

**Social comparison on “FitTok”: A mixed-method study exploring the effects of fitspiration TikTok content on young adults’ body image and mental health**

Student Name: Bente de Bruijn  
Student Number: 660409

Supervisor: dr. Selma Toktas

Master Media Studies - Digitalisation, Surveillance & Societies  
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication  
Erasmus University Rotterdam

Master's Thesis  
*June 2024*

Word Count: 20,687

Social comparison on “FitTok”: A mixed-method study exploring the effects of fitspiration  
TikTok content on young adults’ body image and mental health

**ABSTRACT**

TikTok has become one of today’s most popular social media platforms, especially among Gen Z. As a subcategory of TikTok content, FitTok content is the TikTok equivalent of Instagram’s fitspiration content. While previous research suggesting the detrimental effects of social media and fitspiration consumption on body image and mental health is focused mainly on Facebook and Instagram, the current study explored the effects of fitspiration content on TikTok. Hence, the research was structured around the following central research question: *“How does regular exposure to FitTok’s idealized body and life standards affect young adults’ body image and mental health?”* Central to the operationalization of this research question were Festinger’s (1954) theory of social comparison and Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of practice based on the concepts of habitus and capital – two frameworks on the impact of social influences on individuals’ behaviors. To explore the relationship between FitTok consumption, social comparison, habitus and capital, and body image and mental health, a mixed-method study was conducted, combining an online survey ( $N = 150$ ) and semi-structured in-depth interviews ( $N = 8$ ). The sample consisted of young adult FitTok consumers (aged 18-25). By employing a convergent research design, the data of both methods were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and ultimately interpreted together. While no mediation effect for negative social comparison on the relationship between FitTok consumption and body image and mental health was found, a statistical analysis of the survey data suggested the importance of negative social comparison as a control variable in the relationship under examination. The interview data also revealed a general recognition of negative social comparison caused by FitTok content. However, for most of the interviewees, these comparisons did not negatively affect their body image and/or mental health. Rather, the interviewees emphasized the presence of positive social comparisons, contributing to improved mood. The demographic factors of gender, age (habitus), and education level (capital) were not found to impact the effect of FitTok consumption on body image and mental health. As these findings indicate, the ideals portrayed in FitTok content spark feelings of both negative and positive social comparison, thereby affecting young adults’ body image and mental health to different extents.

**KEYWORDS:** TikTok, FitTok, Social Comparison, Body Image, Mental Health

# Table of contents

- 1. Introduction ..... 1**
  - 1.1. Research topic and research question ..... 1
  - 1.2. Societal and academic relevance ..... 3
  - 1.3. Thesis structure ..... 4
  
- 2. Theoretical framework ..... 5**
  - 2.1.1. #Fitspiration ..... 5
  - 2.2. The effects of social media use on body image and mental health..... 7
  - 2.3. Bourdieu’s theory of practice..... 11
  - 2.4. Festinger and Bourdieu in the online realm ..... 15
  - 2.5. Conceptual model ..... 16
  
- 3. Research design ..... 18**
  - 3.1. Method description and justification ..... 18
  - 3.2. Sampling ..... 19
  - 3.3. Operationalization..... 20
  - 3.4. Data collection ..... 24
  - 3.5. Data analysis ..... 25
  - 3.6. Reliability and validity..... 26
  
- 4. Results..... 30**
  - 4.1. Assumption check: normality ..... 30
  - 4.3. Young adults’ FitTok consumption ..... 34
  - 4.4. The unrealistic FitTok ideal ..... 39
  - 4.5. The (mediating) effect of social comparison caused by the FitTok ideal..... 40
  - 4.6. The habitus, capital, FitTok consumption, and body image and mental health..... 48
  
- 5. Discussion ..... 50**
  - 5.1. Theoretical implications..... 51
  - 5.2. Societal implications ..... 54
  - 5.3. Strengths and limitations..... 56
  - 5.4. Future directions ..... 57
  
- 6. References ..... 58**
  
- Appendix A. Survey ..... 71**
  
- Appendix B. Interview topic list..... 79**

<b>Appendix C. Descriptive statistics: survey respondents .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Appendix D. Descriptive statistics: interviewees .....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Appendix E. Content analysis .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Appendix F. Code book.....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Appendix G. Interview memos.....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Appendix H. Normality check.....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Appendix I. Two-Way ANOVA means and standard deviations tables .....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Appendix J. Additional findings: The effects of FitTok categories .....</b>	<b>104</b>

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Research topic and research question

TikTok has quickly become one of the most widely used social media platforms (SMPs) worldwide in recent years. In 2022, it even managed to become the most downloaded app of the year, thereby dethroning Instagram (Koetsier, 2023). Despite several serious accusations of user privacy invasion (e.g. Van der Linden, 2022; Kasteleijn, 2023; uOttawa, n.d.; Zulkifli, 2022, p. 79; Touma, 2022), the number of monthly active TikTok users is still growing (Iqbal, 2023). What the main driving force behind the SMP's immense popularity is, however, is strongly debated. Whereas many argue that it is the outstandingly advanced algorithm behind the so-called For You Page (i.e. the infinite stream of videos, entered automatically when opening the app), others believe its strength lies in the "full-screen diary[-like]" layout of the app, specifically designed to be viewed on the smartphone (Hern, 2022; Kim, 2022). Today, TikTok is increasingly viewed as a search engine, used to find the tastiest recipes, the latest music, and the most creative Do It Yourself projects, especially by Gen Z (Huang, 2022; Adobe Express, 2024). Prabhakar Raghavan, Senior Vice President at Google, said about this at a conference in 2022: "In our research, almost 40% of young people, when they're looking for a place to eat dinner, don't go to Google Maps or Search anymore. They go to TikTok or Instagram" (Raghavan, 2022). This rapid growth and search engine-like functioning add to the necessity of exploring how individuals, and Gen Z in particular, use TikTok and how they experience the app and its content. Importantly, TikTok is also increasingly employed as a source of information and inspiration for a healthier lifestyle, which is facilitated by physical health-related TikToks posted under hashtags such as #FitTok.

With a current number of 4,2 million TikToks posted under the hashtag, #FitTok can be considered one of the leading hashtags for posting physical health-related content such as workout routines and healthy recipes on TikTok (TikTok, n.d.; Dukoff & Williams, 2020). With its slogan "Whether you're hitting the gym or hitting the trail, work it out with #FitTok", TikTok promotes FitTok content as a useful guide for users who want to become physically healthier (TikTok, n.d.). However, as previous research of similar content on Instagram – often posted under hashtags such as #fitspiration and #fitspo – suggests, online fitness content does not necessarily contribute to a healthier life as the SMPs often claim (Jerónimo & Carraça, 2022, p. 3017). To begin, fitspiration content can be created and posted by anyone, not only by professionals. As a result, false and potentially even harmful content is easily

spread (Friedman, 2023). In addition, as previous studies suggest, fitspiration content can negatively affect individuals' mental well-being. For example, the content has been found to have the potential to lead to “negative mood, body dissatisfaction, and lower appearance self-esteem” in women as a result of comparing their own appearance to that of body images displayed in the content (Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015, p. 65; Jerónimo & Carraça, 2022, p. 3018). Moreover, the content has been found to negatively influence women's perceived sexual attractiveness (Fioravanti, 2021, p. 746).

At the origin of these detrimental effects are the beauty ideals established by the media and a tendency to compare the self to those ideals (e.g. Grabe et al., 2008, p. 460; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015, p. 65; Jerónimo & Carraça, 2022, p. 3018 ). Before the popularization of social media, the mass media used to be the main broadcaster of the thin ideal (Grabe et al., 2008, p. 460). This beauty ideal was imposed, mainly on women, through the inclusion of predominantly thin television actresses and movie stars, and thin models in magazines (Grabe et al., 2008, p. 460). SMPs have now largely taken over this role, allowing every smartphone owner to contribute to the establishment and reinforcement of today's beauty ideals, which are largely reliant on the “thin and toned” female body and the muscular male body (Benton & Karazsia, 2015, p. 22; Fatt et al., 2019, p. 1322). As previous studies suggest, the detrimental effects of such ideals are largely caused by social comparison; the comparison of the self to others (Festinger, 1954, pp. 118-119). As one of the current study's main objectives, this phenomenon will be elaborately discussed. While a majority of the research on the effects of SMPs on body image and mental health has a female focus, several studies suggest potential negative effects of SMP content, and fitspiration content in particular, on male body image and mental health as well (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016, p. 108; Fioravanti et al., 2022, pp. 3021-3029). This study will also take into account demographic factors such as gender. Namely, to further examine how demographic factors such as gender, but also age, and education level might affect the impact of fitspiration content, the current study will also focus on the role of the individual's habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101) in the effect of FitTok consumption on the sample.

Findings such as the ones previously discussed spark questions about the possible effects of the consumption of FitTok content on the consumer's body image and mental health. Because a majority of TikTok's users consist of Gen Zers (individuals born in 1997-2012), the current study will focus on (part of) this generation (Lebow, 2023). Namely, the population under examination is that of young adults, or individuals aged 18-25. In line with this, the remainder of this study will be structured around the following research question and

sub-questions:

**Research question:** How does regular exposure to FitTok’s idealized body and life standards affect young adults’ body image and mental health?

**Sub-question 1:** How are young adults using TikTok as a source of information, also in comparison to other popular social media platforms and Google?

**Sub-question 2:** How does social comparison affect the relationship between young adults’ FitTok consumption and body image and mental health?

**Sub-question 3:** How do one’s habitus and capital affect the impact of their FitTok consumption on their body image and mental health?

To answer the sub-questions and, ultimately, the research question, quantitative and qualitative research methods were combined. On the one hand, an online survey was used to assess the general nature and larger scope of the issue. On the other hand, eight semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to understand the issue in more depth. Eventually, the researcher was able to answer the research question by combining the survey and interview findings and drawing conclusions from this. The entire study was approached from an interdisciplinary perspective by combining psychology and media studies. A holistic understanding of the results, especially those presented in the fourth chapter of this thesis enabled this study to contribute to existing academic studies on the psychological effects of social media.

## **1.2. Societal and academic relevance**

As TikTok is becoming increasingly popular not only as an online space for entertainment and maintaining social relationships but also as a source of information, there is a growing societal relevance of expanding our knowledge about and understanding of the SMP. While research on the app’s technical features (e.g. the algorithmic working) is necessary, an exploration of the psychological implications of using the app is equally important. There is a growing need for gaining insight into how individuals – Gen Z in particular – use and experience the content they are exposing themselves to on an often daily base. Such insights are important and might have implications not only for mental health-related instances but also for brands who consider employing TikTok for their marketing campaigns, for example. For TikTok users themselves as well, gaining knowledge about how the platform they are using could affect their body image and mental health might also be interesting, and can maybe even encourage them to change their watching behaviors on

TikTok.

At the moment, a majority of the recent research assessing the psychological consequences of SMP use and fitspiration content in particular is focused on Instagram. However, as several of these Instagram-focused studies argue, the app's visual character plays a central role in causing the determinantal effects of fitspiration content for individuals (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015, p. 454; Ahrens et al., 2022, p. 2). As a video platform, TikTok can also be considered inherently visual – arguably even more so than Instagram. Because of this similar feature, it might be expected that detrimental effects of the same kind are expected to be caused by FitTok content. Hence, with the current study, the researcher attempted to contribute to filling the gap in academic literature on TikTok in general, and on the effects of FitTok content on young adults in particular.

### **1.3. Thesis structure**

Each of the following chapters functions as a building block for the assessment of the study's research question by discussing the underlying theories, the methodological base, the results of the statistical and qualitative analyses, and the latter's implications. Specifically, in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework underlying both the formulation of the research question and sub-questions and the operationalization of the quantitative as well as the qualitative studies, will be discussed. This includes – but is not limited to – Festinger's (1954) theory on social comparison (pp. 118-119) and Bourdieu's (1984) framework on the habitus and capital (p. 101), which function as the study's pillars. The third chapter, then, provides a more detailed justification for choosing a mixed-method study combining the survey with the semi-structured in-depth interview. It also contains a detailed description of the operationalization of each of the variables employed to explore the research question. Finally, this chapter accommodates the assessment of the reliability and validity of the quantitative and qualitative study. Chapter 4 consists of an analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data, structured along the main themes identified during a cross-check of both data sets. This allowed for a thorough understanding of the issue at hand. Finally, in Chapter 5, an answer to the main research question is formulated, followed by a discussion of each of the study's main findings' academic and societal implications. This chapter also discusses the study's limitations and future directions.



## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1.1. #Fitspiration

Throughout modern history, thinness has been considered a central aspect of feminine beauty (Petty, 2021; Ahrens et al., 2022, p. 2). However, recently the beauty ideal has been shifting towards a body that is "both thin and toned, or athletic" and it has become even more difficult to live up to (Benton & Karazsia, 2015, p. 22; Thompson, 2004, p. 293). An important driving force behind this change reveals itself in social media content. SMPs have become common sources of messages and images "intended to inspire people to live healthy and fit lifestyles through motivating exercise- and diet-related images and text" (Alberga et al., 2018, p. 2; Boepple et al., 2016, p. 133). While the mass media used to be the main source for imposing beauty ideals on people, social media has intensified this process (Grabe et al., 2008, p. 460; Pedersen, 2023). Trends like #thinspiration and #fitspiration, but also #FitTok are clear demonstrations of this that affect both women and men (Ahrens et al., 2022, p. 2). Fitspiration can be viewed as a response to "thinspiration": the appearance-focused trend that promotes the thin body (Liu, 2023). Thinspiration was quickly recognized to be harmful to both physical and mental health (Rodgers et al., 2015, pp. 6-7), and fitspiration was considered the "improved" version of the unhealthy trend (Liu, 2023). However, Renee Engeln, a psychology professor at Northwestern University, argues that "much of what could be called 'fitfluencer' content is just 'thin-spiration' in disguise" (Friedman, 2023). Whereas thinspiration was especially popular among women, fitspiration content is created and consumed by women as well as men, as many FitTok videos also suggest (Hogue et al., 2023, p. 1). The dominating male body ideal in fitspiration is mainly described by the literature as the "muscular ideal" (Fatt et al., 2019, p. 1322).

### 2.1.2. *Fitspiration on the different SMPs*

Despite its relatively recent rise, TikTok already has approximately 1,58 million users, thereby placing itself fifth in the list of the world's most popular SMPs of 2024, thereby following Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp (Dixon, 2024). As previous research on fitspiration content reveals, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are considered the main sources of the content, mainly because of the platforms' highly visual character (e.g. Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019, pp. 936-937; Ahrens et al., 2022, p. 2). Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of how young adults view TikTok as a source of fitspiration content in comparison to similar SMPs (sub-question 1), their use of TikTok in comparison to that of

YouTube and Instagram will be examined. Moreover, as a 2024 study by Adobe Express suggests, Gen Z is increasingly resorting to TikTok instead of Google. For 2 in 5 Americans, Google is replaced by TikTok, and 1 in 10 Gen Zers prefer TikTok over Google as their search engine (Adobe Express, 2024). Similar suggestions are made by Huang (2022) in her New York Times article titled “For Gen Z, TikTok is the new search engine”, and by Google’s Senior Vice President Raghavan (2022), who reported the growing importance of TikTok for “young individuals” looking for a “place to eat dinner”, thereby replacing Google. Hence, besides YouTube and Instagram, Google will also be considered in this respect. In this way, young adults’ use of SMPs vs. an official search engine as information sources is also considered.

Since fitspiration is a form of content that is directly related to physical health, specialists are increasingly emphasizing the significance of doing credential checks on fitfluencers before adopting any of their tips (Friedman, 2023). According to Dr. Bryant (president and chief science officer of the American Council on Exercise), one should “look for references to their credentials and experiences” and “be wary of fitfluencers who offer advice outside their expertise” (Friedman, 2023). How young adult consumers of FitTok content handle this issue will also be examined in the current study.

### ***2.1.3. Trends on FitTok***

As a form of fitspiration content, FitTok videos are not merely contributing to the establishment and reinforcement of the beauty ideal of the athletic and muscular body. As Boepple et al. (2016) justly argue, fitspiration content represents entire lifestyles to which being physically healthy is central (p. 133). These lifestyles include working out regularly, eating healthy, wearing certain gym wear, and using supplements to optimize one’s results. An analysis of 1,000 TikTok videos related to nutrition and weight loss revealed that a majority of the content contained messages of weight loss glorification and “the positioning of food to achieve health and thinness” (Minadeo & Pope, 2022, p. 9).

New workout trends such as the “shy girl workout”, “hot girl walk”, or “ab-shred” challenges constantly appear on TikTok, seemingly all focused on obtaining the ideal body (Radzicki McManus, 2024; Davidson, 2022). “Dry-scooping” is an example of a supplement-related trend that used to circulate on TikTok but is now banned from the platform due to its potential dangers. It entails taking in a scoop of pre-workout powder without any water or other liquid (Radzicki McManus, 2021; France, 2021). Many fitness content creators on TikTok make videos about the supplements they use and recommend to their users. For

example, a current supplement trend on TikTok is that of creatine. Taking a scoop before your workout is argued to increase your energy and help with muscle repair (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). When searching for hashtags such as #gymwear and #fitnessapparel on TikTok, thousands of videos of individuals – mostly women – showing their gym outfits appear.

Another trend on FitTok – and TikTok more generally – is that of sponsored content. Similar to Instagram, TikTok is increasingly used as a marketing platform (Haenlein et al., 2020, p 6). Influencers are posting sponsored videos, promoting their new “favorite” supplement or gym wear brand, and offering their followers discount codes, thereby also contributing to the establishment of the latest trends (Haenlein et al., 2020, pp. 6; 13).

As these trends suggest, FitTok is about the constant improvement of the self; about working hard to obtain the “perfect” body and lifestyle. Although human beings have been assessing and improving themselves by comparing themselves to others for centuries, they are now increasingly exposed to the fit body ideal on social media. As the following paragraphs reveal, this can cause detrimental effects in several dimensions.

## **2.2. The effects of social media use on body image and mental health**

Social media use is strongly related to issues of body image (BI) and mental health (MH) such as body weight dissatisfaction and depression. As findings by Thai et al. (2023) illustrate, lowering social media use can directly lead to an improvement in BI in young adults, thereby suggesting that higher SMP use contributes to worse BI (p. 1). Additionally, Davis and Goldfield (2024) found that reducing SMP use can contribute to reduced depression, anxiety, and FoMo symptoms (p. 1). In line with this, the following hypotheses are formulated:

*H1: Young adults who have a higher FitTok consumption have a lower body image than young adults with a lower FitTok consumption.*

*H2: Young adults who have a higher FitTok consumption have worse mental health than young adults with a lower FitTok consumption.*

This strong relationship between social media use and concerns related to BI and MH is caused by many different online behaviors among young adults (Khalaf et al., 2023, p. 7). Examples of such behaviors consist of online interactions such as cyberbullying, forms of peer pressure, and engaging in dangerous behaviors as a consequence of social media use, but also forms of online social comparison (Khalaf et al., 2023, p. 7), which is one of the current study’s main objectives. Next, Festinger’s (1954) theory of social comparison, online social

comparison, and the effects thereof will be elaborately discussed (pp. 118-119).

### **2.2.2. Social comparison on social media**

Social comparison is one of the most prominent causes of the detrimental effects of social media on MH and BI (Feinstein et al., 2013, p. 161; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015, p. 61; Samra et al., 2022, pp. 607-608). According to social comparison theory, people compare themselves with available information about others (Festinger, 1954, pp. 118-119). Based on this comparison, they evaluate themselves either positively or negatively. In other words, individuals generally see others as the benchmark on which to base their self-judgment (Festinger, 1954, pp. 118-119). There are three main kinds of social comparison-based assessment: self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Kramer et al., 2008, p. 2). The focus of this study, however, is mainly on expressions of self-evaluation and self-improvement. Whereas self-evaluation comparisons are ways to evaluate one's own position (in terms of looks or skills for example) in comparison to others, self-improvement comparisons are evaluations used to improve the self (Kramer et al., 2008, p. 2). Comparisons of self-evaluation and self-improvement are forms of upward comparison; individuals consider the other to whom they compare themselves to be superior, or better than themselves (Collins, 1996, p. 51; Gerber et al., 2018, p. 178).

According to Festinger's (1954) theory, people especially tend to compare themselves to others whom they consider to be similar to themselves (p. 120). In line with this, Cash et al. (1983) found that exposure to photos of women considered similar to oneself has a greater negative effect on perceived self-attractiveness than exposure to comparable photos of professional models (p. 354). Similarly, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) argue that fitfluencers generally are "everyday women rather than fashion models", which according to them might make them more suitable subjects of comparison for the individuals consuming their content (p. 62).

In the current study, both positive and negative comparison are assessed (sub-question 2). However, as previous studies reveal, social media use is often associated mainly with negative social comparison. Namely, on social media, individuals are constantly confronted with photos and videos posted by others. This extreme exposure already encourages them to engage in constant comparison of the self to others on their feeds (Samra, 2022, p. 608). Moreover, social media content is generally carefully selected and edited before posting, thereby allowing people to present an ideal image of themselves and their lives online (Hendrickse et al. 2017, p. 93). Hence, negative social comparison is very common for social

media users. As individuals constantly expose themselves to others' often unrealistically perfect photos and videos, they become convinced that others look better and live happier lives than they do (Chou et al., 2012, p. 117; Samra et al., 2022, p. 608). In line with this, the following hypothesis is formulated:

*H3: Young adults who have a higher FitTok consumption experience higher levels of negative social comparison than young adults with a lower FitTok consumption.*

### **2.2.3. The detrimental effects of negative social comparison**

As suggested by previous research, social comparison activities can contribute to certain MH concerns, such as depressive symptoms and body dissatisfaction (Feinstein et al., 2013, p. 161; Dignard, 2017, p. 82; Yoon et al., 2019, p. 70; Samra et al., 2022, p. 607; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022, p. 8). For example, as Samra et al. (2022) found, the relationship between (problematic) social media use and depressive symptoms is partially mediated by negative social comparison online (p. 607). Feinstein et al. (2013) found similar results, suggesting that negative social comparisons on Facebook can contribute to depressive symptoms, mediated by rumination (p. 168). Instagram browsing, then, was found to negatively affect body appreciation and satisfaction, mediated by upward comparison (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022, p. 8; Dignard, 2017, pp. 82-83). Brown and Tiggemann (2016) concluded that social comparison by women on social media can lead to immediate body dissatisfaction and negative mood (p. 42). Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) drew similar conclusions. Their findings suggest that social comparison causes detrimental effects of fitness content on women's BI (p. 66). In line with this, Dignard (2017) found especially women who are more occupied with their appearance tend to show greater body dissatisfaction after exposure to fitspiration images (p. 82). From their research on college students' responses to fitspiration content, Pasko and Arigo (2021) concluded that a stronger tendency to compare oneself to others in fitspiration content is associated with more negative feelings about the self (p. 11).

