok, a deliberate, theory-based choice explained in Section 4.1. Practically, the researcher posted a series of short videos on their personal TikTok account during active data collection.

These recruitment videos clearly conveyed eligibility: male, aged 18–30, active TikTok users. Both spoken narration and on-screen text communicated these criteria, matching TikTok norms combining audio and text for clarity and engagement.

Each video included a direct link to the SoSciSurvey survey embedded in the researcher’s TikTok bio and mentioned verbally, making survey access straightforward.

Multiple videos were published to maximize reach and counteract TikTok’s variable algorithmic content delivery - since not all users see every post - thus increasing chances participants saw at least one invitation.

No incentives like money, academic credit, or gifts were provided; participation was entirely voluntary and research-motivated.

No alternative recruitment channels (e.g., Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, LinkedIn, university emails, or physical notice boards) were used. TikTok-only recruitment was strictly maintained throughout.

4.6.4 Data Collection Timeline

The survey was publicly accessible from April 30, 2025, to May 20, 2025, a 21-day window. This duration balanced the need for a sufficient sample against the master's thesis schedule and allowed recruitment videos to circulate naturally on TikTok to reach enough eligible participants.

During this time, the researcher monitored response rates and data quality via SoSciSurvey's dashboard, confirming survey performance and data capture integrity. No technical issues or data loss occurred.

After closure on May 20, 2025, the survey was disabled and data exported for cleaning and analysis in R Studio. Initially, 237 individuals completed the survey. After applying exclusion criteria (male gender, age 18–30, TikTok use), the final dataset included $N = 156$ eligible participants for analysis.

4.7. Data Analysis Strategy

Section 4.5 outlines the overall approach to data analysis employed in this study. All statistical procedures were performed within R Studio (R Core Team, 2023), a popular open-source IDE for R that is extensively utilized in scientific and academic research for statistical computations, data visualization, and reproducibility. R Studio was preferred over alternatives like SPSS or JASP due to its adaptability, transparency, and a rich ecosystem of specialized packages that support every stage of the analysis conducted. The entire analysis unfolded in five carefully structured stages, each with a clear and logical methodological objective. Below is a thorough rephrasing of these steps, explaining the reasoning behind each, the R packages utilized, and the criteria used to interpret the findings.

Step 1: Data Cleaning and Filtering

The initial phase post-export from SoSciSurvey involved a detailed cleaning and filtering process applied in R Studio. The collected dataset comprised 237 participant responses who had fully completed the survey. However, as defined in the sampling and eligibility criteria (Section 4.2), only those meeting three key inclusion conditions qualified for analysis: self-identification as male, age between 18 and 30 years inclusive, and confirmed active TikTok use.

The cleaning sequence was executed as follows:

- 1a. Exclusion of Non-TikTok Users: Despite SoSciSurvey's skip logic redirecting those who reported not using TikTok away from substantive items, the dataset was inspected for any respondents who answered "No" to the screening question. Any such cases, potentially bypassing routing or with incomplete data, were removed.
- 1b. Gender Filtering: Data were filtered to include only participants who identified as male in the demographic section. Respondents identifying as female, or selecting "Prefer not to say" or "Other," were excluded, maintaining focus on male body image.
- 1c. Age Filtering: Participants younger than 18 or older than 30 were removed to strictly define the young adult population targeted by the study.
- 1d. Checking for Missing or Duplicate Data: The filtered dataset was then reviewed for substantial missing responses on core scales (BSQ-8D and TikTok Fitness Exposure) and duplicates (e.g., identical response patterns or timestamps). Entries with over one missing BSQ-8D item (beyond acceptable limits detailed in scoring guidelines) and duplicates were discarded.
- 1e. Final Dataset Verification: These steps resulted in a final analytical sample of $N = 156$ participants who met all eligibility criteria (male gender, age 18–30, active TikTok users). This refined dataset was used for all subsequent analyses.

The cleaning stages utilized base R functions in combination with the **dplyr** package (Wickham et al., 2023), chosen for its clear syntax facilitating filtering, selecting, and modifying data. All procedures were scripted to maintain complete reproducibility and transparency.

Step 2: Reliability Analysis – Cronbach's Alpha

Next, internal consistency of the two key measurement tools - the BSQ-8D Body Dissatisfaction scale and the bespoke TikTok Fitness Content Exposure scale - was assessed via Cronbach's alpha

(α). Internal consistency reflects the extent to which items within a scale measure the same psychological construct consistently, meaning item responses correlate in a systematic manner rather than randomly (Cronbach, 1951, p. 299).

Cronbach's alpha, one of the most frequently used reliability statistics in social and psychological research, is computed from the average inter-item correlations weighted by item count, producing values between 0 and 1. Higher values (closer to 1) signify stronger internal agreement among items (Cronbach, 1951, pp. 299–300). This implies participants scoring high on one item tend to score high on others, indicating the scale's cohesiveness.

Interpretation thresholds applied (George & Mallery, 2003, p. 231) were:

- $\alpha < .50$: unacceptable
- $\alpha = .50-.59$: poor
- $\alpha = .60-.69$: questionable
- $\alpha = .70-.79$: acceptable
- $\alpha = .80-.89$: good
- $\alpha \geq .90$: excellent

An $\alpha \geq .70$ is generally the minimal acceptable for social science instruments, ensuring reasonable confidence in the construct's measurement (Nunnally, 1978, p. 245), while established clinical scales prefer $\geq .80$.

Computations were performed using the **psych** package (Revelle, 2023), which provides alpha coefficients along with item-level analyses like item-total correlations and effects of excluding each item on overall alpha. This verified no single item weakened scale reliability and all contributed validly.

