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Digital Self-Presentation and Appearance Anxiety: Evidence from TikTok Use among International Students at Chinese Universities

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the association between digital self-presentation on TikTok and appearance anxiety among international students enrolled in Chinese universities. It investigates whether appearance-based social comparison is indirectly associated with digital self-presentation and appearance anxiety and whether TikTok use intensity strengthens this direct association. This study addresses the intersection of cross-cultural adaptation, identity negotiation, and appearance-focused social media use among an international student population. Data were collected through a cross-sectional online survey of 428 international students enrolled in Chinese universities who reported using TikTok during the preceding month. Digital self-presentation, appearance-based social comparison, appearance anxiety, and TikTok use intensity were measured using 17 reflective indicators. The measurement and structural models were assessed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The analysis examined construct reliability and validity, direct associations, indirect associations through appearance-based social comparison, and interactions between digital self-presentation and TikTok use intensity. Digital self-presentation was positively associated with appearance anxiety and appearance-based social comparison. Appearance-based social comparison was positively associated with appearance anxiety and was significantly indirectly associated with digital self-presentation. TikTok use intensity strengthened the positive association between digital self-presentation and appearance anxiety. The*

measurement model met the specified criteria for internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. This study extends platform-specific body image research by focusing on international students in Chinese universities. It also supports media literacy, culturally sensitive counseling, and digital well-being interventions for this population.

Keywords: Digital self-presentation, appearance anxiety, TikTok, social comparison, international students, Chinese universities

INTRODUCTION

Short-video platforms have transformed the social experience of university students by making visibility, curation, algorithmic feedback, and public comparison central to everyday communication. TikTok is especially consequential because its design encourages rapid content circulation, repeated self-recording, remixing, and audience monitoring. Rather than functioning only as a leisure platform, TikTok also operates as a stage on which users test identities, negotiate belonging, and manage impressions through carefully edited visual performances. Recent studies suggest that appearance-centered and highly visual social media environments are strongly associated with body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, and appearance-related distress, especially when users repeatedly encounter idealized content or engage in upward comparison (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Pan et al., 2023; Seekis & Kennedy, 2023). On TikTok, beauty filters, editing routines, trends built around facial and body displays, and algorithmic amplification can intensify the perceived importance of looking attractive, polished, and socially validated. For students in transitional life stages, this may produce a psychological climate in which self-presentation is not only expressive but also evaluative and anxiety-producing.

The problem becomes more complex in the context of international students enrolled in Chinese universities. International students use social media not only for entertainment but also for information seeking, emotional connection, language support, social support, and adaptation to unfamiliar academic and cultural environments (Li & Peng, 2019; Dwumah Manu et al., 2023; Zhang & Ting, 2024; Duan et al., 2025). Their digital lives often span multiple audiences simultaneously. A single post may be viewed by classmates in China, friends and family in the home country, and broader global peer networks. This multiplies the interpretive pressure surrounding what to post, how to look, and which version of the self is safest or most desirable to display. In such circumstances, appearance can become a symbolic resource through which competence, cosmopolitanism, confidence, and social desirability are communicated. However, the same process can intensify insecurity, especially when users perceive a gap between their offline selves and the polished appearance norms that dominate social media feeds.

The literature has already established that social media use can influence body image and emotional well-being, but the mechanisms differ across platforms and user groups. Research on general social networking sites has shown that self-focused image activities, appearance-based engagement, and feedback seeking are associated with greater body dissatisfaction and self-consciousness (Fox & Vendemia, 2016; Cohen et al., 2017; Fardouly et al., 2018; Boursier et al., 2020). High visual environments also foster comparison processes that can make personal appearance seem continuously measurable against socially rewarded ideals (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Marengo et al., 2018; Tiggemann et al., 2018). Platform-specific TikTok studies indicate similar concerns. Active versus passive use shapes users' body image experiences, with social comparison emerging as an important explanatory pathway (Pan et al., 2023). Experimental evidence further shows that exposure to beauty-oriented TikTok content can increase appearance shame and anxiety, whereas exposure to body-neutral or self-compassion content may mitigate some negative outcomes (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023; Seekis & Lawrence, 2023). These studies are important, but they focus primarily on general youth samples or women rather than students navigating transnational educational lives.

The international student context introduces several additional pressures that may heighten the relevance of appearance anxiety. International students should not be treated as a culturally uniform population. Evidence from Asian and non-Asian international students in China indicates that cross-cultural adaptation differs across broad regional groups and changes with length of residence, suggesting that adjustment experiences vary according to both cultural background and stage of stay (Zhang & Ting, 2025). This heterogeneity may influence which appearance norms, peer groups, and cultural audiences become salient during online self-presentation and comparison. Students studying abroad frequently manage acculturative stress, loneliness, changes in social status, language barriers, and uncertainty about acceptance in new environments (Li & Peng, 2019; Dwumah Manu et al., 2023). Social media can ease these challenges by providing continuity and connection, but it can also extend them by increasing the frequency of social comparison and increasing the labor intensity of identity work (Zhang & Ting, 2024; Duan et al., 2025). Students who are uncertain about whether they "fit" into the host culture may become particularly attentive to appearance signals such as grooming, dress, skin presentation, fitness, or facial aesthetics. TikTok's recommendation system may then reinforce that sensitivity by repeatedly surfacing culturally coded beauty content, study-abroad lifestyle clips, "glow-up" narratives, and idealized peer performances. In this context, appearance anxiety should not be treated as a superficial concern; it may reflect deeper questions about belonging, judgment, and adequacy.