While much research on these effects of social comparison focuses merely on female experiences, the male experience is largely neglected (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016, p. 107). However, as several studies' findings (Feinstein et al., 2013, pp. 166-167; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016, pp. 107-108) suggest, men certainly also engage in practices of social comparison, which causes increased body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms. Moreover, whereas Fioravanti et al. (2022) do not identify a significant relationship between thin-ideal images and body satisfaction in men, they do so between fitspiration images and

body satisfaction (p. 453). As they argue, fitspiration content could be considered a “target that men compare themselves against”, and excluding the male population from further examination would mean potentially missing significant findings (Fioravanti et al., 2022, p. 453).

As these findings illustrate, there is much evidence available already for the relationship between the consumption of SMPs and fitspiration content in particular, and individuals’ worsened BI and MH, mediated by negative social comparison. With regards to FitTok content as a relatively new form of online fitspiration content, therefore, it is hypothesized that:

*H4: Young adults experiencing higher levels of negative social comparison have a lower body image than young adults experiencing lower levels of negative social comparison.*

*H5: Young adults experiencing higher levels of negative social comparison have worse mental health than young adults experiencing lower levels of negative social comparison.*

*H6: Young adults who have a higher FitTok consumption have a lower body image, mediated by negative social comparison, than young adults who have a lower FitTok consumption.*

*H7: Young adults who have a higher FitTok consumption have worse mental health, mediated by negative social comparison, than young adults who have a lower FitTok consumption.*

#### **2.2.4. Positive social comparison fueled by FitTok content**

While (upward) social comparison is mainly associated with negative effects, it has also been found to positively impact individuals. For example, whereas Pasko and Arigo (2021) found social comparison orientation to be an insignificant moderator of the relationship between average feelings about the self and motivation to be physically active after consuming the content (pp. 6; 12), it was found to moderate the relationship between intentional fitspiration consumption (i.e. intentionally searching for fitspiration content) and motivation to be physically active. In other words, individuals who reported higher intentional fitspiration consumption also reported higher motivation to be active after consumption, due to the effect of social comparison (pp. 8; 12). Additionally, Collins (1996) found that individuals seek upward comparisons to become superior through the mechanisms of self-evaluation and self-improvement (p. 67). These findings are consistent with Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory, which also hypothesizes that a strong attraction towards a certain group of people increases the individual’s need to compare themselves to the members of that group (p. 131). An observed discrepancy in opinion or ability between the self and members of the comparison group generally causes a desire to “reduce this gap”, by changing

or improving the self (Festinger, 1954, p. 131; Pasko & Arigo, 2021, p. 2). As Pasko and Arigo's findings suggest, individuals who explicitly search for fitspiration, and thus show a specific interest in fitspiration content creators, seem to be activated by their desire to be similar to those content creators. This relationship between FitTok consumption and positive social comparison will be explored in the interviews.

### **2.3. Bourdieu's theory of practice**

Another theoretical framework dominating the literature on how social dynamics affect how we feel about our bodies and lives is Bourdieu's (1984) work on capital and habitus (p. 101). On the one hand, it helps in understanding how content such as FitTok videos contributes to establishing and reinforcing certain beauty and lifestyle standards. On the other, Bourdieu's emphasis on the role of sociocultural aspects such as age, gender, and education forms a framework for understanding the differences in how individuals behave in and respond to certain circumstances (sub-question 3). Before discussing the theory's relevance for the current study, Bourdieu's main concepts will be introduced.

According to Bourdieu, the way one acts or behaves is based on the formula "[habitus](capital) + field = practice" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101). The *habitus* is shaped by one's upbringing and the class of society they grew up in. As Edgerton and Roberts (2014) describe, it is "the learned set of preferences or dispositions by which a person orients to the social world" (p. 195). The *bodily hexis* is how individuals express these preferences and dispositions or their "true nature" to the outside world (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 64). It is "the bodily expression of habitus", which includes not only the physical shape of one's body but also their manners, the way one moves or stands, and the way one talks and dresses for example (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 311; 314; Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 28-29; 64; Williams, 1995 p. 591). As Williams argues, the concept of bodily hexis is the embodiment of taste (1995, p. 591).

*Capital*, then, is "a social energy that operates in a determined space" (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 223). In Bourdieu's theory of practice, four main categories of capital are identified: cultural capital, economic capital, social capital, and symbolic capital. Whereas an individual's cultural capital depends on one's knowledge, manners, norms and values, skills, and educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243), economic capital is related to one's wealth, finances, and property (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 117). Social capital, then, is related to one's social networks, relationships, and connections (family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, etc.) (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 122; 310; Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). Finally, symbolic

capital is directly related to an individual's recognition; as "honor in the sense of reputation and prestige" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 22). Each individual has a habitus that is embodied within them and certain capital that can decrease and increase throughout their lives. They determine one's identity, behaviors, and place in society.

For FitTok content creators, for example, their expertise in physical health-related topics and their skills to turn this expertise into TikTok content form their cultural capital. Their social capital increases as others engage with their content and start following them. Their growing social capital, then, also increases their value for brands, which enables an increase in their economic capital (Carrigan & Stürmer, 2023). Ultimately, the assembly of their cultural, social, and economic capital contributes to the growth of their reputation as an influential individual, which equals an increase in symbolic capital.

*Field* can be explained as "the formal and informal norms governing a particular social sphere of activity" (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 195). In other words, a field is a space (either physical or abstract) that is based on relations between social actors. Bourdieu (2020) understands fields as games that each "have their own rules and structures" (pp. 239-240) by which the social actors play to gain power in that particular game or field. The way people behave in these fields is dependent on their habitus and capital, and the rules of the fields (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 195). Therefore, [(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice (or, behavior).

Bourdieu's formula of practice can be applied to any social space or situation. As previous research suggests, Bourdieu's theory of practice can be used to expand our understanding of the online realm as well. For example, whereas Hu and Cheong (2021) found that age and information education affect individuals' habitus and social media use (p. 4503), Keen and France's findings (2022) demonstrate that familial class positioning and cultural background are strongly related to one's digital capital (i.e. individuals' digital skills and knowledge) (pp. 3-4; 15). To illustrate how Bourdieu's theory of practice can be understood in relation to self-presentation on Instagram, Smerchinski (2021) proposes the following variation of Bourdieu's formula: [(habitus)(capital)] + Instagram = "the instagrammable" (p. 29). Here, habitus and capital refer to the Instagram user, and Instagram is the social field in which the practice takes place. With "the instagrammable", Smerchinski refers to the practice of content curation, which is central to the process of creating an online presentation of the self that is "good enough to be shared on Instagram" (Smerchinski, 2021, p. 13; Caldeira et al., 2020, p. 1078). In a similar vein, TikTok can be viewed as a social field as well, embodying FitTok as one of its subfields. An interpretation of this will follow, but



only after a discussion of the establishment of certain ideals online.

### **2.3.1. Bourdieu and the FitTok ideal**

In the field of TikTok, different actors such as influencers and other content creators, everyday users, and the platform's algorithm and owners, are actively shaping the platform. Together, they define the rules and structures of the "visibility game" that is central to TikTok and SMP use in general (Cotter, 2019, pp. 895; 908). In this game, if users play by the rules, their visibility will increase, which is the ultimate goal for content creators such as influencers (Bucher, 2012, p. 1174; Cotter, 2019, p. 908). According to Cotter (2019), while everyday users play the visibility game, "influencers have made it their business to understand the algorithms that govern visibility on social media as a means of growing their follower base" (p. 896). In other words, playing by the rules increases one's online social capital, and ultimately also their economic capital, as their growing follower base and engagement makes them more interesting partners for brands (Mathew, 2018). Moreover, SMPs like TikTok can be viewed as fields of recognition. In this way, online visibility can lead to an increase in content creators' symbolic capital (i.e. in the form of followers, likes, comments, etc.) as well (Piroddi, 2022, p. 337). According to Bourdieu (2000), symbolic capital "enables forms of domination" (p. 204). Thus, by playing by the rules of the online social field of FitTok, FitTok content creators can increase their capital, thereby expanding their influence on the consumers of their content. As a dominant sub-"class" of TikTok users, they can create their own rules by setting dominant beauty and lifestyle ideals of which all other TikTok users are aware, but cannot always live up to (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 202-207). Central to their online self-presentation is their "fit"-focused bodily hexis as the "place" where the fitfluencer's habitus and the social meet.

Although no habitus and bodily hexis are identical, the establishment of dominant body and lifestyle ideals in FitTok content reveals the presence of a strong similarity between different FitTok content creators' presences and lifestyles. By regularly posting content that portrays these standards, FitTok content creators not only establish but also reinforce these ideals. During the interviews, the FitTok ideal as perceived by the interviewees will also be explored. How these ideals might affect consumers of FitTok content will be discussed next.

### **2.3.2. The effect of habitus and capital on body image and mental health**

As much research on social media consumption and issues related to BI and MH already suggests, their relationship is often affected by demographical factors such as age and gender; central aspects of Bourdieu's (1984) habitus (p. 101).

For example, a large body of research found stronger detrimental effects of social media consumption (e.g. time spent or certain social media activities, such as posting and chatting) on MH and BI for females than males (e.g. Svensson et al., 2022, p. 1; Thompson & Lougheed, 2012, p. 88; Samra et al., 2022, p. 609). From a sample of undergraduate males and females, the latter were more likely to let their BI be negatively affected by Facebook photos and reported stress-related feelings due to higher Facebook use (Thompson & Lougheed, 2012, p. 88). Similarly, Samra et al. (2022) found that female respondents generally had a higher tendency to negatively compare themselves to others on social media than did the male sample (p. 609). Additionally, Samra et al. reported a partial mediating effect of the tendency to negatively compare the self to the relationship between problematic social media use and depression. This, then, points towards an increased risk of becoming depressed for females in comparison to males (p. 607). Hence, with regard to the current study, the following is hypothesized:

*H8: Female FitTok consumers have a lower body image, caused by their FitTok consumption, than male FitTok consumers.*

*H9: Female FitTok consumers have worse mental health, caused by their FitTok consumption, than male FitTok consumers.*

As Thai et al. (2023) argue, adolescence and young adulthood (ages 17-25) tend to be difficult life stages (p. 2). On the one hand, individuals in these life phases undergo a lot of behavioral and physical changes at once. On the other, they are also generally more prone to (possibly) harmful social processes, such as social comparison (Paus et al., 2008, p. 947; Thai et al., 2023 p. 2). A review of 50 papers on the effect of SMPs on MH revealed several problematic relationships between SMP use and MH problems such as depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and an increase in BI concerns in adolescents and young adults (Karim et al., 2020, pp. 5-6). Additionally, Li et al. (2021) also argue that age affects the impact of social media, suggesting that in comparison to middle-aged adults and elders, adolescents experience more discomfort (e.g. depression and anxiety) from their use of social media (pp. 296; 298). Hence, the current study also assesses the effect of age difference on the relationship between FitTok consumption and BI and MH:

*H10: Younger young adult FitTok consumers have a lower body image, caused by their FitTok consumption, than older young adult FitTok consumers.*

*H11: Younger young adult FitTok consumers have worse mental health, caused by their*

*FitTok consumption, than older young adult FitTok consumers.*

Besides age and gender (habitus), this study also takes into consideration the effect of education level (capital) on the relationship between SMP use and issues related to MH and BI. Although to the researcher's knowledge, this particular relationship has not yet been assessed, previous research does reveal a certain link between education level and MH outcomes. As Kamin et al. (2011) report, higher education generally leads to lower depression levels in both men and women (p. 38). Similar results were found by Amin et al. (2023, p. 4). With regard to BI, Rosenqvist et al. (2023) also found a connection to education level (p. 1). According to their findings, lower-educated individuals generally experience greater body dissatisfaction throughout their lives than higher-educated individuals (Rosenqvist et al, 2023, p. 1). The current study will go one step further by examining if the consumption of FitTok content has a different effect on MH and BI for higher- vs. lower-educated young adults. To do this, the following hypotheses are presented:

*H12: FitTok consumers with a lower education level have a lower body image, caused by their FitTok consumption, than FitTok consumers with a higher education level.*

*H13: FitTok consumers with a lower education level have worse mental health, caused by their FitTok consumption, than FitTok consumers with a higher education level.*

Keeping in mind the foregoing, it is now easier to understand how FitTok might fit in Bourdieu's (1984) formula of practice (p. 101) by replacing Instagram and "the Instagrammable" as proposed by Smerchinski (2021, p. 129). The formula proposed in the current study is, therefore:

[(habitus)(capital)] + FitTok = the effect of FitTok content on the individual's body image and mental health

As the formula proposes, the extent to which an individual's BI and MH are affected by their FitTok consumption is dependent on their habitus and capital on the one hand, and the "rules" of the field of FitTok (i.e. the body and lifestyle ideals portrayed by FitTok content creators) on the other. These effects manifest themselves in the individual's "practice"; their practical behaviors and actions, but also their feelings and thoughts fueled by their FitTok consumption.

#### **2.4. Festinger and Bourdieu in the online realm**

The impact of social influences on how individuals behave and feel is a common point

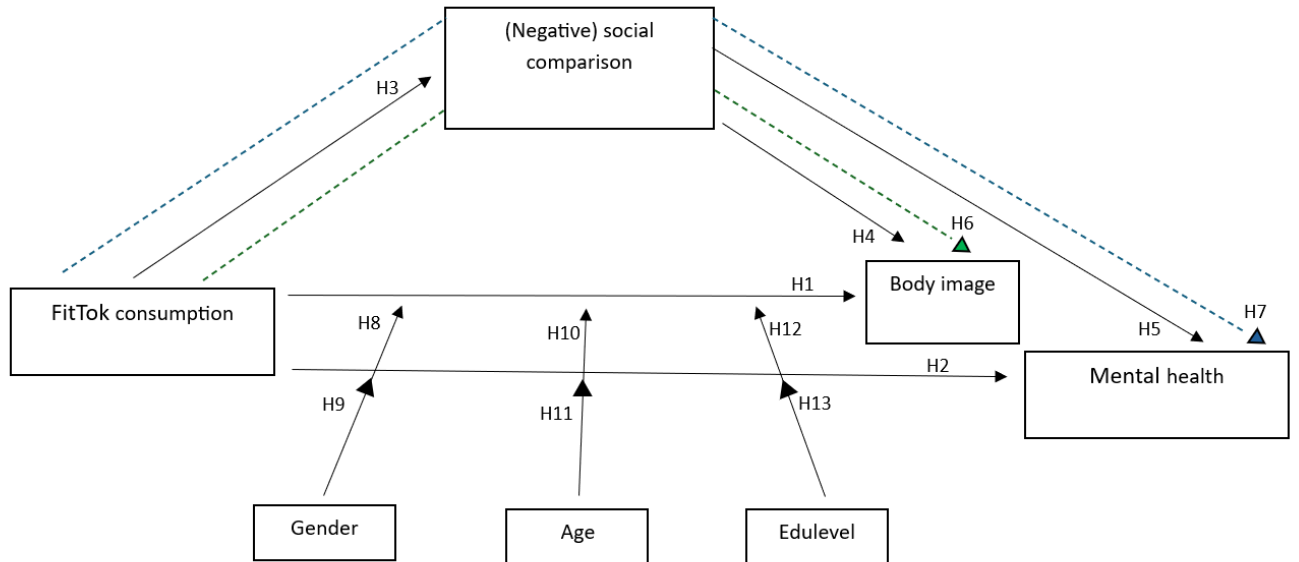
for Festinger (1954, pp. 118-119) and Bourdieu (1984, p. 101). Namely, both of their frameworks emphasize the role of social environments and interactions in the process of shaping individuals' perceptions of themselves. However, in essence, while Bourdieu emphasizes the role of habitus and capital in the formation of (body) perception, Festinger focuses more on cognitive processes. As elaborated above, individuals often tend to compare their skills, knowledge, ways of behaving, accomplishments, etc., to those of others. In other words, one's habitus and capital are central to the nature of their acts of social comparison. In addition, appearance is also a key motivation for appraisals of social comparison, thereby highlighting the significance of Bourdieu's concept of bodily hexis to the dynamics underlying Festinger's comparison theory. In relation to FitTok content, combining both frameworks is expected to offer a solid basis for the assessment of the effects of the dominant body shapes and lifestyles portrayed in the content and how it might affect different individuals' MH and BI in different ways. These effects will be analyzed through a field study, consisting of an online survey and in-depth interviews with regular TikTok users.

## **2.5. Conceptual model**

By addressing the currently available literature on the relationship between social media consumption, social comparison, and BI and MH on the one hand, and the relationship between social media consumption, the habitus and capital, and BI and MH on the other, the current chapter forms the foundation for the analyses carried out. In Figure 2.1, the conceptual model, including the hypotheses leading the assessment of sub-questions 2 and 3, can be found. While also informing the qualitative study, this model will particularly serve as a guide for the quantitative study. In the next chapter, the methods and operationalizations employed will be discussed.

**Figure 2.1**

*Conceptual Model Illustrating the Hypotheses Tested*



### **3. Research design**

#### **3.1. Method description and justification**

Considering the research questions of the thesis, a mixed-method study, combining an online survey and in-depth interviews was deemed most appropriate. The quantitative method of the online survey was used to gain insight into the scope and nature of the issue at hand, by allowing the analysis of a larger population (Gerring, 2017, p. 18). Moreover, the method is suitable for exploring how demographical differences might affect the impact of a certain phenomenon (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 204). This is useful for the exploration of the impact of the habitus and capital on the effect of FitTok consumption on young adults.

The semi-structured in-depth interview was employed to add depth to the survey findings. Qualitative methods like interviewing enable a “deeper understanding of experiences, phenomena, and context” by answering ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions (Cleland, 2017, p. 69). As Johnson (2001) argues, in-depth interviewing is appropriate when seeking to dive deep into “very personal matters, such as an individual’s self, lived experience ..., or perspective” (p. 3). Thus, the interviews were implemented to allow for more in-depth revelations of the psychological and emotional impact of FitTok content on BI and MH.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand, this mixed-method study relied on a convergent design, meaning that the survey and interview data were collected simultaneously and analyzed separately before interpreting them together (Razali et al., 2019, p. 156; Alele & Malau-Aduli, 2023; Guest, 2012, p. 144). Combining the generalizable survey findings with the deeper insights gathered from the interviews enabled more robust and nuanced conclusions, as “the strengths of both styles of research” were combined (Gerring, 2017, p. 31).

It is recognized that a content analysis would provide important data for this study. Namely, there are many different sorts of FitTok videos available (e.g. workout tips, recipes, supplement information) which might cause different effects on the target population. Yet, due to time constraints and the nature of the study’s research questions, the survey and interviews were prioritized. However, a small set of FitTok content was classified and thematically analyzed to enrich the study and to inform the survey and interview questions. See Appendix E for the entire process.

## **3.2. Sampling**

### ***3.2.1 Sampling methods***

Because this study is focused on young adults familiar with FitTok content only, both methods relied on non-random sampling methods. The researcher aimed for 150 TikTok-using survey respondents within the age range of 18-25 and familiar with FitTok content. A pilot study was carried out first with eight individuals, selected by the researcher, to test the survey for clarity and errors. The rest of the sample was gathered mainly through self-selection sampling, meaning that individuals meeting the inclusion criteria could “choose to participate on free will” (Berndt, 2020, p. 226).

The recruitment of the interviewees relied on self-selection sampling and purposive sampling. A LinkedIn post, asking for volunteers (i.e. self-sampling), was posted by the researcher and shared by others, thereby increasing chances to reach individuals outside the researcher’s network. Eventually, two interviewees were recruited via LinkedIn. Because the volunteers were carefully screened and selected by the researcher, purposive sampling was also used. The interviewees had to be daily consumers of FitTok content. The researcher also aimed for maximum variation sampling by recruiting participants who differed in terms of age, gender, nationality, and education (Palinkas, 2015, pp. 534-535). However, due to time constraints and the specific inclusion criteria, this was difficult.

Finally, snowball sampling had to be employed for both the survey and the interview sample, meaning that new participants were recruited through other participants (Berndt, 2020, p. 226). Although the researcher is familiar with the risk of decreasing the sample’s diversity by using snowball sampling, the specific inclusion criteria and limited amount of time available made it necessary (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018, p. 3; Berndt, 2020, p. 226). Moreover, snowballing in qualitative research is argued to be suitable, especially for research on sensitive topics, which BI and MH can be considered to be (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). Five interviewees were recruited via snowball sampling. The last interviewee was found via the personal network of the researcher’s thesis supervisor.

### ***3.2.2. The sample***

As for the survey, 76.7% of the sample ( $N = 115$ ) identified as female, 22.7% ( $N = 34$ ) as male, and .7% ( $N = 1$ ) as non-binary. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 25 ( $M = 22.51$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ). Most of the respondents were Dutch (80.7%,  $N = 121$ ), Belgian (7.3%,  $N = 11$ ), and British (2.0%,  $N = 3$ ). Most respondents reported a University’s Bachelor’s Degree

to be their highest education level completed (30.0%,  $N = 45$ ), followed by HBO (28.0%,  $N = 42$ ), and high school (18.0%,  $N = 27$ ). Finally, 50.0% ( $N = 75$ ) of the respondents reported their annual income of the last year to be less than €10.000, 26.7% ( $N = 40$ ) had an income of somewhere between €10.000 and €30.000, and 14.0% ( $N = 21$ ) of €30.001-€50.000. See Appendix C, Table C1 for a complete overview of the respondents' descriptives. In terms of their FitTok consumption, 36.7% ( $N = 55$ ) of the sample reported consuming FitTok content only sometimes (1-5 TikToks per week), followed by 35.3% ( $N = 53$ ) who reported consuming the videos very often (10+ TikToks per week). A minority of 28.0% ( $N = 42$ ) said to watch it often (5-10 TikToks per week).

Five of the interviewees identified as female and three as male. The youngest interviewee was 18 and the oldest three were 25. While seven of them are Dutch, one is Turkish. For a complete overview of the interviewees' descriptives, see Appendix D. There, you will also find the interviewees' pseudonyms used throughout the remainder of this study to guarantee their privacy.

### **3.3. Operationalization**

The full questionnaire and topic list can be found in Appendix A and B. First, the survey questions were established, based on several pre-existing scales. Next, the interview topic list was composed by altering the survey questions into open-ended questions and adding questions to acquire deeper insights into the interviewees' experiences. In the following, the measures used to operationalize the study's main concepts will be discussed in the order they can be found in Appendix A and B.

#### **3.3.1. Survey measures**

*FitTok consumption.* Respondents were asked to indicate their level of FitTok consumption by choosing one of the following options: *Sometimes (1-5 TikToks per week)*, *Often (5-10 TikToks per week)*, and *Very often (10+ TikToks per week)*.

*Perceived SMP reliability* was measured by asking the respondent to rank YouTube, TikTok, Google, and Instagram from most reliable (1) to least reliable (4) source of information.

*SMPs as physical health-related information sources.* To indicate which SMPs they used most to find fitness-related online content, the respondents were asked to rank YouTube, TikTok, Google, and Instagram from most frequently (1) to least frequently consulted (4) source to find this information.



*Search bar use.* To indicate how often they made use of TikTok's search bar, the respondent could choose between *Never (0 times a week)*, *Sometimes (0-2 times a week)*, *Often (2-5 times a week)*, and *Very often (5+ times a week)*.

