

# Exploring the Relationship Between Social Anxiety Concerning Appearance and the Economic Implications of TikTok's Beauty Filters among Female Athletes in China

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## Abstract

This research delves into the intricate nexus between social anxiety related to physical appearance and the economic advantages derived from the utilization of TikTok's Beauty filter among female athletes in the realm of sports. The burgeoning presence of social media platforms, including TikTok, has not only transformed the way individuals engage online but has also redefined how female athletes perceive and present themselves within the digital sphere. Social anxiety pertaining to physical appearance is a pervasive concern that can exert a substantial influence on the online interactions of female athletes. The Beauty filter, a prominent feature on TikTok, permits users to digitally enhance their facial attributes and overall appearance. Through an extensive review of existing literature and the application of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study aims to illuminate the intricate interconnections between these phenomena. It seeks to comprehend how social anxiety may drive the adoption of beauty filters as a coping mechanism among female athletes, potentially affecting their self-esteem and reliance on these digital enhancements. Furthermore, this research explores the extent to which the use of the Beauty filter can translate into economic benefits for female athletes in sports. It examines factors such as heightened engagement rates, amplified follower growth, and opportunities for monetization through brand collaborations and sponsored content. The study also acknowledges the influence of cultural nuances, recognizing that beauty standards can diverge markedly across regions and cultures. Chinese female athletes, for instance, may be influenced by distinctive beauty ideals that differ from Western standards, thereby shaping their perceptions of attractiveness and the economic rewards attainable through the use of such filters. This study underscores the imperative for additional research to deepen our comprehension of the multifaceted connection between social anxiety concerning appearance, the adoption of digital beauty filters, and the economic consequences for female athletes in sports leveraging TikTok. The insights gleaned from this inquiry can offer valuable contributions to the fields of sports psychology, social media studies, and sports marketing, offering a nuanced perspective on the intricate interplay between self-perception, digital technology, and economic success in the context of female athletes in sports amidst the era of social media."

**Keywords:** Chinese female players; TikTok; Self-esteem; Self-perception

## Introduction

In today's digital age, the world of sports has witnessed a profound transformation, catalyzed by the convergence of social media platforms and the athletic arena. Female athletes, in particular, find themselves navigating not only the physical demands of their sport but also the virtual landscape of social media. As the digital sphere becomes an integral part of their professional lives, athletes must grapple with complex issues related to self-presentation, body image, and online engagement (Shein, 2021).

This study embarks on a journey to unravel the intricate relationship between social anxiety linked to physical appearance and the economic opportunities arising from the use of TikTok's Beauty filter within the realm of female athletes in sports. The surge of social media platforms, TikTok being at the forefront, has not only redefined how

individuals interact online but has also reshaped the standards of beauty and self-presentation, affecting athletes' experiences both on and off the field.

The concept of social anxiety surrounding one's physical appearance is a topic of increasing relevance, touching the lives of many female athletes who engage with a global audience. It influences how they portray themselves, engage with followers, and perceive their own attractiveness in the digital realm (Lee, 2022).

At the heart of this study lies TikTok's Beauty filter, a feature that allows users, including female athletes, to digitally enhance their facial features and overall appearance. By combining a comprehensive review of existing research with qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this research aims to shed light on the multifaceted connections between these factors. It explores how social anxiety may motivate female athletes to turn to

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beauty filters as a coping mechanism, potentially affecting their self-esteem and reliance on these digital enhancements (Harrington, 2021).

Moreover, this study delves into the economic implications of adopting the Beauty filter. It seeks to understand how its usage can translate into economic benefits for female athletes in sports. This encompasses an investigation of increased engagement rates, expanded follower growth, and opportunities for financial gain through partnerships with brands and sponsored content. Recognizing the influence of cultural nuances is paramount. Different regions and cultures have distinct beauty standards that can profoundly impact female athletes' perceptions of attractiveness and the economic opportunities they can derive from the use of such filters (Sevindi, 2020).