This study therefore develops and tests a model in which digital self-presentation predicts appearance anxiety both directly and indirectly through appearance-based social comparison, while TikTok use intensity moderates this direct relationship. Digital self-presentation refers to the strategic curation of one's image, videos, and online persona for anticipated audiences. Appearance-based social comparison refers to the tendency to evaluate one's face, body, style,

or attractiveness in relation to others encountered on the platform. Appearance anxiety refers to worry, self-consciousness, and tension associated with being evaluated on the basis of appearance. TikTok use intensity refers to the degree to which the platform is integrated into daily routines and emotional habits. Together, these variables capture a psychological sequence: students who invest more in curating themselves may also monitor how they rank against others, and this comparison may intensify anxiety about how they look. Intensive use may further amplify this cycle by increasing exposure, emotional investment, and dependence on platform feedback.

The study does not claim that the individual associations among self-presentation, social comparison, and appearance anxiety are unprecedented. Its contribution lies in explaining how these processes operate together within a platform-specific and cross-cultural context. First, the model distinguishes strategic self-presentation from general platform use and identifies appearance-based social comparison as an indirect pathway linking self-presentation with appearance anxiety. Second, it examines whether TikTok use intensity affects the strength of the direct association, thereby separating what students do on the platform from how deeply the platform is integrated into their daily lives. Third, it situates these relationships among international students in Chinese universities, whose self-presentation may be directed simultaneously toward home-country, host-country, and transnational audiences. In this context, appearance may communicate not only attractiveness but also perceived adaptation, belonging, and social competence. The study therefore connects platform-specific body image research with international student identity negotiation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Self-presentation

Digital self-presentation is the intentional management of how one appears to others in mediated environments. On TikTok, this includes selecting camera angles, retaking clips, applying filters, editing lighting, synchronizing with platform trends, and monitoring audience responses after posting. Such practices can be understood through impression management theory, which proposes that individuals actively shape the identities they project in anticipation of social judgment. In visual platforms, impression management becomes especially appearance laden because profile visibility depends heavily on how the body, face, voice, and style are represented. Fox and Vendemia (2016) reported that selective self-presentation through image-based social networking can strengthen comparison tendencies and intensify sensitivity to appearance evaluation. Similarly, Ridgway and Clayton (2016) reported that photo manipulation and Instagram use were linked to body-image concerns, indicating that appearance editing is not only aesthetic play but also a mechanism of self-evaluation. In a short-video environment such as TikTok, where performance is public, repeatable, and algorithmically ranked, the management of appearance can become habitual and psychologically consequential.

For international students, impression management has an added intercultural dimension. These students often present themselves to multiple social groups whose expectations may not fully overlap. A presentation style that signals confidence and social integration to host country peers may communicate something different to family members or friends in the home country. Social media therefore becomes a site of layered identity negotiation rather than simple self-expression. Recent research has indicated that international students also use social media to perform their student identities and obtain mutual social and emotional support, demonstrating that digital identity work can be an agentic resource while they study abroad (Fu, 2025). In the present context, this supportive function may coexist with evaluative pressure when appearance becomes central to self-presentation. Research on international students' social media use has indicated that online platforms are important for support, adaptation, and social self-efficacy, but they can also produce pressure to appear competent, connected, and emotionally successful during the study-abroad experience (Li & Peng, 2019; Dwumah Manu et al., 2023; Zhang & Ting, 2024; Duan et al., 2025). Digital self-presentation may thus include not only aesthetic labor but also symbolic labor: students signal that they are coping well, fitting in, traveling, socializing, and flourishing. When appearance becomes one of the easiest visible markers of this success, the line between self-presentation and self-surveillance begins to blur.

Social media may operate simultaneously as an adaptation resource and a site of identity tension. International students use digital platforms to maintain home-country relationships, develop host-country connections, and manage culturally appropriate presentations of the self. This process involves decisions about audience access, content boundaries, and the compatibility of home country and host country expectations (Yau et al., 2020). A recent integrative review similarly identifies identity management as a central motivation underlying international students' social media practices and emphasizes that these practices vary across cultural backgrounds, mobility contexts, and platform environments (Zhou & Yin, 2025). Appearance-focused self-presentation is situated within this broader process. It may serve as a visible signal of confidence and belonging while also exposing students to multiple and potentially conflicting standards of attractiveness.

Impression management theory helps explain why self-presentation may predict appearance anxiety even before comparison processes are considered. The more effort users invest in curating visibility, the more salient the possibility of negative evaluation becomes. This mechanism is consistent with body image research showing that appearance-focused online behavior can heighten self-objectification and make users feel as though they are viewing themselves through the eyes of imagined audiences (Fardouly et al., 2018; Boursier et al., 2020; Çınaroğlu & Yılmaz, 2025). On TikTok, the constant possibility of replay, comment, duet, stitch, and algorithmic recirculation can intensify this audience's consciousness. A student may begin editing a video to look "presentable" and become more anxious about whether their face, skin, body shape, or clothing meets the norms embedded in the feed. In this way, impression

management theory provides a strong conceptual foundation for treating digital self-presentation as an antecedent of appearance anxiety.