*FitTok content creator credential check.* Respondents were asked to indicate how often they check creators' credentials when watching their content (1 = *Never*; 5 = *Always*).

*Negative social comparison.* Initially, this construct was measured with two pre-existing scales: Vogel et al.'s (2014) scale on social comparisons on Facebook (p. 209) and Samra et al.'s (2022) Negative Social Media Comparison Scale (NSMCS) (p. 613). Vogel et al.'s two items were both adapted and included: 1) "When comparing myself to individuals in FitTok content, I generally tend to focus on individuals who are better off than me" and "When comparing myself to individuals in FitTok content, I generally tend to focus on individuals who are worse off than me" (7-point Likert scale: 1 = *Strongly disagree*; 6 = *Strongly agree*).

Additionally, Samra et al.'s (2022) 7-item NSMCS was employed (p. 613). The items were also altered to make them more FitTok-focused, and merely items that apply to FitTok consumption were included. Examples are "When I consume FitTok content, I feel like other people are more attractive than I am" and "When I consume FitTok content, I feel less satisfied with my own life" (7-point Likert scale: 1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). See Appendix A (Q8) for a complete overview of the items used. Higher scores on this scale indicate higher levels of negative social comparison. Eventually, it was decided that merely the data collected with the NSMCS would be analyzed (see 4.6.2. Survey validity).

*Body image* was initially examined through Mutale et al.'s (2016) Body Dissatisfaction Scale (BDS) (pp. 49-50) and Avalos et al.'s (2005) Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) (p. 289). The BDS, which is based on the discrepancy between a respondent's actual and ideal body, was utilized to measure the respondent's level of body (dis)satisfaction (Mutale et al., 2016, pp. 49-50). First, the respondent was exposed to nine computer-generated bodies that ranged from underweight to obese. Each body was numbered from 1 (most underweight) to 9 (most overweight). Next, the respondent was asked to choose which body they considered similar to their own body, and which body they considered ideal. The discrepancy between the two bodies was considered one's body dissatisfaction score, with a possible score range of 8 (highest dissatisfaction) to 0 (no dissatisfaction).

The BAS (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022, p. 5; Avalos et al., 2005, p. 289) was used to measure body appreciation. To limit the duration of the survey, 9 of the 13 BAS items were altered if needed and included. Examples include "I feel good about my body" and "My self-

worth is independent of my body shape or weight” (5-point Likert Scale: 1 = *Never*; 5 = *Always*). See Appendix A (Q9) for an overview of the BAS items used. To increase the study’s validity, it was eventually decided to exclude the data related to the BDS. Thus, BI was eventually measured through the BAS only (see 4.6.2. Survey validity). Hence, for the remainder of the research, the terms BI and body satisfaction will be used interchangeably.

*Ability to purchase sponsored products.* To measure purchase intention fueled by sponsored FitTok content, respondents were asked: “When encountering TikTok fitness influencers marketing products, how frequently do you have intentions to purchase the products?” (1 = *Never*; 4 = *Often*). This question was taken and adapted from Chetioui et al.’s (2019) survey on “influencers and consumers’ purchase intention” (p. 379), which is based on Azjen’s (2011) theory of planned behavior (p. 1124). Next, the respondent was asked: “How often do you want to purchase the products advertised by TikTok fitness influencers, but you feel like you cannot afford them?” (1 = *Never*; 4 = *Often*).

*Mental health* was assessed with the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D Scale), which measures levels of depression (Radloff, 1977, p. 387). From the 20 items, each examining depressive symptoms experienced in the past week on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *rarely/none of the time (less than 1 day)*; 4 = *most of/all the time (5-7 days)*), the 13 most suitable ones were included. In selecting them, both positively and negatively worded items were included to prevent any kind of steering the respondent in a certain direction. Sample items are “I enjoyed life” and, “I thought my life had been a failure”. See Appendix A (Q14) for the complete list of the items used.

*Interest in FitTok categories.* This measure was assessed based on the categories as established by the additional content analysis. The respondent was asked to indicate their interest in each of the different identified main categories of FitTok content on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Not interested at all* (1) to *Very interested* (5). See Appendix A (Q15) for a complete overview of the question.

*Habitus and capital* were operationalized through the questions regarding one’s demographic background. To indicate one’s gender (*habitus*), the respondent was asked to choose between *Male* (1), *Female* (2), *Non-binary* (3), and *Prefer not to say* (4). For age (*habitus*), the respondent could type in a number ranging from 18 to 25. They were also asked to choose their nationality (*habitus*) from a drop-down list including all countries. An overview of the answer options for education level and income (*capital*) can be found in Appendix A, Q19 + Q20. Due to a lack of adequate diversity in the data for the measures of nationality and income (see 2.1. Descriptive statistics), eventually, only the data for gender,

age, and education level were included in the analysis.

Initially, the demographic questions were placed at the start of the survey, because of the sensitivity of the topics of BI and MH. However, after the first round of data collection, a relatively high drop-out rate was noticed during or shortly after answering the demographical questions. This indicated a quick loss of interest caused by opening the survey with these questions. Hence, the demographical questions were moved to the end of the survey, which seemed to increase the response rate. Because of their relative sensitivity, the questions measuring BI and MH were placed almost directly before the demographic questions. However, to prevent the question related to interest in FitTok categories from affecting the respondents' answers to the BI- and MH-related questions, the former was placed last (see Appendix A, Q15).

### **3.3.2. Interview measures**

Before starting the interviews, the purpose of the interview was briefly explained to the interviewees again: gaining insights into their experiences of FitTok content and the perceived effect thereof on (their) BI and MH. After ensuring everything was clear and receiving the interviewees' consent, the following topics were discussed.

*Habitus and capital* were measured by posing demographic questions regarding the interviewees' age, gender, nationality, and education level. These questions were included to operationalize sub-question 3, and thereby gain insight into the possible impact of the habitus and capital on the interviewees' experiences and perceptions.

Secondly, *TikTok as a source of information* was discussed. This section was included to explore the interviewees' experiences with TikTok, also in comparison to other SMPs (sub-question 1). Importantly, the interviewees were also asked in more detail about the nature of their FitTok consumption (e.g. how often they engage with the content; what kind of FitTok content they consume most; what their main reason for their interest in these kinds of content is).

The third section focused on discussing the "*FitTok ideal*", with a central focus on exploring the interviewees' perceptions of the dominant body and life ideals portrayed in FitTok content. Here, social comparison (negative and positive) served as a central objective, also connecting it to the interviewees' perceptions of its effects on BI and MH (sub-question 2). First, the interviewees were asked about their perceptions of the body ideals they mainly encounter in FitTok content, and if they believed these could negatively affect (their) body satisfaction and self-esteem – both concepts that are inherently connected to BI and MH.

Next, the concept of social comparison was introduced to the interviewees more directly by asking them if they compared themselves to the bodies and lifestyles portrayed in FitTok content, and what feelings this generally sparks in them. Hereafter, certain specific aspects of FitTok content were discussed: male- vs. female-generated content, the different kinds of content, and sponsored content. The interviewees were asked if they felt like these videos had different effects on how they felt about themselves and their lives. Like in the survey, the interviewees were briefly asked about their opinions on sponsored FitTok content, how often they felt influenced to buy the products advertised, and how they felt when they could not afford them. The latter was included to explore if/how the inability to purchase products advertised in FitTok content could affect MH.

To conclude the interview, the interviewees were asked to describe any feelings sparked in them by FitTok content in three words and to give their best advice on maintaining a healthy relationship with the content. On the one hand, answers to this latter question could reveal once again how the interviewees view issues related to FitTok content. On the other, they might offer helpful advice for individuals struggling with these issues.

### **3.4. Data collection**

Survey responses were collected from March 7 until April 1, 2024. After the pilot study, an anonymous link to the Qualtrics survey was shared in several survey exchange Facebook groups. Additionally, the survey was posted on SurveySwap and SurveyCircle: online survey exchange communities. On these platforms, credits are acquired by filling out other individuals' surveys. These credits can then be used to gain respondents for one's own survey. Using these platforms visibly increased respondent diversity, especially related to nationality. Because employing these platforms and Facebook groups alone did not yield enough respondents, a link to the survey was also shared on the researcher's personal LinkedIn and Instagram profiles. Friends and family members were informed not to fill out the survey beforehand to reduce biased results. However, they were asked to share the link with their network. Additionally, the interviewees were asked to fill out the survey. The researcher also approached individuals in her local gym. After informing them about the research and checking their suitability and willingness to participate in the research, the researcher shared a QR code leading to the survey with them.

Eventually, 211 individuals started the survey, but 50 did not complete it. Although dropouts happened throughout the entire survey, most of them occurred immediately after question 1: "Are you familiar with this kind of [FitTok] content". Whereas some reported

being unfamiliar with the content (answering “No”), others’ reasons for quitting remained unclear (answering “Yes”). Another ten responses were excluded from the dataset because they did not pass the control questions (See 3.6.1. Survey reliability and validity). Finally, one response was removed because of a remarkably short duration time of 119 seconds. Not only was this the shortest completion duration measured but this respondent was also one of the 86 respondents that did not yet have to fill out the control questions. The next shortest duration time measured was 214 seconds but included the correct answers to the control questions. Therefore, this duration time was used as the benchmark for the rest of the responses. Ultimately, precisely 150 complete responses remained.

All eight interviews were conducted and recorded between March 13 and March 31, 2024, which was roughly within the planned timeframe. They were conducted in Dutch (7) or English (1), four of them face-to-face, and four via Teams calls. During the interviews, the researcher made use of probing and prompting to ensure proper and elaborate answers to the questions (Boeije, 2010, p. 63). After conducting all interviews, they were transcribed, and coded fragments were translated into English when needed. The entire data collection process of both the survey and the interviews was performed by the researcher herself.

### **3.5. Data analysis**

#### ***3.5.1. Survey data: statistical analyses***

To process and analyze the survey data, SPSS was employed. First, to assess the role of TikTok as an information source also in comparison to other SMPs (sub-question 1), a descriptive analysis was performed. To explore the mediating effect of negative social comparison on the relationship between FitTok consumption and BI and MH (sub-question 2), two mediation analyses were conducted, each consisting of two simple regressions, and one multiple regression. Finally, to assess the impact of gender, age, and education level on the relationship between FitTok consumption and BI and MH (sub-question 3), six two-way between-groups ANOVAs were performed. In this way, the effect of FitTok consumption on BI and MH scores could be examined for different age, age, and educational groups. Each of the analyses is elaborately discussed in the results section. Several additional analyses concerning the different FitTok content categories were also conducted. Since these are not the study’s main objective, their results can be found in Appendix I and J.

#### ***3.5.2. Interview data: thematic analysis***

The interview data was analyzed employing thematic analysis. This method is suitable

for “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” through coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This allowed for a systematic analysis of the interviews while keeping the research questions and sensitizing concepts of social comparison, BI, and MH in mind. Although this suggests a rather deductive approach, the researcher was completely open to new findings as well, thereby combining a deductive and inductive approach during the analysis. After conducting the interviews, the researcher transcribed them manually. While conducting and transcribing the interviews, the researcher took notes about initial ideas, possible codes, patterns noticed, and possibly useful quotes. After a first reading of the interviews, the researcher started open-coding the transcriptions by reading them line by line to exclude irrelevant fragments and code the useful ones. The initial codes were then also revised and adjusted where needed. The researcher employed constant comparison to categorize fragments with similar topics under the same open code to remove redundant codes, and to increase the suitability of others. Eventually, saturation was reached and the open coding phase was completed. The entire coding process was carried out manually.

Next, the open codes were examined to identify overlapping themes present in the data. This phase mainly included comparing the open codes to categorize them into overarching themes/axes by constantly keeping in mind the research questions. During the axial coding, contrasting was also considered important, especially for coding fragments related to social comparison, as these could often be subdivided into positive or negative forms of social comparison. The researcher stayed attentive to the appropriateness of the previously established open codes, and altered, removed, or bundled them when needed.

Eventually, after comparing and reassembling the previously established codes once more, three main themes were identified: 1) Social comparison on FitTok, 2) The unrealistic FitTok ideal, and 3) SMPs as sources of information. An overview of these themes and their accompanying axial and open codes can be found in Appendix F (separate file).

Finally, the interview and the survey findings were interpreted together. This allowed for any overlapping but also deviating findings to be underlined. As the results and discussion sections will demonstrate, the interview data partly supports the survey data, but also adds some nuance and depth to the survey findings. The interview data also highlighted certain topics not addressed in the survey, such as positive social comparison and the FitTok ideal. In this way, the quantitative and qualitative data complemented each other.

### **3.6. Reliability and validity**

### 3.6.1. Survey reliability and validity

To check the internal consistency and thereby reliability of the pre-existing scales included in the survey, reliability analyses were performed, where a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of  $>.7$  was considered acceptable. First, any negatively worded items were reversed (Pallant, 2016, pp. 116; 119).

*Negative social comparison.* None of the four items taken from the NSMCS (Samra et al., 2022) had to be reverse-coded. With a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .84, the internal consistency of this scale was considered good. Samra et al. also found a strong Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .89 (p. 609).

*Body image.* Of the nine BAS items (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022, p. 8; Avalos et al., 2005, p. 289) none were reverse-coded. A reliability analysis revealed a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .79. This was somewhat lower than the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .94 found by Avalos et al., but still acceptable (p. 289).

*Mental health.* Of the 13 CES-D Scale (Radloff, 1997) items used, two were reverse-coded. With a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .87, the internal consistency of this scale could also be considered strong. This is in line with the internal consistency found by Radloff, who reported a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .85 for the general population and .9 for the patient sample (p. 391).

Because the platforms and Facebook groups used to collect responses are mainly used by individuals seeking as many respondents as quickly as possible, the survey's reliability was increased by adding two control questions (i.e. "Tick 'Strongly disagree' to show you are paying attention" and "Tick 'Somewhat interested' to show you are paying attention"). This was done only after 86 respondents had already filled out the survey when Qualtrics warned for potential bots. From the moment of implementation, respondents who ticked a different scale point for one or both of these questions were excluded from the dataset.

A study's validity depends on "the extent to which an empirical measure adequately reflects the real meaning of the concept under consideration" (Babbie, 2008, p. 160). To increase construct and content validity, the survey was closely evaluated before data collection. This contributed to ensuring the measures used were measuring the desired concepts (Srinivasan & Lohith, 2017, p. 46; Rusticus, 2014, p. 1261). After the data collection, the researcher revised the scales used again and decided to exclude certain measures from the analysis (see Appendix A: Q7; Q10; Q11). While the researcher was mainly interested in the respondents' tendency to negatively compare themselves to FitTok content (as measured by Q8), Q7 rather measured the extent to which respondents engaged in upward vs. downward comparison. Q10 and Q11 were considered to not accurately measure body (dis)satisfaction as argued by the scale's creators. Namely, in retrospect, the researcher

considered it too generalizing to measure body (dis)satisfaction by simply calculating the discrepancy between the respondent's own (Q10) and ideal (Q11) bodies.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, these two items were also not included in the analysis, and only the BAS (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022, p. 8; Avalos et al., 2005, p. 289) (Q9) was used to determine body (dis)satisfaction. Additionally, construct validity was increased by the pilot study, which filtered out any errors and uncertainties.

The NSMCS, BAS, and CES-D Scale are established scales, tested in previous research (e.g. Samra et al., 2022, p. 609; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022, p. 5; Avalos et al., 2005, p. 289; Radloff, 1997, p. 391). Moreover, the wording of some of these scales' items was slightly altered to increase their suitability for the current study, thereby also contributing to the questionnaire's validity. Because only the scales' main concepts of negative social comparison, body appreciation, and depression – rather than their underlying components – were of importance, no factor analyses had to be performed for them.

It is recognized that measuring MH through the CES-D Scale (Radloff, 1977, p. 387) only is limited, as it is a comprehensive concept. However, to prevent the survey from becoming too extensive, the researcher decided to rely on previous studies examining the relationship between social media consumption and MH, which mainly highlighted depression as the indicator of MH (e.g. Samra et al., 2022, p. 607; Feinstein et al., 2013, p. 161; Karim et al., 2020, pp. 5-6).

### ***3.6.2. Interview reliability and validity***

To ensure the reliability of the interview data, the researcher aimed for maximum transparency on how the process was carried out. Besides the detailed description of the sampling and coding process, the researcher's memos and coding book (see Appendix F & G), and interview recordings also offer insight into the methodological process. In the coding book, each code contains a definition. This reveals the logic behind the coding of each fragment, and, thereby, what counts as evidence of what. During the first two interviews, the interviewees were asked for feedback on the topic list. As they did not have any notes, the topic list was considered clear and comprehensive and was not altered. Additionally, the researcher limited herself in steering the interviewees in certain directions and stayed open to

---

<sup>1</sup> To illustrate: if a pregnant female respondent reported a high discrepancy between how she looked at that moment and how she desired to look, this does not necessarily point to actual dissatisfaction. She could have been very happy to be pregnant, and her awareness of her temporary body change might not make her feel dissatisfied with her body.



anything they had to say.

The validity of the interview data was maximized with the help of analytic induction, constant comparison, deviant-case analysis, and comprehensive data treatment. Namely, by constantly comparing the data, and being attentive to deviant cases, the researcher sought “the best fitting theoretical structure” for her data (Boeije, 2010, p. 86).

## 4. Results

The results of both the quantitative and qualitative studies will be discussed to explore the nature of young adults' FitTok consumption, and the effect thereof on their BI and MH. First, a normality check including all variables used in the survey will be discussed. Then, after discussing the nature of the sample's FitTok consumption and perceptions of the "FitTok ideal", both data sets will be assessed to uncover findings related to the possible effects of social comparison caused by FitTok consumption on BI and MH. To explore the impact of the habitus and capital and levels of FitTok consumption on BI and MH, the sample's demographics will be considered.

### 4.1. Assumption check: normality

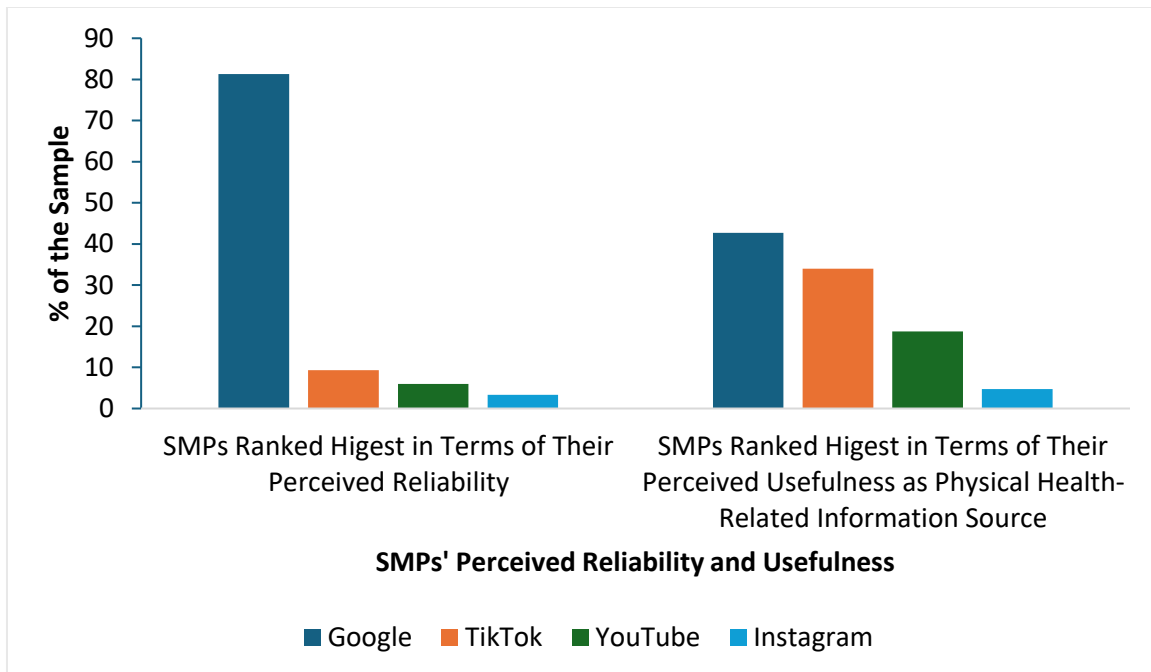
The normality of the data is one of the assumptions for both regression analysis and ANOVA (Pallant, 2016, p. 75). Therefore, the distribution of the data was checked for normality by examining the Skewness and Kurtosis values of each of the variables used in the study. While Skewness indicates the distribution's symmetry, Kurtosis reveals the "peakedness" of the distribution" (Pallant, 2016, p. 75). A perfectly normal distribution of the data would mean that both the Skewness and Kurtosis values are 0. This, however, is rare (Pallant, 2016, pp. 72-73). Therefore, Skewness values between -3 and 3, and Kurtosis values ranging from -10 to 10 were maintained to assess the normality (Griffin & Steinbrecher, 2013, p. 176). The variables' Skewness values ranged from -1.22 to 1.94, and their Kurtosis values from -1.62 to 3.18 (see Appendix H, Table H1). As these values are all within the pre-determined ranges, the distributions were considered normal, and the assumption was met. Additional assumptions specific to linear regression will be discussed later.

### 4.2. Young adults and their use of TikTok in comparison to other SMPs

To examine how young adults experience TikTok as a relatively new addition to the most widely used SMPs available (sub-question 1), a descriptive analysis in SPSS was performed. The respondents were asked to rank YouTube, TikTok, Google, and Instagram 1) from most to least reliable source of information, and 2) from most to least frequently used source of physical health-related content. In terms of reliability, Google was considered the most reliable information source by a majority of 81.3% of the sample ( $N = 150$ ). TikTok followed with 9.3%, YouTube with 6%, and Instagram with 3.3% of the sample placing them first (see Figure 4.1). Half of the respondents reported considering TikTok to be the least reliable information source.

**Figure 4.1**

*Percentages of the Survey Respondents Placing a Specific SMP First in the Ranking of Most Reliable and Most Useful Source of (Physical Health-Related) Information*



Similar conclusions could be drawn from the interview data. Four of the interviewees explicitly questioned and even criticized the reliability of TikTok content, and FitTok content in particular. As Tim (24) argued<sup>2</sup>, for example: “You see [different TikToks conveying opposing information] a lot, and that’s also the danger of TikTok because everyone has a say”. Nina (24) stressed the importance of educating the self well and that she “[doesn’t] think everyone does that”. As an experienced sportsperson who used to participate in competitive bodybuilding, Kim (24) also expressed her worries and said:

What I see going wrong a lot right now, also with influencers and... Young people are actually told so many wrong things, and it’s just the realization of what influence that has on uhm... Ultimately, the health that they will experience for the rest of their lives. ... I can name influencers who really spread so much nonsense on TikTok and Instagram. (Kim, 24)

<sup>2</sup> All interview fragments included in this section, except for those by Frank (18), were translated from Dutch to English.

