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Exploring Key Factors of TikTok Influencing on Purchasing Decisions in Fashion Clothing Among Female University Students in Chengdu, China

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Abstract

This study focuses on female university students in Chengdu, China, and explores the influence of TikTok on their fashion clothing purchasing decisions. A qualitative research method was adopted, with data collected through focus group interviews involving 16 female university students from different academic years and with varying consumption frequencies. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

The findings indicate that TikTok influences purchasing preferences and behaviors through multiple dimensions. The key factors include visual presentation, creative content, shopping convenience, social interaction, and promotional strategies. Based on these results, it is recommended that the TikTok platform use algorithms to push clothing content based on user age, shopping frequency and other characteristics, and strictly review clothing-related information to ensure authenticity and reliability. At the same time, clothing suppliers should customize products according to user needs and strengthen cooperation with TikTok to improve promotion effects and user shopping experience. Future research should consider expanding the sample size and examining new platform features. This study contributes to the growing body of research on the impact of social media on consumer behavior and offers practical insights for relevant industries (Modified according to the suggestion in point 2).

Keywords: TikTok, Female University Students, Fashion Clothing, Purchasing Decision

Introduction

TikTok, released in September 2016, is a popular social media app that allows users to create, watch, and share short videos shot on mobile devices or webcams (D'Souza, James, & Velasquez, 2024). With its personalized feeds of quickly short videos set to music and sound effects, the app is notable for its addictive quality and high levels of engagement. The short form video format of TikTok has revolutionized the way people consume content, providing a quick and engaging form of entertainment.

It has become a platform where users can showcase their talents, share their daily lives, and connect with a global community. The app's algorithmic recommendation system is a key factor in its success, as it analyzes user behavior, such as likes, comments, and the time spent on different videos, to deliver highly personalized content. This not only keeps users engaged but also makes it an effective marketing tool for brands.

In China, TikTok has a large youth user base and its influence on youth growth has attracted widespread attention from families, society, and academia (Gao, 2023). In this study,TikTok refers to Douyin of Chinese version. It is not only an important entertainment social media platform but also plays an increasingly important role in shopping decisions. For example, a study on TikTok influencer marketing shows that influencers on the platform can significantly impact consumer behavior, especially among Generation Z (Tram, 2022). Generation Z being digital natives.They are more likely to be influenced by the content they see on social media platforms like TikTok. They are actively engaged with the platform, following trends, and taking inspiration from influencers.TikTok influencers have the power to shape the purchasing decisions of this generation through their relatable content, whether it's through product reviews, fashion hauls, or lifestyle recommendations. Moreover, the interactive nature of TikTok, with features like comments, likes, and shares, allows for a more direct connection between influencers and their followers, enhancing the influence on consumer behavior.

Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, is known for its strong commercial appeal and diverse fashion brands. The "first - store economy" in Chengdu has thrived, with 708 new stores launched in 2022, ranking among the top three cities in China (Xinhua Silk Road, 2024). The unique fashion environment in Chengdu makes it an ideal place to study the impact of TikTok on fashion purchasing behavior. Chengdu's fashion scene is vibrant and dynamic with a mix of local and international brands. The city's residents have a high enthusiasm for fashion, and the "first-store economy" has further enriched the fashion choices available to consumers. The opening of new stores brings in the latest fashion trends. It creates a competitive and exciting fashion environment. This environment provides a perfect backdrop to study how the platform influences fashion purchasing decisions. It has combined with the widespread use of TikTok among the local youth. The local fashion culture in Chengdu is also influenced by various factors, such as the city's rich history, unique lifestyle, and the influence of neighboring regions, which further adds to the complexity and uniqueness of the research context.

Researching the key factors of TikTok on the fashion purchasing decisions of female university students in Chengdu holds considerable theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it helps to better understand the effectiveness of social media marketing, especially the influence mechanism among young consumer groups (Xiao, Y., Liu, M., & Wu, B., 2023). Practically, it provides great value to brand managers, enabling them to carry out more targeted digital marketing activities.

