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# TikTok Usage and Body Image: The Mediating Role of Social Comparison Among Gen Z

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**ABSTRACT :** TikTok has rapidly gained popularity among Generation Z (Gen Z), exposing users to curated, appearance-focused content that may shape body image perceptions. This study examines the relationship between TikTok usage and body image concerns among Gen Z, focusing on the mediating role of social comparison with peers and influencers. Grounded in social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), the research explores how different comparison targets (close peers, distant peers, and influencers) influence body dissatisfaction. Using a cross-sectional online survey with 88 Gen Z participants, the study reveals that upward comparisons with influencers significantly impact negative body image, whereas comparisons with peers have a weaker effect. Despite frequent engagement with social media, Gen Z users demonstrate awareness of the unrealistic portrayals on TikTok, which may mitigate some negative influences. The findings underscore the need for social media literacy initiatives and algorithmic interventions to promote body-positive content.
**KEYWORDS:** TikTok Usage, Body Image, Social Comparison, Gen Z, close peers, distant peers, influencers

## I.        INTRODUCTION

TikTok is a rapidly growing video-sharing platform that enables users to create and post short videos enhanced with popular music, special effects, and filters (Khattab, 2019; Sensor Tower, n.d.). In addition to basic social media functions such as following, commenting, and reacting, TikTok offers unique interactive features like "duet" (recording a video alongside an existing one) and "stitch" (incorporating a segment of an existing video into a new one) (TikTok, n.d.). Since its global launch in 2016, the platform has attracted a remarkable user base, reaching approximately 1.5 billion monthly active users (Dixon, 2024b). Notably, TikTok is particularly popular among Generation Z, with around 72% of individuals aged 18 to 24 reporting use of the app (Dixon, 2024a). Given Gen Z's high level of engagement with TikTok, the platform's influence on this demographic—both positive and negative—warrants serious scholarly attention. One prominent concern is body image. Recent studies have indicated that TikTok's content algorithm can lead users to frequent exposure to weight-loss content and idealized body types within a short period (Hobbs et al., 2021). Repeated exposure to such content may significantly shape users' perceptions of beauty standards, often resulting in body dissatisfaction and negative body image (Mink & Szymanski, 2022).

Body image refers to the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that individuals have about their own appearance (Grohan, 2008, p.4). Body image concerns are especially common among young people, particularly women (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Among the many contributing factors, social media is considered a major influence on body image (Thompson et al., 1999; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). The negative effects of social media are often explained through the lens of social comparison, where individuals compare themselves to others—frequently celebrities, influencers, or peers—based on heavily edited and idealized images (Harriger, Thompson, & Tiggemann, 2023). When these comparisons are upward in nature (i.e., with someone perceived as more attractive or ideal), individuals are more likely to feel inferior and dissatisfied with their own appearance (Harriger, Thompson, & Tiggemann, 2023). TikTok, in this regard, is no exception; research suggests that it is a highly appearance-focused platform (Mink & Szymanski, 2022; Pan, Mu, & Tang, 2022). With the majority of its users falling within the 18–24 age group, it is reasonable to infer that TikTok may have a significant impact on young users' body image.

In this context, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between TikTok usage and body image among Gen Z users, with a particular focus on the mediating role of appearance-based social comparison involving both peers and influencers. According to social comparison theory, comparisons with similar others— such as peers—tend to exert greater psychological influence (Festinger, 1954; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). However, influencers on TikTok also frequently post highly curated and polished content that promotes unrealistic beauty standards (Pan, Mu, & Tang, 2022), making them prominent targets for appearance comparison in this study.

This research pursues three main objectives: (1) to identify key body image concerns experienced by Gen Z as a result of using TikTok; (2) to assess the extent to which Gen Z users engage in appearance-based social comparison on the platform; and (3) to explore differences in how comparisons with peers versus influencers impact Gen Z's body image.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) What are the common body image concerns reported by Gen Z TikTok users?

(2) To what extent do Gen Z users engage in appearance-based comparisons on TikTok?

(3) Are there differences in the effects of appearance comparisons with peers versus influencers on Gen Z's body image?

(3.1) How frequently do Gen Z users compare their appearance with close peers, distant peers, and influencers on TikTok?

(3.2) What is the direction of these comparisons (e.g., upward, lateral, or downward)?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how social media, and TikTok in particular, influences self-perception and body image among young people. The findings are expected to offer valuable implications for designing interventions and educational strategies aimed at promoting healthier social media use and mitigating the negative impacts of appearance-based comparison on the mental and emotional well-being of Generation Z.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

Social comparison theory serves as a crucial framework for analyzing the effects of social media on body image (Fardouly et al., 2015; Lewallen & Morawitz, 2016; Ho, Lee, & Liao, 2016). Originally proposed by Leon Festinger in 1954, the theory suggests that individuals instinctively assess themselves in relation to others, particularly in the absence of objective benchmarks. This comparison can be classified as either upward—where individuals compare themselves to those they perceive as superior—or downward—where they compare themselves to those they perceive as inferior (Festinger, 1954; Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004; Myers et al., 2012).

In the context of social media, the likelihood of engaging in upward comparisons is significantly amplified due to the exposure to curated and idealized content from influencers, celebrities, and peers (Harriger, Thompson, & Tiggemann, 2023). Such comparisons often result in feelings of inadequacy and body dissatisfaction. While individuals tend to compare themselves with similar others for accuracy (Festinger, 1954; Brown & Tiggemann, 2016), research differentiates between close and distant peers in this process (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). For instance, Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) found that female university students frequently compared their appearance to distant peers on Facebook, which was linked more strongly to body dissatisfaction than comparisons with close peers. This study extends such findings by examining the effects of appearance-related comparisons with close peers and distant peers on TikTok.

Revisions of social comparison theory suggest that individuals may also compare themselves to dissimilar targets, such as professional models or influencers (Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Strahan et al., 2006). While extensive research has explored the influence of traditional media figures, such as celebrities and fashion models, on body image, less attention has been given to the impact of social media influencers. Influencers, who attract large audiences and shape consumer behavior, serve as a distinct comparison group (Vrontis et al., 2021). Studies suggest that upward comparisons with influencers are associated with lower body appreciation among young women, more so than comparisons with peers (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Thus, this study investigates how social comparison with TikTok influencers influences body image among Gen Z.

### 2.2 Body Image

Body image encompasses an individual's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their physical appearance (Grohan, 2008). According to the National Eating Disorders Collaboration (NEDC, 2018), body image consists of four components:

Perceptual body image: How one visually perceives their body, which may not accurately reflect reality.

Affective body image: Emotional responses to one's body, including satisfaction or dissatisfaction with body shape, weight, or features.

Cognitive body image: The thoughts and beliefs an individual holds about their body, which can lead to preoccupation with physical appearance.

Behavioral body image: Actions taken in response to body perceptions, such as dieting, exercising, or avoiding social situations.