The flat nature of TikTok further sharpens the theory. Unlike earlier social media that foreground relatively static photographs or text-heavy updates, TikTok turns self-presentation into a moving, timed, and often performative sequence. Users are not simply posting images; they are staging short audiovisual narratives in which gestures, transitions, rhythm, and bodily presentation are tightly integrated. The burden of looking effortless can therefore require considerable labor. Experimental and survey-based TikTok research suggests that exposure to appearance-focused content can alter mood and self-perception in relatively short time spans (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023; Seekis & Lawrence, 2023). When users are also content producers, the burden can deepen because they are not only consuming appearance ideals but also attempting to approximate them. Therefore, impression management theory remains highly relevant, but in the TikTok environment, it must be understood as continuous, recursive, and strongly tied to the visible body.

Appearance-based Social Comparison

Appearance-based social comparison refers to evaluating one's own physical appearance against that of other people encountered in social environments. Social comparison theory predicts that individuals, especially under conditions of uncertainty, use others as reference points to judge their standing. On visual social media, this process is unusually frequent because users are exposed to curated, filtered, and socially rewarded images of peers, influencers, celebrities, and aspirational strangers. Brown and Tiggemann (2016) demonstrated that attractive peer and celebrity images on Instagram can lower mood and worsen body-image evaluations. Cohen et al. (2017) likewise reported that appearance-focused activities on Instagram and Facebook are associated with body-image concerns among young women. The same logic applies to TikTok, but the platform's rapid scroll design and endless feed may increase the density of comparison cues even further. Users encounter beauty trends, "before and after" transformations, workout content, makeup routines, fashion transitions, and study-life vlogs in quick succession, each offering highly visible standards against which the self can be measured.

TikTok intensifies comparison through both content architecture and social metrics. First, the platform algorithm often delivers clusters of visually similar content, which can create the impression that idealized appearances are normal, popular, and ubiquitous. Second, engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and follower growth transform appearance into a form of publicly measurable value. Third, editing tools reduce the distance between aspiration and simulation, making it easy for users to believe that others' polished appearances reflect stable reality rather than selective production. Pan et al. (2023) reported that social comparison processes are central to understanding how female TikTok users experience body image outcomes, especially when platform engagement is passive and comparison oriented. Similarly, Seekis and Kennedy (2023) reported

that beauty-themed TikTok content can worsen comparison-related emotional responses. These studies underscore that social comparison on TikTok is not incidental; it is built into the consumption logic of the platform.

TikTok's recommendation architecture also shapes the conditions under which self-presentation and comparison occur. Personalized content distribution exposes users to material beyond their established social networks and may repeatedly foreground similar appearance cues. Users may consequently interpret repeated exposure and differential visibility as signals of which appearances, lifestyles, and identities are socially valued. Research on algorithmized self and algorithmic personalization suggests that TikTok users incorporate perceived algorithmic responses into their self-understanding and content decisions (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Lee et al., 2022). In the present study, algorithmic curation is treated as a platform affordance rather than a measured construct. The model does not estimate an independent algorithmic association, but it recognizes that personalized visibility may increase the repetition and perceived normativity of appearance-based comparison.

The international student context provides additional reasons to expect elevated appearance-based comparison. Students living abroad often evaluate themselves not only against peers in their immediate environment but also against those in the host culture and those back home. This means that comparisons are triangulated across multiple cultural standards. Beauty ideals may differ by region, ethnicity, gender presentation, style, or social class, and international students may find themselves navigating these differences while also trying to signal adaptation and confidence. According to social comparison theory, when self-relevant domains are ambiguous, comparison becomes more likely. For a student who is unsure how to present themselves appropriately in a Chinese university context, visual cues from TikTok may become an easily available benchmark. However, those benchmarks may be unrealistic, filtered, or detached from ordinary student life. In this way, social comparison theory helps explain why the international student population may be especially susceptible to appearance-based comparison in platform-based environments.

International students should not be treated as a culturally uniform group. Students may differ in the beauty norms they encounter, the degree of racialized visibility they experience, and the relative importance of home-country, host-country, and global audiences. These differences may shape both the reference groups used for comparison and the social meaning attached to appearance. The present model estimates average associations across the full sample and does not treat cultural background or racial identity as measured moderators. Cultural heterogeneity therefore informs the interpretation of the study context, while subgroup differences remain an empirical question for research designed with adequate representation and measurement invariance.

Importantly, appearance-based social comparison is not only cognitive; it is also emotional and behavioral. Repeated comparison can produce envy, shame, dissatisfaction, body monitoring, and the urge to alter one's self-presentation. Marengo et al. (2018) argued that highly visual social media is linked to internalizing symptoms partly because body image concerns become salient

mediators. Ruan et al. (2025) and Shang and Bao (2025) also reported that social media-related comparison processes are closely tied to appearance anxiety among student populations. Therefore, in the present study, appearance-based social comparison is conceptualized as the key mediating mechanism through which digital self-presentation translates into appearance anxiety. Students who curate themselves more intensely are likely to monitor others more closely, and that comparative gaze may heighten concern about how their own appearance will be judged.

TikTok Use Intensity, Appearance Anxiety, and Use and Gratification

TikTok use intensity captures the extent to which the platform is integrated into everyday routines, emotions, and identity-related practices. It is not reducible to raw screen time alone. Intensity includes habitual checking, emotional attachment, perceived indispensability, and the degree to which platform participation becomes part of one's daily social life. Uses and gratifications perspectives are useful here because they explain why users repeatedly return to platforms that satisfy needs for entertainment, belonging, distraction, information, and self-expression. For international students, this gratification may be especially meaningful. Social media helps them sustain home-country ties, reduce isolation, build support networks, and navigate life in the host environment (Li & Peng, 2019; Dwumah Manu et al., 2023; Zhang & Ting, 2024; Duan et al., 2025). However, gratifications can come with costs. The more emotionally central a platform becomes, the more consequential its norms and feedback structures become for self-evaluation.

