



Breaking the Pore-fect Image: Renegotiating Aesthetic Norms Through TikTok's Acne Content

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ABSTRACT

Acne is often associated with negative perceptions and conventional beauty standards idealize clear skin. However, TikTok has become a space where acne is increasingly represented in different ways. This study examines how women with acne-prone skin represent their experiences and construct meanings of beauty on TikTok, particularly through acceptance, resistance, and negotiation of conventional beauty standards. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) was applied to analyze an initial accessible pool of 24 TikTok videos identified under the hashtags #acneproneskin and #acnefighter and four information-rich videos purposively selected for detailed analysis. The videos were uploaded between January and December 2025 and analyzed through their visual and narrative elements. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: acceptance, resistance, and negotiation. The findings show that acceptance constructs acne as a visible and acceptable part of female identity and self-worth, while resistance challenges negative meanings attached to acne, including associations with poor hygiene and the need to conceal skin imperfections. Negotiation demonstrates how women may maintain conventional beauty practices, such as makeup, while simultaneously accepting the visibility of acne. These themes represent different ways women position themselves in relation to beauty standards. Drawing on Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory, the findings indicate that meanings of acne and beauty are not fixed but can be constructed and rearticulated through visual and narrative practices on TikTok. The study therefore positions acne not only as a physical condition but also as a cultural and representational issue related to beauty, identity, and self-perception in digital spaces, contributing to a broader understanding of how conventional beauty meanings can be negotiated through social media self-representation.

Keywords: Acne, TikTok, Acceptance, Resistance, Negotiation



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1. Introduction

TikTok, a highly short-form video-based platform, has become one of the most popular social media platforms in the world and is characterized by creative sharing aspects and personal content over traditional social interaction. With over 1.39 billion monthly active users globally (Ionescu & Licu, 2023), TikTok outpaces many other platforms in producing social meaning through visual and narrative practices, including self-representation and identity expression. It makes social media an essential part of the development of social

meaning and identity, as it has become a cultural space where norms, trends, and social meanings are frequently shaped through community interaction and creative expression (Hall, 1997). Features, including augmented reality effects and beauty filters, enable algorithms to create highly visual images that often enhance or modify a person's physical appearance. The visual practices do not reflect reality, but build idealized representations that emphasize bright, acne-free, and smooth skin as symbols of female beauty (Gusriatara & Dimyati, 2025). These features help show how identity and beauty are presented, consumed, and negotiated, making TikTok an excellent setting to explore visual self-representation and social norms within digital culture.

There are many genres on social media, and one of the most dominant is beauty content. Beauty content on social media typically highlights skincare routines, make up tutorial, and product reviews. These are visually represented through stories and practices that create idealized forms of beauty, clear and healthy skin, and femininity (Abidin, 2016; Van Duffelen et al., 2026). Such content repeatedly promotes specific beauty standards, including glowing, smooth, and acne-free skin. The use of lighting and filters suggests that acne is something that must be fixed and minimized. According to Wolf (1991) in *The Beauty Myth*, social norms force women to keep to the particular standards through the way beauty is presented. It shows that lighting and filters attach social expectations that link attractiveness and worthiness to edited, smooth skin



Figure 1. (a) A woman with flawless skin and an idealized body in a traditional magazine <https://preloved.co.id/products/majalah-kartini-1?srsId=AfmBOoootdsoSp1p-lvIJtxyp5OPodwKtx1Zz0WsUmr5jYcg6WJYfJO4>; (b) A woman with showing her skin condition on social media <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSm9epUqV/>

Historically, beauty culture in TV shows, magazines, and celebrity advertising often privileged polished skin and flawless imagery that present a perfect complexion and smooth skin as normative standards (Lal et al., 2022). In Figure 1 (a), the concept that visible skin flaws reflect culturally acceptable beauty was supported by these representations in old media, which have traditionally positioned acne-free skin as standards and a desirable state. Turns out, social media has become an important setting for acne discussion because of its immediacy, visual format, and perception of community and support (Zoltan & Silverberg, 2025). In this context, TikTok has begun to open space for personality trends that showcase unedited, unfiltered images, especially for women with acne-prone skin. These TikTok videos feature unedited and no-makeup faces that align with social stigma, personal reflection on self-acceptance, and daily practices for living with skin conditions (Figure 1 (b)). This contrast highlights a transformation within visual culture from the intensely mediated, edited beauty standards of previous media to the visibility of user-generated content, which is more challenging and promotes variety. This transformation reflects the idea that cultural representations are not fixed but change over time, as meanings associated with symbols evolve alongside broader social and cultural changes (Hall, 1997). It signals a shift in the way beauty representations are created and circulated.