Brand managers can use the findings of this research to develop more effective marketing strategies on TikTok. They can identify the types of content that resonate most with female university students in Chengdu, such as the use of certain influencers, the style of video presentation, or the promotion of specific fashion items. This can help brands increase their brand awareness, engagement, and ultimately, sales among this target group. Additionally, understanding the key factors that influence purchasing decisions can also help brands optimize their product offerings and pricing strategies to better meet the needs and preferences of this market segment. Additionally, Chengdu can serve as a model for other regions, reflecting the development trends of cities outside the first-tier cities.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze TikTok's influence on the fashion clothes purchasing preferences of female university students in Chengdu.

2. To explore the key factors of TikTok's influence on purchasing decisions in fashion clothes among female university student in Chengdu.

Research Questions

1. How does TikTok's influence on the fashion clothing purchase preferences of Chengdu female university students?

2. What are the key factors of TikTok's influence on purchasing decision in fashion clothes among female university students in Chengdu?

Literature Review

Social Influence Theory

Originated by Herbert Kelman in the 1950s, Social Influence Theory posits three modes of social influence acceptance: compliance, identification, and internalization (Kelman, 1958). It was inspired by research on conformity, cognitive dissonance, and functional theories of attitude. In the TikTok context, female university students are influenced by others. For example, they might buy certain clothes for social approval (compliance), imitate influencers' styles (identification),or adopt sustainable fashion values (internalization) (Davlembayeva & Papagiannidis, 2024).When a particular fashion trend goes viral on TikTok, many female students may comply and purchase related items to fit in with their peers and gain social approval. They might see their favorite influencers wearing a specific brand or style and identify with that image, leading them to buy similar clothing. Moreover, through exposure to content promoting sustainable fashion on the platform, some students internalize these values and start preferring eco-friendly clothing brands, which not only affects their current purchases but also reflects a long-term shift in their consumption attitudes.

Social Media Marketing Theory

This theory aims to explain how social media impacts consumer behavior, brand communication, and market strategies. Social media marketing strategies include social commerce, social content, social monitoring, and social CRM strategies (Fangfang, Larimo, & Leonidou, 2021). Brands use social media to convey information, and the choice of platform and content encoding depends on the target audience. Social media marketing also involves diverse profit models and customer relationship management methods, playing a crucial role in brand awareness, sales, and customer loyalty.The profit models are wide-ranging in social media marketing. Some brands rely on direct sales through social commerce platforms, where users can purchase products directly from the app. Others generate revenue through advertising, either by promoting their own products or by partnering with other brands. Customer relationship management in social media includes activities like responding to customer comments and messages promptly, which helps build trust and loyalty. For example, a brand that actively engages with customers on social media, addressing their concerns and providing personalized recommendations. It is more likely to retain customers and increase brand loyalty.

Concept of Purchasing Preference and Decision Making

Purchasing preference is related to the economic concept of preference and is affected by factors like product characteristics and price. It can be classified into different types, such as habitual, rational, economic, impulsive, and brand loyal preferences (Wang,2004). Habitual preferences develop when consumers repeatedly choose a particular brand or product out of habit, without much thought or comparison. For example, a person who always buys the same brand of coffee every morning has a habitual preference. Rational preferences involve a more in- depth evaluation of product features, quality, and price before making a decision. Economic preferences are driven by price sensitivity, with consumers opting for products that offer the best value for money. Impulsive preferences are triggered by external stimuli, like attractive packaging or a limited-time offer. Brand-loyal preferences are characterized by a strong attachment to a specific brand, often based on past positive experiences.

The purchasing decision-making process is complex, including problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior. It has different types, like complex and habitual purchasing decisions, and is influenced by purchasing preferences (Munthiu, 2009; Qazzafi, 2019). In the case of complex purchasing decisions, such as buying a high-end smartphone, consumers go through an extensive information search process, comparing different brands, models, and features. They read reviews, consult experts, and visit stores to try out the products. On the other hand, habitual purchasing decisions are more automatic. For example, when buying everyday items like toothpaste, consumers may rely on past experience and simply pick their usual brand without much consideration. Purchasing preferences play a significant role in each stage of the decision-making process.