Though widely used, Cronbach's alpha has limitations: it is influenced by scale length and assumes equal contribution of all items (tau-equivalence), which may not always hold (McDonald, 1999, p. 89). Nevertheless, it was selected here for its universal recognition, comparability with prior BSQ-8D studies, and alignment with field standards.

Step 3: Descriptive Statistics

The third analytic step summarized descriptive statistics for both composite scores: TikTok Fitness Content Exposure and BSQ-8D Body Dissatisfaction. These statistics provide a snapshot of central tendency and variability that is crucial context for later inferential analyses.

For each variable, the study calculated:

- Mean (M): The average score representing the typical level of exposure or dissatisfaction reported.
- Standard Deviation (SD): Quantifies score dispersion around the mean, showing participant variability in responses.
- Minimum and Maximum: The lowest and highest observed scores, indicating the actual data range.
- Score Range: The difference between minimum and maximum, reflecting coverage of the scale's possible values.

These summaries were generated using base R functions and shown in tabular form to ensure clarity. Besides standalone value, these summaries helped interpret subsequent normality tests and correlations - mean levels above or below scale midpoint and degree of individual variation directly inform correlation interpretation.

Step 4: Normality Testing – Shapiro–Wilk Test

Before running the main correlation analysis, normality of both composite score distributions was assessed. Verifying normality is a prerequisite for many parametric tests like Pearson's correlation, which rely on distributional assumptions. While Pearson's r demonstrates some tolerance to non-normality in certain settings, confirming or refuting normality aids in justifying the choice of correlation method.

The Shapiro–Wilk test (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965) was employed to test the null hypothesis that the sample derives from a normally distributed population. This test yields a W statistic (0 to 1; closer to 1 means closer to normal distribution) and a p -value. A $p < .05$ means rejecting normality.

This test was preferred over alternatives (e.g., Kolmogorov–Smirnov, Anderson–Darling) because it offers superior power to detect deviations from normality, especially for small to moderate

samples. Razali and Wah (2011, p. 21) corroborated its better performance in extensive comparisons. Given the sample size of $N = 156$, Shapiro–Wilk was considered most suitable.

Tests were conducted separately on TikTok Fitness Exposure and BSQ-8D scores, with significance set at $p < .05$. Test outcomes informed, but did not mechanically dictate, the selection of correlation approach in the next step.

Complementary to the formal test, Q-Q plots were generated for both variables, visually comparing empirical data quantiles to theoretical normal quantiles. Ideally, points align on a straight reference line; deviations especially at distribution tails suggest non-normality. Visual inspection supplemented the Shapiro–Wilk results by illustrating the degree and nature of any violations.

Step 5 focuses on the final and key inferential statistical procedure of the study: calculating the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) to examine the relationship between the combined score for TikTok Fitness Content Exposure and the composite BSQ-8D Body Dissatisfaction score. This step is crucial because it directly tests the main research question and evaluates Hypothesis H1.

Understanding Pearson's r :

Pearson's r quantifies both the strength and direction of a linear association between two continuous variables (Cohen, 1988, p. 79). Its value ranges from -1.00 to $+1.00$, where -1.00 means a perfect negative correlation (high values on one variable correspond perfectly to low values on the other), 0 means no linear relationship, and $+1.00$ signifies a perfect positive correlation (high values on one variable align exactly with high values on the other). In the context of this study, a positive r would mean that participants with greater exposure to TikTok fitness content also report higher body dissatisfaction, aligning exactly with what Hypothesis H1 predicted.

Effect Size Interpretation:

Beyond significance, the practical impact of the correlation was interpreted using Cohen's well-known benchmarks (1988, p. 80) for behavioral research:

- Approximately $r = .10$ indicates a small effect, showing a real but weak association with limited practical importance.
- Around $r = .30$ indicates a medium effect, which reflects a moderately meaningful relationship.

- r values of .50 or higher represent a large effect, showing a strong, substantial connection between the variables.

These standards allow placing the observed correlation within a wider empirical framework and highlight its practical relevance, not just statistical significance.

Statistical Significance and Confidence Intervals:

Statistical significance was assessed at the conventional alpha level of .05, where a p -value below .05 suggests the correlation is unlikely due to chance and likely reflects a true population relationship. Additionally, a 95% confidence interval (CI) around the calculated r was determined. The CI offers insight into the precision and reliability of the correlation estimate, indicating the range within which the true population correlation likely resides with 95% confidence. Narrow intervals show high precision, while wide intervals indicate less certainty. Importantly, if the CI excludes zero, it serves as extra evidence that a genuine association exists between the two variables beyond just relying on the p -value.

Rationale for Choosing Pearson's r Despite Non-Normality:

Although the Shapiro-Wilk tests demonstrated significant deviations from normality for both variables ($W = 0.870$, $p < .001$ for Body Dissatisfaction; $W = 0.897$, $p < .001$ for TikTok Fitness Exposure), the use of Pearson's r was explicitly justified based on several statistical arguments:

1. **Sample Size and Central Limit Theorem:** With a sample of $N = 156$, the Central Limit Theorem suggests the sampling distribution of the mean - and by extension, Pearson's r - approaches normality even if the raw data are non-normal. This supports the appropriateness of parametric testing.
2. **Robustness to Moderate Normality Violations:** Research shows Pearson's r maintains acceptable error rates and statistical power amid moderate normality violations, particularly in samples of moderate size or larger and when variables use multi-point scales (Field, 2018, p. 246; Norman, 2010, p. 629).
3. **Composite Variable Construction:** Each variable is a composite sum-aggregating multiple Likert-scale items (8 items for BSQ-8D and 10 items for TikTok Exposure). According to the

Central Limit Theorem at the item level, summing several items results in distributions closer to normal than individual items (Norman, 2010, p. 629).