In the present study, appearance anxiety is the dependent variable. It refers to worry, tension, and self-consciousness arising from concern about how one's appearance may be judged by others. Unlike broad body dissatisfaction, appearance anxiety focuses on anticipated evaluation: the fear of not looking good enough, attractive enough, or socially acceptable enough. Recent research in student populations has linked social media use, upward comparison, self-objectification, and online body talk to heightened appearance anxiety (Shang & Bao, 2025; Ruan et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). These studies suggest that appearance anxiety is not only an individual vulnerability but also a socially produced response to environments in which visible appearance is constantly monitored and ranked. TikTok's emphasis on facial visibility, bodily performance, filters, and trend participation makes it a fertile environment for such evaluation concerns.

Self-objectification theory helps connect TikTok use intensity to appearance anxiety. When users repeatedly encounter and produce content that invites external evaluation, they may internalize an observer's perspective on the self. This leads to habitual body monitoring and greater distress when one's appearance seems to fall short of desired standards. Çınaroğlu and Yılmaz (2025) report that problematic social media use is linked to self-objectification and body image disturbance, whereas Ruan et al. (2025) report that self-objectification helps explain the pathway from body talk to appearance anxiety. These insights suggest

that intensive TikTok use should not be treated merely as a background control variable. Instead, it can strengthen the impact of digital self-presentation because intensive users are more exposed to appearance norms, are more likely to invest in audience feedback, and are more likely to experience the platform as a meaningful social arena.

The moderation logic of the present study follows from this reasoning. If a student uses TikTok only occasionally, self-presentation choices may matter, but they remain one small part of a broader social life. If another student uses TikTok intensely, the same self-presentation practices become embedded in a denser loop of exposure, feedback, comparison, and rumination. In this situation, impression management becomes more emotionally consequential, and any discrepancy between one's actual and ideal appearance may make escape more difficult. Limniou et al. (2025) reported that TikTok fitspiration content is associated with sex differences in self-esteem and body satisfaction, illustrating how repeated exposure to idealized content can structure self-evaluations. Similarly, appearance-related anxiety has been shown to coexist with more compulsive and emotionally invested forms of social media engagement (Boursier et al., 2020; Shang & Bao, 2025). Thus, uses and gratifications theory explains why students continue using TikTok, whereas self-objectification reasoning clarifies why intensive use may magnify the psychological costs of self-presentation.

The literature on social media and body image has moved from broad concerns about screen time to more precise questions about what users do on platforms, which kinds of content they encounter, and which mechanisms connect platform activity to psychological outcomes. Recent work suggests that platform-specific affordances matter. Highly visual, feedback-driven environments are more likely to evoke self-monitoring, social comparison, and body-related distress than less visual or less interactive environments are (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Marengo et al., 2018). TikTok deserves special attention because it combines video-based visibility, music and trend replication, algorithmic personalization, and rapid audience metrics. These features can reward polished appearance performance while simultaneously exposing users to endless comparison targets.

Moreover, international student research has shown that social media use cannot be treated only as a risk factor. It is also a key adaptation resource. Students abroad rely on digital platforms to preserve social support, develop social self-efficacy, and manage emotional transition (Li & Peng, 2019; Dwumah Manu et al., 2023; Zhang & Ting, 2024; Duan et al., 2025). This dual role matters theoretically. The same platform that offers belonging and continuity may also intensify self-evaluative pressure, particularly when appearance becomes central to impression management. The following subsections develop five hypotheses that integrate these studies into a model focused on digital self-presentation, appearance-based social comparison, appearance anxiety, and TikTok use intensity.

Research Gaps and Hypotheses

Although prior research has established associations among appearance-focused social media use, social comparison, and adverse body image outcomes, three gaps remain. First, existing studies frequently examine content exposure or general social media use rather than the strategic production and monitoring of short-video content. Second, TikTok’s personalized visibility, rapid trend circulation, and public engagement metrics create a setting in which self-presentation, comparison, and anticipated audience evaluation are closely connected. Third, body image research seldom considers international students whose online identities are negotiated across home-country, host-country, and transnational audiences. The present study addresses these gaps by testing a model linking digital self-presentation with appearance anxiety directly and indirectly through appearance-based social comparison while examining TikTok use intensity as a moderator of the direct association (Figure 1).

On the basis of the preceding theoretical arguments, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. Digital self-presentation is positively associated with appearance anxiety.
- H2. Digital self-presentation is positively associated with appearance-based social comparison.
- H3. Appearance-based social comparison is positively associated with appearance anxiety.
- H4. Appearance-based social comparison is significantly indirectly associated with digital self-presentation and appearance anxiety.
- H5. TikTok use intensity moderates the positive association between digital self-presentation and appearance anxiety such that the association is stronger at higher levels of TikTok use intensity.

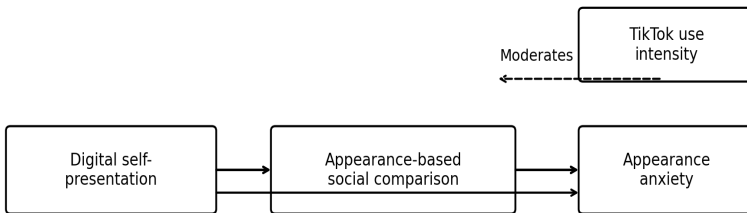


Figure 1: Theoretical Model

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey design. Data were collected between June 2025 and December 2025 from international students enrolled at universities in China. Participants were recruited through the online platform “Wenjuanxing”, and the access link was distributed across universities in China via official university portal websites. Eligibility required respondents to be at least 18 years old, be non-Chinese nationals, be enrolled in a Chinese university at the time of data collection, and have used TikTok during the preceding month. The survey information page explained the purpose of the research, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to discontinue participation. Electronic informed consent was obtained before access to the questionnaire. Ethical approval was granted by the institution prior to the investigation.