Resistance to conventional beauty standards is frequently difficult. Many women share about their acne-prone skin while expressing hopes for healthier and clearer skin, rather than completely rejecting these standards. This reflects continuous struggle between internalizing conventional beauty standards and accepting their true appearance. In this context, representations of women with acne-prone skin on TikTok do not appear in a single or uniform position. Instead, these contents convey various meaning, such as

acceptance of their skin condition, resistance to the conventional beauty standards of flawless skin, and continuous negotiation between self-acceptance and conventional beauty standards. These patterns suggests that representations on TikTok are flexible and open to ongoing process of meaning-making.

Stuart Hall's theory of representation (1997) offers a framework for understanding how meanings are produced in media. Representation is an active process that produces meaning through images, language, and cultural practices rather than merely reflecting reality. Thus, media texts are seen in cultural studies as spaces where social meanings and identities are continuously produced and negotiated (Barker, 2003). In the context of digital culture, TikTok videos can be seen as cultural texts that shape perceptions of female identity, beauty, and self-acceptance through the combination of visual imagery and narratives practices. This study uses this perspective to investigate how women with acne-prone skin construct meanings of acceptance, resistance, and negotiation toward conventional beauty standards through their TikTok content.

Previous studies on social media content related to acne have primarily focused on its function in health communication and information quality. Several studies examined that social media platforms are a major information source for adolescents, influencing their understanding of acne and treatment choices (Fawzian et al., 2023; Yousaf et al., 2020). However, other studies reveal that acne-related content on social media such as TikTok is often dominated by personal experiences rather than fact-based information, creating concerns about its clinical accuracy (Iyengar et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies on beauty-related content indicates a growing emphasis on self-acceptance within influencer campaigns. Nevertheless, rather than being deeper cultural representations that challenge dominant beauty standards, such as messages are frequently presented as motivational narratives (Yahdini et al., 2024). These findings show that while social media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of acne, there is still a gap in understanding how acne is represented as a part of identity and negotiated within beauty discourses.

Nevertheless, these studies still focus on audience responses, information quality, and health aspects, thus paying little attention to how acne is represented and understood as part of identity in the context of digital culture. In the other words, there is still a lack of understanding of how digital self-representation and resistance concepts shaped acne as a visual and narrative category. In addition, this study fills a gap by examining how women with acne-prone skin are represented on TikTok as forms of acceptance, resistance, and negotiation in relation to beauty standards, using Stuart Hall's framework of representation.

Based on this gap, this study focuses on identifying recurring patterns in TikTok content with the hashtags #acneproneskin and #acnefighter and how these themes construct meanings of acceptance, resistance, and negotiation towards beauty standards. Therefore, this study uses Stuart Hall's theory of representation to explore how content by women with acne-prone skin represents their experiences through visual and narrative practices, and how the meaning of beauty and women's identity are constructed within digital culture. The novelty of this study lies in positioning acne with three interconnected patterns of meanings of acceptance, resistance, and negotiation as a practice of cultural representation in the digital space. Based on the research gap and the focus of the study, the following research questions are addressed:

1. RQ1: How is acne-prone skin represented by women on TikTok?
2. RQ2: How do these representations negotiate conventional beauty standards through acceptance, resistance, and negotiation?

2. Method

This study collected the data by selecting TikTok as the research platform and analyzing videos under the hashtags #acneproneskin and #acnefighter. The dataset was limited to videos uploaded between January and December 2025. An initial pool of 24 accessible videos was identified, consisting of 4 videos found under #acneproneskin only, 4 found under #acnefighter only, and 16 videos appearing under both hashtags. Figure 2 presented in the introduction was not included in this dataset because it was used only for contextual example.

Purposive sampling was used to choose the videos that were most relevant to the research questions. The researcher did not aim to exhaustively retrieve all videos associated with the hashtags because TikTok's search function may not display potentially relevant content, particularly content from smaller or less visible accounts. Therefore, the 24 videos represented the accessible pool identified through the selected hashtags rather than the total number of eligible videos available on TikTok.

The videos were further assessed using specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. Videos were included if they (1) were created by women, (2) clearly displayed acne-prone skin, (3) were uploaded between January and December 2025, (4) used English captions or spoken narratives, and (5) expressed personal experiences, feelings, self-perceptions, or reflections related to acne and beauty.

Videos were excluded when they contained sponsored or promotional content, primarily focused on skincare or beauty products, or presented an acne-treatment journey. These criteria were applied to maintain the focus of the study on personal experience and self-representation rather than commercially motivated, product-oriented, or treatment-focused content.