4. Nature of Non-Normality: Visual inspection of Q-Q plots showed moderate, not extreme, departures from normality, with no severe skewness or bimodality, which typically do not bias Pearson's r significantly in sizable samples (Field, 2018, p. 246).

For thoroughness, Spearman's rank-order correlation (ρ) was also computed to serve as a non-parametric robustness check, allowing comparison with Pearson's r and ensuring that findings are not artifacts of non-normality.

Software Implementation:

These analyses-calculating Pearson's r , confidence intervals, and Spearman's rho robustness check were performed using base R functions (`cor.test()`), specifying `method = "pearson"` or `method = "spearman"`. Confidence intervals for Pearson's r were obtained via Fisher's r -to- z transformation, implemented natively in `cor.test()`.

In summary, Step 5 entailed a rigorous calculation and interpretation of the Pearson product-moment correlation between TikTok Fitness Content Exposure and Body Dissatisfaction, supplemented by robustness checks and framed within a well-established methodological context to validate the study's central hypothesis.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Sample Description and Reliability of Measures

5.1.1. Final Sample Composition

After applying the data cleaning and filtering steps outlined in Section 4.5 (Step 1), the ultimate sample for analysis included $N = 156$ male individuals who use TikTok, aged between 18 and 30. From the original 237 survey respondents collected between April 30 and May 20, 2025, 81 participants were excluded because they failed to satisfy one or more eligibility criteria. Specifically, exclusions were made based on: (a) reporting not to be TikTok users (either by circumventing SoSciSurvey's automatic routing or flagged during data checks), (b) identifying as female or choosing "Prefer not to say / Other" in the gender item, or (c) indicating age outside the 18 to 30 range.

Notably, even though recruitment videos clearly specified that only male TikTok users aged 18 to 30 should participate, around 34.2% (81/237) of the initial sample did not meet these inclusion standards and were systematically removed during data processing in R Studio. This attrition is typical for online convenience sampling, especially on TikTok, where content algorithms might display recruitment materials beyond the intended audience. All exclusions strictly followed the predefined eligibility criteria set prior to the study.

All subsequent reported results refer solely to this finalized sample of 156 male TikTok users within the designated age range, excluding any data from the removed respondents.

5.1.2. Internal Consistency of Measurement Instruments

The reliability of the two scales applied, the BSQ-8D Body Dissatisfaction scale and a custom TikTok Fitness Content Exposure scale designed by the researcher, was evaluated via Cronbach's alpha (α) as detailed in Section 4.5 (Step 2). Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics and internal consistency measures for both instruments.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Cronbach's α for BSQ-8D and TikTok Fitness Content Exposure Scales (N=156)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	α
Body Dissatisfaction (BSQ-8D)	3.58	2.03	1.00	6.00	.99
TikTok Fitness Exposure	4.41	1.83	1.00	6.00	.99

Means and standard deviations are calculated as item-level averages rather than total summed scores. Minimum and maximum represent observed item means in the sample. α = Cronbach's alpha.

Both scales showed outstanding internal consistency with $\alpha = .99$ for each, far surpassing the excellent reliability threshold of $\alpha = .90$ commonly cited in psychological measurement (Cronbach, 1951, p. 299; George & Mallery, 2003, p. 231) and nearing the maximum possible coefficient of 1.00. Such results reflect very strong inter-item correlations within each scale.

For the BSQ-8D, the α of .99 aligns with and even exceeds the high reliability reported by Evans and Dolan (1993, p. 317), who found excellent consistency across various 8-item BSQ forms. This assures that within this population of young male TikTok users, the BSQ-8D reliably measures body shape concerns, and the composite score from summing these items validly represents body dissatisfaction.

Regarding the TikTok Fitness Content Exposure scale, the $\alpha = .99$ suggests the 10 researcher-created items consistently capture the same underlying construct, providing strong evidence for the scale's reliability despite lacking prior psychometric validation.

However, extremely high alpha values ($\sim .99$) can sometimes indicate redundancy, meaning items may be overly similar and not contributing unique information (Streiner, 2003, p. 101). The research included further item-level analyses in R Studio (psych package; Revelle, 2023), such as inter-item correlations and "alpha if item deleted" diagnostics, to check for this potential redundancy.

The scatter plot shown below, illustrates the relationship between TikTok Fitness Exposure among male users aged 18-30 years and Body Dissatisfaction among the study participants. The x-axis

represents the level of TikTok Fitness Exposure, measured on a scale from 1 to 7, while the y-axis represents Body Dissatisfaction, also measured on a scale from 1 to 7.