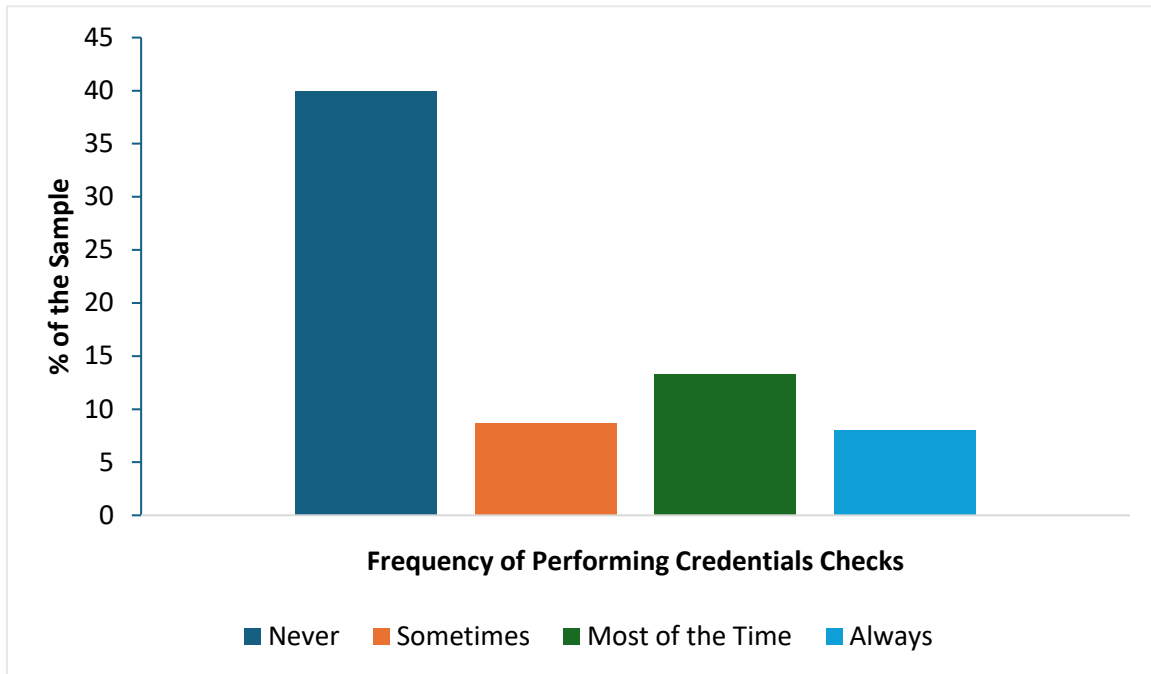
While sharing this concern, Tim (24) also admitted he accepts the data on the platform unconditionally: “Erm, honestly... Yeah, it’s something you have to be honest about. I think I’m certainly not the only one... You pretty easily accept things as true. ... So [blindly accepting things said on TikTok] certainly happened before, yes”. Paul (24) stated feeling rather annoyed by the misinformation spread on FitTok, saying:

I am very annoyed by misinformation ... And I find it very irritating that there is such a rise in natural medicines and homeopathy, and you have to do this, and you have to do that ... based on nonsense. (Paul, 24)

However, while 50% of the survey respondents and most of the interviewees consider TikTok a relatively unreliable information source, a majority of 40% of the respondents said to never check the credentials of fitspiration content creators whose content they consume. 8.7% checked it merely sometimes, only 13.3% reported doing a background check most of the time, and 8% said to always do this (see Figure 4.2). These findings reveal that, while the sample largely acknowledges TikTok’s unreliability, young adults generally do not feel enough concern to do a credentials check. These findings also confirm Dr. Bryant’s concern regarding the unreliability of much fitspiration content and the general lack of background checks performed by social media users (Friedman, 2023).

**Figure 4.2**

*Distribution of the Frequency With Which Survey Respondents Perform Credential Checks on TikTok Fitfluencers*



In line with the survey findings, for some of the interviewees, Google is still a more reliable information source. Three of them stated to often combine (physical health-related) information they find on TikTok with information retrieved from Google. Joya (25) argued:

So, I started looking up [on TikTok], like, when should I use it and how much ....  
And then, after that, I would check Google. So, it was really a combination, that I still used Google to find articles or websites. (Joya, 25)

As a source of physical health-related subjects, the survey respondents also ranked Google highest, with 42.7% placing them at number 1, followed by 34% of the sample placing TikTok first. While YouTube was placed first by 18.7%, Instagram received merely 4.7% of the sample's highest ranking (see Figure 4.1). 24% of the sample considered TikTok to be their least favorite source of fitspiration from the list. Because all eight interviewees were selected based on their high FitTok consumption, most of them considered TikTok their main source of physical health-related information. However, as mentioned previously, Google was viewed as a reliable source to complement the information found on TikTok, which is in line with the survey findings. Additionally, Frank (18) and Paul (24) also mentioned YouTube as a useful information source, especially when they "have the time"

(Frank, 18). While Facebook, Snapchat, and particularly Instagram were referred to as SMPs used mainly for maintaining social relationships, TikTok was considered to serve more as an SMP for individual entertainment and information-seeking. Although also highlighting similarities between Instagram and TikTok (“Reels are basically kind of outdated TikToks”), Frank (18) explained the difference between the two platforms as follows: “Instagram is kind of just there. It’s kind of like a social profile. ... And TikTok is more for entertainment, I think”.

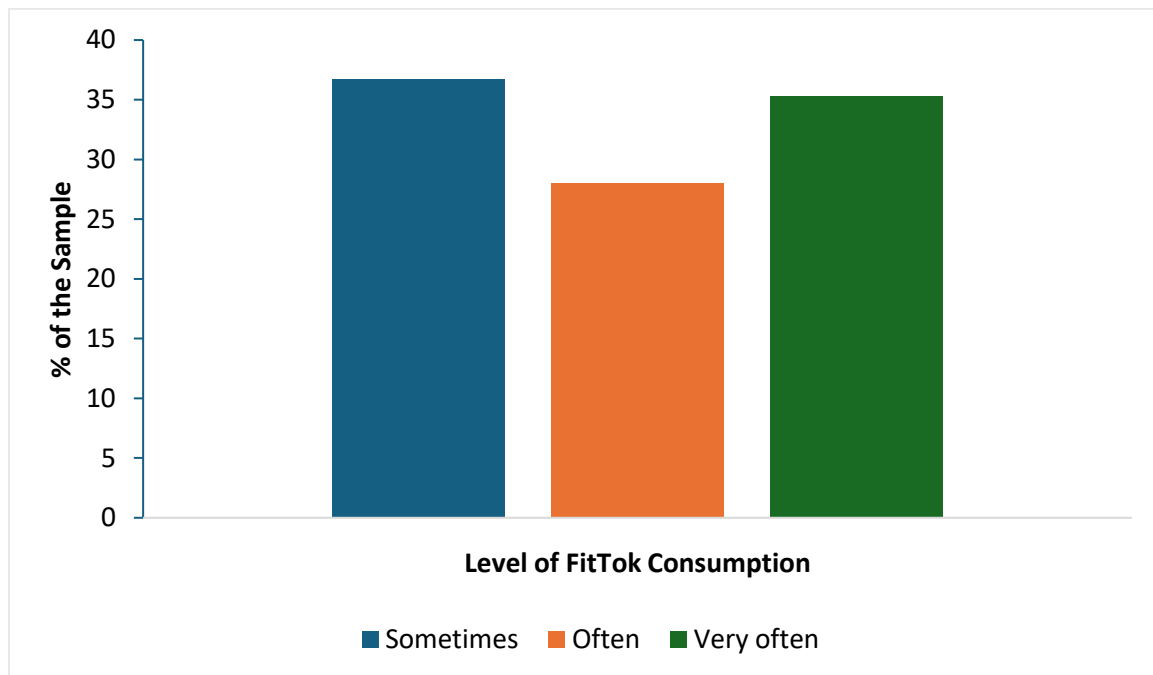
Although a relatively large part of the sample considered TikTok to be their least favorite source of physical health-related information, the SMP did come in second in the ranking with a substantial share of the sample placing TikTok first. As these findings suggest, while young adults still mainly rely on Google, SMPs are also increasingly consulted as sources of information, with TikTok as the most consulted SMP, at least for fitpiration content.

#### **4.3. Young adults’ FitTok consumption**

The survey respondents were asked to indicate their FitTok consumption by choosing from the options sometimes, often, and very often. Whereas a slight majority of 36.7% reported consuming FitTok content sometimes, 35.3% do so very often, and 28% often (see Figure 4.3). The interviewees all indicated consuming FitTok content daily. Although not consuming the content as much anymore because of a decrease in interest in physical health, Tim (24) stated that “back then”, 3 out of 4 TikToks he encountered (daily) were FitTok content. Joya (25) even reported that 80% of her TikToks consumed were “sports videos”.

**Figure 4.3**

*Distribution of the Survey Respondents' Levels of FitTok Consumption*

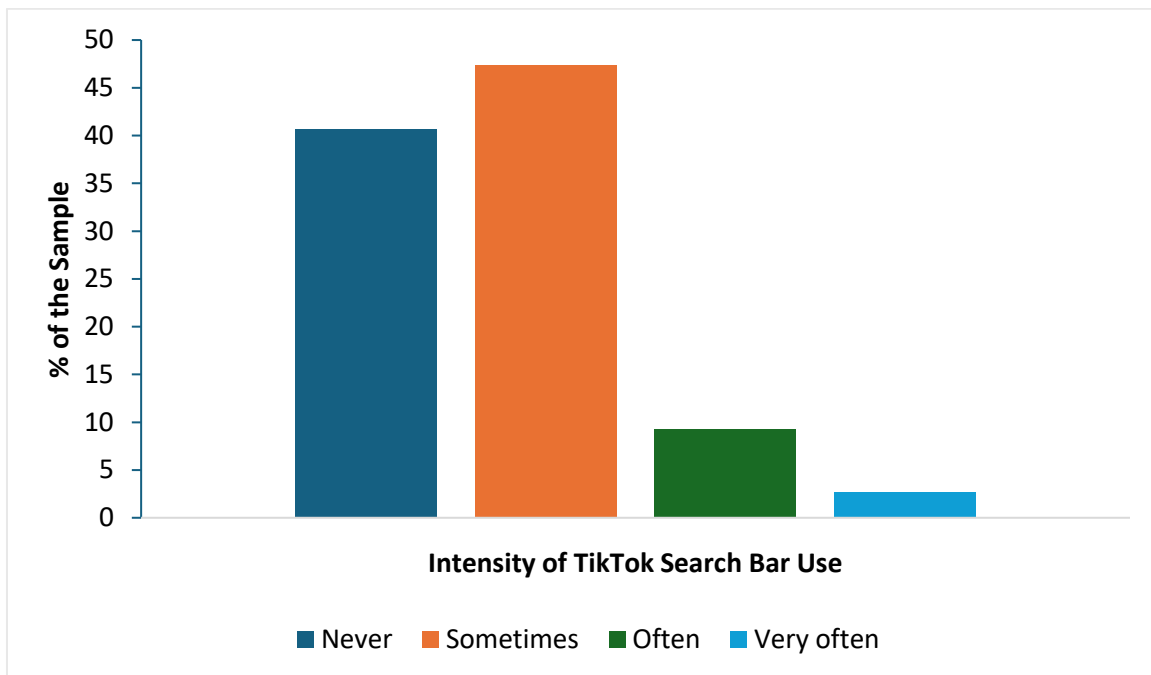


With a percentage of 47.3%, most survey respondents reported using TikTok's search bar sometimes (0-2 times a week), while merely 9.3% said to do so often (2-5 times a week), and 2.7% very often (5+ times a week). 40.7% stated to never use the search bar (see Figure 4.4). Whereas Frank (18) stated never using the search bar, four of the interviewees reported doing so sometimes to effectively search for information. As Joya (25) described:

Well, now, with running, I was looking at if I want to try those kinds of gels, so I started looking up what kinds of gels people use, and how they use them. I search for these things via the search bar. (Joya, 25)

**Figure 4.4**

*Distribution of the Survey Respondents' Intensity of Their Use of the TikTok Search Bar*



However, the interviewees reported mainly encountering FitTok content via their personalized For You Page, therewith also explaining their understanding of the platform's algorithmic workings. Five of the interviewees reported considering their For You Page to be mostly filled with content about matters that interest them in their offline lives. Tim (24) said about this:

But I also notice that my algorithm changes according to the life phase I'm in. So uhm, I used to work out a lot, which is when I encountered a lot of food TikToks. And now, yeah, I work out less in my spare time (laughs) ...So I notice that my TikTok is a bit more, uhm, funny, and... A lot of funny videos. (Tim, 24)

For the interviewees, reasons for watching FitTok content ranged from amusement to education, but most referred to FitTok content as inspiring and motivating. When asked to describe the feelings sparked in her by FitTok content, Lola (25) said: "... Inspired is also a good word, I think. Yeah, ... you see videos, you think 'Oh that's fun, I'll try that'. Yeah, in that sense, the videos inspire me." In line with that, Nina (24) argued:

And if I can't think of what I want to do by myself... Yeah, that's also a reason to just look it up and be like 'OK, you know, you make it up for me, then I'll perform it'. And that's really the positive side of it. (Nina, 24)



All interviewees indicated often saving FitTok videos to use them during their workouts. Amber (23), for example, illustrated: “Yes, I do indeed save them to use them later with a friend of mine, and then I’ll say ‘Let’s try that’ or ‘That seems like a good thing to do’”. Lola (25) explains her use of FitTok content as “a way of adding things [to her own routine] or things to vary”.

In terms of sponsored FitTok content, a majority of 40% of the respondents reported almost never having intentions to purchase the products advertised to them. 31.3% stated having these intentions sometimes, 20.7% never, and 8% often (see Figure 4.5). Three of the interviewees, however, stated being easily influenced by sponsored FitTok content. Three others reported sometimes feeling tempted to purchase advertised products and two of them argued (almost) never desiring to do so. Additionally, an assessment of how often the survey respondents feel like they could not afford the products advertised to them via FitTok content revealed that a majority of 55% felt like that sometimes, 43% almost never, 28% never, and 24% often (see Figure 4.6). While most interviewees said to rarely experience such a feeling, for Amber (23), sponsored FitTok content can spark feelings of annoyance:

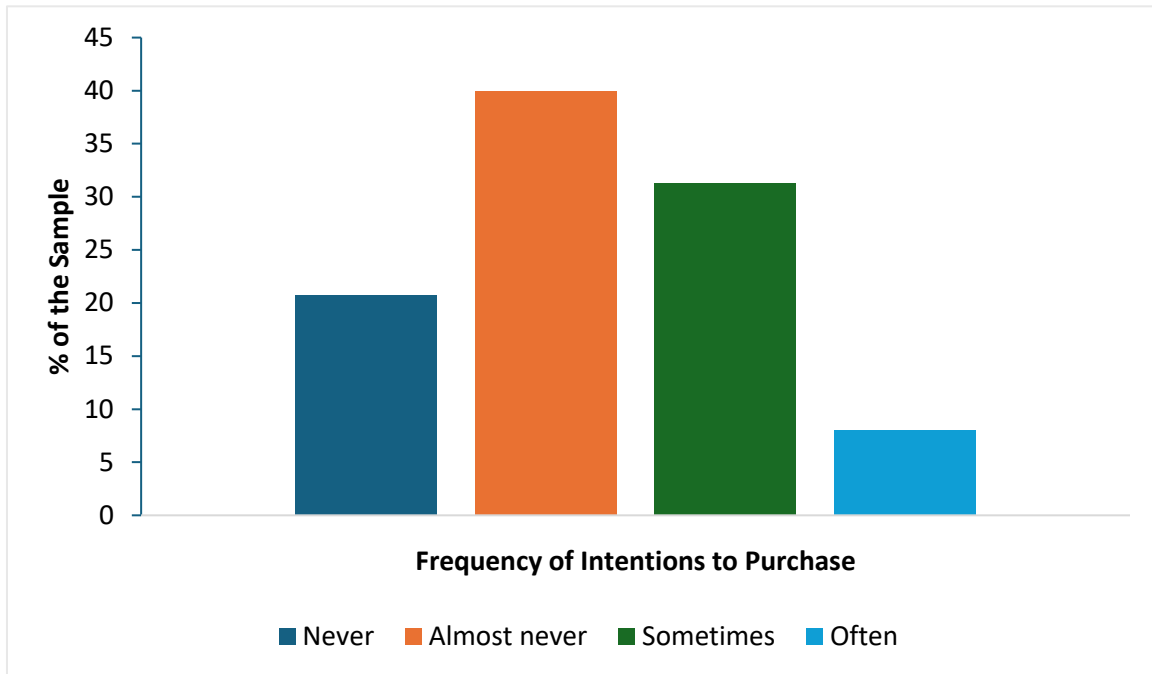
I’m like ‘Yes, I don’t really have any money’, but they are constantly advertising it, constantly keeping it in front of my face, so to speak. So I can find that very annoying, yes. That I’m like ‘If only I had the money’. (Amber, 23)

The interviewees also expressed some skepticism toward sponsored FitTok content, mainly related to the trustworthiness of the information spread in the videos. Frank (18) generally wonders “how much [FitTok content creators] made from this video”. Tim (24) thinks there is certain dishonesty about the content as he believes that “if you pay someone enough, they’ll say anything”.

As their limited trust in (sponsored) FitTok content and TikTok content in general already suggests, the interviewees do not perceive TikTok and FitTok as purely advantageous. Their negative experiences with and perceptions of FitTok content will be discussed next.

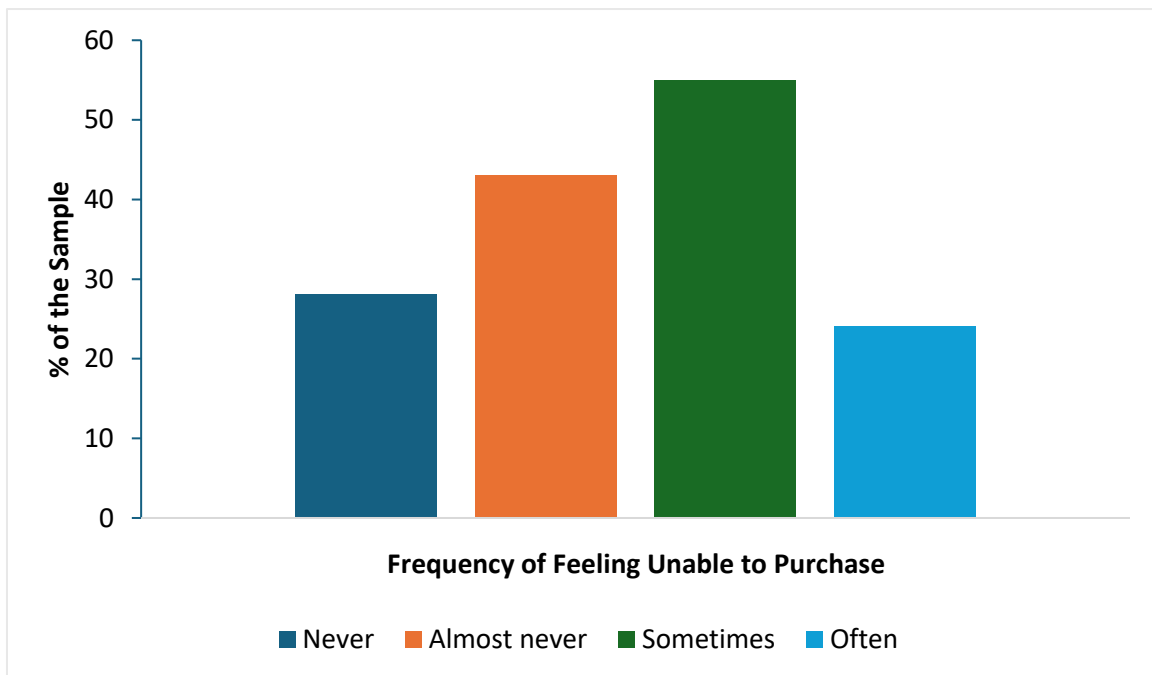
**Figure 4.5**

*Distribution of the Frequency of Survey Respondents' Intentions to Purchase Products Advertised to Them by Fitfluencers*



**Figure 4.6**

*Distribution of the Frequency With Which Survey Respondents Feel Unable to Purchase Products Advertised to Them by Fitfluencers*



#### 4.4. The unrealistic FitTok ideal

The interviewees highlighted several dominant body and life standards portrayed in FitTok content. Terms that were repeatedly mentioned regarding the dominating female body ideal were “solid buttocks” (Nina, 23) or similar, “flat belly” (Tim, 24), “tight waist” (Lola, 25), and “thin, but muscular in the right places” (Amber, 23). Joya (25) reported encountering two different body standards in her FitTok content; that of the running- and gym physique. She said about this:

Erm, well, I think that right now, there’s a bit more variety, because right now, I see both gym videos and running videos, and people who run have a different physique than people who just go to the gym. So I think that that’s somewhat less at the moment, that there’s not one dominant [body standard]. (Joya, 25)

The male physique dominating FitTok was also described as consisting of two kinds of ideals: that of “a Greek god” (Paul, 24) and that of “getting big” (Frank, 18). Whereas the former is described as looking “athletic” (Frank, 18; Tim, 24) and “aesthetic” (Paul, 24), the latter is more about “pushing your body and taking in as many calories as possible and getting big” (Frank, 18). In the end, however, the ideal “does come down to being very muscular” (Paul, 24).

Another recurring theme was that of the unrealistic FitTok ideal, in terms of both body and life(style) standards. Kim (24), who used to struggle with her body and lifestyle after finishing her bodybuilding process, expressed her worries by referring to the images sketched in FitTok content as “not sustainable”, and yet “glorified”. Joya (25), Amber (23), and Paul (24) also emphasized experiencing feelings of skepticism toward FitTok content caused by the lack of realism of the images portrayed in the videos. As Paul (24) explained:

Uhm, and with that whole image of inspiring videos that are like ‘I did this and now I look like this’ ... a certain image of the muscular physique is drawn, uhm... Of the large, toned body as something that can be achieved by everyone, and I think that’s an unrealistic image because everyone has a different personal limit .... (Paul, 24)

These perceptions reveal the interviewees’ recognition of the effect of symbolic capital gained by online visibility as described by Piroddi (2022, p. 337). Namely, while considering the body ideals and life standards portrayed in FitTok content as unrealistic and unsustainable, they also recognize their power caused by their online influence (Piroddi, 2022, p. 337; Bourdieu, 2000, p. 204).

Because of the unrealism portrayed in FitTok content, Amber (23) expressed a specific interest in FitTok content that is also “showing that part, reality, that also shows that people sometimes also just eat crisps on the couch ...”. According to her, this can help put that portrayed perfect image into perspective. In her statement, Festinger’s (1954) hypothesis that individuals compare themselves more easily to others whom they consider similar shines through (p. 120). Namely, Amber (23) feels greater relatability to FitTok content creators who also show the more realistic sides of their lives.

#### **4.5. The (mediating) effect of social comparison caused by the FitTok ideal**

The sample was also asked to indicate their experiences with social comparison (sub-question 2). Whereas the focus of the survey questions was on negative social comparison only, the interviews touched upon both negative and positive social comparison. An analysis of the data sets revealed three main themes, related to experiences of negative social comparison, a decrease of negative social comparison, and experiences of positive social comparison. After a brief description of the additional necessary assumption checks, each of the themes will be elaborately discussed.