A positive body image is characterized by self-acceptance and appreciation of one's body, whereas body dissatisfaction arises when individuals perceive a discrepancy between their actual and ideal body (Grogan, 2008). Although both males and females experience body dissatisfaction, studies suggest it is more prevalent among women. Research in the United States has found that female adolescents report greater concerns about their body image and eating behaviors compared to males (Ata et al., 2007). Similarly, in Australia, nearly 50%

of young women identify body image as a major personal concern, while only 15% of young men express the same worry (Tiller et al., 2021).

## 2.3 TikTok

Since its launch in 2016, TikTok has grown to 1.9 billion users worldwide (Ceci, 2024a). The platform enables users to create and share short videos, typically between 15 seconds and 10 minutes, with engaging content that appeals particularly to younger demographics—36.2% of TikTok users belong to Gen Z (Ceci, 2024b). On average, users spend nearly an hour daily on the app (Duarte, 2024). Unlike other platforms where users primarily see content from people they follow, TikTok's "For You" page presents an algorithmically curated stream of videos, increasing exposure to a diverse range of content. The platform's algorithm prioritizes engagement, tailoring content to users' preferences. Compared to Instagram's polished aesthetic, TikTok's spontaneity and unfiltered content make it particularly appealing to young users (Muliadi, 2020).

## 2.4 Gen Z

TikTok's demographic influence is particularly significant among Gen Z, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). This generation, often referred to as "digital natives," relies heavily on online platforms for various aspects of life, including social interactions, news consumption, and shopping (Ernst & Young, 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2023). Unlike previous generations that passively consume content, Gen Z is more engaged in content creation, making TikTok a central space for self-expression (Muliadi, 2020).

Despite embracing digital culture, Gen Z faces challenges associated with social media, including heightened self-consciousness and external validation. Studies suggest that social media plays a greater role in determining the happiness, self-esteem, and well-being of Gen Z than any other generation (The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2016). This generation values authenticity and individuality, and TikTok's algorithm allows even lesser-known creators to achieve viral success, further reinforcing its appeal (Narayanan, 2022; Stokel-Walker, 2023). However, the exposure to curated body ideals on the platform may also contribute to body image concerns.

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves based on comparisons with others (Festinger, 1954). Prior research highlights that exposure to highly edited images on social media exacerbates negative body image (Harriger et al., 2023). While comparisons with close peers may provide a sense of relatability, comparisons with influencers—who often present polished and curated content—may intensify body dissatisfaction (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). The literature underscores the need to differentiate between peer and influencer comparisons in understanding social media's impact on body image.

## 2.5 TikTok and Body Image

The Tripartite Influence Model identifies three main factors influencing body image: peers, parents, and media (Thompson et al., 1999). This relationship is shaped through two key mechanisms: the internalization of societal beauty standards and the frequent comparison of physical appearances (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Societal norms often emphasize thinness for women and muscularity for men as ideals of attractiveness, though the standards for men tend to be more flexible (Grohan, 2008; Strahan et al., 2006).

While initial studies focused on the negative influence of traditional media, such as television and magazines, on body image concerns (Jung et al., 2022), the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter has prompted further research into their impact (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Social media, like traditional media, is heavily appearance-focused, frequently promoting unattainable beauty ideals (Rodgers & Melilo, 2016). The persistence of thin-ideal imagery, particularly among female celebrities and influencers, reinforces unrealistic beauty expectations (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). Additionally, social media encourages not only weight-related comparisons but also concerns about facial features, skin, and hair, as users increasingly share portrait-focused images (Haferkamp et al., 2012). Many individuals feel pressured to present an idealized version of themselves, often engaging in extensive photo editing and filtering before posting content (Chua & Chang, 2016).

TikTok, much like Instagram, is a highly appearance-oriented platform. Many viral dance trends incorporate suggestive elements, including revealing clothing, sexualized movements, and music with provocative themes (Mink & Szymanski, 2022). The culture of TikTok encourages users to follow trends, imitate popular videos, and engage with visually appealing content (Kaufman, 2020). The availability of editing tools and beauty filters allows users to modify their appearance, further contributing to the dissemination of unrealistic beauty standards (Pan, Mu, & Tang, 2022). Mink and Szymanski (2022) caution that excessive exposure to such content can lead to body dissatisfaction, particularly among young women. However, the platform has also witnessed the emergence of body neutrality content, which promotes a non-judgmental perspective on physical appearance. As of May 2023, this content has garnered over 1.1 billion views, positively influencing body satisfaction and emotional well-being, particularly among Australian women (Seekis & Lawrence, 2023).

*The Mediating Role of Social Comparison*

In alignment with the Tripartite Influence Model, the negative effects of social media on body image are largely mediated by the process of social comparison. Brown and Tiggemann (2016) found that exposure to attractive images of peers and celebrities on Instagram negatively affects women's mood and body satisfaction, with social comparison playing a central role. Similarly, Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) demonstrated that the frequency of appearance comparisons with close friends, distant peers, and celebrities on Facebook mediates body image concerns.

Research on TikTok's impact on body image is still developing, though several studies suggest that social comparison is a key factor in mediating its effects. Mink and Szymanski (2022) examined TikTok's influence on body dissatisfaction among young adult college women in the United States, finding an indirect link between TikTok usage and negative body perception, mediated by upward appearance comparisons. They argue that frequent engagement with TikTok may be harmful to body image.

Conversely, some studies suggest that certain types of TikTok content may mitigate negative effects. Pryde and Prichard (2022) analyzed the impact of "fitspiration" (fitness inspiration) videos on young Australian women. Their findings indicate that although these videos contribute to negative mood and increased appearance comparisons, they do not necessarily lead to body dissatisfaction. The authors propose that TikTok's emphasis on movement and functionality may shift users' focus from appearance to physical capabilities, fostering greater appreciation for body functionality. Similarly, Seekis and Lawrence (2023) found that exposure to body neutrality videos reduces upward comparisons and promotes immediate improvements in body image and mood. By emphasizing the body's functional value rather than its aesthetic appeal, such content fosters a more positive and accepting attitude toward physical appearance.

Despite extensive research on the negative impact of social media on body image, several gaps remain. One significant limitation is the lack of diversity in study participants. Many studies predominantly focus on young white women, overlooking the experiences of men, non-binary individuals, and individuals from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Harriger, Thompson, & Tiggemann, 2023). Expanding research to include more diverse samples is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of social media's effects on body image.

Furthermore, while platforms like Facebook and Instagram have been extensively studied, research on TikTok—a video-based platform with unique engagement dynamics—is still in its early stages (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). This study aims to address these gaps by examining TikTok's influence on body image among Gen Z users across different genders and cultural backgrounds.