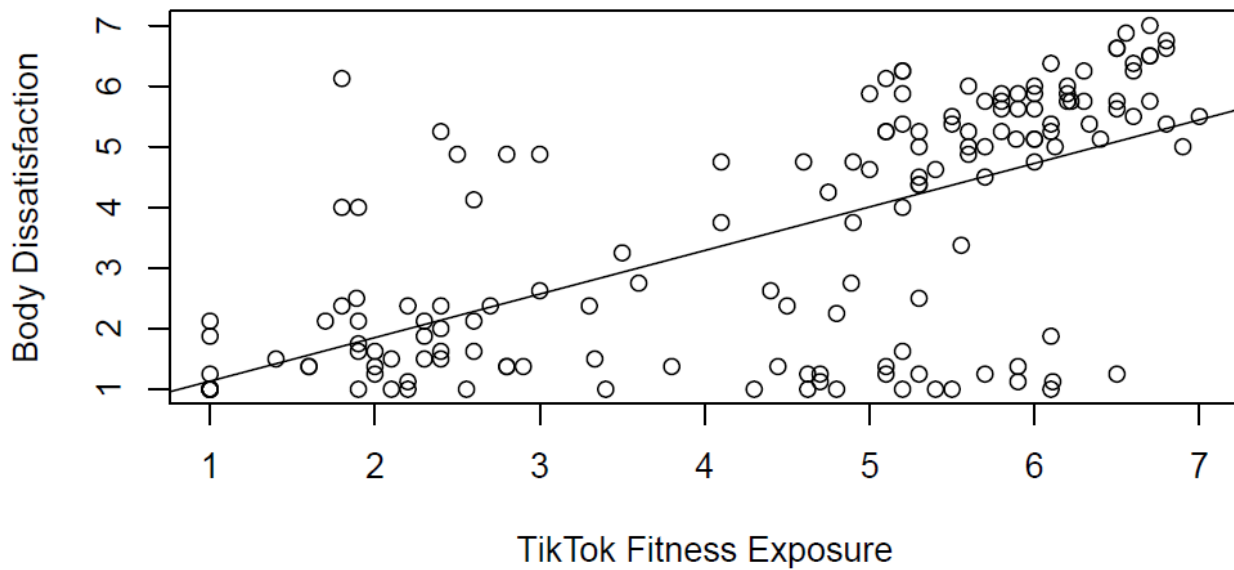


Figure 1. Scatter plot depicting the positive relationship between TikTok Fitness Exposure and Body Dissatisfaction (N = 156).

The data points are scattered across the plot, and a regression line has been fitted to the data, which shows a clear upward trend. This indicates that as the level of TikTok Fitness Exposure increases, the level of Body Dissatisfaction also tends to increase. In other words, participants who reported higher exposure to fitness-related content on TikTok also tended to report higher levels of body dissatisfaction.

At lower levels of TikTok Fitness Exposure (scores of 1–2), Body Dissatisfaction scores are predominantly low, clustering between 1 and 3. As exposure levels increase toward the middle range (scores of 3–4), body dissatisfaction scores begin to rise, ranging more broadly between 2 and 5. At the highest levels of TikTok Fitness Exposure (scores of 5–7), Body Dissatisfaction scores are predominantly high, with most data points falling between 4 and 7.

The scatter plot provides visual evidence of a positive association between TikTok Fitness Exposure and Body Dissatisfaction, suggesting that greater consumption of fitness content on TikTok may be linked to increased feelings of body dissatisfaction among participants.

5.2 Descriptive Statistics

5.2.1. Body Dissatisfaction (BSQ-8D)

Descriptive data for BSQ-8D are reported as item-mean scores (scale 1 to 6), rather than total sum scores, to facilitate direct interpretation relative to the response anchors (Never to Always). The final sample mean was $M = 3.58$ ($SD = 2.03$), with observed item means ranging from 1.00 (no concern) to 6.00 (maximum concern).

A mean of 3.58 slightly exceeds the response scale midpoint of 3.50, indicating a moderate average level of body dissatisfaction, between "Sometimes" (3) and "Often" (4). This suggests that while body dissatisfaction is not clinically severe, it is a notably present experience among participants. The relatively large SD, amounting to about 57% of the mean, reflects considerable variability - some reported little to no body concern, while others consistently reported high dissatisfaction.

5.2.2. TikTok Fitness Content Exposure

The TikTok Fitness Content Exposure scale produced a mean item score of $M = 4.41$ ($SD = 1.83$), with responses spanning the full 1-to-6 range. The mean lies well above the midpoint, between "Often" (4) and "Very Often" (5), indicating that these male TikTok users generally encounter fitness and idealized body content regularly on the platform. The variability suggests differing individual experiences likely influenced by TikTok's personalized algorithm-driven content curation.

5.2.3. Comparison

Together, these means suggest a pattern consistent with the hypothesized relationship: the sample shows relatively high exposure to TikTok fitness content alongside a moderate level of body dissatisfaction ($M = 4.41$ vs $M = 3.58$). While descriptive statistics alone do not prove this relationship, they set an empirical foundation for further correlation analyses performed later.

5.3 Normality Testing

Before performing the primary Pearson correlation, normality of the distribution for both composite variables was tested with the Shapiro–Wilk test (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965), as per Section 4.5 (Step 4). The null hypothesis for this test assumes data comes from a normal distribution. A significant p-value ($< .05$) rejects normality.

Table 2. Shapiro–Wilk Test Results (N=156)

Variable	W	p
Body Dissatisfaction (BSQ-8D)	0.870	$< .001$
TikTok Fitness Exposure	0.897	$< .001$

Both variables significantly deviated from normal distribution ($p < .001$). Despite this, W values of 0.870 and 0.897 indicate moderate, not extreme, departures from normality. Visual Q-Q plots showed slight deviations in distribution tails but reasonably normal central regions.

Given this moderate non-normality and the robust nature of Pearson’s correlation in samples of this size ($N=156$), along with the multi-item composite nature of variables (Norman, 2010, p. 629) and Central Limit Theorem applicability, the Pearson correlation was retained as the main analysis. Additionally, Spearman’s rho was computed as a nonparametric robustness check, with those results reported alongside Pearson’s in Section 5.4 to confirm findings are stable regardless of correlation method.

