INFLUENCE OF THE TIKTOK APPLICATION ON THE ONLINE SHOPPING BEHAVIOR OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of TikTok on students' online shopping behavior, focusing on the platform's unique algorithm-driven personalization and interactive features. The study targeted approximately 15,000 Chinese students from Hunan Province, collecting 434 valid responses through a structured online questionnaire. The questionnaire covered demographic characteristics, factors influencing online shopping behavior and shopping preferences. Statistical methods, including frequency and percentage analysis, were used in the data analysis to summarize the results in tables and narratives.

The results show that the social and interactive nature of TikTok significantly influences shopping behavior. Popular hashtags and recommendations from friends proved to be the most important means of discovering new content, while ads highlighting discounts and creative content were particularly influential. In addition, interactive features such as live streaming and user comments played an important role in enhancing the shopping experience, encouraging user trust and engagement. Marketers should adopt ethical advertising practices and combine authenticity with creativity, while educators and policy makers should prioritize initiatives that provide students with the necessary skills to critically evaluate content.

Keywords: Influence, TikTok Application, Online Shopping

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Introduction

In the digital age, short video platforms have risen to become a dominant form of media, especially popular among college students who use them for relaxation, entertainment and to connect with cultural trends. Among these platforms, TikTok has become a cultural and technological phenomenon that fits seamlessly into the everyday lives of young users. Its appeal lies in its ability to deliver engaging, algorithmically-tailored content based on user preferences, creating a continuous cycle of consumption. However, TikTok's influence goes beyond entertainment value and subtly influences the consumption patterns of its primary audience. The immediacy of the short videos combined with sophisticated algorithms encourages impulsive and often unconscious buying behavior (Yu et al., 2021).

This phenomenon is amplified by the rise of influencer culture on TikTok, where content creators with a large follower base promote products in a way that appeals to the desires and social instincts of young audiences. Influencers often use their credibility and likeability to encourage purchases. This leads to a "herd instinct" among students who buy products recommended by these individuals without critically examining their necessity or quality. This pattern of behavior underscores a worrying dynamic in which consumer preferences are unconsciously shaped, weakening critical thinking and reinforcing a culture of trend-driven consumption (Yang et al., 2021).

Another critical aspect is the evolution of advertising strategies on TikTok, where traditional overt advertising is increasingly replaced by subtle "soft ads" This advertising is cleverly embedded in entertaining content, making it harder for a young audience to recognize as advertising. As a result, students who are already inclined to trust entertaining content are more likely to adopt the consumer identity shaped by these ads. This dynamic reinforces impulsive buying habits driven by a mix of trust, entertainment, and lack of awareness of marketing tactics (Yang et al., 2021).

This study explores the complexity of TikTok's influence on college students' online shopping behavior and addresses the role of TikTok in shaping consumption habits, decision making, and critical engagement with digital content. By examining these behavioral changes, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the risks and challenges facing young consumers in the digital age. The findings will contribute to the development of strategies aimed at promoting media literacy and responsible consumption among college students. Educational institutions, parents, and policy makers can use these findings to mitigate the negative effects of digital platforms and promote critical thinking and informed decision-making among young consumers (Li, 2020).

Furthermore, this study has significant implications for e-commerce platforms and online retailers. By understanding the dynamics of consumer behavior on TikTok, companies can adopt ethical and sustainable marketing practices that align with consumer well-being while fostering long-term brand loyalty. Such practices can create a balanced ecosystem where profit motives are aligned with the protection of consumer rights, minimizing the financial and psychological impact on vulnerable populations such as college students.

In summary, TikTok's growing influence on students' online shopping behavior underscores the need for a concerted response from various stakeholders. Educators, policy makers and digital platforms must work together to promote digital literacy, ethical advertising practices and critical consumer engagement. By equipping students with the skills to navigate digital environments responsibly, it is possible to cultivate a culture of informed consumption and improve the overall wellbeing of young audiences in an increasingly digital society.

Research Objective

To explore the influence of the TIKTOK application on the online shopping behavior of college students.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates how TikTok applications and marketing communication strategies influence the online shopping behavior of college students. TikTok's personalized algorithms and influencer-driven content encourage impulsive purchases and engagement, while marketing communications integrate channels such as live streaming and participatory marketing to build trust and brand loyalty. The framework can be drawn as shown in Figure 1. Together, these elements shape consumer behavior by fostering interactive and community-driven shopping experiences that align with modern consumers' values and promote long-term loyalty (Wang, 2021; Guo et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021).
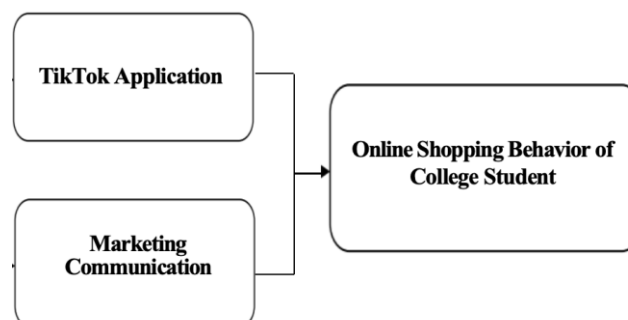