**Figure 1: The relationship between TikTok usage, social comparison, and body image**
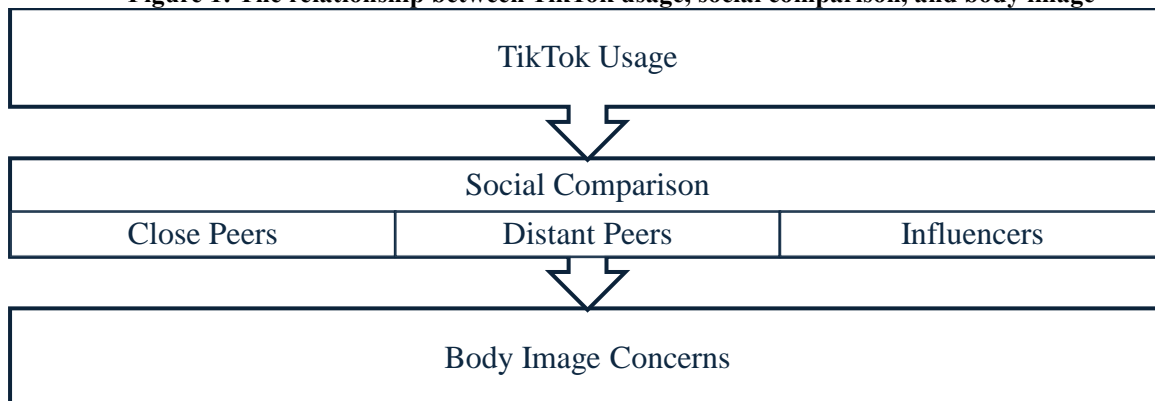


### III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research design to systematically analyze the relationship between TikTok usage, social comparison, and body image among Gen Z. A cross-sectional survey method was utilized, allowing for data collection at a single point in time to assess associations between variables. The data was collected through an online questionnaire using Google Forms, targeting individuals aged 18-27 who actively use TikTok.

The questionnaire comprises 14 closed-ended questions, which are divided into 4 sections: 1) Demographic information, 2) Body image concerns, 3) Tendency to compare appearance on TikTok, 4) Comparison with Peers versus Influencers. The questions include clear instructions on how to answer, and explanation of concepts such as body image is also included in non-technical terms to ensure that all respondents can understand and give out truthful answers. Risk of omitting a question is diminished as the researcher sets all questions as compulsory, that means respondents must answer all questions to submit. For filter questions, participants are redirected to different sections according to their answers using the settings of Google Forms.

To measure Gen Z tendency to engage in appearance comparison on TikTok, two statements were adapted from the Physical Appearance Comparison Scale (PACS; Thompson, Heinberg, & Tantleff, 1991). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) with these two following statements: 1) "When using TikTok, I compare my physical appearance to the physical appearance of others," 2) "When using TikTok, I sometimes compare my figure to the figures of other people."

The impact of comparison with different targets on Gen Z body image were measured with six items adapted from Fardouly and Vartanian (2015). The target groups were close peers (friends that participants follow on TikTok and regularly hang out with), distant peers (peers that participants come across on TikTok "For you" page) and TikTok influencers. With each target, participants were asked to indicate their frequency of comparison and direction of appearance comparison. To measure frequency of comparison, participants were asked how often they compare their body to a target when looking at their videos on TikTok, with answers ranging from "never" to "very often". To measure the direction of appearance comparison, participants were asked to rate their body when comparing to a target on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 = much worse, 2 = worse, 3 = slightly worse, 4 = slightly better, 5 = better, 6 = much better). Participants who indicated that they never compare their body to a target would not be asked the question regarding direction of comparison, and they would be redirected to the next section about another target.

Convenience and snowball sampling methods were employed to recruit 88 participants, predominantly from Asia, with additional respondents from Europe, America, and Australia. Data was analyzed using Excel for initial visualization and SPSS for statistical analysis, including descriptive statistics and mean comparisons. Ethical approval is obtained from the HUM S-REC (Faculty of Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Subcommittee) before data collection begins, ensuring participant anonymity and informed consent.

## IV. RESULTS

### 4.1. Research question 1: What are the common body image concerns reported by Gen Z TikTok users?

The first research question aims to identify the most common body image concerns faced by Gen Z TikTok users. A number of questions were asked to explore multifaceted aspects of Gen Z body image concerns as a result of TikTok use.
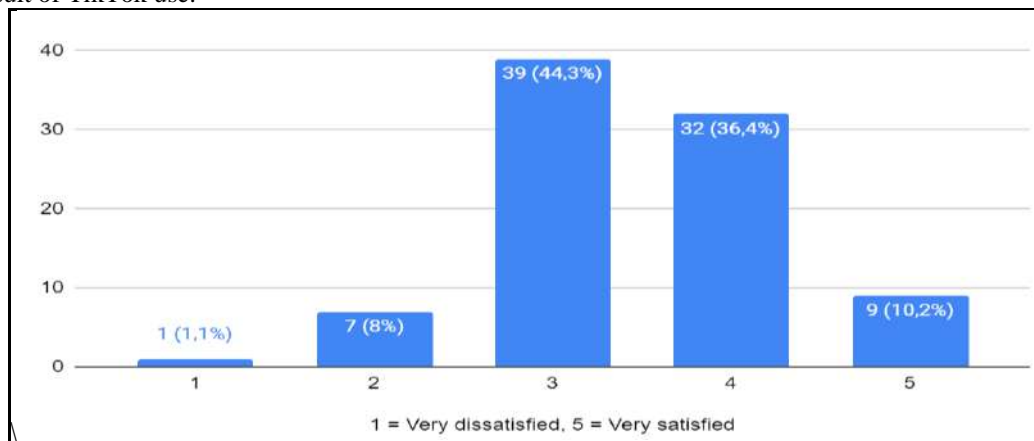


**Figure 2: Gen Z's Level of Body Satisfaction**

Participants rated their body satisfaction on a scale from 1 (strong dissatisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). The largest group (44.3%) chose 3, indicating moderate contentment, followed by 36.4% selecting 4 for higher satisfaction. Only 1.1% rated 1 (strong dissatisfaction), 10.2% chose 5 (very high satisfaction), and 8% rated 2 (mild dissatisfaction). Overall, most Gen Z individuals feel neutral to positive about their body image, with few expressing strong dissatisfaction. (Figure 2)
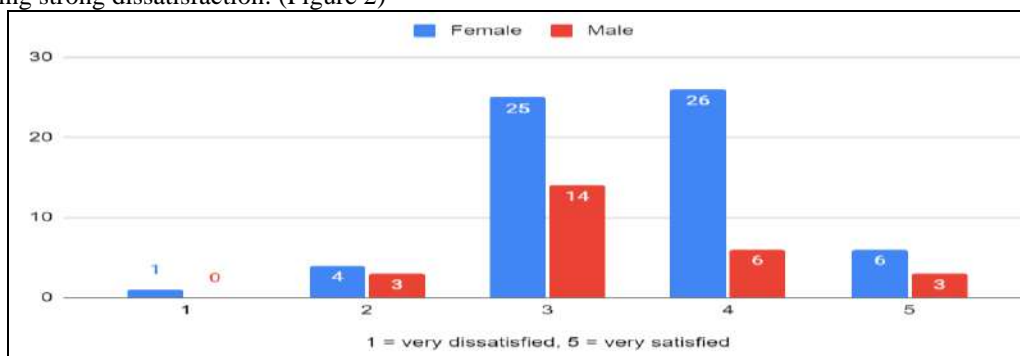