##### **4.5.1. Assumption check: mediation analyses (survey data)**

Two mediation analyses were performed in SPSS, meaning that for both DVs (BI and MH) three regression analyses were performed ( $X \rightarrow Y$ ,  $X \rightarrow M$ , and  $X + M \rightarrow Y$ ). To meet the assumptions of linear regression, the variable FitTok consumption was transformed from categorical to continuous first. To do this, three dummy variables were created: FTCSometimes, FTCOften, and FTCVeryOften. The regressions were conducted using FTCSometimes and FTCVeryOften as the IVs, thereby assessing the highest and lowest reported FitTok consumption.

As another assumption of linear regression, the absence of multicollinearity was also tested. With a VIF value of 1.46 for FTCSometimes, 1.48 for FTCVeryOften, and 1.01 for negative social comparison, multicollinearity was ruled out, meaning that the assumption was met (Pallant, 2016, p. 178).

Finally, the data was checked for linearity. As two Means tests revealed, while negative social comparison had a linear relationship with both BI ( $p < .001$ ) and MH ( $p < .001$ ), FitTok consumption did not have a linear relationship with either BI ( $p = .843$ ) or MH ( $p = .123$ ). Thus, some evidence that the linearity assumption is violated was found. However, as the other assumptions were met and the data set was relatively large, the analyses were pursued. This does mean that the results should be interpreted with some caution.

#### **4.5.2. Negative social comparison, body image, and mental health**

For both of the mediation analyses, the direct relationships between FTCSometimes and FTCVeryOften and the DVs (BI and MH) were assessed first. This effect was found to be nonsignificant for both BI,  $F(2, 147) = 1,67, p = .193, R^2 = .02$ , and MH,  $F(2, 147) = 1.42, R^2 = .02$ . This deviates from Thai et al.'s (2023) suggestion that lower social media use can lower body image concerns (p. 1), and Davis and Goldfield's (2024) findings that suggest a reduction of depressive symptoms for individuals who lower their SMP use (p. 1). Hence, these findings weaken H1 and H2.

Next, the effect of the two IVs (FTCSometimes and FTCVeryOften) on the mediator was tested. This model was also found to be statistically nonsignificant,  $F(2, 147) = .81, p = .448, R^2 = .01$ , thereby suggesting a need to debunk H3. Because no significant effect of FitTok consumption on the mediator was found, a mediation effect of negative social comparison in the relationship between FitTok consumption and BI and MH was ruled out. This finding is not in line with previous research assessing the relationship between social media use, BI, and MH, which confirmed the mediating effect of social comparison (e.g. Pedalino & Camerini, 2022, p. 8; Dignard, 2017, pp. 82-83; Samra et al., 2022, p. 161; Feinstein et al., 2013, p. 168), and indicates a rejection of H6 and H7.

To further explore the effects of FitTok consumption and negative social comparison on BI and MH, however, two multiple regression analyses, using the former two as the IVs and the latter two as the DVs, were performed. Both the BI-model,  $F(3, 146) = 10.25, p < .001, R^2 = .17$ , and the MH-model,  $F(3, 146) = 12.84, R^2 = .21$ , were found to be statistically significant. For the model using BI as the DV, FTCSometimes ( $\beta = .15, p = .101$ ) and FTCVeryOften ( $\beta = -.015, p = .870$ ) were not found to be significant predictors of BI, but negative social comparison was ( $\beta = -.39, p < .001$ ) (see Table 4.1). A visual overview of the relationships tested can be found in the path analysis model in Figure 4.7 below. These results on the one hand indicate that FitTok consumption does not significantly affect one's body satisfaction score. On the other hand, the coefficient for negative social comparison suggests that a higher score on the negative social comparison scale is related to lower body satisfaction/body image, which supports H4. For the MH-model, then, whereas FTCSometimes ( $\beta = .04, p = .679$ ) was not found to be a significant predictor for MH outcomes, FTCVeryOften ( $\beta = .20, p = .026$ ) and negative social comparison ( $\beta = .44, p < .001$ ) were (see Table 4.2). These relationships are visualized in Figure 4.8. As these findings suggest, individuals who consume FitTok content very often (in comparison to individuals consuming the content merely sometimes or often) generally score higher on the CES-D

Scale, meaning that they generally experience worse MH. In the assessment of the direct effect of FitTok consumption on MH, no significant effect was found. However, when adding negative social comparison to the model, this effect *was* found to be significant, albeit only for FTCSometimes. Additionally, individuals who score higher on the negative social comparison scale also score higher on the CES-D Scale, thus experiencing worse MH. This finding, then, supports H5.

Although the variable of negative social comparison is not a mediator as was hypothesized, the statistical significance of the variable does suggest its importance in the relationship between FitTok consumption, BI, and MH. Namely, as these findings suggest, negative social comparison has to be considered a control variable in the assessment of these relationships, meaning that it can be used to control for confounding variables. A further explanation of the implications of this finding will be given in Chapter 5.

**Table 4.1**

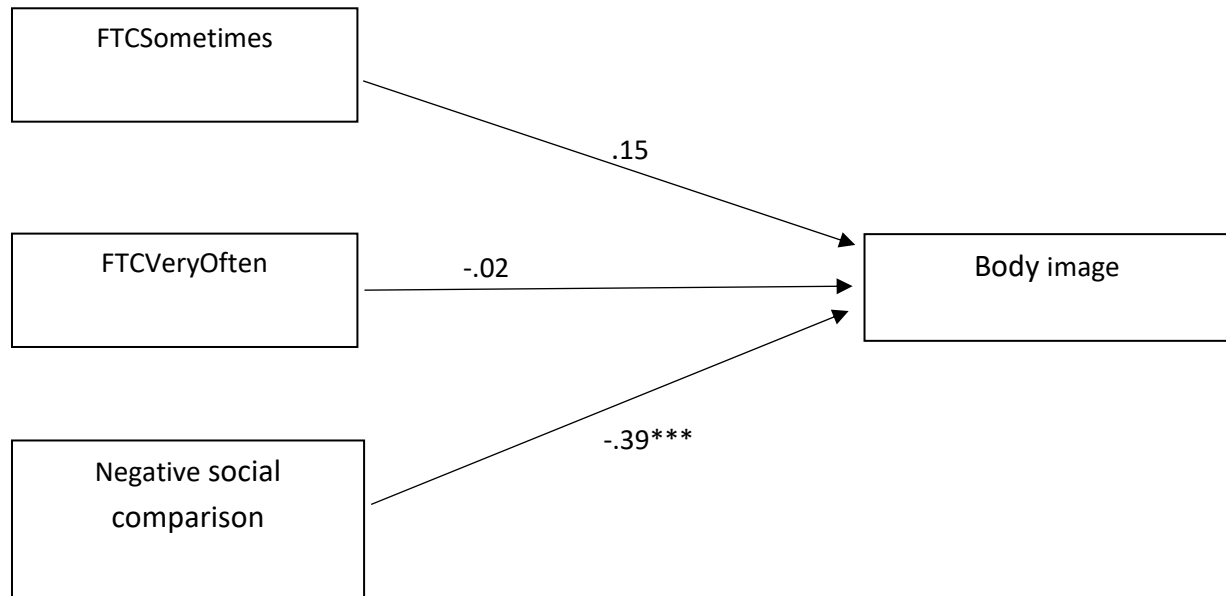
*Multiple Regression Analysis: The Effects of FitTok Consumption and Negative Social Comparison on Body Image*

Variable	Beta	SE	95% CI		$\beta$	p
			LL	UL		
FTCSometimes	1.57	.95	-.31	3.45	.15	.101
FTCVeryOften	-.16	.96	-2.06	1.74	-.02	.870
Negative social comparison	-.40	.08	-.55	-.25	-.39	< .001

*Note.* CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

**Figure 4.7**

*Path Analysis Model of Associations Between FitTok Consumption, Negative Social Comparison, and Body Image*



*Note.* The path analysis shows associations between FitTok consumption (using dummy variables FTCSometimes and FTCVeryOften) and negative social comparison, and BI as measured with a multiple regression analysis. Coefficients presented are standardized linear regression coefficients. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.2**

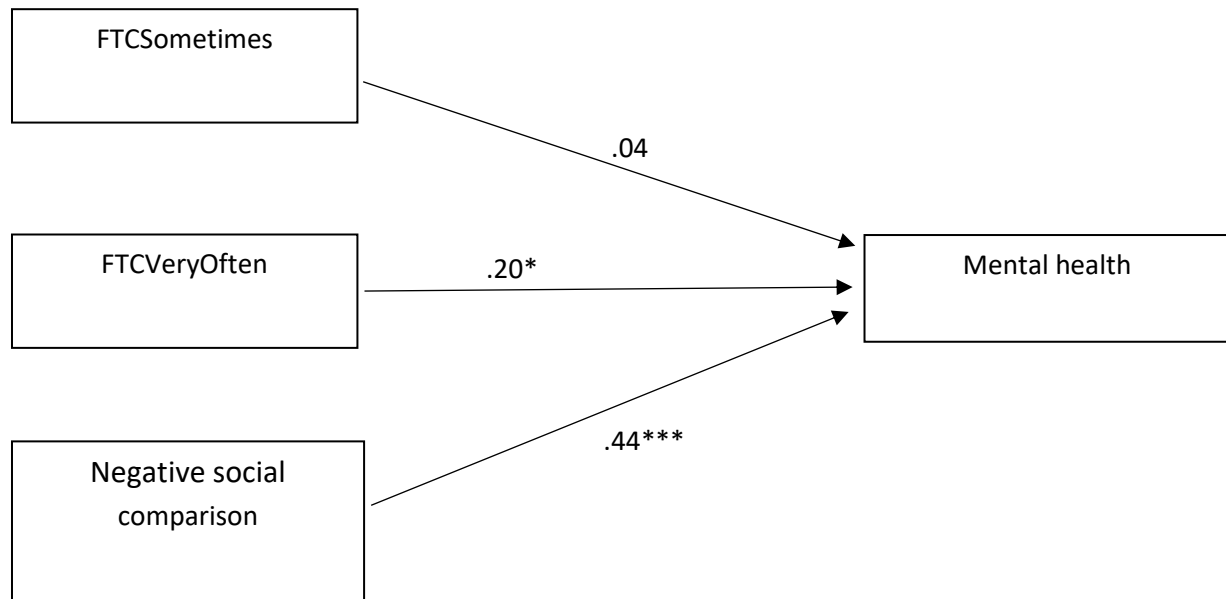
*Multiple Regression Analysis: The Effects of FitTok Consumption and Negative Social Comparison on Mental Health*

Variable	Beta	SE	95% CI		$\beta$	p
			LL	UL		
FTCSometimes	.51	1.23	-1.92	2.94	.04	.679
FTCVeryOften	2.80	1.24	.34	5.26	.20	.026
Negative social comparison	.59	.10	.39	.79	.44	< .001

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

**Figure 4.8**

*Path Analysis Model of Associations Between FitTok Consumption, Negative Social Comparison, and Mental Health*



Note. The path analysis shows associations between FitTok consumption (using dummy variables FTCSometimes and FTCVeryOften) and negative social comparison, and MH as measured with a multiple regression analysis. The coefficients presented are standardized linear regression coefficients. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The interview findings on negative social comparison partially support and deviate from these survey findings. Namely, while most of the interviewees did not experience worsened BI and/or MH due to negative social comparison to FitTok content, most of them did report engaging in acts of negative social comparison, or at least recognized its existence and possible effects. Joya (25), Lola (25), and Paul (24) all reported feelings of negative self-evaluation and/or self-improvement caused by FitTok content. Lola (25), for example, is certain that FitTok content can influence individuals' self-esteem and body image: "Yes, I'm pretty sure about that. Erm... It's already the case for me, and I'm pretty satisfied with my body, so I don't worry too much. ...". While Joya (25) admitted sometimes – especially depending on her daily emotional state – feeling jealousy towards females in FitTok content, she said to also increasingly be able to "think, like, 'they are TikTokers who have nothing else



to do than work out”’, thereby distancing herself from negative forms of comparison. Paul (24) compares himself to others in FitTok content, but, as he argued:

For me it's just that I think ‘Oh yes, maybe I need to try even harder to be a bit more trained’, but it’s not like... It's not that it bothers me or anything, it's not that I think about it. (Paul, 24)

Thus, these three interviewees all recognized the presence of negative social comparison but reported not letting it affect their BI and/or MH.

Amber (23), then, admitted generally experiencing high levels of negative social comparison to the individuals in FitTok content in the form of self-evaluation and self-improvement. She referred to FitTok content as very contradictory, as it can inspire her but also often decreases her self-image, even to the extent that it has caused problems in her relationship with her boyfriend. She believes that this high sense of comparison is caused by the high time spent consuming the content, resulting in constant exposure to the “perfect body” (Amber, 23). This is in line with Thai et al.’s (2023) idea that lowering one’s social media use could also reduce negative social comparison and the internalization of certain body ideals (p. 4). When she was still actively training for her bodybuilding competition, Kim (24) also experienced extreme negative social comparison caused by FitTok content, sparking feelings of negative self-image and stress in her:

... but I also know that when you’re involved in something toxic like bodybuilding, it really causes a lot of negative stress, like ‘I need to be even drier’, ‘I need to eat even less’. That side is also very much to it. (Kim, 24)

Frank (18), Nina (24), and Tim (24), on the other hand, all reported that although they recognize the possible negative effects of social comparison, they never negatively compare themselves to FitTok content. On the one hand, Frank (18) believes that comparison caused by FitTok content “can be very demoralizing”, especially for “a person who’s insecure about their body”. When asked if he thinks the idealized body shapes on TikTok are harmful to people, he said:

Uhm, I think yes, for maybe especially people who maybe don’t like doing sports or maybe don’t have like the ideal body shape would maybe feel like forced to do it because of, in terms of society and the way that people are like, find people attractive, or something like that. (Frank, 18)

On the other hand, however, when asked about his own experience with negative social comparison, he denied it and said: “There’s more important stuff than I would be demoralized by FitTok”. Nina (24) attributes her absence of upward or downward social comparison to being content with herself:

I like myself the way I am (laughs). So yeah, no, I don’t really do that [comparing herself to individuals in FitTok content]. And I also don’t really feel the need to look at others in the gym, and think ‘Oh they’re better or worse than I am’. (Nina, 24)

Like Frank (18), Nina (24) does also recognize the possibility of negative social comparison, especially for women.

#### ***4.5.3. Decreasing negative social comparison caused by FitTok content***

Several of the interviewees mentioned certain matters they believe to contribute to a limitation of their feelings of negative social comparison. Joya (25), Amber (23), and Lola (25), for example, all believed that content by a FitTok content creator whose life is too different from their own limits their feelings of negative social comparison. Amber (23) explained: “I can compare myself to [a more realistic, less extreme life] more than [to] someone who lives such an extreme life indeed”. Lola (25) said: “See, you compare yourself much easier with someone if you kind of live the same lives, I think”. Here again, one can recognize Festinger’s (1954) hypothesis where he argued that individuals tend to compare themselves more with those whom they consider similar to them (p. 120).

Joya (25) and Paul (24) stated that staying realistic about your own abilities can also contribute to a lower sense of negative social comparison. For example, after suffering an injury, Paul (24) drew certain conclusions for himself:

Like, the more you push your limits and your body... And take risks with your body, the greater the risk of injuries. Then I thought ‘Yes, it is nice to be stronger, but yes, you have to see what is sensible and also accept at a certain point what your limits are’. (Paul, 24)

When asked about the best strategies to maintain a healthy relationship with FitTok content, most of the interviewees also highlighted the importance of staying realistic and being able to put things into perspective. When asked about it, Nina (24) recommended:

Erm, yeah, mainly to stay realistic. ... So reality can be very different than what you see on the screen. Yeah, and what works for one person might not work for the other.

... I think it's really also reality, and what works for you, and what you're OK with, and what's enough for you. (Nina, 24)

After being very prone to negative social comparison for quite some time, Kim (24) now also knows the value of being realistic about what is doable for her:

Look, I now know very well for myself that some people also work as content creators and they have the time to do things like that... Uh, look, I work full-time, I want to exercise because I enjoy it, and try to find a kind of middle ground in that and that is also what I keep up with now. (Kim, 24)

Frank (18) and Tim (24) mainly emphasized issues of self-acceptance, such as being at peace with the self, listening to the self, and appreciating the self. Other, more practical strategies mentioned included decreasing one's FitTok consumption, blocking or unfollowing people that negatively affect BI and/or MH, and following the right people (i.e. "people who are specialists in their field" (Kim, 24)). Nina (24) and Lola (25) reported simply knowing how to distance themselves from comparison to others because they prefer their own way of living a healthy life.

#### ***4.5.4. Positive social comparison fueled by FitTok content***

Arguably even more widely experienced by the interviewees, are feelings of positive social comparison sparked by FitTok content. When asked to describe how they feel about FitTok content in three words, seven of them included either "motivated", "inspired", or both. This is partially in line with Pasko and Arigo's (2021) finding that higher (intentional) fitspiration consumption increases motivation to be physically active, moderated by social comparison orientation (pp. 8; 12). All interviewees, each having a special interest in fitspiration, reported feeling motivated either to be more physically active, to eat more healthily, or both, by comparing their physiques and lives to those portrayed on FitTok. Lola (25), for example, reported considering FitTok motivational on bad days: "...but if I see those videos, it does give me the motivation to be like 'Yes, when I go for it now, it will be OK, and I'll feel better'". In referring to food-related content, Tim (24) stated: "Yes, for me it's a kind of education; 'Oh, he eats that, so I could also try that sometime'. In that way, it does motivate me, yes."

In line with the motivation fueled by social comparison to FitTok content, two of the interviewees also more explicitly touched upon a sense of positive self-evaluation and self-improvement sparked by it (Krayner et al., 2008, p. 2). For example, when asked about his

FitTok consumption, Paul (24) said: "... well, maybe I think to myself, 'OK, hey, they can do it, so it must be possible for me to be even better... To be able to do this better in the gym'". Kim (24) said something similar about her newly developed interest in running: "But I do have to admit that I'm now very easily influenced by those types of aesthetic videos and then I think 'Oh that's fun to do', so then I want to do it myself (laughs)". For almost all of the interviewees, the positive feelings evoked by FitTok seemed to dominate the negative ones. These reported motivational feelings confirm Collins' (1996) argument that individuals often seek upward social comparison to improve themselves (p. 67).

#### **4.6. The habitus, capital, FitTok consumption, and body image and mental health**

To investigate the effect of the habitus (gender and age) and capital (education level) on the relationship between FitTok consumption and BI and MH (sub-question 3), both data sets were consulted. Relevant findings will be discussed next.

##### ***4.6.1. (Survey) data preparation***

To analyze the survey data, six two-way between-group analyses of variance were conducted; three using BI as the DV, and three using MH as the DV.

Before performing the ANOVAs, the variables gender, age, and education level were transformed into binary dummy variables. Gender was divided into "Female" and "Non-female". While "Female" included female participants only, the "Non-female" group consisted of respondents who identified as male, non-binary, or those who preferred not to say. As merely one respondent responded with "Non-binary" and none with "Prefer not to say", merging them with the male group was no issue. The continuously measured age variable was transformed into a categorical variable, divided into two groups: "Younger young adults ( $\leq 23$ )" and "Older young adults (24+)". Finally, the education level variable was divided into the groups "Lower education" (high school & MBO) and "Higher education" (HBO, University Bachelor's Degree, University Master's Degree & PhD or higher).

##### ***4.6.2. The effect of habitus and capital in the relationship between FitTok consumption, body image, and mental health***

The first three two-way ANOVAs explored the impact of gender, age, and education level in combination with FitTok consumption on BI. An ANOVA to assess the effects of gender and FitTok consumption on BI revealed a nonsignificant interaction effect between FitTok consumption and gender,  $F(2, 144) = .17, p = .847$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .00$ . This means that no significant difference in the effect of FitTok consumption on BI for females and non-

females was found. The interaction effect between FitTok consumption and age was also found to be nonsignificant,  $F(2, 144) = 1.21, p = .301$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ . Finally, a nonsignificant effect of education level was found,  $F(2, 144) = .88, p = .419$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ . See Appendix I, Tables I1-I3 for the corresponding means and standard deviations.

The same analyses were performed for the DV MH. Again, none of the models were found to be significant. Namely, gender:  $F(2, 144) = .86, p = .426$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ ; age:  $F(2, 144) = .12, p = .884$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .00$ ; education level:  $F(2, 144) = .89, p = .411$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ . See Appendix I, tables I4-I6 for the corresponding means and standard deviations. Thus, for both BI and MH, differences in gender, age, and education level did not impact the effect of FitTok consumption on the DVs.

Drawing generalizable conclusions about the impact of demographic factors on the relationship between the interviewees' FitTok consumption and BI and MH is difficult. While several of the interviewees believed that age and gender can impact the effect of negative social comparison, they did not mention any concrete examples. For example, Joya (25), Paul (24), and Lola (25) all believed that younger individuals could be affected by it more intensely. Tim (24), Nina (24), and Lola (25) felt that negative social comparison caused by FitTok content and the effects thereof are more intense for females. Lola (25) argued:

But if you're 14/15, yeah then, erm... What people think about you is really important at that age, so if you see girls ... on the internet who talk about a certain body ideal, then those girls probably want that too. (Lola, 25)

As this reveals, most evidence suggests a nonsignificant effect of gender, age, and education level on the relationship between FitTok consumption and BI and MH, and thereby a rejection of H8-H13. This, then, deviates from Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice (p. 101). A further reflection of this will follow in the discussion, succeeding this section.

## 5. Discussion

Central to the current study was the research question “*How does regular exposure to FitTok’s idealized body and life standards affect young adults’ body image and mental health?*” As both the survey and interview data suggest, it cannot be argued that different levels of regular FitTok consumption (ranging from sometimes to very often) directly affect levels of body satisfaction (BI) on the one hand, and depressive symptoms (MH) on the other ( $\neq$  H1 & H2). As statistical analyses of the survey data also revealed, differences in gender, age, and education level did not significantly impact the effect of young adults’ FitTok consumption on their BI and MH ( $\neq$  H8-H13). Some of the interviewees, however, reported believing younger and female individuals to be more prone to negative social comparison to FitTok content and its effects on BI and/or MH. This interview data shows some, although not very convincing support for H8, H9, H10, and H11.

Because no significant effect of FitTok consumption on negative social comparison was found during a statistical analysis of the survey data ( $\neq$  H3), no mediating effect of negative social comparison as hypothesized, was possible ( $\neq$  H6 & H7). However, multiple regression did reveal an effect of online negative social comparison on BI and MH, thereby suggesting the variable’s importance as a control variable in the relationship between FitTok consumption and young adults’ BI and MH. This quantitative finding is in support of H4 and H5. While most of the interviewees – all having a high FitTok consumption – reported not experiencing actual BI and/or MH issues caused by negative social comparisons to FitTok content, they did recognize the feeling of negatively comparing the self to the content, or at least recognized its existence and possible effects of it for individuals’ BI and MH. These findings partially support, but also deviate from the survey data, as the effects of negative social comparison on their BI and MH were considered quite limited by most of the interviewees. Therefore, the qualitative data arguably only partially supports the quantitative findings regarding H4 and H5.