The final analytic sample comprised 428 eligible respondents aged 18 to 32 years. Of the 453 questionnaires received, 25 were excluded because of missing responses, duplicate submissions, invariant response patterns, inconsistent eligibility responses, or implausibly short completion times and because the attention check question failed, resulting in 428 valid cases. All observations analyzed in the study were obtained from questionnaires completed by participants. The latent constructs were estimated from the observed item responses.

All four constructs were specified as reflective measures and were assessed using five-point Likert response options ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree. Digital self-presentation comprised four items assessing the deliberate selection, editing, and monitoring of appearance-related TikTok content. Appearance-based social comparison comprises four items assessing the extent to which respondents evaluate their appearance relative to that of other users. Appearance anxiety comprises five items assessing worry, self-consciousness, and anticipated negative evaluation on the basis of appearance. TikTok use intensity comprised four items assessing habitual use, emotional attachment, integration into daily routines, and perceived difficulty disengaging from the platform. The wording was adapted from the cited source measures and contextualized for international students using TikTok while studying in China.

Table 1 presents the questionnaire profile. The instrument contains four reflective constructs and 17 total items. The scale sources were adapted from recent studies on selective self-presentation, social comparison, TikTok-related body image, and appearance anxiety. All the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The wording was adjusted to fit the experience of international students using TikTok while studying at Chinese universities.

Table 1: Questionnaire profile

Variable	Items	Scale source
Digital self-presentation	Four	Adapted from Fox and Vendemia (2016); Boursier et al. (2020)
Appearance-based social comparison	Four	Adapted from Fardouly et al. (2018); Pan et al. (2023)
Appearance anxiety	Five	Adapted from Ruan et al. (2025); Shang and Bao (2025)
TikTok use intensity	Four	Adapted from Li and Peng (2019); Limniou et al. (2025)

Before the main survey, the contextualized instrument was reviewed by 3 experts in this field of research to assess conceptual correspondence and wording clarity. The questionnaire was created in English and then translated to Chinese to cater to the respondents' primary language; the data were back-translated to English prior to analysis. It was subsequently pilot tested with 17 international students who met the study eligibility criteria. Feedback from the pilot assessment was used to revise the wording used in the questionnaire for improved clarity. Pilot responses were not included in the final analytic sample.

The measurement and structural models were estimated using PLS-SEMing. The reflective measurement model was assessed using outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, ρ_A , average variance extracted, and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations. Discriminant validity was evaluated primarily using the heterotrait–monotrait criterion, with the Fornell–Larcker criterion reported as a supplementary assessment. The structural model was assessed using collinearity statistics, standardized path coefficients, coefficients of determination, and f^2 effect sizes. Statistical inference was based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples, from which standard errors, t statistics, p values, and 95% confidence intervals were derived. The indirect association was evaluated from the bootstrapped product of the relevant paths. Simple slopes were estimated at one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and at one standard deviation above the mean of TikTok use intensity. The reporting procedure followed established PLS-SEM recommendations (Hair et al., 2019; Henseler et al., 2015). The out-of-sample predictive performance was assessed using PLSpredict, Q^2 predict, root mean square error, and mean absolute error were interpreted in accordance with the methods of Shmueli et al. (2019).

RESULTS

The collected sample contained 428 respondents. Female students constituted 54.7% of the sample, and male students constituted 45.3%. The oldest age groups were 21–23 years (35.7%) and 24–26 years (38.1%), indicating a concentration around the typical undergraduate-to-postgraduate transition. Master's students formed the largest academic subgroup (43.9%), followed by undergraduates (34.6%) and doctoral students (21.5%). The respondents were also distributed across regions of origin, with Asia representing 41.1% and Africa representing

26.4% of the sample, followed by Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. In terms of residence duration in China, 43.0% had been in the country for one to two years and 31.8% for three to four years. Daily TikTok engagement was substantial: 33.6% reported one to two hours of daily use, and 27.3% reported more than two hours.

Measurement Model Reliability and Convergent Validity

Table 2: Variable reliability and validity

Construct	Dijkstra-Henseler rho A	Jöreskog rho C	Cronbach's alpha	AVE
Digital self-presentation	0.8827	0.9052	0.8603	0.7047
Appearance-based social comparison	0.8952	0.9148	0.8756	0.7287
Appearance anxiety	0.8904	0.9079	0.8729	0.6636
TikTok use intensity	0.8981	0.9169	0.8792	0.7341

Table 2 presents the internal consistency and convergent validity results for the four constructs. Digital self-presentation showed strong internal consistency, with $\rho_A = 0.8827$, composite reliability = 0.9052, Cronbach's alpha = 0.8603, and $AVE = 0.7047$. Appearance-based social comparison demonstrated similarly strong measurement quality, with $\rho_A = 0.8952$, composite reliability = 0.9148, Cronbach's alpha = 0.8756, and $AVE = 0.7287$. Appearance anxiety and TikTok use intensity also exceeded conventional thresholds, with all reliability coefficients above 0.87 and AVE values above 0.66. These values indicate that the items within each construct are sufficiently homogeneous and that each construct explains more than half of the variance in its indicators. From a measurement standpoint, the model therefore satisfies standard expectations for internal consistency and convergent validity.