A consumer with a brand-loyal preference may only consider products from their preferred brand during the evaluation of alternatives, while a price-sensitive consumer will focus more on cost during this stage.

Concept of Social Media Influencer

Social media influencers are independent third party endorsers who shape audience attitudes. They can be classified into engagement-based, credibility- based, purchase intent driven, brand awareness, and opinion leader types (Freberg et al., 2011; Gashi, 2017). They influence consumers' purchasing decisions by sharing content and have different ways of promoting brands and products. Influencers may use various content formats to promote brands, such as product reviews, unboxing videos, and sponsored posts. Some influencers create long-form, in-depth reviews that provide detailed information about the product, while others use short, catchy videos to quickly showcase the product's features. They also collaborate with brands in different ways, such as receiving free products in exchange for promotion or getting paid for sponsored content. These promotional activities can significantly impact consumers' perception of a brand and their likelihood of purchasing the product.

Concept of TikTok Social Media

TikTok is a globally popular social media app with a large young user base. Its algorithm pushes personalized content, and advertising is a major income source. TikTok offers diverse video genres, has unique content in audio and editing styles, and is known for its authenticity and personalization (Carkner, 2024). The algorithm of TikTok analyzes users' behaviors, such as their likes, comments, and the time they spend on different videos to deliver highly personalized content. This means that each user's "For You" page is tailored to their interests, making the app highly addictive. In terms of video genres, TikTok has everything from dance challenges and comedy skits to educational content and DIY tutorials. The audio on TikTok is a key element, with popular songs and sound effects often going viral and becoming associated with specific trends. The editing styles, like quick cuts and special effects, are designed to keep users engaged. Moreover, the platform's authenticity and personalization come from the fact that it encourages users to share their real life experiences and unique talents, creating a sense of connection among users.

Conceptual Framework Theory

The traditional five stage model(Figure 1) of the consumer buying process serves as the framework for this study. In the context of fashion clothing consumption, TikTok plays a role in each stage for Chengdu female university students. It influences problem recognition by presenting trendy outfits, provides information during the search stage, affects the evaluation of alternatives in terms of price, quality, and style, simplifies the purchase decision process, and impacts post-purchase evaluation through user feedback (Qazzafi, 2019; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010).However, this model-traditionally viewed as linear-is increasingly being challenged in the age of digital consumer behavior.

While the traditional five-stage model remains relevant (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; Qazzafi, 2019), Solomon's (2011) framework of "buying, having, and being" and "consumer tribes" helps explain newer, more interactive consumption patterns, such as those facilitated by TikTok. As Solomon (2011) notes, modern consumers do not simply "buy"-they participate in a broader system of "buying, having, and being." Especially in the TikTok ecosystem, users are not only decision-makers but also creators, trend initiators, and community contributors. Female university students in Chengdu engage in co-creation, not just passive viewing. They share outfit inspiration, participate in challenges, and shape fashion trends through TikTok content. This reflects Solomon's concept of "the extended self,"where consumption becomes a mode of identity expression and social positioning (Solomon, 2011).

Moreover, in the current digital age, the influence of TikTok extends beyond the individual purchase decision-making process. It has also shaped a unique fashion consumption culture. Female university students on TikTok form a community where they share fashion experiences, inspiration, and advice. These peer interactions mirror what Solomon(2011) describes as "consumer tribe"-temporary but powerful brand or lifestyle-centered communities that influence not only purchase behaviors but also cultural norms.Although Solomon (2011) could not have predicted platforms like TikTok, his theories offer a useful lens for understanding symbolic consumption and community-based identity formation in today's digital ecosystems.For example, the popularity of certain fashion challenges or trends within the community can drive a large number of students to buy related clothing items. This kind of symbolic consumption-driven by the need for identity performance, group belonging, and cultural relevance-adds a new layer of depth to the classic five-stage model.Thus, the traditional consumer buying process becomes non-linear, cyclical, and socially mediated in the TikTok environment. Buying decisions are shaped not only by individual needs and rational evaluations but also by emotional, cultural, and community dynamics embedded in platform use.