At least as important for drawing conclusions and formulating an answer to the central research question is a discussion of the interviewees’ experiences with positive social comparison. All eight interviewees reported often feeling inspired and/or motivated by FitTok content. For most of the interviewees, these positive effects were arguably even more present than the hypothesized negative ones. While not directly asked to indicate how these positive feelings affect their BI and MH, their descriptions of the inspirational and motivational effects suggested a rather positive impact on their overall mood.

To conclude, it can be argued that while there is no proof that higher levels of FitTok consumption directly lead to an increase in body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms, both negative and positive comparisons to the ideals portrayed in the content affect outcomes related to young adults' BI and MH. To come to this conclusion, several sub-questions were explored. Next, the most important findings drawn from exploring these questions will be highlighted while also discussing their theoretical and societal implications.

## **5.1. Theoretical implications**

### ***5.1.1. How young adults use TikTok as a source of information***

First, an assessment of young adults' perceptions of TikTok as a source of information was performed. Although this did not directly contribute to answering the main research question, it was deemed important for gaining insights into the background against which the rest of the findings had to be understood. It explored the extent to which young adults are using TikTok as their main source of (physical health-related) information. Findings by Adobe Express (2024) emphasize the growing importance of TikTok as a search engine, popular especially among Gen Z. Something similar was suggested by Google's Senior Vice President Raghavan when he said that 40% of the young individuals seeking specific information now use TikTok or Instagram instead of Google (2022). These conclusions indicate the growing reliance on TikTok for information-seeking, thereby maybe even transcending Google. With TikTok finishing as the second most preferred source of physical health-related information, thereby directly following Google, and almost all interviewees reporting TikTok to be their main source of fitspiration content, the data of the current study partially supports these suggestions. However, roughly 1 in 4 of the survey respondents reported TikTok to be their *least* favorite source of fitspiration-related information, and both a majority of the survey respondents and several interviewees underlined their remaining dependence on Google for more reliable information. The survey and interview data thus nevertheless emphasize that overstating TikTok's importance as a source of information would be incorrect, at least for the current sample, at this point in time. The respondents' reported limited use of TikTok's search bar, available for intentional searches, also underscores this. Although not opposing Adobe's and Google's findings, these findings do offer a slightly more nuanced and arguably more realistic image of the current situation.

While keeping these findings in mind, the exploration of the effects of FitTok consumption – ranging from sometimes to very often for the survey respondents and equaling

daily for the interviewees – on BI and MH in young adults was continued. The impact of online social comparison is assessed next.

### ***5.1.2. The role of social comparison in young adults' FitTok consumption***

As discussed previously, several existing studies have suggested a mediating effect of social comparison on the relationship between SMP consumption and fitspiration content in particular and outcomes related to BI and MH (e.g. Samra et al., 2022, p. 161; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022, p. 8; Dignard, 2017, pp. 82-83). Based on these prior findings, several hypotheses were formulated to guide (mainly) the statistical analyses performed in the current study. Because social comparison was operationalized by employing Samra et al.'s (2022) Negative Social Media Comparison Scale (p. 613), merely the level of negative social comparison was measured for the survey respondents. Hence, the survey and interview findings could be juxtaposed only with regard to the presence of negative social comparison, rather than also on the subject of positive social comparison. A cross-check interpretation of the results of both studies revealed a multifaceted relationship between FitTok consumption, negative social comparison, and BI and MH in young adults.

As briefly mentioned already, negative social comparison was found to be an important control variable rather than a mediating variable in the relationship between FitTok consumption and BI and MH, according to the survey data. This means that in the current study, negative social comparison has to be considered not to necessarily mediate, or, carry forward the effect of FitTok consumption on BI and MH, but rather to affect BI and MH separately from FitTok consumption. In other words, negative social comparison has to be included as a variable to control for confounding variables. Confounding variables are unaccounted variables that affect/distort the relationship between the independent and dependent variables under examination (Pallant, 2016, p. 145). Thus, not accounting for negative social comparison when assessing the relationship between FitTok consumption and BI and MH would mean drawing distorted and inaccurate conclusions. In partial support of this, the interviewees all believed that the FitTok ideal could generally fuel negative social comparisons, thereby contributing to individuals' worsened moods. The interviewees did, however, consider the often unrealistic nature of this ideal to contribute to a decrease in the overall comparison due to a lack of relatability, which is in line with Festinger's (1954) hypothesis on the role of relatability in comparisons (p. 120).

When comparing these findings with previous studies assessing the effect of SMP use on BI- and MH-related outcomes, the current findings deviate from the existing body of



literature in that social comparison was not found to mediate this relationship. While Samra et al. (2022, p. 611), Pedalino and Camerini (2022, p. 1), and Dignard (2017, pp. 59-60) all found forms of social comparison to mediate the relationship between SMP use and BI- and MH-related outcomes of some sort, the current study denies any form of mediation for negative social comparison. One explanation for this deviation could be the differing nature of the independent variable assessed. All assessing the effect of SMP use on BI or MH in one way or another, Samra et al. focused on the effect of problematic social media use (p. 611), Pedalino and Camerini on the effect of different kinds of Instagram use (i.e. browsing, commenting, and posting) (p. 5), and Dignard on the consumption of fitspiration content vs. travel images on Instagram (p. 60). As their results reveal, for each of these forms of SMP use, social comparison was a mediating factor in their effect on either BI or MH. It could be argued, then, that the effect of FitTok consumption, as a specific kind of SMP consumption, is not affected by social comparison in the same way. The current findings do, however, again highlight the importance and influence of social comparison in the online social realm. Moreover, they add to the existing body of literature on online social comparison by emphasizing its importance as a control variable in the relationship between levels of SMP use and BI- and MH-related outcomes.

While the current study also recognized the possibility of the presence of positive social comparison caused by SMP use, its operationalization mainly focused on the relationship between FitTok consumption, negative social comparison, and BI- and MH-related outcomes. However, by highlighting the inspirational and motivational feelings sparked by FitTok content, the interviewees underscored the importance of positive social comparison to fitspirational online content. This is in line with one of Pasko and Arigo's (2021) findings, which also suggest a connection between social comparison, fitspiration content, and motivation to be physically active (p. 12). It also adds to the ideas established by findings such as Collins' (1996), which argue that self-evaluation and self-improvement fueled by upward social comparison are often considered helpful and motivational, rather than self-degrading or -demoralizing – which much of the currently available research on SMP consumption is focused on (p. 67). Most of the interviewees stated believing that the FitTok ideal as they described it, could inspire and motivate them to live healthier lives or work even harder at least sometimes. This suggests the individuals' urge to improve themselves to become more like the FitTok content creators, thereby reducing the gap between themselves and the idealized bodies and lives portrayed in the content. This shows evidence of Festinger's (1954) hypothesis that when individuals feel attracted to a certain group of

individuals they look up to, this increases their need to compare themselves to them and to become more like them (p. 131).

### ***5.1.3. The (absence) of the impact of young adults' habitus and capital on the effects of their FitTok consumption***

According to Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice, the way one behaves and responds in certain situations is dependent on their habitus and capital, and the field in which they find themselves at a certain moment (p. 101). As Smerchinski (2021) suggests, Bourdieu's formula can also be used to explain individuals' online behavior, which she illustrates by applying it to the field of Instagram. She argues that individuals' posting behaviors are affected by both their habitus and capital, but also the unwritten rules of the field of Instagram (p. 29). This was also tested in the current study by assessing the impact of the survey respondents and interviewees' demographic variables gender, age (habitus), and education level (capital) on the effect of FitTok consumption on BI- and MH-related outcomes. Both the statistical and thematic analyses did not reveal any significant effect of any of the demographic variables taken into account, thereby suggesting a deviation from Bourdieu's theory. This also diverges from a large body of literature, especially on assessing the impact of gender on detrimental effects caused by SMP consumption. For example, research by both Svensson et al. (2022, p. 1) and Thompson and Loughed (2012, p. 88) found stronger detrimental effects for BI and MH caused by SMP use on women than on men. Findings by Samra et al. (2022), then, revealed higher female tendencies to negatively compare the self to others online, thereby making them more prone to depression than males (p. 609). Hence, there is a possibility that were the effect of negative social comparison on BI and MH tested instead of the effect of FitTok consumption on BI and MH, a gender-related difference would have been found.

## **5.2. Societal implications**

Besides theoretical implications, the findings of the current study can also be of significance to certain specific population groups. First of all, in the constantly changing world of social media, to stay relevant and constantly attract new users, it is of great importance for SMPs like TikTok to keep improving themselves. To do so, TikTok has to know its audience; know what it likes and does not like, and what the effects of this are, but also what can be done to help them when necessary. In line with what Riedl et al. (2019) also suggest, there is a need for tools that allow SMP users to personalize what they desire to see and, even more so, what they do not want to see. In this way, users can opt out of any unwanted and potentially harmful content. TikTok currently already offers its users such a

tool: a hashtag blocker that allows users to prevent videos with certain hashtags from showing up on their For You Page (Smith, 2024). Offering such a tool is a step in the right direction. Spreading awareness about its existence and its possible purposes, however, could increase its potential to contribute to the users' better overall mental health by helping them to reduce negative social comparisons for example.

Additionally, as the current study implies, TikTok content is often still considered rather unreliable. To improve its perceived reliability, and thereby increase its potential to grow its significance as a search engine, TikTok could do more to spread awareness about content reliability as well. On the one hand, this could make content consumers more alert to the possibility of misinformation but also encourage them to check (FitTok) content creators' credentials. On the other hand, an increased awareness of this among content creators could lead to more conscious choices for them, thereby possibly decreasing the spread of incorrect information.

Another party that might be interested in the current findings, is that of advertisers. In 2023, TikTok's advertising revenue was 14.15 billion US dollars (Dencheva, 2024). Additionally, sponsored influencer content – based on trust between the influencer and the follower – is increasingly popular on TikTok as well (Lebow, 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021, p. 223). This indicates the growing potential companies see in TikTok's engaging “short form video content” for advertising their products and services (Barreto, 2023). However, as the findings suggest, there is a certain skepticism towards sponsored (FitTok) content among young adults. While not a main finding of the study, not only was the reported intention to purchase sponsored products relatively low, but the interviewees also reported having doubts about the trustworthiness and honesty of sponsored FitTok content. Such more nuanced insights could help brands to make well-informed decisions about their marketing strategies.

FitTok content creators can also learn from the insights gained regarding the perceived realism and relatability of their content. Namely, as most of the interviewees indicated, content that portrays body and lifestyle ideals considered unattainable is generally considered less interesting and sometimes even annoying. This suggests that by using this feedback to improve their content, FitTok content creators may increase their engagement (i.e. obtain social capital), thereby making themselves more interesting partners for brands (Mathew, 2018).

Finally, while the current study does not suggest underestimating the possible detrimental effects of social comparison on FitTok, it does add some nuance to the general negative stance toward SMP use in terms of online comparisons by shedding light on the

reported advantages. These findings could be useful for psychological and educational instances wishing to educate youths on SMP use by implementing the information into their methods. For example, the strategies for maintaining a healthy relationship with FitTok content mentioned by the interviewees could be useful for teaching young SMP users how to handle fitspiration content wisely and even to their advantage. After all, as daily consumers of the content, the interviewees could be considered FitTok “experts”.

### **5.3. Strengths and limitations**

One of the current study’s most important strengths is the research design used. Employing a mixed-method approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand, as the strengths of both methods are combined (Gerring, 2017, p. 31; Razali et al., 2019, p. 156). Another strong point is the relatively large, but not too large survey sample size, which contributed to increasing the study’s validity (Faber & Martins Fonseca, 2014, pp. 28-29).

There are also several noteworthy limitations to this study. First, while the researcher aimed for maximum variety, both the survey and the interview sample were slightly homogeneous with regard to their demographic factors. This had consequences, especially for sub-question 3. Namely, the effect of differences in gender, age, and education level was examined based on a sample that was predominantly female, aged 22 or older, and higher educated. For the variable age, for example, it would have been interesting to assess the impact of FitTok consumption on BI and MH in the age groups 18-20 vs. 21-25. These categories would have formed a more accurate representation of the population groups younger young adults and older young adults than the groups currently used ( $\leq 23$  and  $24+$ ). This homogeneity limits the study’s generalizability. Greater diversity might have led to different results more in line with previous studies and Bourdieu’s (1984) theory (p. 101).

A second limitation is related to the operationalization of social comparison. As argued previously, the main focus of the study was on negative social comparison. Therefore, only measures of negative social comparison and not positive social comparison were included in the survey. Although the interview topic list also included several questions about the possible positive impact of watching FitTok content (e.g. “Can comparing yourself to others in FitTok content motivate you to eat healthier and/or work out more?”), the main theme was negative social comparison. However, as the interview data suggests, a larger focus on questions about positive social comparison could have led to even more interesting new insights on the effects of fitspiration content on young adults.

A final limitation concerns the operationalization of the concept of MH. It was decided to operationalize MH by employing Radloff's (1977) established CES-D Scale, which assessed the respondents' levels of depression (p. 387). However, because MH is such a comprehensive concept, there is a possibility that a different operationalization (e.g. using Nolen-Hoeksema's (2003) Ruminative Response Scale (pp. 248-249)) would have offered different results. This decreases the study's validity to some extent.

#### **5.4. Future directions**

This study revealed the significance of negative social comparison as a control variable in assessing the relationship between young adults' FitTok consumption and BI and MH. Future studies on the relationship between SMP use and BI- and MH-related outcomes could explore the function of negative social comparison further. This could offer more insight into the scenarios in which it could be considered a mediator or serve as a control variable, as this remains slightly unclear from the current findings. For future studies that are not planning on assessing negative social comparison as a mediating or moderating factor, it should be included as a control variable to increase the study's internal validity (Marakas, n.d.). Future research could also contribute to a more balanced overview of the effects of negative vs. positive social comparison to fitspiration content. Whereas much of the research conducted on online social comparison is on negative comparisons, the current study reveals that positive comparisons are at least as present and impactful. This highlights the research potential of positive social comparison.

Related to the previously mentioned limitations of the study, studies working with a more diverse sample could offer more generalizable and arguably more valuable insights into the impact of demographic variables, and, therefore, individuals' habitus and capital on BI- and MH-related outcomes. Finally, employing a more comprehensive operationalization of the concept of MH may increase the validity of future studies.

## 6. References

- Adobe Express. (2024, January 3). *Using TikTok as a search engine*.  
<https://www.adobe.com/express/learn/blog/using-tiktok-as-a-search-engine>
- Ahrens, J., Brennan, F., Eaglesham, S., Buelo, A., Laird, Y., Manner, J., Newman, E., & Sharpe, H. (2022). A longitudinal and comparative content analysis of Instagram fitness posts. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(11), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19116845>
- Alberga, A. S., Withnell, S. J., Ranson, K. M. (2018). Fitspiration and thinspiration: A comparison across three social networking sites. *Journal of Eating Disorders*, 6(39), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-018-0227-x>
- Alele, F., & Malau-Aduli, B. (2023). *An introduction to research methods for undergraduate health profession students*. James Cook University.  
<https://jcu.pressbooks.pub/intro-res-methods-health/>
- Amin, V., Fletcher, J. M., Lu, Q., & Song, J. (2023). Re-examining the relationship between education and adult mental health in the UK: A research note. *Economics of Education*, 93, 1-5.  
<https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2023.102354>
- Avalos, L., Tylka, T. L., & Wood-Barcalow, N. (2005). The Body Appreciation Scale: Development and psychometric evaluation. *Body Image*, 2(3), 285-297.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2005.06.002>
- Azjen, I. (2011). The theory of planned behaviour: Reactions and reflections. *Psychology and Health*, 26(9), 1113-1127.  
<https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/08870446.2011.613995>
- Babbie, E. (2008). *The basics of social research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thomson Wadsworth.
- Barreto, H. (2023, November 6). *Does your business really need to be on TikTok?* Forbes.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescontentmarketing/2023/08/17/does-your-business-really-need-to-be-on-tiktok/?sh=53b84a3b56a1>
- Benton, C., & Karazsia, B. T. (2015). The effect of thin and muscular images on women's body satisfaction. *Body Image*, 13, 22-27.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2014.11.001>

Berndt, A. E. (2020). Sampling methods. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 36(2), 224-226.

<https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0890334420906850>

Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10(2), 141-163.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/004912418101000205>

Boeije, H. (2010). *Analysis in qualitative research*. Sage.

Boepple, L., Ata, R. N, Rum, R., & Thompson, J. K. (2016). Strong is the new skinny: A content analysis of fitspiration websites. *Body Image*, 17, 132-135.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.03.001>

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Greenwood.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *In other words: Essays towards a reflexive sociology*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian meditation*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine domination*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2019). *Classification struggles: General sociology, volume 1 (1981-1982)* (P. Collier, Trans.). Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2020). *Habitus and field: Lectures at the Collège de France (1982-1983)*. (P. Collier, Trans.). Polity Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

<https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Brown, Z., & Tiggemann, M. (2016). Attractive celebrity peer images on Instagram: Effect on women's mood and body image. *Body Image*, 19, 37-43.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.08.007>

Bucher, T. (2012). Want to be on top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 14(7), 1164-1180.

<https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/1461444812440159>

Caldeira, S. P., Van Bauwel, S., & De Ridder, S. (2020). 'Everybody needs to post a selfie every once in a while': Exploring the politics of Instagram curation in young women's self-presentational practices. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(8), 1073-1090. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1776371>

Carrigan, M., & Stürmer, M. (2023, August, 7). *The influencer industry: The quest for authenticity on social media*. LSE.

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2023/08/07/book-reviewthe-influencer-industry-the-quest-for-authenticity-on-social-media-emily-hund/>

Cash, T. F., Cash, D. W., & Butters, J. W. (1983). "Mirror, mirror, on the wall...?": Contrast effects and self-evaluations of physical attractiveness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 9(3), 351-358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167283093004>

Chetioui, Y., Benlafqih, H., & Lebdaoui, H. (2019). How fashion influencers contribute to consumers' purchase intention. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, 24(3), 361-380. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-08-2019-0157>

Chou, H.-T. G., & Edge, N. (2012). "They are happier and having better lives than I am": The impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(2), 67-125.

<https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1089/cyber.2011.0324>

Cleland, J. A. (2017). The qualitative orientation of medical education research. *Korean Journal of Medical Education*, 29(2), 61-71. <https://doi.org/10.3946/kjme.2017.53>

Cleveland Clinic. (2023, January 24). *TikTok trend alert: How creatine can improve your workout*. <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-does-creatine-do>

Collins, R. L. (1996). For better or worse: The impact of upward social comparison on self-evaluations. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119(1), 51-59.

Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms



- negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, 21(4), 895-913.  
<https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/1461444818815684>
- Davidson, A. (2022). "I tried every major TikTok fitness trend – these are the ones actually worth doing". Stylist. <https://www.stylist.co.uk/fitness-health/workouts/tiktok-fitness-trends-workouts/759402>
- Davis, C. G., & Goldfield, G. S. (2024). Limiting social media use decreases depression, anxiety, and fear of missing out in youth with emotional distress: A randomized controlled trial. *Psychology of Popular Media*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000536>
- Dencheva, V. (2024, March 20). *TikTok net advertising revenue worldwide 2020-2024*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1344972/tiktok-net-ad-revenue-worldwide/>
- Dignard, Nicole A. (2017). *The effects of thinspiration and fitspiration on body satisfaction and appearance self-esteem are equivalent and mediated by appearance comparisons* [Master thesis, University of Windsor]. Leddy Library.  
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/7249>
- Dixon, S. J. (2024, May 22). *Most popular social networks worldwide as of April 2024, ranked by number of monthly active users*. Statista.  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>
- Dukoff, S., & Williams, B. (2020, May 17). *How fitness influencers are turning TikTok into 'FitTok'*. Men's Health. <https://www.menshealth.com/fitness/a32435173/tiktok-fitness-influencers-fittok/>
- Edgerton, J. D., & Roberts, L. W. (2014). Cultural capital or habitus? Bourdieu and beyond in the explanation of enduring educational inequality. *Theory and Research in Education*, 12(2), 193-220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878514530231>
- Faber, J., & Martins Fonseca, L. (2014). How sample size influences research outcome. *Dental Press Journal of Orthodontics*, 19(4), 27-29. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2176-9451.19.4.027-029.ebo>
- Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., & Halliwell, E. (2015). The mediating role of appearance comparisons in the relationship between media usage and self-

- objectification in young women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 39(4), 447-457.  
<https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0361684315581841>
- Fatt, S. J., Fardouly, J., & Rapee, R. M. (2019). #malefitspo: Links between viewing fitspiration posts, muscular-ideal internalization, appearance comparisons, body satisfaction, and exercise motivation in men. *New media & Society*, 21(6), 1311-1325.  
<https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/1461444818821064>
- Feinstein, B. A., Hershenberg, R., Bhatia, V., Latack, J. A., Meuwly, N., & Davila, J. (2013). Negative social comparison on Facebook and depressive symptoms: Rumination as a mechanism. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 2(3), 161-170.  
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0033111>
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 115-256. <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>
- Fioravanti, G., Benucci, S. B., Ceragioli, G., & Casale, S. (2022). How the exposure to beauty ideals on social networking sites influences body image: A systematic review of experimental studies. *Adolescent Research Review*, 7, 419-458.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-022-00179-4>
- France, A. (2021, October 8). *Parents warned about TikTok 'dry scooping' gym craze*. The Standard. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/parents-tiktok-dry-scooping-gym-protein-powder-b959605.html>
- Friedman, D. (2023, May 15). Most fitness influencers are doing more harm than good. The New York Times.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/10/well/move/fitness-influencers.html>
- Gerber, J. P., Wheeler, L., & Suls, J. (2018). A social comparison theory meta-analysis 60+ years on. *Psychological Bulletin*, 144(2), 177-197.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bul0000127>
- Gerring, J. (2017). Qualitative methods. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20, 15-36.  
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-092415-024158>
- Grabe, S, Ward, M. L, & Hyde, J. S. (2008). The role of the media in body image concerns among women: A meta-analysis of experimental and correlational studies.

*Psychological Bulletin*, 134(3), 460-476. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.134.3.460

Griffin, M. M., & Steinbrecher, T. D. (2013). Large-scale datasets in special education research. *International Review of Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 45, 155-183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-407760-7.00004-9>

Guest, G. (2012). Describing mixed methods research: An alternative to typologies. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 7(2), 141-151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689812461179>

Haenlein, M., Anadol, E., Farnsworth, T., Hugo, H., Hunichen, J., & Welte, D. (2020). Navigating the new era of influencer marketing: How to be successful on Instagram, TikTok, & Co. *California Management Review*, 63(1), 5-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008125620958166>

Harriger, J. A., Wick, M. R., Sherline, C. M., & Kunz, A. L. (2023). The body positivity movement on TikTok: A content analysis of body positivity TikTok videos. *Body Image*, 46, 256-264. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2023.06.003>

Hendrickse, J., Arpan, L. M., Clayton, R. B., & Ridgway, J. L. (2017). Instagram and college women's body image: Investigating the roles of appearance-related comparisons and intrasexual competition. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 74, 92-100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.04.027>

Hern, A. (2022, October 24). *How TikTok's algorithm made it a success: 'It pushes the boundaries'*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/oct/23/tiktok-rise-algorithm-popularity>

Hogue, J., Minister, C., Samsom, L., Campbell, G., & Mills, J. (2023). Young women's dialectical responses to fitspiration and thinspiration: A qualitative study. *Eating Behaviors*, 50, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2023.101758>

Holland, G., & Tiggemann, M. (2016). A systematic review of the impact of the use of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating outcomes. *Body Image*, 17, 100-110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.02.008>

Hu, Q., & Cheong, P. H. (2021). Understanding digital generations: Social media habitus, memetic engagements, and digital social inequalities in China. *International Journal*

*of Communication*, 15, 4503-4524.