The comparatively high AVE values are especially useful for the present study because the constructs concern related yet conceptually distinct aspects of social media experience. Digital self-presentation and appearance-based social comparison are often intertwined in theory, while appearance anxiety and TikTok use intensity can cooccur behaviorally. Strong AVE values suggest that the indicators nevertheless capture coherent latent phenomena rather than an indistinct general distress factor. This matters for later path interpretation because mediation and moderation claims are meaningful only when the constructs are measured reliably and distinctly. The reliability and convergent validity estimates indicate that each construct was measured consistently and accounted for more than half of the variance in its indicators. These results support the interpretation of the structural associations among digital self-presentation, appearance-based social comparison, appearance anxiety, and TikTok use intensity.

Estimated Model

TikTok use intensity -> Appearance anxiety: $\beta = 0.237^{***}$
 Interaction (DSP \times TUI -> Appearance anxiety): $\beta = 0.121^{**}$

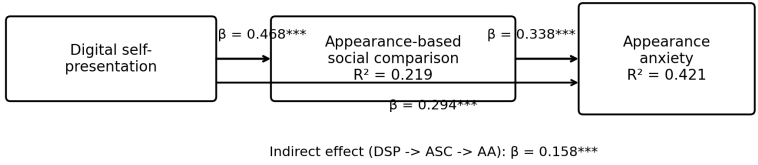


Figure 2: Estimated Model

The estimated structural model is presented in Figure 2.

Indicator loading

Table 3: Measurement item fitness statistics

Indicator	DSP	ASC	AA	TUI
DSP1	0.8497			
DSP2	0.8373			
DSP3	0.8340			
DSP4	0.8369			
ASC1		0.8880		
ASC2		0.8622		
ASC3		0.8437		
ASC4		0.8192		
AA1			0.8449	
AA2			0.8362	
AA3			0.8058	
AA4			0.8185	
AA5			0.7652	
TUI1				0.8607
TUI2				0.8699
TUI3				0.8560
TUI4				0.8402

Digital self-presentation was positively associated with appearance-based social comparison and appearance anxiety. Appearance-based social comparison was positively associated with appearance anxiety, whereas TikTok use intensity was also positively associated with appearance anxiety. The interaction effect

between digital self-presentation and TikTok use intensity was positive. The simultaneous direct and indirect associations are consistent with partial mediation, whereas the positive interaction indicates that the direct association varies according to TikTok use intensity.

Table 3 reports the indicator loadings. The digital self-presentation items ranged from 0.8340 to 0.8497, indicating that all four indicators loaded strongly on their intended construct. The appearance-based social comparison items ranged from 0.8192 to 0.8880, again suggesting robust item performance. The items for appearance anxiety loaded between 0.7652 and 0.8449, with all five items comfortably above the minimum threshold typically expected for reflective measurement. TikTok use intensity items ranged from 0.8402 to 0.8699. None of the indicators required deletion because all the loadings were strong and conceptually consistent with their respective constructs. Taken together, the outer loadings supported the retention of all 17 indicators in their specified constructs.

Discriminant Validity

Table 4: Discriminant validity (HTMT)

Construct	DSP	ASC	AA	TUI
DSP	—	0.5387	0.573	0.251
ASC	0.5387	—	0.5988	0.2328
AA	0.573	0.5988	—	0.4161
TUI	0.251	0.2328	0.4161	—

Discriminant validity was assessed using both the HTMT criterion and the Fornell–Larcker criterion. As shown in Table 4, all the HTMT values were below the conservative cutoff of 0.85. The highest off-diagonal value was 0.5730 between appearance anxiety and digital self-presentation, followed by 0.5387 between appearance-based social comparison and digital self-presentation. These values indicate that although the constructs are related in theoretically meaningful ways, they are not empirically redundant. This is an important finding because a key concern in appearance-related social media research is that multiple constructs sometimes collapse into a broad negative affect factor. The present results do not suggest such collapse.

Table 5: Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Construct	DSP	ASC	AA	TUI
DSP	0.8395	0.4677	0.4969	0.2181
ASC	0.4677	0.8536	0.5237	0.2046
AA	0.4969	0.5237	0.8146	0.3656
TUI	0.2181	0.2046	0.3656	0.8568

Table 5 provides the Fornell–Larcker matrix. In each case, the square root of the AVE on the diagonal exceeds the corresponding interconstruct correlations in the same row and column. For example, the square root of the AVE for digital self-presentation was 0.8395, which was greater than its correlations with appearance-based social comparison (0.4677), appearance anxiety (0.4969), and

TikTok use intensity (0.2181). The same pattern held for appearance-based social comparison, appearance anxiety, and TikTok use intensity. This second discriminant validity check supports the HTMT conclusion and reinforces confidence that the proposed structural paths can be interpreted as relationships among distinct constructs rather than artifacts of measurement overlap.