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Literature Review

TikTok Application

Since its inception in 2016, TikTok has quickly evolved into a versatile platform that is gaining popularity among young users thanks to its intuitive design and sophisticated algorithms that tailor content to individual preferences. Originally launched as an app for sharing short videos, TikTok now serves as a medium for educational content, e-commerce and interactive learning that promotes critical thinking and rapid knowledge acquisition (Wang, 2021; Guo et al., 2022). The unique video format and algorithm-driven content recommendations are in line with media theory, support different learning styles and improve the accessibility of knowledge.

In the field of marketing, TikTok has become a powerful tool for brands to build credibility and connect with their target audience through collaboration with influencers and content-driven commerce. Known as Douyin in China, the platform is also fostering cultural and economic growth by democratizing content creation, supporting local economies and reshaping digital commerce through live streaming and user-generated content (Shen, 2022; Lixăndroiu et al., 2021). TikTok's influence also extends to media studies, where it exemplifies the shift in media consumption, user-generated content and algorithm-driven information dissemination, cementing its role as a transformative force in the digital landscape (Santos, 2022; Ma, 2023).

Marketing Communication

Marketing communications is an integrated approach that combines advertising, public relations, social media and analytics to create a consistent and recognizable brand identity. This integration is crucial for improving the customer experience, building stakeholder relationships and fostering brand loyalty (He, 2020; Juska, 2021). By harmonizing different channels, such as social media, email campaigns and in-store promotions, marketing communication ensures a consistent brand message and adapts in real time to optimize campaign success. Current trends emphasize the importance of transparency and trust. Brands are using personalized content, live streams and partnerships with influencers to engage consumers. In addition, incorporating social responsibility and sustainability into marketing strategies appeals to an environmentally conscious audience, which aligns with modern consumers' values and enhancing collaborative engagement (Azpeitia, 2021; Guo et al., 2022; Liu, 2022).

Online Shopping Behavior of Customers

In the digital age, online shopping behavior has changed significantly, driven by platforms such as TikTok, which influence the decision-making process at various stages of the purchase. Key opinion leaders (KOLs), influential everyday users and interactive community features such as comments and shares help create a trustworthy environment that fosters

brand loyalty and impulsive buying behavior among younger demographics (Tseng & Wang, 2023). TikTok's advanced data analytics enables brands to provide targeted marketing and personalized shopping experiences, including one-click purchases and live-stream sales. In addition, the platform encourages participatory marketing by enabling consumers to engage in brand stories and co-create content, creating a sense of community and shared experiences. This shift towards interactive, social consumer engagement is redefining brand strategies in an increasingly competitive digital marketplace (Yang et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2022).

Research Methodology

1. The population for this research includes about 15,000 Chinese students from freshmen to seniors who are interested in online shopping and studying at educational institutions in Hunan Province. Based on the size of the population and using the Yamane formula to calculate the sample size with a margin of error of 5, the required sample size was set at 400 students. To account for possible non-response, the response rate was adjusted by 10%, bringing the total number of questionnaires distributed to 440. Ultimately, 434 valid responses were received and used for the analysis.

2. A structured questionnaire was used for the study, which was distributed via an online platform. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section collected demographic information about the respondents, including their gender (options: male or female) and their year of study (options: freshman, junior or senior). The second section focused on the factors that influence online shopping behavior. Multiple-choice and two-choice (agree/disagree) questions were used to explore respondents' shopping habits and preferences.

3. Statistical methods, in particular frequency and percentage analyzes, were used to interpret the data collected with the questionnaire. The results are presented in tables that summarize the distribution of responses across different variables such as demographic characteristics, online shopping behavior and influencing factors.

Research Results

The demographic information of the 434 respondents is summarized as follows. In terms of gender, 210 respondents (48.39%) were male, while 224 respondents (51.61%) were female. In terms of academic year, 150 respondents (34.56%) were freshmen, 160 respondents (36.87%) were juniors, and 124 respondents (28.57%) were seniors. These results show a balanced gender representation and a slightly higher proportion of juniors among the respondents.

1. TikTok Application Result

Table 1. The main factors affecting viewing content on TikTok

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very influential	171	39.45
Somewhat influential	120	27.74
Uncertain	43	10.01
Little Influence	42	9.76
Not at all	58	13.04
Total	434	100.00

Survey data shows that location has a significant influence on the content viewed by most users on TikTok, with 39.45% saying it has a great influence, 27.74% saying it has a medium influence.