- Huang, K. (2022, September, 17). *For Gen Z, TikTok is the new search engine*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/technology/gen-z-tiktok-search-engine.html>
- Iqbal, M. (2023, October 31). *TikTok revenue and usage statistics (2023)*. Business of Apps. <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/>
- Jerónimo, F., & Carraça, E. V. (2022). Effects of fitspiration content on body image: A systematic review. *Eating and Weight Disorders – Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity*, 27, 3017-3035. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40519-022-01505-4>
- Johnson, J. M. (2001). In-depth interviewing. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 103-119). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412973588>
- Kamin, T., Berzelak, N., & Ule, M. (2011). The influence of education on differences in depressive symptoms between men and women in Slovenia. *Slovenian Journal of Public Health*, 51(1), 33-42. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10152-012-0005-0>
- Karim, F., Oyewande, A., Abdalla, L. F., Ehsanullah, R. C., & Khan, S. (2020). Social media use and its connection to mental health: A systematic review. *Cureus*, 12(6), 1-9. DOI 10.7759/cureus.8627
- Kasteleijn, N. (2023, September 15). *Boete van 345 miljoen euro voor TikTok vanwege schenden privacy kinderen*. NOS. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2490552-boete-van-345-miljoen-euro-voor-tiktok-vanwege-schenden-privacy-kinderen>
- Keen, C., & France, A. (2022). Capital gains in a digital society: Exploring how familial habitus shapes digital dispositions and outcomes in three families from Aotearoa, New Zealand. *New Media & Society*. <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/14614448221122228>
- Khalaf, A. M., Alubied, A. A., Khalaf, A. M., & Rifaey, A. A. (2023). The impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents and young adults: A systematic review. *Cureus*, 15(8), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.42990>
- Kim, D. Y., & Kim, H. (2021). Trust me, trust me not: A nuanced view of influencer

- marketing on social media. *Journal of Business Research*, 134, 223-232.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.024>
- Kim, L. (2022, November 6). *TikTok's greatest asset isn't its algorithm – It's your phone*. Wired. <https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-phones-extended-mind-philosophy/>
- Kirchherr, J., & Charles, K. (2018). Enhancing the sample diversity of snowball samples: Recommendations from a research project on anti-dam movements in Southeast Asia. *PLoS ONE*, 13(8), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0201710>
- Koetsier, J. (2023, January 4). *10 most downloaded apps of 2022: Facebook down, Spotify up, TikTok stable, CapCut keeps growing*. Forbes.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkoetsier/2023/01/04/top-10-most-downloaded-apps-of-2022-facebook-down-spotify-up-tiktok-stable-capcut-keeps-growing/?sh=5f9d65b621cc>
- Krayer, A., Ingledew, D. K., & Iphofen, R. (2008). Social comparison and body image in adolescence: A grounded theory approach. *Health Education Research*, 23(5), 892-903. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cym076>
- Lebow (2022, January 19). *Marketers increasingly turn to TikTok for influencer marketing*. Emarketer. <https://www.emarketer.com/content/tiktok-influencer-marketing>
- Lebow, S. (2023, December 14). *Gen Z leads the pack on Snapchat, TikTok*. Emarketer.  
<https://www.emarketer.com/content/gen-z-leads-pack-on-snapchat-tiktok>
- Li, W., Lin, X., Wu, J., Xue, W., & Zhang, J. (2021). Impacts social media have on young generation and older adults. *Advances in Social Sciences, Education and Humanities Research*, 615, 294-300. <https://www.atlantis-pess.com/proceedings/ichess-21/125967395>
- Liu, J. (2023, September 22). What does fitspo actually mean? Everything you need to know about fitspiration. Kara Lydon.  
<https://karalydon.com/health-wellness/what-is-fitspiration/>
- Marakas, G. M. (n.d.). *Control and moderation – It's easy when you understand*. Retrieved June 4, 2024, from [Control and Moderation – It's Easy When You Understand | FIU College of Business](#)

- Mathew, J. (2018, July 30). *Understanding influencer marketing and why it is so effective*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2018/07/30/understanding-influencer-marketing-and-why-it-is-so-effective/?sh=b5ac1a771a94>
- Matthews, B., & Ross, L. (2010). *Research methods: A practical guide for the social sciences*. Pearson.
- Minadeo, M., & Pope, L. (2022). Weight-normative messaging predominates on TikTok – A qualitative content analysis. *PLoS ONE*, 17(11), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0267997>
- Mutale, G. J., Dunn, A., Stiller, J., & Larkin, R. (2016). Development of a body dissatisfaction scale assessment tool. *The New School Psychology Bulletin*, 13(2), 47-57.
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42, 533-544. <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Pallant, J. (2016) *SPSS survival manual* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Open University Press.
- Pasko, K., & Argio, D. (2021). The roles of social comparison orientation and regulatory focus in college students' responses to fitspiration posts on social media: Cross-sectional study. *JMIR Mental Health*, 8(9), 1-15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2196/26204>
- Paus, T., Keshavan, M. & Giedd, J. N. (2008). Why do so many psychiatric disorders emerge during adolescence? *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 9, 947-957. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2513>
- Pedalino, F., & Camerini, A.-L. (2022). Instagram use and body dissatisfaction: The mediating role of upward social comparison with peers and influencers among young females. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(3), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19031543>
- Pedersen, T. (2023, February 27). *How does social media affect body image?* PsychCentral. <https://psychcentral.com/health/how-the-media-affects-body-image>
- Petty, A. (2021, February 11). How women's 'perfect' body types changed throughout

- history. The List. <https://www.thelist.com/44261/womens-perfect-body-types-changed-throughout-history/>
- Piroddi, C. (2022). Fields of recognition: A dialogue between Pierre Bourdieu and Axel Honneth. *Human Studies*, 45, 311-339. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-022-09630-w>
- Radloff, L. S. (1977). The CES-D Scale: A self-report depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurement*, 1(3), 385-401. <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/014662167700100306>
- Radzicki McManus, M. (2024, January 5). *Popular TikTok workouts may be dangerous or ineffective, experts say*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/05/health/tiktok-exercises-to-avoid-wellness/index.html>
- Raghavan, P. (2022, July 18). *Brainstorm Tech 2022: Organizing the world's information*. Fortune Conferences. <https://fortune.com/videos/watch/Brainstorm-Tech-2022-Organizing-The-Worlds-Information/934585a6-7fb6-41a5-8ef3-e497f8ca2986>
- Ratwatte, P., & Mattacola, E. (2019). An exploration of 'fitspiration' content on YouTube and its impact on consumers. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 26(6), 935-946. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105319854168>
- Razali, F. M., Aziz, N. A. A., Rasli, R. M., Zulkefly, N. F., & Salim, S. A. (2019). Using convergent parallel design mixed method to assess the usage of multi-touch hand gestures towards fine motor skills among pre-school children. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9(14), 153–166. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v9-i14/7023>
- Riedl, M. J., Masullo, G. M., Tenenboim, O., & Jomini Stroud, N. T. (2019, November 7). *Social media: The good, the bad, and how platforms can do better*. Media Engagement. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/social-media-how-platforms-can-do-better/>
- Rodgers, R. F., Lowy, A. S., Halperin, D. M., & Franko, D. L. (2015). A meta-analysis examining the influence of pro-eating disorder websites on body image and eating pathology. *European Eating Disorders Review*, 24(1), 1-88. <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/erv.2390>

- Rosenqvist, E., Konttinen, H. Berg, N., & Kiviruusu, O. (2023). Development of body dissatisfaction in women and men at different educational levels during the life course. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 1-12.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12529-023-10213-x>
- Rusticus, S. (2014). Content validity. In Michalos, A. C. (eds), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research* (pp. 1261-1262). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5\\_553](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_553)
- Samra, A., Warburton, W. A., & Collins, A. M. (2022). Social comparisons: A potential mechanism linking problematic social media use with depression. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 11(2), 607-614. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.2022.00023>
- Smerchinski, E. (2021). *The practice of curation on Instagram: A Bourdieusian approach* [Unpublished master's research paper]. Western University.
- Smith, G. (2024, April 9). *Can you block hashtags on TikTok?*. Dexerto.  
<https://www.dexerto.com/entertainment/can-you-block-hashtags-on-tiktok-2039359/>
- Srinivasan, R., & Lohith, C. P. (2017). *Strategic marketing and innovation for Indian MSMEs*. Springer. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3590-6\\_6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3590-6_6)
- Svensson, R., Johnson, B., & Olsson, A. (2022). Does gender matter? The association between different digital media activities and adolescent well-being. *BMC Public Health*, 22, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-12670-7>
- Thai, H., Davis, C. G., Mahboob, W., Perry, S., Adams, A., & Goldfield, G. S. (2023). Reducing social media use improves appearance and weight esteem in youth with emotional distress. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 13(1), 162-169.  
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/ppm0000460>
- Thompson, J. K., Van den Berg, P., Roehrig, M., Guarda, A. S., & Heinberg, L. J. (2004). The sociocultural attitudes towards Appearance Scale-3 (SATAQ-3): Development and validation. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 35(3), 247-362.  
<https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/eat.10257>
- Thompson, S. H., & Lougheed, E. (2012). Frazzled by Facebook? An exploratory study of gender differences in social network communication among undergraduate men and



- women. *College Student Journal*, 46(1), 88–98.
- Tiggemann, M., & Zaccardo, M. (2015). “Exercise to be fit, not skinny”: The effect of fitspiration imagery on women’s body image. *Body Image*, 15, 61-67.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2015.06.003>
- TikTok. (n.d.). #fittok. Retrieved May 29, 2024, from <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/FitTok>
- Touma, R. (2022, July 19). *TikTok has been accused of ‘aggressive’ data harvesting. Is your information at risk?* The Guardian  
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jul/19/tiktok-has-been-accused-of-aggressive-data-harvesting-is-your-information-at-risk>
- Treynor, W., Gonzalez, R., & Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (2003). Rumination reconsidered: A psychometric analysis. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 27(3), 247-259.  
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023910315561>
- uOttawa. (n.d.). *Recommendations regarding TikTok use and privacy risks*. Retrieved December 11, 2023, from <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/information-technology/services/security/tiktok-use-privacy-risks#:~:text=Think%20ahead%20of%20possible%20uses,%2C%20iris%20scans%2C%20and%20fingerprints.>
- Van der Linden, A. (2022, December 23). *Hoe gevaarlijk is TikTok?* NOS.  
<https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2457547-hoe-gevaarlijk-is-tiktok>
- Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3(4), 206-222.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000047>
- Williams, S. J. (1995). Theorising class, health and lifestyles: Can Bourdieu help us? *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 17(5), 577-604. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.ep10932093>
- Wills, T. A. (1981). Downward comparison principles in social psychology. *Psychological Bulletin*, 90(2), 245-271.
- Yoon, S., Kleinman, M., Mertz, J., & Brannick M. (2019). Is social network site usage related to depression? A meta-analysis of Facebook-depression relations. *Journal of Affective*

*Disorders*, 248, 65-72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2019.01.026>

Zulkifli, A. (2022). TikTok in 2022: Revisiting privacy and data. *Computer*, 55(6), 77-80.  
<https://doi.org/10.1109/MC.2022.3164226>

## **Appendix A. Survey**

### **Introduction**

Dear participant,

Thank you for participating in this study. Please carefully read the following information before starting the survey.

### Goal of the study

This research is conducted for a thesis that is written as an element of the Master's program Digitalisation, Surveillance and Society at Erasmus University Rotterdam. The goal of the study is to gain insights into the possible effects of FitTok content (i.e. TikToks containing physical health-related content) on mental health and body image in young adults.

### Participation

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can withdraw from the study at any time by closing the survey. Completing the survey should take approximately 10-12 minutes. Importantly, there are no right or wrong answers; the researcher is interested in your experiences and perceptions only.

### **Confidentiality**

The survey is 100% anonymous and your answers will be handled confidentially. The collected data will exclusively be used for research purposes and will be stored only for as long as necessary to complete the thesis. Once the thesis project is finished, all data will be deleted. The data will not be shared with third parties.

Thank you in advance for your time and help!

Kind regards,

Bente

If you have any questions regarding the survey, you can send an email to [660409bb@eur.nl](mailto:660409bb@eur.nl).

### **Informed consent**

I read the above information and I agree to participate in the survey.

Yes

No, I would like to end the survey here

### **Familiarity FitTok content**

In this study, "FitTok content" is a term used to refer to TikToks that are related to physical health. Examples include TikToks about workouts, nutritional and supplement tips, exercise explanations, the best gym wear, etc.

Q1: Are you familiar with this kind of content?

Yes

No

### **FitTok consumption**

The following questions are about your social media, TikTok and FitTok consumption.

Q2: On average, how often do you watch and engage with FitTok content? Please try to be as precise as possible.

Sometimes (1-5 TikToks per week)

Often (5-10 TikToks per week)

Very often (10+ TikToks per week)

Q3: How would you rank the following platforms in terms of their reliability as sources of information?

Put the platforms in the right order from most reliable source of information (1) to least reliable source of information (4). You can do so by dragging the names of the platforms.

YouTube

TikTok

Google

Instagram

Q4: When you seek information on physical-health related subjects such as exercise

instructions, where do you go to find it?

Put the platforms in the right order from your most frequently used source of information (1) to your least frequently used source of information (4). You can do so by dragging the names of the platforms.

YouTube

TikTok

Google

Instagram

Q5: How often would you say you actively search for FitTok content via TikTok's search bar?

Please try to be as precise as possible.

Never (0 times a week)

Sometimes (0-2 times a week)

Often (2-5 times a week)

Very often (5+ times a week)

Q6: When searching for fitness or food related tips on TikTok, how often do you check a content creator's credentials (e.g. whether they are a personal trainer, dietitian, doctor, etc.) before following the tips?

Never

Sometimes

Most of the time

Always

### **Social comparison**

The following statements are about how you see yourself and your life in comparison to the individuals in FitTok content and the lives they portray.

Q7: Please indicate to what extent you agree with the statements.

Strongly disagree – Disagree – Somewhat disagree – Neither agree or disagree – Somewhat agree – Agree – Strongly agree

*When comparing myself to individuals in FitTok content,*

I generally tend to focus on individuals who are better off than me.

I generally tend to focus on individuals who are worse off than me.

Q8/20: Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.

Strongly disagree – Disagree – Somewhat disagree – Neither agree or disagree – Somewhat agree – Agree – Strongly agree

*When I consume FitTok content,*

I feel like other people's lives are better than mine

I feel like other people are more attractive than I am

I feel like other people have a better body than I do

Tick "Strongly disagree" to show you are paying attention

I feel less satisfied with my own life

### **Body image and appreciation**

The following questions are about how you perceive your body.

Q9: Please indicate how often you agree with the following statements.

Never – Seldom – Sometimes – Often – Always

I respect my body

I feel good about my body

On the whole, I am satisfied with my body

I feel that my body has at least some good qualities

My self-worth is independent of my body shape or weight

I do not focus a lot of energy being concerned with my body shape or weight

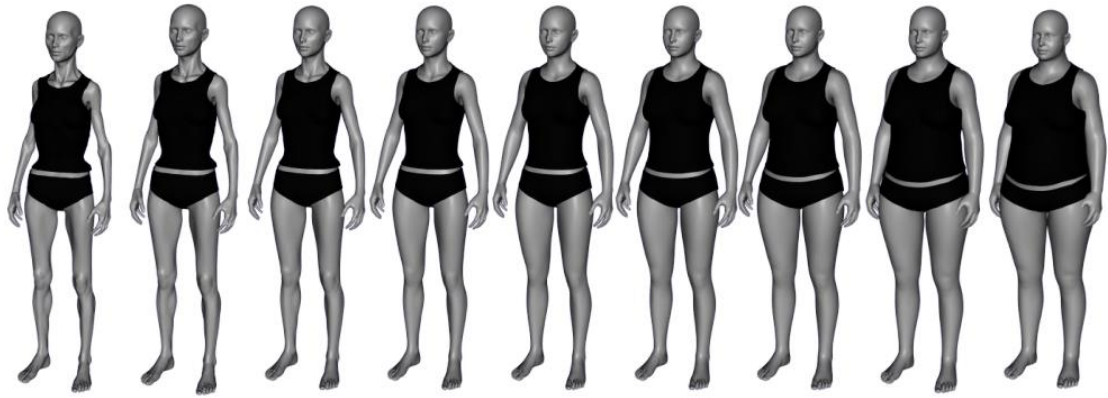
My feelings toward my body are positive, for the most part

I do not allow individuals with the “ideal” body presented in FitTok content to affect my attitudes to my body

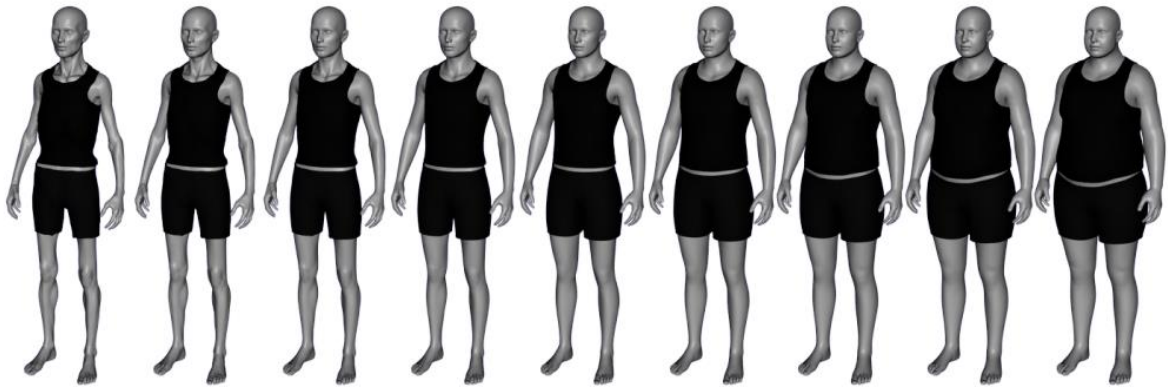
Despite its imperfections, I still like my body

### **Body dissatisfaction**

Below, you see 2 sets of 9 computer-generated bodies. The top ones are female bodies and the bottom ones male bodies. Closely look at the set of bodies of the gender that you identify with most while answering the following two questions.



Body 1    Body 2    Body 3    Body 4    Body 5    Body 6    Body 7    Body 8    Body 9



Body 1    Body 2    Body 3    Body 4    Body 5    Body 6    Body 7    Body 8    Body 9

Images: Mutale, G. J., Dunn, A., Stiller, J., & Larkin, R. (2016). Development of a body dissatisfaction scale assessment tool. *The New School Psychology Bulletin*, 13(2), 47-57.

Q10: If you could choose, which body would you want to look like the most?

- ▼ Body 1
- Body 2
- Body 3
- Body 4
- Body 5
- Body 6
- Body 7
- Body 8

Body 9

Q11: Now, please indicate which body you consider to be most similar to your own body.

▼ Body 1

Body 2

Body 3

Body 4

Body 5

Body 6

Body 7

Body 8

Body 9

### **Income-related**

Fitness influencers often advertise certain brands, products, and services to their followers (gym wear, supplements, workout programs, etc.). The following questions are about your experiences of this kind of advertising.

Q12: When you encounter TikTok fitness influencers marketing products, how frequently do you have intentions to purchase the products?

Never

Almost never

Sometimes

Often

Q13: How often do you want to purchase the products advertised by TikTok fitness influencers but you feel like you cannot afford them?

Never

Almost never

Sometimes

Often

Q14: The following statements are about how often you had certain feelings or thoughts in the past week. Please indicate as precise as possible.

Never (less than 1 day) – Some/little of the time (1-2 days) – Moderate amount of the time (3-



4 days) – Most/all of the time (5-7 days)

*During the past week,*

I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor

I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends

I enjoyed life

I felt depressed

I felt that everything I did was an effort

I thought my life had been a failure

I felt fearful

I felt lonely

I had crying spells

I felt sad

I felt that people disliked me

I could not get "going"

I was happy

### **FitTok categories**

Q15: How interested are you in the following different kinds of FitTok content?

Not interested at all – Not very interested – Neutral – Somewhat interested – Very interested

Work-out routine videos

Videos of individuals "showing off"/flexing their bodies in the gym

Exercise explanation-videos

Transformation/progress videos incl. "before" and "after" footage

Tick "Somewhat interested" to show you are paying attention

Gym wear-related videos ("Get ready with me for the gym"; the best gym wear brands)

"What I eat in a day"-videos, food tips, healthy recipes (high protein & low kcal)

(Educational) videos encouraging you to take fitness supplements (e.g. creatine or vitamins)

### **Demographics/habitus**

Finally, please answer the following questions about your demographics.

Q16: What gender do you identify with?

Male

Female

Non-binary

Prefer not to say

Q17: What is your age?

Q18: Where are you originally from?

▼ Afghanistan

...

Zimbabwe

Q19: What is your highest level of education completed? If you are currently still pursuing a degree, please enter your highest degree received.

High school

MBO

HBO

University Bachelor's Degree

University Master's Degree

PhD or higher

Q20: What was your annual (net) income of last year?

Less than €10000

€10000 - €30000

€30001 - €50000

€50001 - €70000

More than €70000

I don't know/prefer not to say

## **Appendix B. Interview topic list**

### **Building rapport**

1. Do I have your consent to record this interview?
2. Before proceeding, do you have any questions about me, the research, or the interview?

### **Section 1: Demographic background**

1. How old are you?
2. What gender do you identify with?
3. Where are you originally from?
4. What is your highest level of education completed?

### **Section 2: TikTok as a source of (fitness) information**

5. On TikTok, a lot of different kinds of content are available (e.g. funny videos, dog videos, cleaning or traveling tips, strange hacks, and of course, also tips for a healthy lifestyle)

#### **How would you describe your use of TikTok? What do you generally use it for?**

(e.g. amusement, informational/educational)

→ Do you feel like it is different than your use of Instagram or other SMPs you use?  
How?

6. **How often would you say you engage (watch, like, save, share, etc.) with FitTok content on a weekly basis?** You can express this in minutes but also in an estimation of the number of videos you watch weekly.

→ How do you generally encounter these videos? (algorithm/For You Page, search bar, shared by friends, etc.)