Structural Model Estimates

Table 6: Variable effects overview

Effect	Beta	Indirect effects	Total effect	Cohen's f ²
Digital self-presentation -> Appearance-based social comparison	0.4677		0.4677	0.2801
Digital self-presentation -> Appearance anxiety	0.2944	0.1579	0.4523	0.1142
Appearance-based social comparison -> Appearance anxiety	0.3379		0.3379	0.1517
TikTok use intensity -> Appearance anxiety	0.2367		0.2367	0.0908
Digital self-presentation × TikTok use intensity -> Appearance anxiety	0.1206		0.1206	0.0253

Table 6 summarizes the standardized path coefficients, indirect associations, total associations, and f² values. Digital self-presentation was positively associated with appearance-based social comparison, with $\beta = .468$ and $f^2 = .280$. In the appearance anxiety model, digital self-presentation was directly associated ($\beta=.294$) and indirectly associated ($\beta=.158$) through appearance-based social comparison, yielding a total association of $\beta=.452$. Appearance-based social comparison was positively associated with appearance anxiety, with $\beta=0.338$ and $f^2=0.152$. TikTok use intensity was also positively associated with appearance anxiety, with $\beta=0.237$ and $f^2=0.091$. The interaction effect between digital self-presentation and TikTok use intensity was positive, with $\beta=.121$ and $f^2=.025$. The interaction was weaker than the principal structural associations and should be interpreted accordingly.

Explanatory and Predictive Performance

Table 7: R-square statistics and Model Goodness of Fit Statistics

Construct	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Q ² predict	RMSE	MAE
Appearance-based social comparison	0.2188	0.2170	0.1362	0.8880	0.7268
Appearance anxiety	0.4212	0.4157	0.2888	0.8090	0.6846

The model accounted for 21.88% of the variance in appearance-based social comparison. Digital self-presentation, appearance-based social comparison, TikTok use intensity, and the interaction term accounted for 42.12% of the variance in appearance anxiety, with an adjusted R² of 0.416. These values indicate the proportion of variance accounted for by the specified model and should not be interpreted as evidence of causal explanation.

Both endogenous constructs showed positive Q²predict values under the cross-validation procedure described in the Methodology section. For appearance anxiety, the root mean square error was 0.809, and the mean absolute error was 0.685. These values should be interpreted relative to the specified benchmark model rather than as stand-alone evidence of acceptable prediction.

Structural Model for Path Analysis

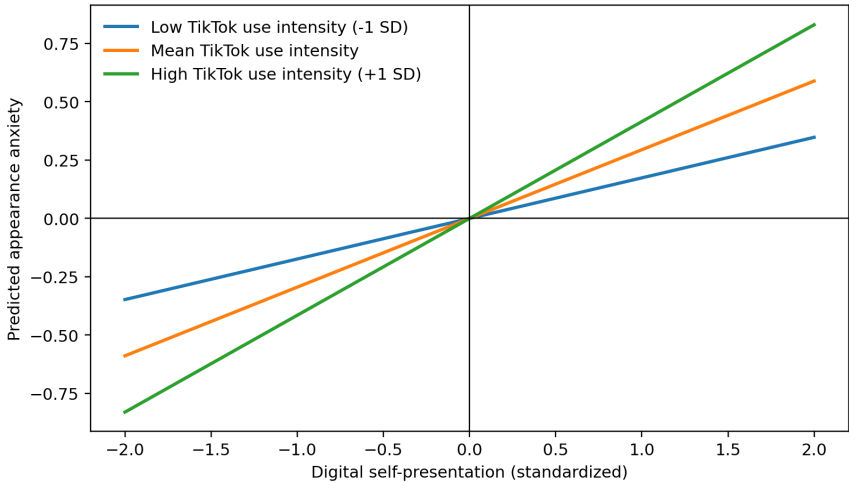


Figure 3: Moderating Effect of TikTok Use Intensity

The simple slopes for the association between digital self-presentation and appearance anxiety are shown in Figure 3. At one standard deviation below the mean of TikTok use intensity, the standardized slope was .174. At the mean, the slope was .294. At one standard deviation above the mean, the slope was .415. The progressively stronger slopes indicate that the positive association between

digital self-presentation and appearance anxiety was stronger among respondents reporting higher TikTok use intensity.

Hypothesis Tests

Table 8: Path Analysis

Hypothesis	Original Sample	STDEV	T Statistics	P Values
H1: Digital self-presentation significantly influences appearance anxiety	0.294	0.042	6.951	<0.001
H2: Digital self-presentation significantly influences appearance-based social comparison	0.468	0.043	10.923	<0.001
H3: Appearance-based social comparison significantly influences appearance anxiety	0.338	0.042	8.012	<0.001
H4: Appearance-based social comparison significantly mediates the relationship between digital self-presentation and appearance anxiety	0.158	0.024	6.579	<0.001
H5: TikTok use intensity significantly moderates the relationship between digital self-presentation and appearance anxiety	0.121	0.037	3.268	0.001

Note: Bootstrapped confidence interval: 95%

Table 8 reports the results of the hypothesis tests. H1 was supported because digital self-presentation was positively associated with appearance anxiety, with $\beta=0.294$, $t=6.951$, and $p<0.001$. H2 was supported because digital self-presentation was positively associated with appearance-based social comparison, with $\beta=0.468$, $t=10.923$, and $p<0.001$. H3 was supported because appearance-based social comparison was positively associated with appearance anxiety, with $\beta=0.338$, $t=8.012$, and $p<0.001$. H4 was supported by a significant indirect association of $\beta=.158$, with a bootstrap standard error of $.024$, $t=6.579$, and $p<.001$. H5 was supported because the interaction between digital self-presentation and TikTok use intensity was significant, with $\beta=0.121$, $t=3.268$, and $p=0.001$.