**Figure 3: Gen Z's Level of Body Satisfaction (Gender analysis)**

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Gen Z's Level of Body Satisfaction (Gender analysis)**

**Descriptive Statistics**

|  | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Female | 62 | 3.5161 | .82466 |
| Male | 26 | 3.3462 | .84580 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 26 |  |  |

Gender analysis shows slight differences in body satisfaction. Most females rated their satisfaction at 4, indicating high contentment, while most males chose 3, reflecting moderate satisfaction. On average, females had a slightly higher mean score (3.5161) than males (3.3462), though the difference is minimal. Overall, both groups rated their satisfaction above the midpoint, suggesting a generally positive body perception. (Table 1)
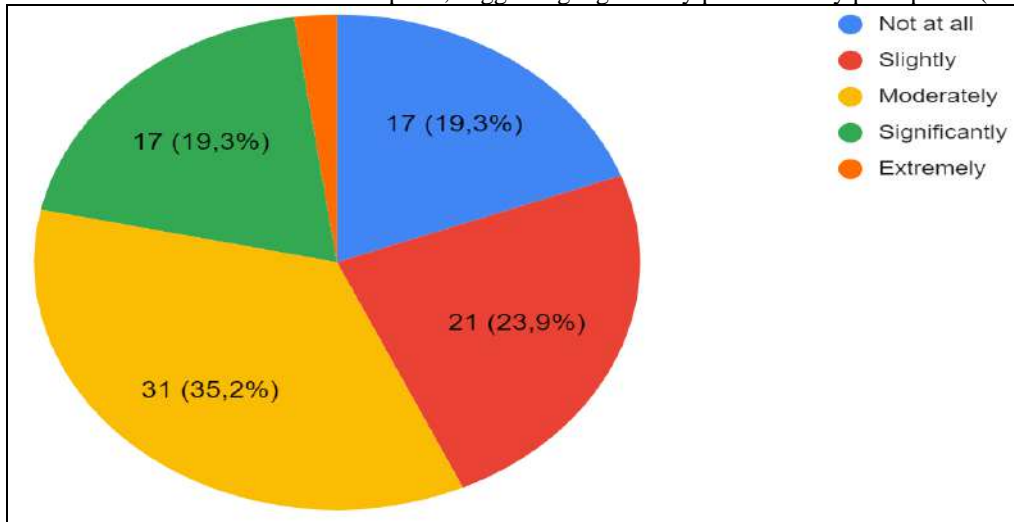


**Figure 4: Tiktok Influence of Gen Z's Perception of Ideal Body**

Participants assessed TikTok's influence on their perception of an ideal body. A vast majority (97.7%) acknowledged its impact, with 23.9% finding it extremely influential and 19.3% significantly so. Additionally, 35.2% saw it as moderately influential, while 19.3% considered its effect slight, indicating other factors also shape their perception. (Figure 4).

Further analysis on the basis of gender illustrates significant insights. It is worth noticing that the results for male participants show contrasting trends, with half of respondents indicating that TikTok has little to no impact, while the other half acknowledged its role in influencing the ideal body. Whereas results for females suggest their perception of an ideal body is more likely to be influenced by TikTok than that of males. Particularly, around two-thirds of females (59,7%) rated TikTok to be moderately to extremely influential on ideal body perceptions. (Figure 5)
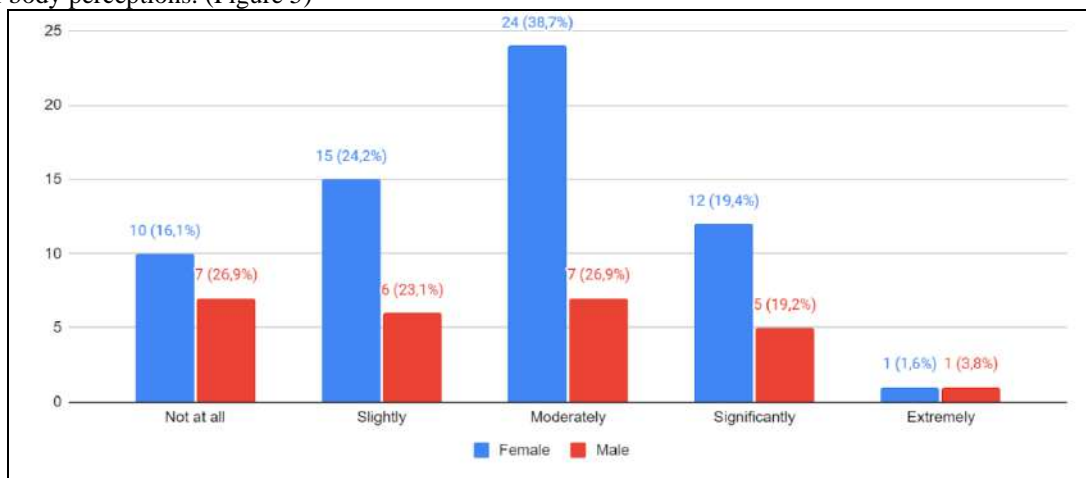


**Figure 5:Tiktok Influence of Gen Z's Perception of Ideal Body (Gender analysis)**

**Figure 6: Gen Z's body image concerns due to Tiktok usage**

In order to identify the common body image concerns among Gen Z as a result of TikTok usage, participants were asked to choose from a list of attributes, namely weight, muscle tone, skin appearance, hair appearance, facial features, overall body shape, and "other" option. The chart represents results for the seven named attributes, with the exception of one answer from a participant who indicated that they faced no body image concerns due to TikTok usage. Skin appearance is the greatest concern of Gen Z, with the vote from 44,3% of participants. The second greatest body image concern reported by TikTok gen Z users is overall body shape, at 39,8%, followed by weight, at 38,6%. (Figure 6).