5.4 Pearson Correlation Analysis – Primary Hypothesis Test

This chapter presents the Pearson correlation analysis conducted to evaluate the main hypothesis of the study - that increased exposure to idealized body image content on TikTok is linked to greater body dissatisfaction among males aged 18 to 30. Specifically, the analysis examined the relationship between two composite scores: the TikTok Fitness Exposure score and the BSQ-8D Body Dissatisfaction score.

The results indicated a statistically significant and robust positive correlation between these variables, with a correlation coefficient of $r(154) = .648$ and a p-value less than .001, signifying very strong evidence against the null hypothesis. The 95% confidence interval for this correlation ranged from .547 to .731, which firmly excludes zero and remains within the bounds of a large effect size.

Importantly, the positive direction of the correlation confirms that as exposure to fitness-related and idealized body content on TikTok increases, so do the levels of body dissatisfaction reported by the participants. According to Cohen's criteria (1988, p. 80) for interpreting correlations, where an r value of .50 or above is considered large, the observed effect of .648 clearly represents a substantial association.

The very low p-value ($< .001$) underscores that the likelihood of this strong correlation occurring by chance is minimal, emphasizing the statistical reliability of the finding. The confidence interval further provides assurance that the true population correlation is both meaningful and large in effect size.

In conclusion, this Pearson correlation analysis offers compelling empirical validation for the study's primary hypothesis: young men aged 18 to 30 exposed more frequently to TikTok's fitness and idealized body imagery experience significantly higher body dissatisfaction levels.

5.5 Hypothesis Evaluation

The central hypothesis steering this research was articulated as follows:

H1: Young males aged 18 to 30 who experience greater exposure to content portraying idealized body types on TikTok will demonstrate elevated levels of body dissatisfaction.

This proposition was directly informed by the theoretical groundwork laid out in Chapters 2 and 3, which combined Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory with the unique algorithmic content amplification mechanism characteristic of TikTok's For You Page recommendation system. The hypothesis explicitly predicted a positive correlation: as the amount of exposure to idealized body imagery on TikTok rises, so too should body dissatisfaction among young male users. This prediction was operationalized through two composite indicators defined earlier, the TikTok Fitness Content Exposure scale created by the researcher as the independent variable, and the BSQ-

8D Body Dissatisfaction scale as the dependent variable - and its validity tested through Pearson's correlation analysis on a final sample of $N = 156$ male TikTok users aged 18 to 30 years.

The Pearson correlation analysis results revealed:

$$r(154) = .648, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.547, .731]$$

This outcome confirms Hypothesis H1 with strong empirical support based on three converging strands of statistical evidence:

1. Direction of Correlation: The positive Pearson coefficient ($r = .648$) signifies a direct relationship whereby higher scores on the TikTok Fitness Content Exposure scale consistently coincide with increased scores on the BSQ-8D Body Dissatisfaction scale across participants. This alignment matches the prediction in H1 exactly: young men reporting greater and more intense exposure to TikTok's fitness and idealized body content are also those expressing heightened concern and dissatisfaction regarding their body shape. No inverse relationship emerged, ruling out the possibility that greater exposure correlates with lesser dissatisfaction.

2. Statistical Significance: The extremely low p-value ($p < .001$) far surpasses the conventional significance cutoff ($\alpha = .05$), indicating that the likelihood of observing such a strong correlation by random chance alone - if no real relationship existed - is less than 0.1%. This strongly substantiates the conclusion that the detected association is genuine at the population level rather than a random artifact due to sampling variability.

3. Effect Size Magnitude: According to Cohen's (1988, p. 80) criteria, the correlation of $r = .648$ constitutes a large effect size, well above the $r = .50$ benchmark for strong effects in correlational studies. Given that social sciences often report small to medium effects, this finding is notably substantial and practically important, explaining about 42% of the variance in body dissatisfaction ($r^2 = .648^2 \approx .420$) within the sample - a considerable proportion in behavioral research terms.

The 95% confidence interval spanning [.547, .731] further bolsters the robustness of this result. Even the lower bound (.547) exceeds the threshold for large effect size, ensuring that conservative estimates do not undermine the strength of the relationship. The upper bound (.731) implies the true correlation could be stronger than the point estimate of .648. Importantly, the interval excludes zero, reinforcing that the null hypothesis of no association can be confidently rejected, using both

p-value and interval estimation methods, allowing a more nuanced understanding of precision and population implications.

A robustness check performed via Spearman's rho, a non-parametric correlation measure applied due to the non-normal distribution of variables (Section 5.3), returned $\rho = .658$ ($p < .001$), nearly identical to the Pearson r . This confirms that the non-normality does not bias the findings and that the results remain consistent regardless of correlation technique, enhancing confidence in the validity and reproducibility of the core finding.

Together, these evidential strands - the positive correlation, highly significant p-value, large effect size, confidence interval wholly above zero, and corroborating non-parametric analysis - form a comprehensive and persuasive statistical case validating Hypothesis H1. The data clearly illustrate that among these 156 young male TikTok users, greater engagement with fitness and ideal body content on TikTok strongly and significantly associates with increased body dissatisfaction.

This finding aligns well with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954, p. 118), which posits that individuals frequently exposed to others perceived as superior in valued attributes - here, physical appearance and muscularity - tend to perform upward social comparisons. These comparisons provoke negative self-assessments and lower satisfaction with one's own body. When such comparisons are repeatedly reinforced by TikTok's personalized content recommendation system (as theorized in Chapter 3), the aggregate psychological effect is a pronounced positive linkage between frequency of exposure and body dissatisfaction severity. The large effect size also suggests that TikTok's algorithm-driven, repetitive content delivery likely intensifies this association beyond what might be observed on less algorithmically curated social platforms.