Table 2. TikTok discovers what influences new content

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Application recommendations	54	12.52
Search	43	9.92
Follow influencers	84	19.29
Recommendation from friends	108	25.09
Popular hashtags	145	32.37
Total	434	100.00

32.37% of TikTok college student users discover new content mainly through "hot topic tags", followed by "friend recommendations" (25.09%), showing a strong preference for community-driven and socially recommended content. Only 12.52% of TikTok's college users discover new content primarily through app recommendations, indicating a relatively low reliance on algorithmic suggestions compared to other methods.

Table 3. Short video advertising preferences

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Discount information	139	32.03
Creative content	107	24.72
Product pictures	56	13.01
Celebrity/Internet celebrity endorsement	95	21.87
User comments	37	8.37
Total	434	100

Preference for discount information (32.03%) has become the most attractive factor in short video advertisements. The 24.72% preference for short video advertising creative content highlights the importance users place on innovation and originality. And user reviews in short video ads have a preference of 8.37%.

2. Marketing Communication Result

Table 4. Influencing factors to online shopping

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Price	140	32.23
Uniqueness	39	9.06
Brand reputation	38	8.67
Reviews and Ratings	48	11.00
Recommendation by friends	169	39.04
Total	434	100.00

"Recommendations from friends" received the most attention at 39.04%. This underlines the significant influence of personal networks on online purchasing decisions. However, the data also shows that 32.23% of online shopping consumers are primarily interested in products because of price. College students are very price sensitive and pay attention to deals, discounts and overall value when shopping online.

Table 5. Function of short video helpful for online shopping

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Live streaming	156	36.08
Product recommendation algorithm	60	13.78
User comments	182	42.07
Coupon reward	18	4.15
Product function comparison	17	3.92
Total	434	100.00

The interactive nature of TikTok and the preference for user reviews (42.07%) highlight the key role of peer reviews in influencing shopping decisions on the short video application. In addition, live streaming is as high as 36.08%, highlighting the effectiveness of this feature in improving the online shopping experience on short video applications.

Table 6. Ease of finding products of interest on TikTok

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very simple	165	39.05
Somewhat simple	160	36.79
General	50	12.03
Somewhat difficult	38	9.63
Very difficult	21	6.50
Total	434	100.00

Survey data shows that 75.84% of college students think it is relatively easy to discover products or brands of interest on TikTok, which demonstrates the effectiveness of the application in content personalization and discovery. Only 16.13% of college students think it is difficult.

3. TikTok Factors Influencing Online Shopping Behavior

Table 7. Factors influencing purchasing decision

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Recommended by internet celebrities/experts	82	18.85
Recommendation by friends	133	30.69
Price	98	22.69
Product evaluation	113	26.16
Shipping options	7	1.61
Total	434	100.00

According to Table 7, factors influencing purchase decisions mainly include friend recommendations, price, and product reviews, with these three factors accounting for 30.69%, 22.69% and 26.16% respectively.

Discussions

The results show the significant impact of TikTok on the online shopping behavior of college students and provide valuable insights for marketers, content creators and educators. TikTok's unique features, such as its algorithm-driven personalized content and short, engaging

video format, offer new opportunities to target this audience while presenting challenges that require strategic approaches. The tailored content and community nature of the platform have a strong influence on online shopping behavior. The study highlights TikTok's ability to facilitate product discovery through popular hashtags (32.37%) and recommendations from friends (25.09%), reflecting the social and interactive nature of the platform. These findings echo those of Wang (2021), who emphasized that TikTok's personalized algorithm provides a highly engaging user experience that makes product discovery seamless and enjoyable. In addition, the preference for discount information (32.03%) and creative content (24.72%) in ads emphasizes the importance of price incentives and originality to attract users' attention. Yang et al. (2021) came to similar conclusions and emphasized the crucial role of innovative and trend-based marketing strategies in influencing consumer preferences on short video platforms. While this trend-based marketing is effective, brands must find a balance between short-term consumer interest and long-term authenticity and consistent messaging to maintain trust and loyalty.

TikTok's influencer culture amplifies the impact of social proof on student decision making. Influencers who are seen as credible and trustworthy by their followers play a crucial role in shaping opinions and encouraging purchases. Zhang (2021) found that influencer recommendations significantly influence consumer trust, especially among younger audiences who perceive these recommendations as more personal and credible. The algorithmic preference for personalized content further amplifies this dynamic, fostering a trend-driven environment where students feel compelled to follow influencers' recommendations. However, this leads to ethical concerns, as highlighted by Yang et al. (2021), who point out the importance of ensuring that influencer recommendations are authentic and in line with ethical marketing standards. Furthermore, the rapid, trend-driven nature of decision making highlights the need for improved digital literacy, enabling students to critically evaluate online content and make informed purchasing decisions.