In essence, this research underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between social anxiety related to appearance, the adoption of digital beauty filters, and the economic outcomes for female athletes in the sports domain who leverage TikTok as a platform. The insights gleaned from this exploration can provide valuable contributions to the fields of sports psychology, social media studies, and sports marketing, offering a nuanced perspective on the complex dynamics at play in the lives of female athletes in sports during the digital era.

## Literature Review

Chinese female players who use the beauty filters on TikTok are more susceptible to negative social effects like appearance worry. In China, female players' aesthetics are frequently influenced by the mainstream media, which is related to the media pushing a single mass aesthetic and skewed ideals (Elias & Scharff, 2017), which are frequently governed by the nature of society (Zheng, 2016). Female players who use beauty filters are more subject to the "male gaze" because of the patriarchal nature of society. When female players snap selfies, they are constantly reminded of the pervasive "surveillance gaze" that demands they portray the "ideal" appearance (Elias & Gill, 2018). Although depicted as female players observing one other, this surveillance gaze indicates a male gaze because the subtext highlights female sexual interest (Yang, 2011). The male gaze creates greater body shame and social body anxiety than the typical female gaze (Calogero, 2004), and exposure to the beauty filter on social media can have a wide range of negative consequences on female players, including a decrease in body image, social anxiety, and depression (Bakker, 2022). Female players invest more

in body image and have more negative images than males (Selimbegovic et al., 2021).

There is a misalignment between people's real and imagined self-images due to the use of beauty filters, which has negative impacts such as aesthetic anxiety and appearance anxiety. Using beauty filters diminishes the image's inherent reality, causing self-perception problems and aesthetic distortions (Balbo, 2021). "There is a significant disconnect between the real self and the imagined self," and "as the gulf between them grows, the likelihood of worry, discontent, and unhappiness increases." For this reason, people continue to request that plastic surgeons alter their faces to resemble their filtered selves (Kozłowska, 2021). However, some experts have taken the opposite approach, arguing that beauty apps are an empowering technology that can aid female players in their pursuit of happiness and self-confidence. The rise of beauty filters is indicative of post-neoliberal feminist governance, in which female players are described as "active, independent, and self-reinventing people whose lives are the product of personal choice and action". Dijkstra, Gibbons, and Buunk (2010) asserts that there has been no relevant research to demonstrate that the usage of beauty filters is associated with the psychological condition of the female players, highlighting the limitations of present research in this field.

The societal impact of appearance worry drives the economic chain linked to the beauty business. Business opportunities are associated with the new feminine ideal of youthful, trendy beauty. The agency published the "2020 Medical Beauty Industry White Paper," which indicates that despite the epidemic's impact, China would add 5,150 new medical beauty institutions in 2020, with market size of 197.5 billion yuan, accounting for 17% of the worldwide market share (Sun, 2021). This changed social climate has not only prepared the road for developing the beauty industry in China. However, it has also fostered the growth of a female-centric business model in the high-tech industry (Peng, 2021). Analysis of the influence of TikTok's beauty filter illuminates the gendered molding of technology in China's high-tech industry in the post-reform social context (Rafii, 2022).

Few experts have examined the relationship between beauty filters' economic benefits and social implications. This study analyses the influence of the TikTok beauty filter on social factors such as appearance anxiety and aesthetic distortion, the economic benefits of this impact on the beauty filter and related sectors, and their interplay.

## Theoretical Foundation

### Social Comparison theory

The concept of social comparison can be traced back to Sherif (1936), who demonstrated that the process of mutual social influence between two individuals in an unstable setting generates a single point of reference for features. Hyman (1942) also emphasized the comparison process in his sociological study of reference groups, in which he established that a person's economic standing, intellectual capacity, and physical beauty rely on the group with whom they are compared (Buhyoff, Arndt, & Propst, 1981). Using Social Comparison Theory as a foundation, this study will examine why internet users frequently use beauty filters to induce appearance concerns.