DISCUSSION

The results revealed that digital self-presentation was positively related to appearance-based social comparison and appearance anxiety and that appearance-based social comparison was positively related to appearance anxiety. This is in line with impressions management and social comparison perspectives. Strategic

curation invites users' gaze to examine how they look from the point of view of a targeted audience, and visible peers and creators offer a set of criteria for the users to consider. This study builds on existing work by identifying the processes involved in the context of TikTok use by international students instead of conceptualizing visual social media use as monolithic behavior (Fox & Vendemia, 2016; Pan et al., 2023).

The significant indirect association suggests that digital self-presentation is indirectly linked to appearance anxiety to a certain degree through appearance-based social comparison. The other direct link is in line with the notion of audience awareness, self-monitoring and fear of negative evaluation. Furthermore, the intensity of TikTok usage is positively correlated with the relationship between self-presentation and appearance anxiety. These findings do not prove that excessive TikTok usage leads to appearance anxiety. Instead, it suggests that as the platform is more salient in everyday life and feelings, the use of self-presentational practices is more related to appearance-related concern.

These associations are given an intercultural interpretation in the international student context. Going abroad, students can appear before the officials of their country, the officials of the country where they are going, and others, representing even the trans national community, with different expectations. Appearance can thus serve as a visual indicator of confidence, adaptation and belonging and attractiveness. Studies on acculturation conducted through social media suggest that audience, boundary and culturally appropriate content are the elements involved in identity management (Yau et al., 2020), and recent international student research suggests that identity management is among the key elements of digital practice (Zhou & Yin, 2025). However, in the present study, identity negotiation and acculturative stress were not directly measured. Notably, they should not be interpreted as empirically tested mechanisms that mediate the effects of the tested variables; rather, they should be regarded as theoretically informed characteristics of the study context.

The results need to be interpreted in an affordance-sensitized manner. TikTok's personalized content space can repeatedly expose users to similar appearance cues and spread content beyond the establishment of social networks. This repetition can lead to the perception that certain beauty ideals are common, valued, and relatable. Research on algorithmized self and algorithmic personalization suggests that users inculcate the perceived algorithmic response in their self-understanding and content decision-making (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Lee et al., 2022). Algorithm exposure was not measured directly; thus, the independent association of algorithmic exposure with appearance anxiety cannot be estimated. Instead, it sees algorithmic visibility as an integral part of the platform context that shapes algorithmic self-presentation and comparison.

The results do not necessarily indicate that TikTok is entirely bad. Social media can be helpful for international students' connection, adaptation, and subjective well-being, and content on body neutrality or self-compassion may have distinct effects on experiencing subjective well-being as opposed to beauty-focused content (Dwumah Manu et al., 2023; Duan et al., 2025; Seekis & Lawrence, 2023). Any practical action should therefore be geared toward patterns

of use and not toward abstinence. There are opportunities for universities and counselors to integrate critical reflection of curated content, upward comparison, audience metrics, and self-worth contingent upon appearance into digital wellbeing and international student support. Such programs must be culturally sensitive and not presume shared norms of appearance or platforms for international students.

First, the cross-sectional design cannot be used to determine a sequential or cause-and-effect relationship. While the hypothesized model is theoretically specified, appearance anxiety could also lead to greater monitoring of appearance and/or greater feedback seeking. Longitudinal and experience-sampling designs are needed to determine whether changes in digital self-presentation precede changes in comparison and appearance anxiety.

Second, all the constructs were measured by a self-report method. Recall that error, social desirability, and shared measurement context may, therefore, influence the findings. Future research should integrate surveys with ethically gathered behavioral information, e.g., from platform use records, posting frequency or diary reports associated with a viewing/posting episode.

Third, the selection of the sample is not representative, as it was performed on a purposive basis, and they were all volunteers. International students vary in terms of nationality, race/ethnicity, gender identity, language skills, length of stay and previous experience abroad. The study design was to estimate the hypothesized associations for the entire sample. No post hoc tests were performed between large cultural or racial groups, as it is not defensible to make multigroup inferences unless there are reasonable sample sizes within each group and evidence of measurement invariance. The reported coefficients should thus be viewed as average associations; that is, there are no uniform relationships associated with the culture. Future studies should apply stratified recruitment and invariance testing to explore the possibility of cultural and identity group differences with the model.

Fourth, the study did not differentiate beauty content, fitness content, body-neutral content, or the other categories of content found on TikTok users' pages. It also did not attempt to measure patterns of recommendation or algorithmic exposure. The results, therefore, cannot be analyzed to determine the effects of specific content or personalization recommendation algorithms. In the future, it would be beneficial to look at the intensity of platform use in addition to content exposure and to compare relevant reference groups.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the associations among digital self-presentation, appearance-based social comparison, TikTok use intensity, and appearance anxiety among international students enrolled in Chinese universities. Digital self-presentation was positively associated with appearance anxiety both directly and indirectly through appearance-based social comparison. The direct association was also stronger at higher levels of TikTok use intensity. These findings are consistent with a process in which strategic self-curation, appearance comparison,

and platform integration are related to appearance-related concern. This study contributes by connecting platform-specific body image processes with the identity and adaptation context of international student life. Because the evidence is cross-sectional, the results should be interpreted as theoretically ordered associations rather than causal effects. Future research should examine temporal direction, culturally specific comparison standards, and the role of content and algorithmic exposure.

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In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:

- None
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- Some sections, with extensive editing
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

AI tools were used only for grammar proofreading, language clarity, and minor sentence-level refinement. No AI tools were used to generate research content, data, analysis, references, findings, interpretations, or conclusions. The authors carefully reviewed and approved the final manuscript and take full responsibility for its accuracy, originality, and integrity.

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