Further gender analysis shows distinct areas of concerns between male and females. The majority of female users, 31 out of 62, are most concerned with their skin. Overall body shape, weight and facial features share a similar amount of concerns among females. Additionally, 22 out of 62 females also consider hair appearance to be important aspects of body image concerns. Women are least concerned with muscle tones, with only a small proportion of respondents choosing this aspect. In contrast, males are most concerned with muscle tones. Similar to their female counterparts, weight and overall body shape are also among males' top body image concerns. Men are less concerned with face related features such as skin, facial features and hair. (Figure 7)
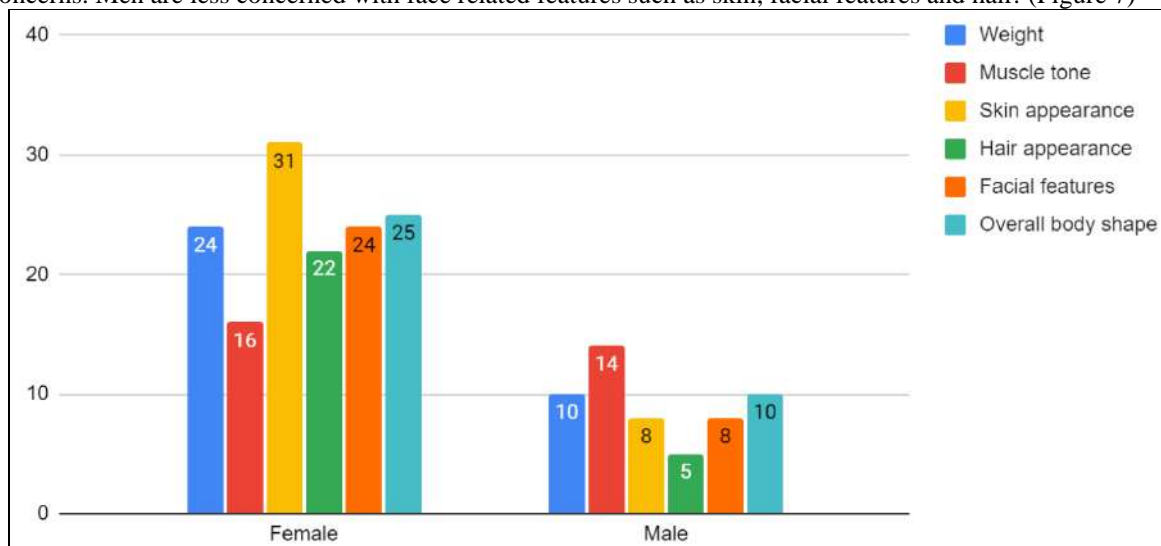


**Figure 7: Gen Z's body image concerns due to Tiktok usage (Gender analysis)**

### 4.2. Research question 2: To what extent do Gen Z engage in appearance comparison on TikTok?

To determine the extent to which Gen Z participate in physical appearance comparison on TikTok, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement to two statements on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. Participants who rated from score 3 to score 5 are considered to engage with physical appearance comparison on TikTok.
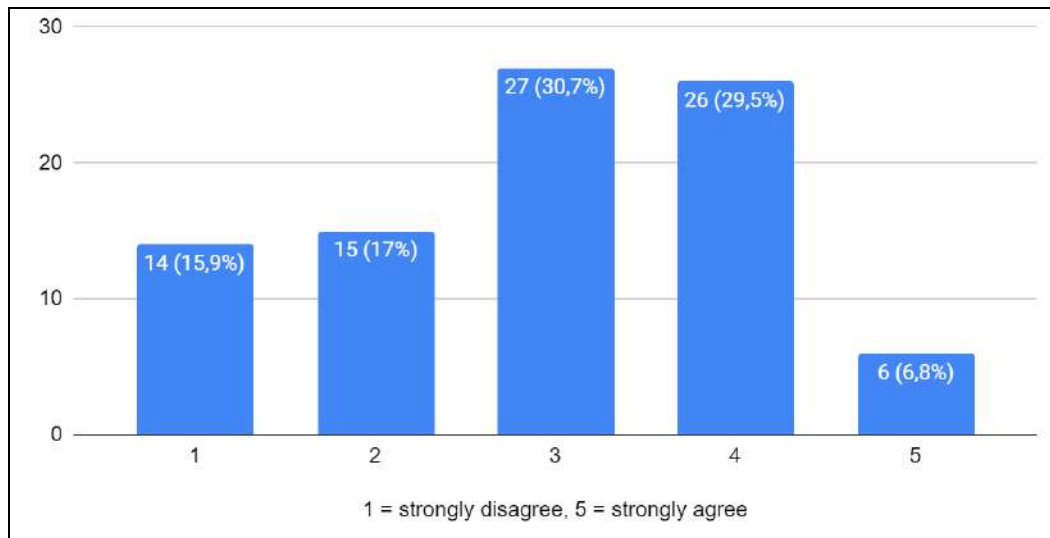
**Figure 8: Responses for "When using TikTok, I compare my physical appearance to the physical appearance of others"**

Figure 8 illustrates responses to the statement "When using TikTok, I compare my physical appearance to the physical appearance of others" on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The majority of respondents (67%) rated between score 3 and 5, indicating that they do engage in physical appearance comparison with others when using TikTok. A large percentage of 30,7% chose a neutral standing with a rating of 3. This is closely followed by 29,5% of respondents leaning towards agreement, selecting 4, indicating that they often compare themselves to others on the platform. Conversely, 17% disagreed, and 15.9% strongly disagreed with the statement by choosing 1, showing they rarely or never engage in such comparisons. A smaller portion, 6.8%, strongly agreed with the statement, indicating frequent comparisons. Overall, the responses suggest a tendency towards neutral or moderate comparison behaviour among TikTok users, with fewer individuals feeling strongly one way or the other.
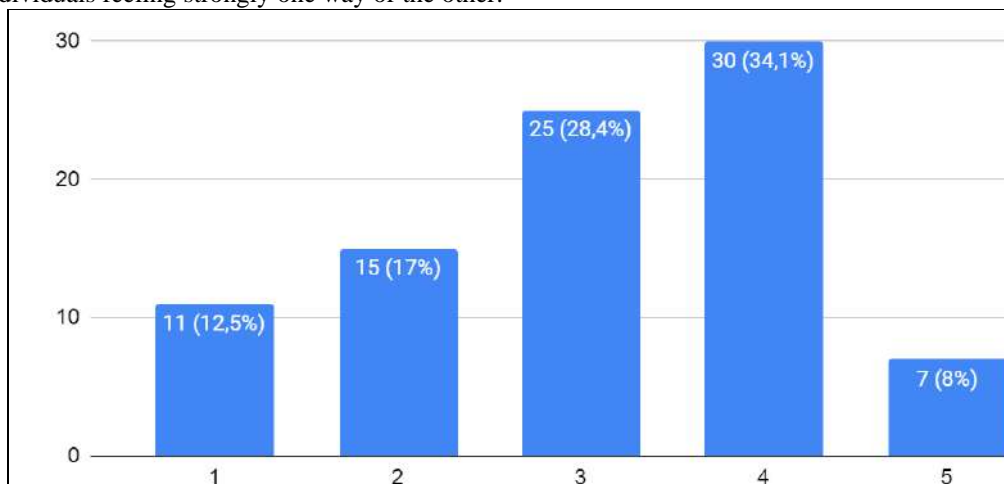


**Figure 9: responses for "When using TikTok, I sometimes compare my figure to the figures of other people"**

Figure 9 presents the responses to the statement, "When using TikTok, I sometimes compare my figure to the figures of other people," on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The most common response was 4, with 34.1% of respondents agreed that they sometimes compare their figure to others while using TikTok. Following this, 28.4% of respondents chose a neutral position with a rating of 3. On the disagreeing side, 17% selected 2, and 12.5% strongly disagreed by choosing 1, suggesting that they rarely or never make such comparisons. A smaller group, 8%, strongly agreed with the statement, indicating frequent comparisons. These results suggest that while a substantial portion of users engage in comparing their figures with others on TikTok, a significant number also remain neutral or less inclined to do so.

**Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha**

**Reliability Statistics**

| Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
|---|---|
| .871 | 2 |

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistic for Appearance _Conparison**

**Appearance_Comparison**

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1.00 | 10 | 11.4 | 11.4 | 11.4 |
| | 1.50 | 3 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 14.8 |
| | 2.00 | 10 | 11.4 | 11.4 | 26.1 |
| | 2.50 | 7 | 8.0 | 8.0 | 34.1 |
| | 3.00 | 17 | 19.3 | 19.3 | 53.4 |
| | 3.50 | 16 | 18.2 | 18.2 | 71.6 |
| | 4.00 | 18 | 20.5 | 20.5 | 92.0 |
| | 4.50 | 2 | 2.3 | 2.3 | 94.3 |
| | 5.00 | 5 | 5.7 | 5.7 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 88 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

**Descriptive Statistics**

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Appearance_Comparison | 88 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.0114 | 1.09853 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 88 | | | | |

The two statements are combined using the "Compute Variable" function in SPSS to form a general measure for Gen Z tendency to engage in appearance related comparison on TikTok. The high Cronbach's alpha of 0.871 indicates that the two items used to measure appearance comparison are reliable and can be confidently used as a combined score. The descriptive statistics of data (Mean: 3.0114) suggest that on average, the tendency to compare one's appearance to others on TikTok is neutral to slightly positive among the participants.

***4.3. Research question 3: Differences in the impact of comparison with peers versus influencers on body image among Gen Z?***

This research question aims to explore the extent to which comparison with peers and influencers on TikTok might affect Gen Z's body image. Frequency of comparison and comparison directions, either upward or downward, are examined in order to identify the difference in the impacts of comparison with each group.

*4.3.1. Appearance comparison with close peers*

Participants reported how often they compare their body to close peers on TikTok. Most rarely or never engage in such comparisons, with 31.8% never doing so and 30.7% sometimes. Additionally, 26.1% compare rarely, 9.1% often, and only 2.3% very often. These findings suggest that appearance comparisons on TikTok are not a frequent habit for most Gen Z users. (Figure 10)
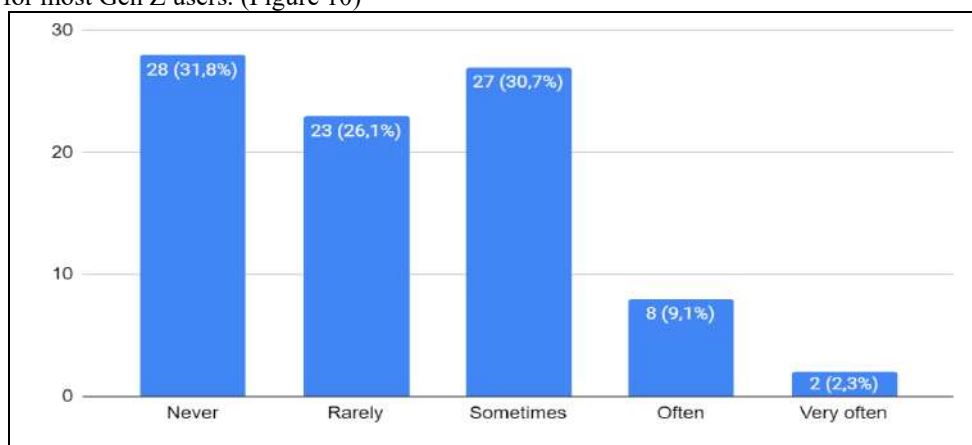


**Figure 10: Frequencey of Appearance Comparison with Close peers on Tiktok**
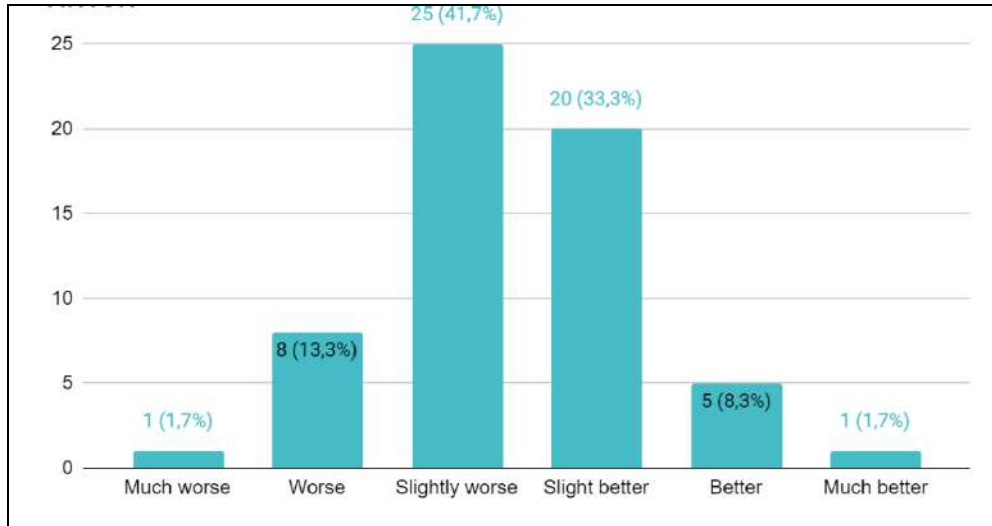
**Figure 11: Direction of Appearance Comaprison with Close peers on Tiktok**

Figure 11 shows Gen Z's appearance comparisons with close peers on TikTok. Over half (56.7%) rated themselves between 1 and 3, indicating upward comparison, with 41.7% feeling slightly worse and 13.3% perceiving themselves as worse or much worse. Meanwhile, 33.3% felt slightly better, 8.3% better, and 1.7% much better. Overall, most Gen Z participants feel slightly worse about their appearance, suggesting that upward comparisons on TikTok may contribute to a negative body image.