Following the application of these criteria, four information-rich videos were purposively selected for detailed thematic analysis. The selected videos provided clear examples of the recurring representational patterns related to acne, beauty, and self-perception.

Table 1. Initial Accessible TikTok Dataset

Hashtags occurrence	Number of videos
#acneproneskin	4
#acnefighter	4
Both hashtags	16
Total	24

Table 2. Selection Stage

Selection stage	Number
Initial accessible pool	24
Final videos selected for detailed analysis	4

Thematic analysis was employed as the primary analytical method, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The analysis was theoretically informed with acceptance, resistance, and negotiation established as the main analytical categories based on the research questions and conceptual framework. Within these categories, specific empirical codes were identified from the data.

The analysis focused on both visual and narrative elements of the selected TikTok videos. Visual elements included the visibility of acne, skin texture, makeup, and the presence or absence of beauty filters, while narrative elements included captions, on-screen text, and spoken statements. The researchers first familiarized themselves with the selected videos and generated initial codes from recurring visual and narrative features. These codes were then grouped according to their shared meanings within the three analytical categories. For example, within the acceptance category, bare-face presentation, the absence of beauty filters, visible acne, and self-love narratives emerged as empirical codes.

The codes were reviewed and refined to identify recurring patterns within each category. The three categories were subsequently interpreted through Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory to examine how the visual and narrative practices constructed meanings of acne, beauty, self-perception, and identity.

The thematic analysis followed the six-phase process proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006), as illustrated in Figure 2.

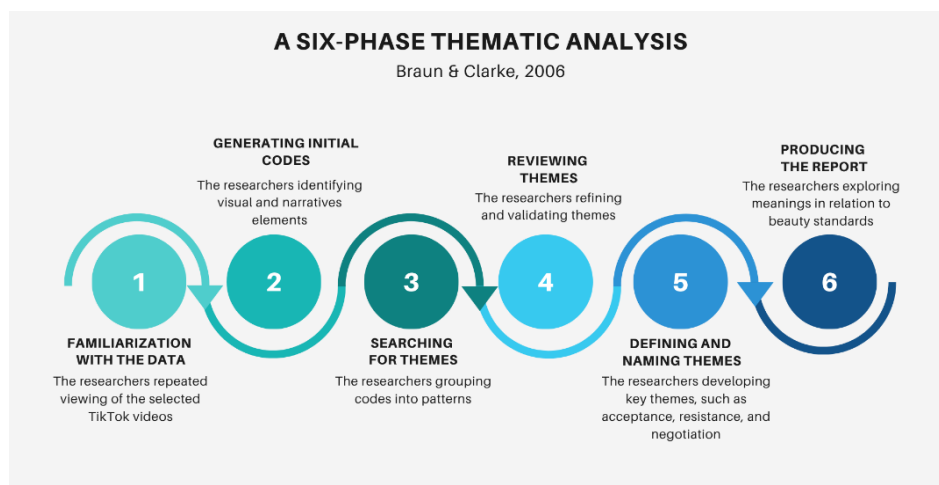


Figure 2. A six-phase thematic analysis process by Braun & Clarke 2006
Through this analytical process, the selected videos were organized according to the three theoretically

informed categories of acceptance, resistance, and negotiation. These categories were examined as interconnected forms of representation through which meanings of acne, beauty, self-perception, and identity were constructed in the selected TikTok content. Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory was then used to interpret these meanings in relation to conventional beauty standards.

3. Results and Discussion

The main analysis of this study is presented in this section by applying Stuart Hall's theory of representation to understand the meaning of TikTok content by women with acne. From a cultural studies perspective, TikTok content is seen as a cultural text that actively produces meanings about identity, beauty, and self-acceptance, rather than simply reflecting reality (Hall, 1997). This study highlights how acne is represented in relation to conventional beauty standards by using thematic analysis to find recurrent patterns of meaning in the selected videos.

3.1 Acceptance of acne-prone skin

Acceptance is presented in the selected TikTok content through the presentation of acne as a visible and acceptable part of female identity rather than a flaw that must be concealed. This pattern addresses the first research question by showing how alternative meanings of beauty are constructed through self-representation. Rather than treating clear and flawless skin as the only desirable form of appearance, the selected content presents acne-prone skin as compatible with beauty and self-worth.

