



# A Study on the Body Consumption Practices of University Students on Short Video Platforms from the Perspective of Affordance

Huifang Pan

School of Marxism, South China Normal University,  
Guangzhou City, Guangdong Province, 510631, China

huifang1122@163.com

**Abstract.** In the digital age, short video platforms have become significant venues for body consumption among university students. Through participatory observation and in-depth interviews with university students who create body-related content on these platforms, this study applies thematic analysis to examine the interview data. The findings reveal that university students' body consumption on short video platforms is characterized by everyday performance, meticulous management, and homogenisation of aesthetic projection. From the perspective of affordance, short video platforms provide technological possibilities for body consumption through their content affordance, social affordance, and dissemination affordance. However, individuals' body consumption practices are often constrained by the aesthetic preferences and traffic mechanisms of the platform. The perception of platform rules embodies a dynamic interplay between individual agency and platform control. The aesthetic standards shaped by the platform, along with the competition for visibility and the emotional experiences of individuals, jointly create a unique ecological environment for body consumption on short video platforms. This study adopts the affordance theory framework within a localized Chinese context to explore the interaction between technological logic, individual emotions, and the body, offering a new theoretical perspective for research on body consumption and affordance.

**Keywords:** Affordance, Short Videos, University Students, Body Consumption, Body Aesthetics.

## 1 Introduction

On January 26, 2021, TikTok released its 2020 Douyin University Student Data Report, revealing that videos posted by university students on the platform had accumulated over 311 trillion views, with 118.4 billion likes and 2.7 billion shares during the year 2020 [1]. University students have now become a major force in creating short video content. The ease of use, portability, and participatory nature of short video apps have made video creation an indispensable part of daily life for many students. In the visual mechanics of short video platforms, the body is increasingly pushed from the

background to the foreground, becoming both the subject of self-presentation and the object of technological discipline. Whether it is a skill demonstration, a social hotspot or an advertising campaign, body images fill almost all short videos, and the development, transformation and worship of the body form the core of the visual mechanism of short video platforms.

This study focuses on university students' body consumption practices, defined as the behaviors through which students display and manage their bodies on short video platforms, including dance, fitness routines, imitation, and other presentations of physical abilities and life states [2]. Supported by audiovisual multimedia integration, algorithmic distribution, automated editing, and personalized video cutting, body consumption on short video platforms offers students a creative experience of self-entertainment, self-presentation, social interaction, and identity formation. But behind the enthusiasm of college students for body consumption, is it a positive pursuit of aesthetic interest in daily life after technological empowerment, or is it a blind pursuit of creating 'visual spectacle' and platform traffic? This study explores the following research questions: First, what are the specific manifestations of body consumption among university students on short video platforms? Second, how do short video platforms guide university students in body consumption practices?

Given that young university students are generally intellectually curious yet may lack firm moral will, they are increasingly prone to dependence on and addiction to social media. It is thus of great importance to guide them in developing a healthy approach to media usage. From the perspective of affordance, this study critically examines the manifestations and practical logic of university students' body consumption behaviors. The goal is to offer insights into how university students can better understand media technologies, regain cultural consciousness, and cultivate rational thinking.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Affordance and Media Affordance**

The concept of affordance was first introduced by American scholar James J. Gibson in the field of ecological psychology to describe the limitations and opportunities the environment provides for action [3]. Gaver later argued that affordance is a useful tool for user-centered technological analysis, noting that affordances are not limited to visual perception but can also be perceived through other senses[4]. Subsequently, communication scholars introduced the notion of social affordance, which emphasizes the possibilities that technology creates for altering daily life [5]. In the context of media studies, affordance research often explores how social media platforms provide possibilities for individual use. Schrock coined the term communicative affordances, defining it as "an interaction between subjective perceptions of utility and objective qualities of technology that alter communicative practices or habits" [6]. Schrock argued that mobile media affordances include portability, availability, locatability, and multifunctionality. Pan, Z. and Liu, Y. discussed media affordance in the context of new

media, proposing three specific dimensions of affordance: production affordance, social affordance, and mobile affordance [7].

Because earlier discussions of affordance overlooked how users' perceptions, emotions, and expectations influence their media usage, communication scholars proposed the concept of imagined affordance [8]. Imagined affordance highlights how users' interactions with technology are shaped largely by their emotions and perceptions, thereby bridging the gap between human use and the material aspects of technology, platforms, algorithms, data, and media. This concept reveals the agency of users in shaping and perceiving the media environment.