*4.3.2. Appearance comparison with distant peers*

Figure 12 shows how often Gen Z compares their body to distant peers on TikTok. The largest group (33%) does so sometimes, followed by 28.4% rarely and 21.6% never. Additionally, 14.8% compare often, while only 2.3% do so very often. These findings suggest that while appearance comparisons with distant peers are common, most engage in them only occasionally or infrequently.
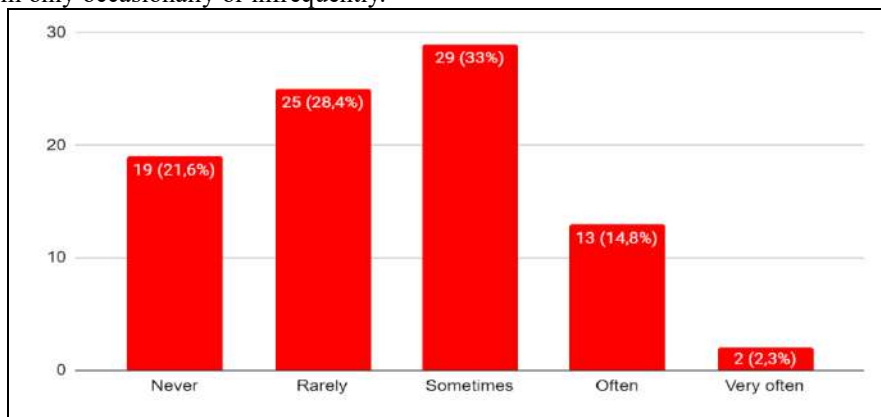


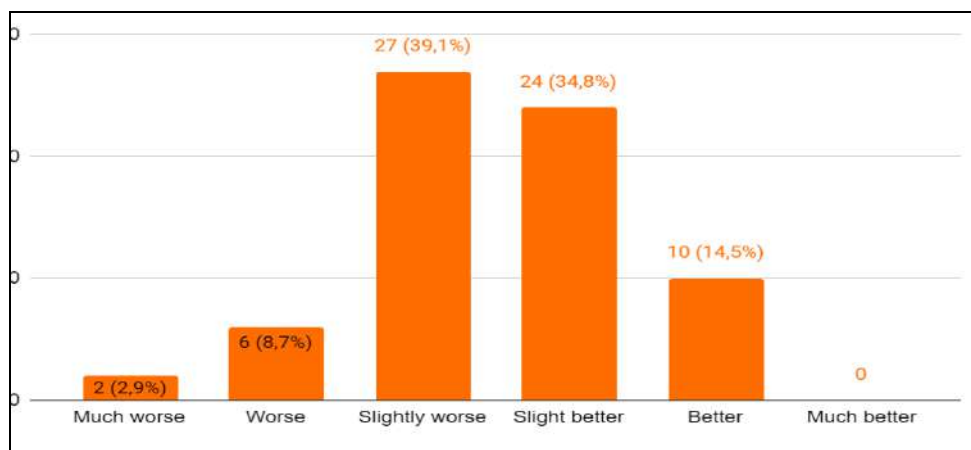**Figure 12: Frequencey of Appearance Comparison with Distant peers on Tiktok**



**Figure 13: Direction of Appearance Comparison with Distant peers on Tiktok**

Figure 13 shows how Gen Z compares their appearance to distant peers on TikTok. The largest group (39.1%) viewed their appearance as slightly worse, indicating moderate upward comparison, while 34.8% felt slightly better, reflecting moderate downward comparison. Smaller percentages saw themselves as better (14.5%) or worse (8.7%), with only 2 participants feeling much worse and none perceiving themselves as much better. These findings suggest that Gen Z is more likely to make upward comparisons, which may contribute to negative body image.

*4.3.3. Appearance comparison with TikTok influencers*

Respondents rated how often they compare their body to TikTok influencers. The most common response (36.4%) was "sometimes," followed by "rarely" (26.1%) and "never" (19.3%). Additionally, 15.9% compared often, while only 2.3% did so very often. These results suggest that occasional comparisons are common, but frequent comparisons are less so. (Figure 4)
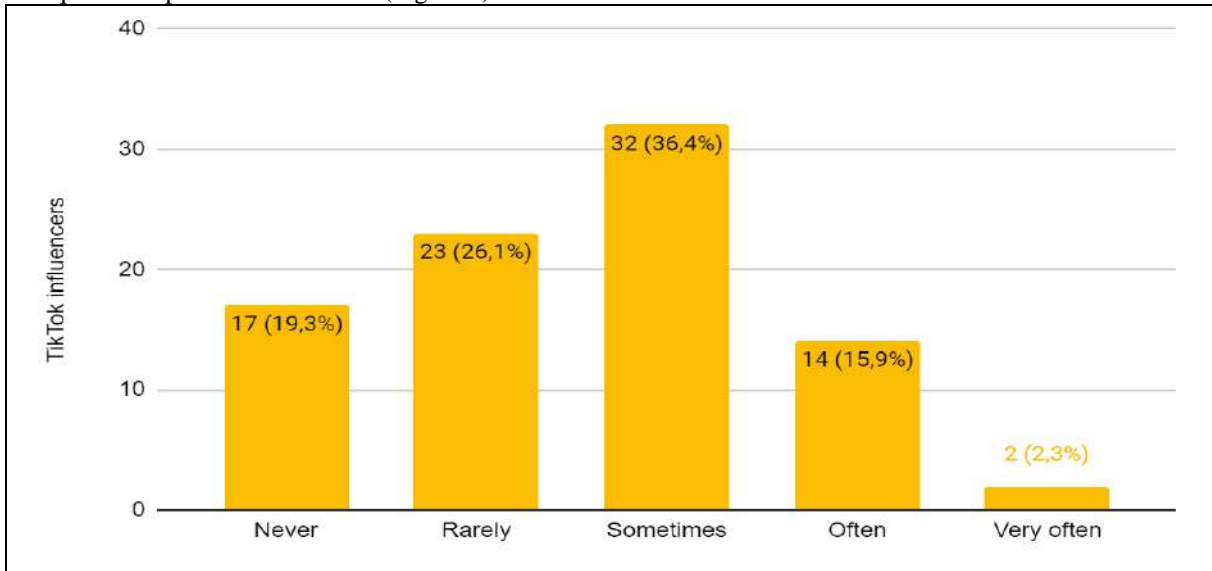