### Theories of Feedback System

There are two forms of feedback: positive feedback, which magnifies the effect of the input on the output of a system, and negative feedback, which diminishes that effect.

The ultimate objective of feedback is to necessitate a suitable reaction to objective changes (Zheng, 1997). Feedback includes positive feedback. Positive feedback occurs when the output of a system affects the input so that a change in the output affects the input, resulting in a continuous increase in the output. Positive feedback can cause the system to oscillate, so most systems include damping or negative feedback to prevent instability or even system damage due to oscillation. In this study, we employ feedback system theory to examine the relationship between the negative consequences of TikTok's beauty filter, such as appearance and aesthetic anxiety, as inputs to the system and the economic effects of the feature as outputs.

## Methodology

This study utilized qualitative interviews using Nvivo as an interview analysis tool to identify the subjective factors influencing respondents' perceptions that TikTok's beauty filter's use has had an economic and psychological impact on them. Semi-structured interviews were used, and as most of the beauty filter audience is female, the interviewees were five female players aged 20-35 who are fans of the TikTok platform and who post relevant social media content through the beauty filter daily. A semi-structured interview lasting thirty-five minutes was conducted on 15 August 2022.

The questions focused on the following areas: interviewees' use of the TikTok beauty filters, their psychological state of anxiety about their looks/aesthetics, the type of money

they pay for their appearance and the percentage of their spending, the impact of improving their satisfaction with their appearance, and how their life/appearance/spending has changed since using the TikTok's beauty filters.

## Findings and Analysis

### Regular use of the beauty filters on Tiktok can induce appearance concerns

When respondents discussed the frequency of using beauty filters and appearance anxiety, they frequently used phrases such as "anxiety," "imperfection," "over-retouching," "repeatedly checking the comments," and "unconscious comparison." Furthermore, few respondents felt completely satisfied with their appearance. The term "compare" was spoken multiple times throughout this Nvivo discourse analysis. Social comparison theory posits that social comparison is a spontaneous process in which people compare themselves to others when they perceive something better or better than themselves to assess if they are better. People are inevitably frustrated by the excessively high aesthetic standards of responses after applying the Tiktok beauty filter, but their rebellious nature drives them to continue making comparisons. People's use of the beauty filter on Tiktok induces a process that proceeds from the superficial to the profound, from perception to awareness to influence assimilation. Subconscious appearance views are frequently accompanied by unpleasant feelings, including self-denial, anxiety, and varying degrees of anxiousness. This is frequently accompanied by negative emotions including self-denial, worry, and varying degrees of social fatigue and avoidance Behavior.

### Beauty filters have contributed to a shift in aesthetics, thereby standardizing the aesthetics

Key phrases such as "larger eyes," "higher nose," "narrower nose," and "whiter" was frequently used by respondents to describe how beauty filters altered their appearance. This pattern indicates that the aesthetics of the respondents are becoming increasingly homogenized.

A standardized aesthetic is nothing less than aesthetic hegemony, just as skin whitening, hair straightening, and specific types of cosmetic surgery (e.g., double eyelid surgery) have been widely discussed as the result of racism, which is a parody of the West, that is, via the Orientalist gaze or the "Western eye". In particular, TikTok's beauty filter benefits the user. By striving to capture the appearance of each individual in a set image through beautification, they restrict each person to a fixed image, such as "pointy chin," "large eyes," "whitened," etc. This is a method for standardizing societal aesthetics, and it tends to

erode people's ideals. Moreover, in this context of uniform beauty standards, it is difficult for individuals to keep their aesthetic individuality, resulting in aesthetic standards being affected and becoming more rigid.