Figure 1: Five-stage model of the consumer buying process (Qazzafi,2019)

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research method, using focus group interviews to explore the influence of TikTok on fashion clothing purchasing decisions among female university students. The focus group interview allows for in-depth discussion and understanding of participants' thoughts and feelings. It can explore factors like content characteristics, user interactions, and platform recommendation mechanisms.

Source of Information

The study focuses on female university students in Chengdu, 16 key informants were divided into two focus groups (Group A and Group B) to participate in the study, with Group A consisting of junior students aged 18-20 and Group B consisting of senior students aged 21-22. Each group included respondents with high and low consumption frequencies. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit eligible female college students in Chengdu (aged 18-22, actively using TikTok, and having experience in purchasing fashion apparel) through platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok. Quota sampling was performed based on grade and consumption frequency, and 16 people were finally selected to conduct focus group interviews. (Modified according to the suggestion in point 8).

Data Tool

The data tool in this study is a set of carefully designed semi-structure interview questions(-Figure 2). These questions cover aspects such as demographic data and five-stage model of the consumer buying process. They aim to uncover the relationship between TikTok content and key factors of TikTok influencing on purchasing decisions.

Content	Description
Demographic data	Please state your name and age： √Education √Grade √Consumption Frequency
Problem Recognition	1. How do you consider budget, price, and quality when buying fashion clothing? 2. In the field of fashion clothing, do you have a loyal brand or particularly like to follow fashion bloggers?
Information Search	3.What forms on TikTok (e.g., live streaming, short video recommendations) affect your convenient shopping experience? 4.Do you think the quality and style of fashion clothing recommendation videos on TikTok impact your purchasing decision? What kind of video attracts you more?
Alternative Evaluation	5.To what extent does the style, presentation, and personal image of the model/streamer in videos influence your purchase of related clothing? 6.What is your view on the credibility of fashion clothing recommendations on TikTok, and what factors affect your trust in these recommendations? 7.How does the price of recommended clothing on TikTok influence your purchasing decision? What price range is most attractive to you?
Purchase Decision	8.What types of marketing (e.g., discounts, co-branding) are you more inclined to buy? 9. How does the brand's publicity and image shaping on TikTok affect your purchase of the brand's clothing?
Post-Purchase Evaluation	10.How do you share feedback on purchased clothing via TikTok (e.g., through reviews, likes, or shares)?

Figure 2: Focus Group Interview Semi-structure Questionlist

Data Analysis

This study uses thematic analysis to analyze the semi-structured interview data. The specific steps are as follows: (1) Transcribe the interview recording into text and read it to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data. (2) Based on the key nodes of the five stage consumer purchase decision model (such as recognition of needs, information search, alternative evaluation, etc.), openly code the content of the interview and mark the influencing factors. (3) Classification and theme extraction: Group similar codes into themes to help identify key drivers in purchasing decisions. (4) Find out the key influencing factors by comparing the answers of different respondents and compare with the theoretical framework. Summarize the influence of TikTok in the purchase of fashion clothing.

Research Results Conclusion

Demographic Data of Respondents

The participants are female undergraduate students from Sichuan University of Media and Communication, with ages ranging from 18 to 22. Different grades bring about various consumption concepts and behaviors. For example, freshmen are still in the process of forming their consumption ideas, while seniors with more personal income pay more attention to clothing quality and style. Their consumption frequencies vary from 1-6 times a month, reflecting different consumption needs and patterns.