**Figure 14: Frequencey of Appearance Comparison with Tiktok influencers**
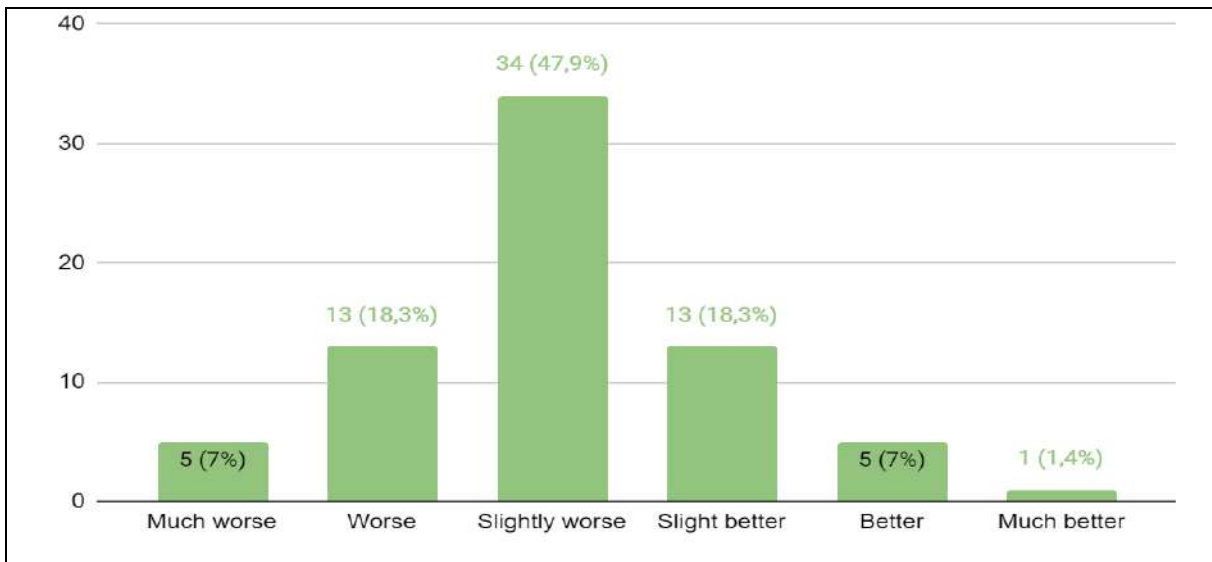


**Figure 15: Direction of Appearance Comparison with Tiktok influencers**

The chart presents the direction of appearance comparison with TikTok influencers among Gen Z participants. Approximately half of Gen Z (47,9%) reported that their body is slightly worse when compared to TikTok influencers, indicating a strong tendency to make upward appearance comparison with this target. A fewer portion of Gen Z reported engaging in downward appearance comparison with influencers on TikTok. Specifically, 13 respondents (18,3%) rated their body to be better, while 5 respondents (7%) felt that their body is much better. Only 1 respondent ranked themselves to be much better. Conversely, 25,3% of Gen Z respondents felt that their body is worse or much worse when compared to that of TikTok influencers. Overall, it can be said that upward appearance comparison with TikTok influencers is common among Gen Z respondents, with most respondents viewing their body as slightly worse than that of TikTok influencers.

*4.3.4. Differences in the impact of comparison with peers versus influencers on body image among Gen Z*
The results are further analyzed using the descriptive frequency analysis through SPSS to evaluate the difference in the impact of comparison with close peers, distant peers, and influencers on TikTok on Gen Z body image. Frequency of comparison with close peers, distant peers and TikTok influencers are coded on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = never, 5 = very often). Data is then averaged and presented in the table 5.

**Table 5**

**Descriptive Statistics**

|  | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Frequency_Closepeers | 88 | 2.2386 | 1.07205 |
| Frequency_Distantpeers | 88 | 2.4773 | 1.06109 |
| Frequency_TikTokInfluencers | 88 | 2.5568 | 1.04890 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 88 |  |  |

On a 5-point scale, the results indicate that on average, Gen Z most frequently compare their appearance with TikTok influencers (Mean: 2.5568), and slightly less frequently with distant peers (Mean: 2.4773) and close peers (Mean: 2.2386). This suggests that participants are more likely to compare their appearance to TikTok influencers than to their peers, with distant peers being compared slightly more often than close peers.

Descriptive statistics for participants' self-assessment of their bodies compared to three different groups, close peers, distant peers, and TikTok influencers are presented in the table 6.

**Table 6**

**Descriptive Statistics**

|  | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Close_peers | 60 | 3.3833 | .94046 |
| Distant_peers | 69 | 3.4928 | .94904 |
| TikTok_influencers | 71 | 3.0423 | 1.03422 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 53 |  |  |

On a 6-point scale without a midpoint, a mean below 3.5 indicates upward comparison, while above 3.5 suggests downward comparison. Gen Z engage in upward comparison with all groups, rating themselves lowest against TikTok influencers (mean: 3.0423), followed by distant peers (3.4928) and close peers (3.3833). While upward comparison occurs, its impact on body image is not extreme, as scores for distant and close peers are near neutral (3.5).

## V. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Body Image Concerns of Gen Z TikTok Users
Gen Z participants reported a generally neutral to positive body image, with little difference between genders. This contrasts with past studies showing greater female body dissatisfaction, possibly due to evolving beauty standards and body positivity movements. TikTok plays a role in shaping body ideals, particularly skin appearance, as its beauty filters create unrealistic portrayals. Body shape and weight are also major concerns, influenced by the platform's appearance-focused content. While body positivity has made progress, gendered beauty standards persist, with females concerned about weight and skin, and males about muscle tone.

### 5.2. Tendency to Engage in Appearance Comparison on TikTok
Gen Z users engage in moderate appearance comparisons on TikTok, similar to findings on Instagram and Facebook. However, TikTok's algorithm promotes both appearance-focused and entertainment-driven content, which may reduce the frequency of comparisons. Additionally, trends like fitspiration and body neutrality encourage users to focus on body function rather than aesthetics, possibly mitigating negative effects.

### 5.3. Comparison with Close Peers, Distant Peers, and Influencers
Gen Z users compare their appearance more frequently with TikTok influencers than with peers. Influencer comparisons tend to be upward, contributing to body dissatisfaction, whereas peer comparisons are less frequent and evoke more neutral feelings. While influencers shape beauty standards, Gen Z's media literacy helps them critically evaluate idealized portrayals, reducing their impact. Peer comparisons, in contrast, foster relatability and community, aligning with research suggesting their lesser impact on body dissatisfaction.

## VI. IMPLICATIONS

*6.1. Theoretical Implications*

This study expands social comparison theory by distinguishing between the effects of comparing with close peers, distant peers, and influencers. It also highlights the platform-specific role of TikTok's algorithm in shaping body image concerns.

*6.2. Practical Implications*

TikTok and similar platforms could adjust algorithms to reduce unrealistic beauty portrayals and prioritize diverse body representations. Stricter guidelines on edited or filtered content and encouraging authentic posts could help foster a healthier online environment. Users should also develop media literacy to critically assess social media content and limit negative comparisons.

## VII. LIMITATIONS

The study's small sample size (n=88) and lack of non-binary participants limit its generalizability. The majority of respondents were from Asia, omitting potential cultural variations in body image perception. Self-reported data may introduce bias, and the cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions. Future research should consider a longitudinal approach and examine the impact of specific TikTok content types on body image.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This study explored TikTok's influence on Gen Z body image, highlighting the role of social comparison. Users compare more frequently with influencers than peers, with influencer comparisons leading to greater body dissatisfaction. However, Gen Z's media awareness helps mitigate extreme effects. While body positivity movements have improved perceptions, concerns about skin, weight, and shape persist. The study underscores the need for platform changes to promote body diversity and user awareness of idealized portrayals. Strengthening media literacy can help young users develop a healthier relationship with social media and their self-image.

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