Moreover, this outcome extends and corroborates existing empirical research on social media exposure and male body image. Fardouly and Vartanian (2016, p. 3) showed that appearance-related social comparisons mediate the link between exposure and body dissatisfaction on social media. This study replicates those patterns specifically within TikTok's environment, characterized by its distinct algorithmic curation, contributing a platform-specific empirical insight. Historically, research has predominantly centered on Instagram and Facebook; thus, confirming H1 adds to the growing body of evidence demonstrating psychological repercussions of algorithmically curated fitness content exposure among young men on TikTok.

In sum, Hypothesis H1's confirmation not only validates the theoretical foundations of this study but also adds significant empirical data on how TikTok's content ecosystem influences body dissatisfaction in young male users.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Overview of Findings

The primary outcome of the research is unequivocal: within a group of 156 male TikTok users aged between 18 and 30, there is a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between the amount of exposure to TikTok fitness-related content and levels of body dissatisfaction, indicated by $r(154) = .648$, $p < .001$, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from .547 to .731. This result supports Hypothesis H1 and offers solid empirical evidence aligning with the theoretical expectation that younger men who engage more frequently and intensely with TikTok fitness videos featuring idealized bodies report increased concerns and dissatisfaction regarding their body shape. The strength of this relationship, classified as a large effect size per Cohen's (1988, p. 80) criteria, explains roughly 42% of the variance in body dissatisfaction ($r^2 \approx .420$), which is notably significant in social and behavioral sciences. This highlights that exposure to TikTok fitness content is not marginal or weakly connected to body dissatisfaction but rather represents a key impactful factor within this demographic. Additional validation comes from a Spearman's rho analysis ($\rho = .658$, $p < .001$), which, using a non-parametric approach, yielded nearly identical results, confirming that the association is robust and not due to non-normal data distributions.

This study contributes to and expands an increasing body of research demonstrating negative body image effects caused by social media exposure among young men. Previous findings consistently show social media use - especially on visually driven platforms like Instagram and Facebook - correlates with heightened body dissatisfaction in male populations (Mingoia et al., 2017; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016, p. 3; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013, p. 634). This study advances that literature in two key ways. First, it focuses specifically on TikTok, a platform that, despite its massive global user base and uniquely sophisticated content recommendation system, has been underrepresented in body image research up to now. Second, it explicitly examines male users, a group historically less emphasized compared to the extensive literature on female body image, especially as TikTok is dominant within the 18–30 age bracket, making these findings especially relevant theoretically and practically. The large effect size suggests TikTok could be a particularly influential environment amplifying body image concerns - a hypothesis the following sections explore in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

6.2 TikTok Exposure and Body Dissatisfaction: Interpreting the Correlation

Although the strong correlation between TikTok fitness content exposure and body dissatisfaction is compelling, it requires thoughtful theoretical interpretation because correlation alone does not explain causation or the underlying reasons for this link. Understanding this association necessitates applying the theoretical mechanisms discussed earlier in this work, which provide a multi-layered explanation of how greater exposure to fitness and idealized body imagery on TikTok might lead to increased psychological dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance.

The core theoretical mechanism is upward social comparison, rooted in Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory. Festinger posited that individuals have an inherent motivation to evaluate their opinions and competencies - and by extension their physical features - by comparing themselves to others. When objective benchmarks are missing, people rely on social referents for self-assessment. In terms of physical appearance, comparisons tend to be directional and are often upward; people compare themselves to those perceived as better looking or physically superior on relevant dimensions (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007, p. 5). Upward appearance comparisons regularly result in negative emotions such as reduced satisfaction with one's body, increased appearance-related anxiety, and lower self-esteem (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015, p. 63).

TikTok's environment is arguably optimized to increase both the frequency and intensity of such upward comparisons, especially for young male users. The platform features a large and highly visible community of fitness influencers, bodybuilders, personal trainers, and creators specializing in aesthetic physical presentation, who frequently post short videos displaying lean, muscular, and meticulously sculpted bodies. Every video that appears on a user's "For You Page" is a potential point where the user's own physique is implicitly or explicitly compared against the idealized bodies shown. Repeated exposure across many videos and sessions over days or weeks leads to a cumulative psychological impact. Consequently, the observed strong positive correlation ($r = .648$) can be partly understood as the quantitative reflection of this ongoing burden of upward social comparison: those who report the greatest exposure to TikTok fitness content experience the most frequent appearance-based upward comparisons and in turn report the highest body dissatisfaction.

Another key explanatory factor is the role of TikTok's algorithm-driven content repetition, which is unique to the platform's technological design and sets it apart as a particularly risky environment

for body image. As detailed in Chapter 3, TikTok's "For You Page" uses an advanced machine-learning recommendation algorithm continuously analyzing user engagement patterns - including watch time, likes, shares, comments, and re-watches - to deduce personal content preferences and adjust the feed dynamically (Montag et al., 2021, p. 3). Even casual or accidental engagement with fitness videos - such as lingering a few seconds longer or watching a video in full out of curiosity - sends the algorithm a signal to prioritize similar content in the future. This feedback creates a self-reinforcing loop, with fitness and idealized body content becoming increasingly prevalent in the user's FYP without deliberate user choice.