TikTok Display Content On Cloth Selling

TikTok presents diverse content. High quality video images with stable footage, accurate colors, and professional filming techniques can show fabric textures and details.It significantly influence students' perception of clothes. For instance, a TikTok video of a cashmere sweater with close-up shots of its soft texture and fine knitting received a high number of likes and shares among the student group. Many students said they were more likely to consider buying it because the video allowed them to closely examine the product's quality, which increased their trust in the item. The outfits displays which combine different clothing items and simulate various scenarios, inspire students' purchase desire. Professional and charming presenters can enhance students' understanding and trust in clothes through detailed explanations and diverse styling. The convenient buying process improves the shopping experience. It includes personalized recommendations, easy to use shopping links, and fast delivery. The interaction between buyers and sellers, from pre-purchase inquiries to post-purchase feedback, affects the overall shopping experience and future purchase decisions When a seller on TikTok promptly and helpfully answered a student's question about the sizing of a dress, the student was not only more likely to purchase the dress but also left a positive review, which in turn influenced other potential buyers.

TikTok's Influence on Purchasing Preference

TikTok users can be classified into three types. Trend-seeking users are mostly junior students with high shopping frequencies.They are keen on following the latest fashion trends and trying new brands like ZARA and UR. A junior student shared that she often participates in TikTok fashion challenges related to emerging trends, such as the Y2K revival, and has purchased multiple ZARA items inspired by the outfits shown in these challenges. This not only satisfies her desire for fashion but also allows her to showcase her style on the platform. Value-oriented users are from all grades with moderate or low shopping frequencies. They are focus on cost-effectiveness and prefer brands like 1JINN and METERSBONWE. Quality-focused users are mainly senior students.They care more about fabric quality and design, and are willing to pay more for high-quality clothes from brands like Uniqlo or high-end brands. University students use TikTok for entertainment, knowledge-acquisition, and social interaction. Entertainment helps them relax, knowledge-seeking improves their fashion sense, and social interaction meets their need for connection and shapes their fashion ideas and buying choices. For example, a student mentioned that through TikTok's fashion knowledge-sharing videos, she learned about different fabric types and how to match colors, which influenced her subsequent clothing purchases. Additionally, social interaction on TikTok, such as participating in fashion - related group chats, helped her discover new brands and styles recommended by like-minded peers.

TikTok Users Interaction Behavior

Students' interactions on TikTok have a profound impact, such as following favorite influencers or brand accounts, liking, sharing, recommending, and commenting.Following allows them to access new product and styling information. Liking and sharing boost brand popularity. Commenting enables direct communication with brands. When a popular fashion influencer on TikTok recommended a new sustainable fashion brand, many of her followers not only showed interest but also shared the recommendation with their friends, leading to a significant increase in the brand's visibility among the student community. This word - of - mouth promotion was a powerful marketing tool for the brand. About post-purchase interactions, if positive, can build brand loyalty and promote word-of-mouth; if negative, they may affect the brand image and future consumer decisions. A student who had a great experience with a brand's clothing shared her positive review on TikTok, along with pictures of herself wearing the clothes. This post received a lot of likes and comments, and several of her followers were inspired to purchase from the same brand. Conversely, a negative review about a brand's poor - quality clothing spread quickly on TikTok, causing some students to avoid the brand.

Factors that Influence Purchase

Brand factors play a crucial role. Well known brands with good reputations and stable quality are more likely to gain user trust. Fashion bloggers and celebrities' recommendations can help students discover new brands and styles. Clothing quality is a key consideration. Students with different budgets have different views on the balance between quality and price.

Promotions, such as discounts and co-branded products, can effectively stimulate students' purchase desire, and different consumer groups have different preferences for promotions. Junior students are often more attracted to flashy promotions and new brand collaborations. For example, a co-branded product between a popular fashion brand and a well known anime received a lot of attention from junior students, who saw it as a trendy and unique item to own. On the other hand, senior students are more likely to consider the long term value and practicality of a product, even during promotions. They may focus on the quality and functionality of the item rather than just the discount or novelty factor.