## 2.2 Body Consumption Practices in Social Media

The body serves as a crucial medium linking individuals with society. In Baudrillard's view, in post-industrial society, the body's concrete values—whether energy, actions, or sexuality—transform into a singular exchange value, rendering the body the most exquisite consumer product [9]. Foucault argued that the body is a site for the exercise of power, with power no longer residing in individuals but in the systematic regulation of bodies, surfaces, light, and gazes [10]. O'Neill suggested that body consumption arises from anxiety in modern economic society, representing a psychological response to the alienation created by social class structures [11]. According to Giddens, the body is not merely a physical entity but a key medium for maintaining a sense of self-identity, as individuals construct their identities through body consumption practices [12].

In the context of social media, the body, technology, and society are deeply intertwined. In recent years, short video platforms have introduced new mechanisms for body display and discipline, disrupting traditional media's body consumption landscape with features like fragmentation, narrative structure, immediacy, and interactivity. Existing studies on body consumption in social media have largely focused on three areas: 1) the body consumption practices of different social groups, emphasizing the diversity and group-specific features of individual body displays in short videos [13]; 2) the mechanisms of body consumption in online media, exploring how symbols such as emotions, gestures, and language are employed by streamers, with consumers participating in the symbolic production and interaction of body consumption in real time [14]; and 3) the ethical dilemmas of body consumption under consumerism, such as the "reverse control" exerted by vertical media, the commercialization of the body, the vulgarization of content, and audience alienation [15].

In conclusion, while previous research has recognized the characteristics of body consumption in the digital age and critically examined them, it has not yet deeply explored body consumption practices from the perspective of affordance. Thus, this study contributes to the literature by examining the body consumption practices of university students on short video platforms, offering new insights into how affordance theory can be applied to these practices. Additionally, while most prior research has focused on technological affordance to explain media use, few scholars have explored the application of imagined affordance. By integrating both technological affordance and imagined affordance, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of

the symbiotic relationship between individuals and technology within the media ecology of short video platforms.

### **3 Research Methodology**

This study employs a combination of participatory observation, in-depth interviews to investigate the phenomenon of body consumption among university students on short video platforms.

A purposive sampling method was used to select university students who have engaged in body consumption practices on short video platforms. The study involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 university students. To ensure that all interviewees had experience in body consumption on short video platforms, the sample consisted of students who had previously posted content on platforms like TikTok. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted either via online voice calls or face-to-face meetings. The content of the interviews focused on the process and experience of creating body-related short video content, daily body management practices, and the formation of body aesthetic perceptions. A semi-structured interview guide was designed, with questions such as: “What aspect of body performance in short videos attracts you the most?” “What creative experience do you gain?” “What body management strategies do you adopt to present a good body image?” and “How do you understand the platform’s influence on body aesthetics?” The interviewees were encouraged to answer these pre-set questions freely. All interviews were recorded with the participants’ consent and were transcribed into textual format for analysis.

### **4 Exploring the Logic of Body Consumption Practices Among College Students on Short-Video Platforms from an Affordance Perspective**

In current communication research, scholars have proposed various dimensions for understanding the concept of affordance. Building upon the theoretical framework of media affordances, this study aims to conceptualize affordance as the opportunities and possibilities that short-video platforms provide for college students’ body consumption. By examining the technical affordances of short-video platforms from three dimensions—production affordance, communication affordance, and social affordance—this study explores the complex relationship between humans and technology. By integrating technical and imagined affordances, the study attempts to capture the ecological characteristics of short-video platforms and offers a comprehensive explanation of the logic underlying college students’ body consumption practices on these platforms.