7. **What are the kinds of videos you watch most or find most interesting?** (e.g. workout routines, exercise explanations, food/supplement tips, transformation videos, tips for the best gym wear)

→ What is your main reason for watching these kinds of videos? (e.g. seeking (and actually using?) the tips, inspiration, motivation, amusement)

### Section 3: The “FitTok ideal”

8. **Would you say there is a dominant body shape present in the FitTok content that you watch?** If so, how would you describe this?
  - How does this body ideal make you feel about yourself? (How) does it impact you and what you do?
  - Do you think ideal body types on FitTok affect users’ body satisfaction and self-esteem?
  
9. **Do you generally feel like you are satisfied with your own body?**
  
10. **Do you sometimes compare yourself or your life to the individuals in the videos?**

This can be in terms of body shape, but also in terms of anything else you notice while watching the videos (skills, motivation/discipline, outfits, etc.)

  - If so, how often would you say this is? (e.g. not so often, sometimes, quite often)
  - How does it make you feel? Do they cause stress, anxiety, ambition, etc.?
  
11. **Can comparing yourself to others in FitTok content motivate you to eat healthier and/or work out more?**
  
12. **Do you think that the idealized body and life images foster a sense of comparison among the users?**
  
13. **Do you feel like there is a difference in how women and men portray themselves in FitTok content?** (in terms of tone of voice, portraying their bodies, style of the content, etc.)
  - If so, how?
  - What kind of content do you prefer / How do you view both of these types of content in relation to each other?
  
14. We just discussed that there are different kinds of FitTok videos out there. **Do you feel that they have a different impact on you and how you feel?**
  - If so, how?

15. I want to zoom in on a specific kind of FitTok video: that of the fitness content creator advertising certain products and services to their followers (e.g. gym wear, supplements, workout subscriptions)

**What do you think about these kinds of videos in particular? How do they make you feel?**

→ How often would you say these kinds of videos influence you to purchase some things? Are you able to actually buy them less often than you would like?

16. **In three words, how would you describe how FitTok content generally makes you feel?**

→ Why these three words?

17. **What strategies do you think would be helpful for you to maintain a healthy relationship with FitTok content?**

18. **Is there anything I did not touch upon that you would like to discuss or add, or something you would like to go over again?**

→ Any final remarks, statements, or questions?

## Appendix C. Descriptive statistics: survey respondents

**Table C1**

*Descriptive Statistics Survey Respondents – Nationality, Education Level, and Annual Income*  
(*N* = 150)

Measure	Item	<i>N</i>	Percentage of <i>N</i>
Nationality	Belgium	11	7.3%
	China	1	.7%
	Germany	1	.7%
	Greece	1	.7%
	India	1	.7%
	Indonesia	1	.7%
	Italy	2	1.3%
	Latvia	1	.7%
	Lithuania	1	.7%
	Netherlands	121	80.7%
	Spain	2	1.3%
	Suriname	1	.7%
	Sweden	1	.7%
	Turkey	1	.7%
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	3	2.0%

	Vietnam	1	.7%
Education level (completed)	High school	27	18.0%
	MBO	15	10.0%
	HBO	42	28.0%
	University Bachelor's Degree	45	30.0%
	University Master's Degree	21	14.0%
Annual income (of last year)	Less than €10000	75	50.0%
	€10000-€30000	40	26.7%
	€30001-€50000	21	14.0%
	€50001-€70000	2	1.3%
	More than €70000	1	.7%
	I don't know/prefer not to say	11	7.3%

## Appendix D. Descriptive statistics: interviewees

**Table D1**

*Background Information on the Interviewees*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education level	Country of origin	Occupation
Nina	24	Female	HBO Bachelor's	NL	Student
Kim	24	Female	HBO Bachelor's	NL	Nurse
Lola	25	Female	HBO Bachelor's	NL	Licensor
Joya	25	Female	University Master's	NL	Communication advisor
Paul	24	Male	University Bachelor's	NL	Student
Frank	18	Male	University Bachelor's	TR	Student
Amber	23	Female	HBO Bachelor's	NL	Student
Tim	25	Male	MBO 4	NL	Intermediary



## **Appendix E. Content analysis**

### **E.1. Sampling**

As mentioned previously, to enrich the survey and interview questions, a content analysis of FitTok content was carried out. The only criteria for TikToks to be included in the sample were 1) being posted under the hashtag #FitTok, and 2) containing content that is really related to FitTok content. TikToks posted as a response to a comment made under another TikTok were excluded because of a general lack of context without inclusion of the original TikTok. Eventually, 100 TikToks were collected and analyzed, which brought saturation. To limit the personalization of the output generated by filling out the search term “#FitTok” in TikTok’s search bar, the researcher created a new TikTok account for the research. This method was based on the sampling method employed by Harriger et al. (2023) in their content analysis of body-positive TikTok videos (p. 258). The videos were selected based on their position on the results page, starting with the ones on top of the page, and ending with the 100<sup>th</sup> video complying with the inclusion criteria.

### **E.2. Data collection & analysis**

The data collection and analysis processes of the content analysis overlapped, as each of the 100 TikToks with #FitTok was analyzed and coded immediately after collecting it. Because the researcher is familiar with the different kinds of FitTok content, she started the analysis with some knowledge already, which aided the categorization progress. Before starting the analysis, a code table was created, in which the videos were numbered from 1 to 100. In it, the “kind of video” could be described, and any additional notes added (see Table E1). During the initial round of coding, an open code for each of the TikToks was created. During this step, the researcher made use of constant comparison of the videos, to identify similarities between the different videos and assign the same code to those. Next, during the axial coding phase, the open codes were reevaluated once more, comparing them and merging the codes related to similar phenomena into axes. These larger categories, extracted from open and axial coding, were utilized as the main categories of FitTok content, which were eventually used in the survey and interview questions (see Table E2).

**Table E1***Code Table for 100 Analyzed FitTok videos*

#	Kind of video	Notes
1	Workout routine	
2	Workout routine	Body seems to be explicitly shown
3	(Realistic) what I eat in a day (to build muscles) + <b>supplements</b> + flex video	Sponsored post for supplement brand
4	Workout routine	
5	Workout routine	
6	Exercise explanation	
7	Workout routine	Booty very much flexed in first part of video
8	Workout routine	
9	What I eat in a day (in a calorie deficit)	Opening shot showing off flat/toned stomach
10	Workout routine	Opening shot showing off body/booty (marketing her techniques)
11	“Relatable” or joke/flex video (showing body/workout without informing the watcher)	
12	What I eat in a day (high protein)	“A girl with a big booty)  Opening shot showing off body and booty
13	Workout routine	Opening shot showing off her sixpack
14	Flex video	Somewhat self-sexualizing

15	Flex video	
16	Workout routine	“POV: You’re a beginner in the gym but want a fat ass”  Opening shot showing off her booty
17	Transformation video/flex video	You see her transformation, but finally, it’s very much showing off her “new” toned, and slim body
18	“Relatable” gym situations/flex video	There’s an emphasis on showing her booty
19	Flex video	
20	Flex video	
21	Workout routine	Doesn’t seem to be necessarily focused on showing off body but toned/slim body is very visible
22	Flex video	Not necessarily thin, but very muscular
23	Flex video	Very sexual
24	“Relatable” gym situation	More focused on the dynamics in the gym, not a lot of focus on her body
25	Flex video	Very much emphasis on toned and thin body
26	Informative video about creatine (supplement)	
27	Workout routine	
28	“Relatable”/joke about the gym	
29	Workout routine	Doesn’t seem to be necessarily focused on showing off body but toned/slim body is

		very visible
30	Workout routine	Doesn't seem to be necessarily focused on showing off body but toned/slim body is very visible
31	Transformation video	
32	Workout routine/informative	His body isn't really showing
33	Flex video	Very much focused on his body/sexualizing himself
34	Transformation/progress video	Body very visual
35	Healthy recipe video	Focused on protein
36	Flex video	Athletic body very visual
37	Flex video	Very booty-focused
38	Gym hack/tip	Booty very visible
39	Workout routine	"I want slim toned arms but idk what to do" > setting an ideal
40	Flex video	
41	Transformation video	Very much focused on his sixpack and arms
42	Flex video	
43	Flex video	Completely about showing booty
44	Workout routine + food tips ("I focus on protein, the right carbs, the right fats")	"I ask really fit people what they do for their workout"
45	Flex video	

46	Workout routine	Doesn't seem to be necessarily focused on showing off body but toned/slim body is very visible
47	Transformation/progress video	"after body" is made very visible > emphasis on booty
48	Workout routine	Opening shot showing off body and booty
49	Workout routine	"I want toned arms but idk what to do"  > body also very visible
50	Workout routine/flex video	Body + booty very much visible
51	Workout routine	Body very visible, but more very muscular than thin and toned
52	Workout routine	Opening shot showing off body  Very much focused on his sixpack and arms
53	Workout routine	Opening shot showing off body  Very much focused on his body
54	Supplement video	Body not visible
55	Workout routine	Opening shot showing off body and booty
56	Exercise explanation/flex video	Very much focused on showing her booty
57	Flex video	All about her body
58	Tips for losing fat and building muscles	A mix of the woman eating healthy (protein rich) and her in the gym, then also images of her posing/showing her body
59	Workout routine/very	Not really about his body

informative

60	Flex video / inspirational video	
61	Transformation/progression video	After body isn't "perfect" but you see she's aiming for thin and toned
62	Transformation/progression video	Very much focused on the ideal of big booty, thin and toned body
63	Informative/educational video	"How many calories do you need"
64	Flex video	Focused completely on her booty and thin and toned body
65	Workout routine	Opening shot of his sixpack
66	Workout routine	"Save these ab exercises that will snatch your waist"  > ideal body of thin and toned like her > opening shot of her posing showing her body
67	Food + exercise tips to lose belly fat	She shows a before and after pic of her belly "for reference" > she wants to be thin
68	Workout routine	Her booty and thin and toned body are very visible
69	Workout routine/informative video	Body ideal very much present (she has a big booty + thin and toned body)
70	Progression/informative/flex video	"Me when I only did cardio and abs" > her being less toned, having less big booty  "vs when I completely switched to weight

		lifting only” > more toned body, bigger booty
71	Workout routine	Opening shot of him flexing
72	Inspirational/body positivity video	“We have to let fat body exist, especially at the gym”
73	Flex video / relatable joke for girls that lift weight	Big booty, snatched waste, flat stomach
74	Transformation/progress video	“After body” isn’t the “perfect” body, but you see she’s aiming for much more toned and less body fat
75	Workout routine	Opening shot of her flexing her booty
76	Flex video	Completely about his body
77	Flex video	Completely about showing her body: thin, toned, snatched waist, big booty
78	Exercise explanation	Opening shot of her posing  Thin, toned, muscular booty
79	Exercise explanation	Thin, toned body + big booty
80	Food tips	Protein + low calorie
81	Workout routine / flex video	Opening shot of her posing, showing off her body  Booty very much visible all the time
82	Workout routine	Not necessarily focused on showing body, but she has a very “ideal” body
83	Informative video	“it comes from not having enough muscle to give your body that lean, toned, or defined

		look you're going for"
84	Informative video / exercise explanation/tips	His muscular body is very much visible all the time
85	Workout routine/ exercise explanation video	Opening shot of her posing, really showing off her booty  "Let me put you on this juicy ass routine that took me from this to this"
86	Joke/relatable gym situation/flex video	Tucking your gym shirt in on the back so your booty shows, but your belly doesn't: showing off your best features
86	Workout routine (to burn fat)	Opening shot of her showing her thin and toned body/flat stomach  "Hot girl walk" > sexualizing
88	Workout routine	Very much focused on glutes (= booty)  Thin, toned body very much visible
89	Outfit video	Very much about showing body > snatched waist, thin, toned, big booty and muscular legs
90	Flex video	All about showing booty
91	Outfit video	Very much about showing off "ideal" body
92	Flex video/workout routine	
93	Workout routine	"Ideal" body very much visible (booty especially)
94	Inspirational/tips videos	Opening shot really flexing her flat, toned belly and legs



		“Ideal” body very much visible (booty especially)
95	GRWM for the gym (supplements + outfit + flex)	“Ideal” body very much visible (booty especially)  Opening shot of her showing off her body  Supplement ad
96	Workout routine	Opening + closing shot of her showing off her body  “Ideal” body very much visible (booty especially)
96	Transformation/progression video / tips	Very muscular body, which is the central goal of his training
98	Flex video	Completely about his body and muscles
99	Workout routine/tips	“Snatched waist – do’s and don’t’s”  “Ideal” body very visible
100	Food tips	High protein oatmeal

## Classifications

1. Centrality of the “ideal” body type (female: thin, toned, snatched waist, big booty; male: very muscular/big): work-out routines, flex videos, exercise explanations, transformation/progress video (before-after results)
2. Centrality of healthy food: what I eat in a day-videos (often according to a certain amount of calories), food tips (e.g. protein-rich replacements for other products), healthy (often low kcal and high protein) recipes

3. Centrality of supplements: tips for the best supplement brand(s)/products, informative videos about what a supplement can do for you; videos in which you're encouraged to take supplements > **something you need to buy**
4. Centrality of gym clothing (most often for women's clothing): GRWM for the gym-video, tipping the best brands for gym clothing > **something you need to buy**

**Table E2**

*Main Categories of FitTok Content as Established from the Content Analysis.*

Category name	Category description
Work-out routine videos	Showing what exercises the content creator performs and in what order (often to target a certain area of the body).
Videos of individuals "showing off"/flexing their bodies in the gym	Showing the muscular/trained body just for the looks of it.
Exercise explanation-videos	Showing how certain exercises should be done. The main focus is on informing viewers.
Transformation/progress videos incl. "before" and "after" footage	Showing the body before and after a particular period. Generally, a transformation that is caused by working out more and eating healthier.
Gym wear-related videos ("Get ready with me for the gym"; the best gym wear brands)	Showing which brands and pieces of gym wear the content creator considers best. Often also sponsored content and about showing the "ideal" body.
"What I eat in a day"-videos, food tips, healthy recipes (high protein & low kcal)	Showing healthy food habits, thereby generally trying to inspire their followers/
(Educational) videos encouraging you to take fitness supplements (e.g. creatine or vitamins)	Explaining the different purposes of taking certain supplements. This content can generally have two main aims: informing viewers and

sponsoring certain supplement brands.

## **Appendix F. Code book**

See separate file: Appendix F.pdf

## Appendix G. Interview memos

During interviews

- Lola (25): if someone's lifestyle isn't similar enough to yours, you tend to compare yourself less → Festinger

→ Nina (24) also says this

- Nina (24), Kim (24), Joya (25), Amber (23) > increase in FitTok content that also preaches it's OK to sometimes skip the gym or eat unhealthily.

- Instagram vs. TikTok: IG is more for social relationships (content by friends and family), while TikTok is more for the self; a platform of amusement and inspiration.

While open coding

- Recognition of social comparison as a way of motivating, but not really experiencing it himself → Tim (24)

- Misinformation on TikTok > Paul (24), Frank (18), Tim (24)

→ danger of TikTok

- Some recognize that negative social comparison can play a role while watching FitTok content, but they don't recognize it in themselves → Frank (18), Tim (24)

- Positive social comparison often goes hand in hand with motivation to become better → self-improvement

- The dominant body ideals perceived to be portrayed in FitTok content does differ for some of the interviewees → e.g. Kim (24): not necessarily skinny; Amber (23): skinny.

- Staying realistic is a strategy that many of the interviewees use to maintain a healthy relationship with FitTok content

- Kim (24) explained two phases of consuming FitTok content

- bodybuilding phase: unhealthy FitTok algorithm; caused a lot of negative social comparison in her

- healthier phase (now): healthier FitTok algorithm (healthier body ideals and lifestyles portrayed); decrease in negative social comparison

## Appendix H. Normality check

**Table H1**

*Normality Check: Skewness and Kurtosis*

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis
Body image		
I respect my body	-.56	.45
I feel good about my body	-.53	.35
On the whole, I am satisfied with my body	-.85	.39
I feel that my body has at least some good qualities	-1.01	2.04
My self-worth is independent of my body shape or weight	-.20	-.70
I do not focus a lot of energy being concerned with my body shape or weight	.30	-.73
My feelings toward my body are positive, for the most part	-.54	-.06
I do not allow individuals with the “ideal” body presented in FitTok content to affect my attitudes to my body	-.01	-.32
Despite its imperfections, I still like my body	-.69	.43
Mental health		
During the past week, I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor	1.42	1.54
During the past week, I felt that I could not shake	1.20	.58

off the blues even with help from my family or friends		
During the past week, I enjoyed life	.92	.63
During the past week, I felt depressed	1.84	3.18
During the past week, I felt that everything I did was an effort	.46	-.46
During the past week, I thought my life had been a failure	1.94	3.15
During the past week, I felt fearful	1.04	.17
During the past week, I felt lonely	1.05	.27
During the past week, I had crying spells	1.67	2.29
During the past week, I felt sad	.89	.37
During the past week, I felt that people disliked me	1.08	.78
During the past week, I could not get “going”	.69	-.19
During the past week, I was happy	.83	.48
FitTok consumption	.03	-1.62
Negative social comparison		
When I consume FitTok content, I feel like other people's lives are better than mine	-.71	-.41
When I consume FitTok content, I feel like other people are more attractive than I am	-.92	.35
When I consume FitTok content, I feel like other people have a better body than I do	-1.19	1.61

When I consume FitTok content, I feel less satisfied with my own life	-.40	-1.07
Gender (binary dummy variable)	1.27	-.38
Age (binary dummy variable)	.71	1.51
Education level (binary dummy variable)	-.99	-1.03
Ability to purchase sponsored products	-.09	-.97
Interest in FitTok categories		
Work-out routine videos	-.72	-.35
Videos of individuals "showing off"/flexing their bodies in the gym	1.08	.20
Exercise explanation-videos	-1.22	1.08
Transformation/progress videos incl. "before" and "after" footage	-.48	-.81
Gym wear-related videos ("Get ready with me for the gym"; the best gym wear brands)	-.04	-1.16
"What I eat in a day"-videos, food tips, healthy recipes (high protein & low kcal)	-.77	-.49
(Educational) videos encouraging you to take fitness supplements (e.g. creatine or vitamins)	.40	-1.07



## Appendix I. Two-Way ANOVA means and standard deviations tables

**Table I1**

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Effects of Gender and FitTok Consumption on Body Image*

Gender	FitTok consumption	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Female	Sometimes	31.10	4.67
	Often	29.13	5.11
	Very often	29.81	5.41
Non-female	Sometimes	32.40	4.72
	Often	31.70	4.57
	Very often	31.20	5.12

**Table I2**

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Effects of Age and FitTok Consumption on Body Image*

Age	FitTok consumption	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Younger young adults (<=23)	Sometimes	31.10	4.81
	Often	30.38	4.82
	Very often	30.00	5.44
Older young adults (24+)	Sometimes	31.85	4.58
	Often	27.70	5.50
	Very often	30.29	5.24

**Table I3**

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Effects of Education Level and FitTok Consumption on Body Image*

Education level	FitTok consumption	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Lower education	Sometimes	32.07	4.71
	Often	29.17	4.82
	Very often	31.63	3.28
Higher education	Sometimes	31.24	4.70
	Often	29.97	5.21
	Very often	29.41	5.93

**Table I4**

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Effects of Gender and FitTok Consumption on Mental Health*

Gender	FitTok consumption	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Female	Sometimes	20.95	5.33
	Often	20.19	4.68
	Very often	23.19	7.75
Non-female	Sometimes	21.07	8.40
	Often	22.30	8.38
	Very often	20.90	7.45

**Table I5**

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Effects of Age and FitTok Consumption on Mental Health*

Age	FitTok consumption	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Younger young adults (<=23)	Sometimes	21.24	7.63
	Often	20.91	6.20
	Very often	23.26	8.09
Older young adults (24+)	Sometimes	20.69	4.28
	Often	20.00	4.06
	Very often	21.36	6.42

**Table I6**

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Effects of Education Level and FitTok Consumption on Mental Health*

Education level	FitTok consumption	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Lower education	Sometimes	19.00	4.72
	Often	19.92	4.87
	Very often	23.56	8.45
Higher education	Sometimes	21.66	6.57
	Often	21.00	6.09
	Very often	22.41	7.41

## **Appendix J. Additional findings: The effects of FitTok categories**

### **J.1. The effects of different categories of FitTok content**

Although not the study's main object of research, the impact of the different categories of FitTok content on BI and MH was also briefly examined. First, a one-way ANOVA was performed to assess the effect of sponsored FitTok content, using ability to purchase sponsored products as the IV and MH as the DV. An assessment of the effect on BI was deemed less valuable and was therefore not performed. The analysis revealed a nonsignificant main effect of the ability to purchase sponsored products on MH in young adults,  $F(3, 146) = .44, p = .728$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ . Hence, it could not be concluded that one's (in)ability to purchase desired FitTok-related products affects their MH. When taking into consideration the interview data, the results are similar. Namely, whereas Amber (23) generally considers sponsored FitTok content as "annoying" because she often feels like she cannot afford the products advertised, the other interviewees' moods were never affected by this.

Secondly, a multiple regression was conducted to examine how the dominant categories of FitTok content (see Appendix E) might affect BI and MH. Interest in FitTok categories was used as the IV. First, BI was inserted as the DV. The effects on MH were analyzed secondly.

Before running the regression analyses, the method's assumptions were checked. First, the data was checked for multicollinearity. As the VIF values ranged between 1.14 and 1.72 (Table I1), and thereby far below 10, multicollinearity was ruled out (Pallant, 2016, p. 178). Next, the data was checked for linearity. As the Means tests show, there is evidence of a nonlinear relationship between interest in FitTok categories and BI ( $p = .139$ ) and MH ( $p = .252$ ). Because the other assumptions were met, however, the analyses were continued. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with some caution.

A regression analysis was performed with BI as the DV. The model turned out to be statistically nonsignificant,  $F(7, 142) = .82, p = .575, R^2 = .04$ , meaning that no significant relationship between the FitTok content categories and BI was found in the data.

The second regression analysis, using MH as the DV, was performed next. This model was found to be nonsignificant as well,  $F(7, 142) = 2.04, R^2 = .09$ . Therefore, it has to be concluded that according to this dataset, one's interest in the different FitTok categories does not significantly affect their MH. This is largely in line with the interview findings. While only two interviewees reported a difference in the effects of the different FitTok categories on their MH/BI, the others argued not experiencing any significant differences. Whereas Kim

(24) considers “aesthetic” and “physique” (flexing) videos to be somewhat more triggering, Amber (23) reported to sometimes being negatively affected by videos of “perfect” women explaining exercises.

**Table J1**

***Multicollinearity Check: VIF Values***

Item	VIF
Work-out routine videos	1.72
Videos of individuals "showing off"/flexing their bodies in the gym	1.19
Exercise explanation-videos	1.71
Transformation/progress videos incl. "before" and "after" footage	1.41
Gym wear-related videos ("Get ready with me for the gym"; the best gym wear brands)	1.14
"What I eat in a day"-videos, food tips, healthy recipes (high protein & low kcal)	1.36
(Educational) videos encouraging you to take fitness supplements (e.g. creatine or vitamins)	1.24