The Key Factor of TikTok's Influence on Purchasing Decision

TikTok influences every stage of female university students' fashion clothing purchase decisions. In the problem recognition stage, it triggers the desire to buy through trendy outfit videos. In relation to information search, it serves as a key information source. During alternatives evaluation, it affects students' assessment of price, quality, style, and trends. With regard to purchase decision, its convenient shopping path and promotional activities encourage buying. In terms of post-purchase evaluation, students' feedback influences future buying and sharing behavior. Overall, TikTok's visual display, creative content, shopping convenience, social interaction, and promotional strategies jointly influence students' purchase decisions. For example, in the alternatives evaluation stage, students often compare different brands and styles on TikTok. They consider factors like the fabric quality shown in the videos, the price mentioned in the product descriptions, and whether the style matches the current fashion trends. A student might see a trendy dress on TikTok but then check user reviews and compare prices across different sellers before making a decision. This shows how TikTok provides a comprehensive platform for students to gather information and make informed choices. This section interprets the research findings using Social Influence Theory and Social Media Marketing Theory, also referring to prior studies to explain TikTok's impact on female university students' fashion clothing purchases in Chengdu.

Discussion

TikTok's Influence on Purchase Preferences

From the perspective of Social Influence Theory, as proposed by Kelman (1958), TikTok wields its influence on students' purchase preferences through compliance, identification, and internalization. Compliance prompts students to conform to popular fashion trends on TikTok for social approval, such as wearing the latest styles to fit in, as observed in Gentele & Persson (2022)'s research on social influence in consumer decisions. Identification leads students to imitate the looks of their favorite influencers, seeking to project a similar image. Internalization is evident when students embrace sustainable fashion values promoted on the platform, reflecting a shift in their long - term consumption attitudes.

Under the Social Media Marketing Theory framework by Fangfang et al. (2021), TikTok's algorithms play a crucial role in brand targeting. Brands leverage creative videos and influencer collaborations to showcase product advantages. For example, a sportswear brand's fitness challenge featuring influencers can effectively attract female students. Moreover, brand stories shared on TikTok create emotional connections with users. Additionally, user interactions like likes and comments strengthen the brand-user relationship, which aligns with the significance of user-generated content in brand promotion.

Key Factors of TikTok's Influence on Purchasing Decision

In the problem recognition stage, social influence theory explains that the transition to university heightens students' awareness of their appearance. TikTok's fashion-focused content, similar to what Tangtatsawasdi (2015) found regarding the influence of media on fashion attitudes, prompts students to compare their wardrobes with current trends, thus generating a desire to purchase new clothing.

Regarding information search, social media marketing theory emphasizes TikTok's role as a vital information source. Influencers and brand accounts on the platform offer valuable tips and product details. As Qayyum et al. (2024) discovered, TikTok's User-Generated Content significantly impacts purchasing decisions. Students rely on this information, along with user reviews, to make informed choices.

During the alternatives evaluation phase, both theories are relevant. Students take into account factors like price, quality, style, and trends. Social influence theory shows that reviews and outfit demonstrations on TikTok by others affect students' evaluations. Meanwhile, social media marketing theory highlights how TikTok's trend-setting content shapes students' preferences.

When it comes to the purchase decision, TikTok's convenient shopping features, diverse brand offerings, and promotional activities, as studied in e- commerce and social media marketing, encourage students to make purchases. Livestreams with product demonstrations further enhance students' confidence in buying.

Finally, in the post-purchase evaluation stage, social influence theory indicates that students' feedback on TikTok has a significant impact on future buying and sharing behavior. Positive reviews can attract new customers, while negative reviews can damage the brand's reputation, as demonstrated in studies on online reviews. This feedback also serves as a catalyst for brands to improve their products and services.

Recommendation

For TikTok, it is recommended to utilize algorithms for precise content delivery, ensuring that users receive content that aligns with their interests and preferences. For clothing suppliers, optimizing products to meet user needs and strengthening cooperation with TikTok can help enhance brand exposure and sales. Future research could expand the sample size, focus on new TikTok features, and incorporate quantitative methods to further validate the findings.

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