The display of bare faces, the absence of beauty filters, and the absence of makeup function as visual practices of acceptance. As shown in Figure 3, the creator visibly presents redness, acne, and uneven skin texture. Rather than using visual techniques to conceal or minimize acne, the creator allows these features to remain visible. This presentation is significant because it challenges the conventional expectation that beauty should be associated with smooth, clear, and flawless skin. By making acne visible without concealment, the creator constructs an alternative representation in which acne can coexist with beauty and self-acceptance.



Figure 3. A woman showing self-acceptance despite having acne
<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSm9d1RUK/>

Narratively, the caption “When I fall in love with myself, everything starts to bloom beautifully,” reinforces this visual representation by presenting self-acceptance as an internal process rather than a result of achieving physical perfection. The emphasis on “fall in love with myself” positions beauty in relation to

self-recognition and emotional acceptance rather than the elimination of acne. In this representation, acne-prone skin is not constructed as an obstacle that must first be removed before a woman can feel beautiful. Instead, acne becomes part of a broader process of developing confidence and accepting one's appearance. The combination of the visible acne and the self-acceptance narrative therefore constructs beauty as subjective and compatible with skin imperfection.

In the perspective of Stuart Hall (1997), these visual and narrative elements do not simply reflect the creator's skin condition but actively construct meaning around acne and beauty. The visibility of acne, combined with the self-acceptance narrative, reworks the conventional association between beauty and flawless skin by giving acne a different cultural meaning. Acne is therefore represented not as a deficiency that undermines femininity or attractiveness, but as a condition that can coexist with self-worth and beauty. This illustrates Hall's (1997) view that meaning is constructed through representational practices and is therefore open to being reworked within cultural contexts such as social media.

3.2 Resistance toward conventional beauty standards

In contrast to acceptance, esistance is represented through practices that challenge the meanings attached to acne and conventional beauty standards. In the selected TikTok content, acne is not presented as a condition that must conform to the ideal of flawless skin. Instead, creators question the assumptions that connect acne with undesirable appearance, poor hygiene, or the need to conceal skin imperfections. Resistance therefore operates not only through rejecting conventional beauty ideals, but also through reworking the meanings associated with acne and visible skin texture.

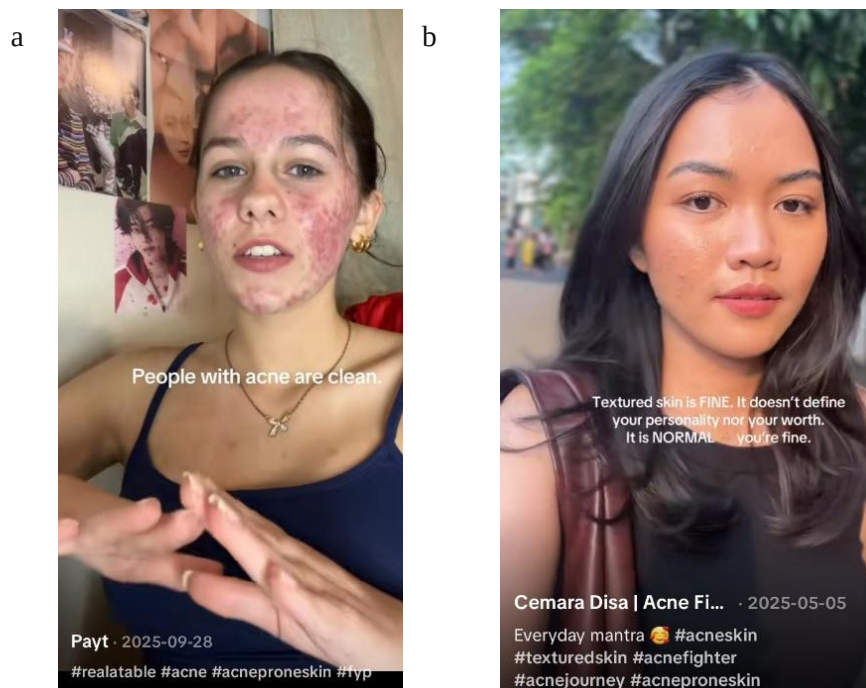


Figure 4. (a) A woman with acne confirms that acne does not define cleanliness <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHAE67Cb/>; (b) A woman with textured skin affirms it as normal <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHAEYUKU/>

As seen in Figure 4 (a), the creator displays visible acne alongside the statement “people with acne are clean.” The statement directly challenges the cultural association between acne and poor hygiene or inadequate self-care. By explicitly separating acne from the meaning of being “unclean,” the creator redefines the condition as something that does not indicate personal negligence or lack of cleanliness. The visible presentation of acne strengthens this message because the skin is not concealed while the negative association is being challenged. Thus, the representation works as a form of resistance by contesting a stigmatized meaning attached to acne and constructing an alternative meaning in which acne does not determine a woman's cleanliness or worth.