#### 4.1 Technical Affordance: Platform Usage in Body Consumption

**Technological Empowerment: Production of Body Images.** In terms of content production, technological empowerment and decentralization are key reasons why college students engage in the creation of body imagery. Short-video platforms fully meet the production affordances, such as editing, reviewing, copying, scaling, and linking. Due to the decentralization and participatory nature of content creation on these platforms, short-video culture has quickly permeated all levels of society, especially offering college students, who often experience a monotonous campus life but have a desire to explore and share novel experiences, a convenient tool for entertainment, emotional expression, seeking attention, and finding community. These platforms grant users the role of “director”, enabling them to produce, edit, and collage images based on their creativity. Users need only a smartphone to shoot videos anytime, anywhere, and use the platform’s technical support to edit and beautify their content, choosing platform-recommended or self-selected music as background. This process enables the rapid creation and publication of short videos. Interviewee R20 explains their content creation process, stating, “It’s very convenient to shoot short videos on Douyin, the process is simple. After recording, I usually edit the video using a mobile editing app. Sometimes, when I see popular video templates, I upload my video directly to the template, which automatically applies the same music, editing techniques, tempo, and filters, saving me a lot of time and effort.”

The “create a similar video” function on short-video platforms allows college students to quickly mimic others’ creations, fostering a modular, portable form of creativity that significantly enhances their enthusiasm for producing short videos.

**Virtual Presence: Interaction with Body Images.** By implementing interactive features such as “likes”, “comments”, and “shares”, platforms enable creators and users to engage in a shared viewing environment, achieving greeting, emotional expression, coordination, and connection through virtual presence. Through “follows”, “likes”, and “shares”, users express their admiration and recognition for creators, while “private messages” and “comments” facilitate rich emotional exchanges with creators and other users. Individuals maintain real-life relationships while also establishing virtual companionships with strangers. On one hand, creators often expect responses after publishing their body imagery, monitoring metrics such as follower count, likes, and comments to assess whether their video content has been positively received. Positive feedback significantly enhances self-affirmation and increases their willingness to create more videos. Interviewee R7 noted, “I really hope to receive compliments after posting a video where I look pretty. When people praise me for my looks, it encourages me to post more short videos of myself”.

On the other hand, college students often aim to expand their social circles by posting and sharing short videos. Social platforms leverage networks built on personal preferences and interest-based tags to help creators find communities with shared affinities, expanding their social range and enabling them to meet like-minded friends. These affinity-based relationships promote more proactive sharing and dissemination of body imagery.

**Precise Distribution: Dissemination of Body Images.** The communication affordances of short-video platforms include portability, accessibility, locatability, and compatibility. These platforms can push personalized content based on users' real-time location and usage scenarios, identify potential acquaintances, and target audiences accordingly, as explained by interviewee R2. "My short videos are first pushed to mutual followers, then to my fans, and finally to interested strangers. I interact a lot with my friends by replying to their comments or sharing fun videos via private messages."

The dissemination of body imagery among college students exhibits stratified patterns, facilitated by algorithmic support. The algorithmic dissemination of short videos constructs virtual public spaces where social networks are often segmented into "circles". Interaction primarily occurs within one's social circle, and through a process of "selection and feedback", users are exposed to more homogeneous body imagery, increasingly following creators who share similar content. Consequently, the body imagery they receive becomes more homogeneous. Prolonged immersion in such aesthetic environments leads to information silos, interrupting the reception of diverse aesthetic information.

## 5 Conclusion

This study focuses on the bodily consumption practices of university students on short video platforms, exploring these practices through the lens of affordance theory. By investigating the technological logic underlying their bodily performances, the study addresses the previously overlooked interaction between bodily practices and technology within affordance research.

Short video platforms have deeply penetrated the bodily consumption practices of university students. Their ease of use, virtual coexistence, and precise distribution capabilities amplify the creativity, initiative, and agency of users in producing bodily representations, providing essential conditions for the commodification of the body. Furthermore, the platform's rules, aesthetic standards, and the emotional experiences of creators together construct the ecosystem for bodily consumption practices, viewed from the perspective of imagined affordances. Short video platforms hold the authority to dictate rules and allocate visibility. By producing bodily visual symbols and creating aesthetic distinctions, the platforms, through algorithmic mechanisms and attention-driven models, continuously propagate their aesthetic standards. Users are compelled to explore and adapt to these platform-driven standards, willingly investing physical and mental labor in pursuit of visibility, which highlights both the platform's control and individual agency.

In summary, by reflecting on affordance theory, this study uses university students' bodily consumption behaviors as an entry point to examine how the operational mechanisms of short video platforms influence individual bodily consumption practices. It reveals the logic behind the bodily consumption behaviors of university students on short video platforms. Based on local empirical observations, this study fo-

cuses on the interaction between platforms, society, and individuals, offering new theoretical perspectives for the study of bodily consumption and affordances.

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