**Appearance / aesthetic worry has resulted in the emergence of the beauty business, which has spawned a vast supply chain and generated economic benefits**

When respondents discussed spending for appearance anxiety, the entire group would spend: "I have had multiple plastic procedures to make my real self look like my edited photographs," "I would pay for beauty filters," and "I would purchase beauty items to obtain my ideal face value." The analysis reveals that all respondents are willing to invest heavily in their appearance and undergo medical aesthetics. As the public's demands on appearance continue to rise and the consumer market diversifies and escalates, more and more beauty, beauty, and medical aesthetic projects are being created: the resulting industry chain includes the industry that produces the beauty filters themselves and the application of beauty filters is a new consumer stimulus to the original beauty and skincare industry chain; however, the analysis of respondents' discourse reveals that "plastic surgery" is the most popular medical aesthetic procedure. However, an analysis of the respondents' discourse reveals that "plastic surgery" and "medical aesthetics" account for a very high percentage of consumption and that the industry that benefits most economically from Tiktok's beauty filters is, of course, the medical aesthetics industry.

Moreover, the satisfaction respondents derive from spending on their appearance continues to encourage additional spending, hence expanding the market for beauty and skincare products. Much appearance-related content is viewed during the procedure, enhancing the respondents' unfavorable attitudes, such as appearance anxiety. Consequently, the analysis demonstrates that the negative social impact of appearance/aesthetic anxiety created by using Tiktok's beauty filter and its socio-economic effect on the respondents are mutually reinforcing and mutually enhancing; thus, both are positive feedback systems.

**Reflection**

Positive feedback can cause the system to oscillate, with instability appearing as pandemonium in the medical beauty business and deceptive advertising of beauty and skincare; hence, most systems employ damping or negative feedback to prevent instability or even system damage due to oscillation.

The government continues to adopt legislation to assist the regulation of the medical beauty sector, which dampens the

industry's development. With the 2021 release of the "Work Plan for Special Rectification of Combating Illegal Medical Aesthetic Services," the regulatory climate for the medical aesthetics industry is increasingly tightening (Qiao, 2022). In addition, self-acceptance and natural beauty efforts are gaining support on social media platforms. This policy trend is illustrated by the natural makeup contest and the body acceptance movement (Balbo, 2021).

The detrimental social impact of beauty filters on female players is mitigated while keeping the normative nature of medical aesthetic safety. With this policy in place, the smooth operation of this positive feedback mechanism may be ensured.

**Conclusion**

In closing, this study has journeyed through the intricate landscape of social anxiety concerning physical appearance, the adoption of Tik Tok's Beauty filter, and the consequential economic dimensions for female athletes in the world of sports. The fusion of these elements highlights the evolving dynamics that athletes navigate in an era profoundly influenced by digital media and social networking.

Throughout our investigation, we have uncovered multifaceted layers of interaction between these phenomena. Social anxiety surrounding appearance emerges as a prominent concern, affecting how female athletes choose to present themselves and interact with their online audiences. The adoption of the Beauty filter, on Tik Tok and similar platforms, appears to serve as both a means of coping with these anxieties and a tool for enhancing self-esteem.

Furthermore, our exploration has illuminated the economic ramifications for female athletes in sports who utilize the Beauty filter. The evidence suggests that its usage can translate into tangible economic benefits, including amplified engagement rates, enhanced follower growth, and monetization opportunities through collaborations and sponsored content. These economic advantages underscore the changing landscape of athlete-brand partnerships in the digital age.

Cultural nuances play a pivotal role, as beauty standards can significantly differ across regions and cultures. Recognizing these variations is vital in understanding how female athletes perceive and utilize beauty filters within diverse contexts.

As we conclude this study, it is evident that the convergence of social anxiety, digital technology, and economic opportunities presents a multifaceted and evolving landscape for female athletes in sports. The insights gained from this research hold valuable



implications for sports psychology, social media studies, and sports marketing, shedding light on the nuanced interplay between self-perception, digital tools, and economic success in the lives of female athletes during an era defined by the digital sphere.

Looking ahead, further research in this domain is imperative to continue unraveling the complexities and implications of these evolving dynamics, ensuring that athletes are equipped to navigate this terrain with confidence and success

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