The immersive nature of TikTok often results in users' interest being converted into actual purchases, encouraging impulsive buying behavior. Features such as live streaming and user reviews significantly influence students' purchasing decisions, with user comments accounting for 42.07% of preferences and live streaming 36.08%. This aligns with the findings of Guo et al. (2022), who showed that reviews and interactive features play an important role in building trust and facilitating online purchases. Furthermore, limited-time offers and

aspirational portrayals of lifestyles on TikTok further drive spending, which is consistent with the findings of Santos (2022), who found that the platform's engaging and aspirational content motivates users to make quick, emotion-driven purchases. Policymakers and educators need to advocate for responsible consumer behavior by promoting transparent advertising practices and addressing the financial and psychological impact of social media consumption (Wang, 2021; Zhang, 2021).

TikTok is both an opportunity and a challenge for marketers and young consumers alike. Its algorithmic precision and socially responsive features make it a powerful tool for businesses to connect with students, a demographic with high digital engagement. However, the platform's influence also raises critical questions about ethical marketing and consumer protection. Wang (2021) emphasizes the importance of addressing these issues to ensure that users are not exploited through manipulative advertising techniques. The researcher also emphasizes the importance of digital literacy and financial awareness among young users. Zhang (2021) supported this view and emphasized that educating consumers to critically evaluate content is essential for informed decision-making. Policy makers, educators and marketers should work together to develop programs that equip students with the skills to resist impulsive buying behavior driven by fleeting trends. Finally, the researcher emphasizes the responsibility of marketers to adopt sustainable and ethical advertising practices to ensure that their strategies encourage informed consumer behavior and build trust with this highly engaged audience. A holistic approach that involves all stakeholders will be crucial to creating a balanced digital ecosystem that benefits both consumers and businesses.

The new body of Knowledge found in this study

This study highlights the unique role of TikTok in shaping the online shopping behavior of college students. Unlike traditional social media platforms, TikTok's combination of algorithm-driven personalization and community-driven content discovery fosters a highly engaging and trust-based shopping environment. The study shows that students frequently turn to social features such as popular hashtags and recommendations from friends to discover new products, highlighting the interactive and socially-oriented nature of the platform. In addition, ads that include economic incentives such as discounts and creative content were found to be particularly good at capturing the attention of this demographic. These findings add to the understanding of how personalized content, peer recommendations

and engaging marketing strategies influence consumer behavior and underscore the central importance of social trust and interactive dynamics in modern digital marketplaces.

The study also highlights the significant impact of TikTok's interactive features, such as live streaming and user comments, in enhancing the online shopping experience. These elements enable real-time engagement and peer reviews, which facilitates informed decision-making and builds trust. At the same time, the trend-driven nature of the platform can lead to impulsive buying behavior, raising concerns about users' financial and psychological wellbeing. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the importance of digital literacy and critical thinking among young consumers, while emphasizing the need for ethical and sustainable marketing practices. By addressing these dynamics, the study provides valuable insights for educators, policy makers and marketers to address the evolving challenges and opportunities of platforms like TikTok in the digital age.

Recommendation

This study provides several practical recommendations for marketers, educators and policy makers. Marketers should focus on leveraging TikTok's unique algorithm-driven personalization and socially interactive features to create engaging and trust-based marketing campaigns. Strategies that emphasize creative and authentic content in conjunction with economic incentives such as discounts can effectively capture the attention of students. In addition, brands should prioritize ethical marketing practices and ensure transparency and genuine endorsements from influencers to build long-term trust with their target audience. Educators and policy makers, on the other hand, are encouraged to develop programs that promote digital literacy and critical consumption habits among young consumers. These initiatives should aim to equip students with the ability to critically evaluate online content, resist impulsive buying tendencies and make informed purchasing decisions. Furthermore, collaboration between platforms, marketers and regulators is essential to promote a balanced digital ecosystem that ensures user welfare while creating economic opportunities.

Future research is recommended to investigate the long-term effects of TikTok's marketing strategies on consumer loyalty and purchasing behavior, especially among different age groups and cultural contexts. Investigating the psychological and financial impact of impulsive buying behavior on young consumers would also provide deeper insights into the challenges of platforms like TikTok. In addition, comparative studies could examine how TikTok's

marketing dynamics differ from those of other social media platforms to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving digital marketing landscape. Future studies could also explore the role of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and augmented reality in shaping customer engagement on short video platforms. By addressing these areas, future research can further enhance the understanding of digital consumer behavior and contribute to the development of more ethical and effective marketing practices in the digital age.

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