This algorithmic reinforcement is psychologically significant. Unlike traditional media where ideal body imagery in ads or magazines is episodic and limited, or platforms like Instagram where content discovery is more user-driven (following accounts or hashtags), TikTok's FYP delivers a steady, unavoidable, algorithmically amplified stream of idealized body visuals. The system not only reacts to preferences but actively shapes and narrows them, deepening the user's immersion in a highly specific, homogenous body ideal. This structural aspect explains why the correlation here is not just significant but large - the algorithm acts as a psychological intensifier of exposure, magnifying and accelerating social comparison processes. Participants with higher TikTok fitness exposure scores likely experience stronger algorithmic shaping of their content feeds, and these are the same individuals reporting elevated body dissatisfaction.

A further important mechanism is the normalization and internalization of the muscular male body ideal through persistent exposure. Frequent and extensive engagement with a narrow set of ideal male bodies - lean, muscular, aesthetically curated and enhanced by TikTok's short-form video visuals - can progressively shift the psychological norm for evaluating one's own body. When most male bodies seen daily in media are sculpted and idealized, this image becomes perceived as normal and expected rather than exceptional, a cognitive process called the normalization of the ideal. As this internalized standard moves upward toward a highly idealized form, the perceived gap widens between actual and ideal bodies - a key driver of body dissatisfaction (Thompson et al., 1999, cited in Cafri et al., 2005, p. 524).

This internalization is particularly potent on TikTok because the platform's visual and production features - high-definition video, strategic lighting, flattering camera angles, filters, and editing tools - present ideal bodies in an enhanced, aesthetically maximized way. This can be even less

representative of typical human bodies than digitally retouched still photos historically studied in media influence research. Receiving these polished images repeatedly via an algorithmically tailored feed fosters rapid and deep internalization of this muscular ideal. Hence, the large correlation found may partly reflect this internalization process: users with the greatest fitness content exposure may simultaneously have internalized an increasingly unrealistic ideal, increasing their actual-versus-ideal discrepancy and thus experiencing more pronounced body dissatisfaction. This explanation aligns with broader theoretical literature on media internalization and body image (Cafri et al., 2005, p. 524) and offers a coherent psychological account for how TikTok's algorithm-driven exposure results in stable, chronic body dissatisfaction rather than just immediate, short-term negative feelings.

6.3. Descriptive Findings: Exposure Levels and Dissatisfaction Patterns

This chapter presents descriptive results focused on exposure levels and patterns of dissatisfaction, emphasizing their practical implications. The average TikTok Fitness Exposure score was 4.41 on a 6-point scale, which reveals that participants generally encounter fitness-related content on TikTok quite often - this value surpasses the midpoint, highlighting that such exposure is a routine aspect rather than an uncommon occurrence for young male users. This emphasizes that engaging with fitness and ideal body imagery on TikTok is widespread among this demographic.

Regarding body dissatisfaction, the mean score was 3.58, just below the halfway mark of the scale, indicating that participants experienced a moderate degree of dissatisfaction with their bodies overall. However, there was notable individual variation, as shown by the standard deviation of 2.03. This spread signifies that dissatisfaction is not uniform across the sample; some individuals feel more dissatisfied than others. This diversity points to differential effects of exposure on dissatisfaction, suggesting that other factors - such as existing concerns about body image, the extent to which individuals internalize societal body ideals, or their self-esteem- may influence how exposure relates to dissatisfaction. These factors provide promising directions for further research investigating potential moderators in this relationship.

6.3.1. Theoretical Implications

This part addresses the contribution of the research to the conceptual framework surrounding algorithm-driven social comparison. The study's discovery that exposure to fitness content on TikTok has a strong association with body dissatisfaction in young men adds valuable empirical data that questions previous beliefs which positioned body image issues mainly as problems affecting women (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013, p. 631; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016, p. 3). Furthermore, the research broadens Social Comparison Theory within the context of algorithmic media by proposing that the classic model - where a person compares themselves individually to another - should be reimagined as a cumulative process. In this new framework, the algorithm curates repeated and personalized content, creating sustained upward comparison pressure over time (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 210).

6.3.2. Practical Implications

The practical consequences relate to platform design, mental health practice, and media literacy education. From the standpoint of platform developers, the study raises ethical considerations about recommendation algorithms that may systematically push vulnerable individuals toward content linked to psychological harm. Clinically and in public health, these findings highlight the need to assess TikTok usage and body image concerns specifically among young men, a group potentially less prone to seek help for appearance-related distress because of social stigma. Media literacy programs targeted at young men, especially those that increase understanding of how algorithmic curation works and the artificial construction of idealized images, could serve as an effective intervention approach.

6.4. Future Research Directions

Based on the previously noted limitations, this part should propose effective avenues for upcoming investigations:

- Employing longitudinal methodologies that observe both TikTok exposure and body dissatisfaction over an extended period is vital to establish the direction of causality clearly.

- Utilizing experimental or quasi-experimental frameworks, where TikTok fitness content exposure is deliberately controlled or altered (for example, through short-term laboratory exposure sessions), can offer more direct proof of causal effects.
- Introducing moderating factors such as internalization of body ideals, self-esteem levels, pre-existing concerns about body image, tendencies toward social comparison, and the amount of daily TikTok use would help identify which groups are most vulnerable to TikTok's influence and under what conditions.
- Conducting cross-cultural comparative research could reveal whether the connection between fitness content on TikTok and dissatisfaction with body image differs across societies with varying cultural ideals related to body and media consumption.
- Including qualitative, complementary studies could provide deeper insights into the personal experiences of young men who consume large amounts of TikTok fitness content, adding rich contextual understanding that pure quantitative correlational studies cannot offer.

7. CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate whether exposure to idealized body content on TikTok is related to body dissatisfaction among young men, focusing specifically on the platform's algorithm-driven exposure and guided by Social Comparison Theory. The research design was a cross-sectional, correlational survey conducted exclusively with active TikTok users aged 18–30. Participants ($N = 156$) completed two key measures: the BSQ-8D, a validated instrument for assessing body dissatisfaction, and a researcher-constructed TikTok Fitness Content Exposure scale designed to capture the frequency and intensity of exposure to fitness-related and idealized male bodies within TikTok's distinctive For You Page environment. Recruitment was carried out solely through TikTok, yielding a sample that is tightly aligned with the study's theoretical and ecological focus.

The central empirical finding is clear and robust: a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between TikTok fitness content exposure and body dissatisfaction, $r(154) = .648$, $p < .001$, with a 95% confidence interval from .547 to .731. This result confirms the main hypothesis (H1) and indicates that greater exposure to idealized body content on TikTok is associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction among young men. The magnitude of this effect is large by conventional standards, and the proportion of variance explained (approximately 42%) underscores the substantive relevance of TikTok exposure as a correlate of body image concerns in this population. Supplementary non-parametric analysis (Spearman's rho) produced a highly similar estimate, providing convergence evidence that the observed association is not an artifact of distributional assumptions.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings align with Social Comparison Theory, which posits that upward comparisons to perceived superior others can precipitate negative self-evaluations. On TikTok, the combination of an environment saturated with idealized male bodies and an algorithmic engine that amplifies similar content creates repeated opportunities for upward social comparisons. This study suggests that such comparative processes, when embedded in an algorithmically reinforced exposure milieu, can contribute meaningfully to body dissatisfaction among young men. The results extend the existing literature beyond traditional platforms by drawing attention to TikTok's distinctive architecture - specifically its continuous, personalized feed and rapid content turnover - and by demonstrating that algorithm-driven exposure can have

sizable associations with psychological outcomes in male populations, a group that has historically been underrepresented in body image research.

Several methodological strengths bolster confidence in these conclusions. The use of a validated body image measure (BSQ-8D) in combination with a carefully constructed TikTok exposure scale provides a coherent and theoretically integrated measurement framework. The online data collection approach, conducted via a platform known for secure data handling and flexible survey logic, supports rigorous data quality controls, including screening for platform-relevant eligibility. The exclusive recruitment through TikTok ensures ecological validity, as participants' experiences and exposure pertain directly to the platform under study. The final sample size ($N = 156$) is adequate for detecting a large effect and for stabilizing correlation estimates, and the consistency of findings with non-parametric corroboration adds a layer of robustness to the conclusions.

Nonetheless, the study's limitations warrant careful consideration, and they point to valuable directions for future research. The cross-sectional design precludes definitive causal inferences about the direction of the relationship between exposure and body dissatisfaction. It remains possible that pre-existing body image concerns could shape engagement with TikTok content, or that a bidirectional interplay exists. Longitudinal or experimental designs - such as controlled exposure manipulations or repeated measures across time - would be instrumental in clarifying causal dynamics and temporal sequencing. The exclusive focus on TikTok users aged 18–30 limits generalizability to other age groups or non-users and to different platform contexts. Although the recruitment method enhances ecological validity for TikTok, it may introduce self-selection biases that could influence the observed associations. The reliance on self-report data raises common concerns about social desirability and measurement error, though the use of validated scales and the large observed effect mitigate some of these concerns. Finally, while the BSQ-8D is well established, the TikTok exposure instrument is exploratory in nature; future work should aim to validate or refine this scale, including tests of its dimensional structure, test-retest reliability, and convergent validity with related constructs like time spent on TikTok, active following of fitness creators, and actual engagement metrics.

In terms of practical and policy implications, the findings highlight a potential public health and well-being concern related to algorithmic media environments. If larger exposure to idealized body content on TikTok is linked to greater body dissatisfaction among young men, there are important

considerations for platform design, content moderation, and digital literacy initiatives. Educational interventions that promote media literacy and critical engagement with idealized portrayals could help mitigate the impact of algorithmic exposure. Clinically, awareness of TikTok's potential influence on male body image could inform screening practices and early intervention efforts among populations that may not be reached through more traditional channels. For researchers, the study contributes a platform-specific empirical anchor to the growing literature on media exposure and male body image while expanding the methodological toolkit with a validated construct and a contextually grounded exposure measure.

Looking forward, several avenues seem particularly fruitful. Longitudinal research could track exposure and body dissatisfaction over time to examine trajectory patterns and potential cumulative effects. Experimental designs, even with brief controlled exposure to specific content categories, could provide more direct causal evidence about the mechanisms at play. Incorporating moderating and mediating variables - such as internalization of body ideals, self-esteem, social comparison tendencies, and daily screen time - would deepen understanding of why some individuals are more susceptible to exposure effects than others. Cross-cultural comparisons would reveal whether these dynamics hold across diverse cultural contexts with varying body ideals and media ecosystems. Finally, qualitative inquiries could illuminate the subjective experiences and coping strategies of young men who engage heavily with TikTok fitness content, offering richer detail to complement quantitative findings.

In sum, this research makes a meaningful contribution to the understanding of how algorithmically shaped exposure to idealized body content on a rapidly growing short-form platform relates to body image concerns among young men. It provides an empirical foothold for ongoing dialogue among researchers, platform designers, clinicians, and educators about how digital media environments shape self-perception and well-being in contemporary society. The study's results invite continued investigation, with an eye toward translating knowledge into practical interventions that promote healthier media ecosystems and more resilient body image among male youth and emerging adults.

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