Resistance can also take a more subtle form, as shown in Figure 4(b). Although the creator wears makeup, acne and skin texture remain clearly visible rather than being completely concealed. This

combination complicates the conventional function of makeup as a means of producing a flawless appearance. The accompanying statements, “textured skin is fine” and “it is normal,” further reinforce the normalization of visible skin texture. In this representation, makeup does not erase the signs of acne; instead, it coexists with them. The practice therefore challenges the assumption that using makeup requires the concealment of skin imperfections and constructs visible texture as compatible with beauty and self-expression.

In line with Stuart Hall’s (1997), these representations demonstrate that the meaning of acne is constructed rather than inherently fixed. In Figure 4(a), the statement about cleanliness contests the cultural meaning that associate acne with poor hygiene, while Figure 4(b) reworks the meaning of makeup by allowing visible acne and skin texture to remain present. Together, these representations challenge the assumption that acne is a sign of personal deficiency or an appearance that must be corrected. Resistance therefore occurs through the reconstruction of meaning: acne can remain visible without signifying uncleanliness, unattractiveness, or failure to meet conventional beauty standards. In this sense, TikTok functions as a cultural space in which established meanings of acne and beauty can be contested and rearticulated through everyday self-representation.

3.3 Negotiation of acne representation within beauty standards

Negotiation emerges when women with acne-prone skin neither completely reject nor fully conform to conventional beauty standards. In the selected TikTok content, this pattern is represented through the continued use of makeup while acne remains visibly present. The use of makeup suggests that conventional beauty practices and the desire to enhance one’s appearance are still meaningful, while the visibility of acne indicates that achieving a flawless appearance is not treated as the only acceptable outcome. Rather than positioning acceptance and beauty conformity as mutually exclusive, the representation allows both to coexist. Beauty is therefore negotiated through a flexible position in which conventional beauty practices are retained while the visibility of acne is simultaneously accepted.



Figure 5. A woman being both accepting her skin condition and dealing with the desire for clearer skin

<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHhQMoaY/>

In Figure 5, the creator uses makeup to alter her appearance, while acne and skin imperfections remain visible. Makeup is therefore used to balance the desire to participate in conventional beauty practices with the reality of her skin condition rather than to completely conceal it. The coexistence of makeup and visible

acne creates a tension between the desire to achieve an ideal appearance and the willingness to remain visible with acne. Although makeup may be associated with enhancing or improving appearance, its use in this context does not erase the reality of the creator's skin. At the same time, the continued use of makeup indicates that acceptance does not necessarily require abandoning practices associated with conventional attractiveness. This representation therefore positions the creator between two expectations: the desire to appear according to established beauty practices and the willingness to remain visible with acne. The negotiation lies in maintaining both positions rather than choosing one exclusively.

From Stuart Hall's (1997) perspective, this representation demonstrates that meanings of beauty are not fixed but can contain competing positions. Makeup may traditionally be associated with improving or concealing perceived imperfections, while the continued visibility of acne introduces an alternative meaning in which imperfection does not have to be eliminated to maintain attractiveness. The creator therefore does not simply accept or reject conventional beauty standards; instead, the representation rearticulates them by allowing conventional beauty practices and visible acne to coexist. Negotiation can thus be understood as a process of constructing meaning between dominant beauty ideals and personal experience, rather than as a complete departure from existing standards.

4. Conclusion

Through three key themes, including acceptance, resistance, and negotiation, this study highlights how TikTok content by women with acne-prone skin construct different meanings of beauty. Acceptance reflects how acne is represented as a visible and acceptable part of female identity and self-worth, while resistance illustrates how negative meanings attached to acne, such as associations with poor hygiene and the need to conceal imperfections, are contested. Negotiation, on the other hand, reveals a more complex process where women maintain conventional beauty practices while simultaneously accepting the visibility of acne and their actual skin condition. Viewed through Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory, these findings demonstrate that meanings of acne and beauty are not fixed but can be constructed and rearticulated through visual and narrative practices. These findings suggest that acne is not only viewed as a physical condition but also as something that shapes how women see themselves in digital space. More broadly, the findings position acne as a cultural and representational issue related to beauty, identity, and self-perception.

In order to provide a broader understanding of beauty meanings in various digital contexts, future research may explore how acne is represented on other social media platforms. It is also recommended to include audience perspectives to examine how these representations are interpreted by viewers. Future research may focus on various demographic groups to examine how acne experiences and representations may differ across social and cultural backgrounds.

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6. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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