

Article

Hooked on the Feed: How TikTok Shapes the Mental Health of University Students



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Abstract: With the rapid expansion of social media platforms, short-video applications such as TikTok have become deeply embedded in the daily lives of university students due to their highly engaging and algorithm-driven content. This growing reliance has raised increasing concerns about the potential psychological and behavioural effects of excessive TikTok use on students' mental health and overall well-being. This research paper investigates how the use of TikTok (TT) can affect the mental health of students at the University. A sample of 60 undergraduate and postgraduate students took part in the study using a descriptive analytical strategy consisting of three dimensions through an electronic questionnaire, where the usage level and addiction indicators, psychological problems related to TT usage, and suggested solutions to reduce its adverse impact were considered. The results indicate that the students spend a lot of time on the platform daily, admitting that it is hard to stop using it, they become anxious when they cannot use the application, and they tend to use TT to forget about adverse effects. Findings also reveal that there are significant psychological issues, such as heightened anxiety, a lack of socialisation, disturbed sleep and loss of concentration. The Pearson correlation analysis indicates the significant positive association between excessive use of TT and psychological distress. The paper suggests awareness campaigns, digital-wellbeing policies and counselling services to reduce digital addiction among the university students.

Keywords: *TikTok, mental health, digital addiction, university students, anxiety*

Introduction

A radical digital transformation is taking place in the present-day world as a result of speedy advancements in information and communication technologies that have transformed the everyday life, social life and communication patterns (Hamelink, 1997; Preston, 2000; Graham, M., & Dutton, Eds; Aithal & Aithal, 2020; Mapiye et al., 2023). The prevalence of mobile phones and internet expansion has established a globalised virtual world that spans geographical boundaries and affects people of various ages; especially teenagers and university students (Marko, 2021; Chakraborty et al., 2024; Hartwell et al., 2024; Usman, 2020). In this growing digital world, social media sites have turned out to be potent instruments that define who you are, how you act, and how you feel (Askar, 2025; Stein, 2024; Liao et al., 2024; Barta & Andalibi, 2021). Of these platforms, TT has attained incredible popularity thanks to its short-form videos, its dynamic content, and its extremely engaging interface, based on algorithms which attract attention and sustain longer use on the platform (Gottbrath, 2025; Anderson, 2022).

Due to the growing popularity of TT, the psychological and social influence of this social media platform has become a topic of increased research (Meliawati et al., 2023; Sameer, 2025; Nugroho et al., 2023). Although the platform has provided a space in which one can be creative, express and connect with peers, there is mounting evidence that the misuse of this platform can be linked with poor mental health (Braghieri, 2022; Chancellor & De Choudhury, 2020; Nesi, 2020). The research points to the issues associated with anxiety, depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal, which can possibly be attributed to the addictive nature of the app. The TT algorithm dynamically creates a customised feed based on the preferences of the user, thus creating a reinforcement loop which maximises the engagement, hence creating a dependency on behaviour at the same time.

As a result, the emotional stability and self-assessment can be further influenced by the immersive aspect of TT content, as well as the continuous social comparison and exposure to idealised images. Such issues bring up some critical questions regarding how frequent users might feel a psychological burden and achieve the stability, concentration and emotional balance that is demanded in an academic setting. The knowledge of how TT affects mental health is thus vital to the development of effective awareness strategies that will assist students in having healthy digital habits and reducing the degrees to which they may be hurt. The future consequences of such behaviours also deserve serious scholarly

research as young people resort more and more to digital media as a source of social interaction, entertainment, and stress relief.

As a reaction to such emerging issues, the current study examines how the use of TT affects the mental health of students at Latakia University. The study will seek to bring more accurate conclusions about the relationship between digital behaviour and wellbeing by assessing the level of usage, behavioural outcomes of excessive engagement, and the psychological outcomes related to excessive engagement. The study is also aimed at contributing to the wider debates on the topic of digital wellness and why institutions should be able to help students learn how to navigate the online environments safely. This data will be useful in informing the programmes that encourage students to adopt healthier digital practices.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. What are the demographic, social, and economic factors of the research sample the Latakia University students?
2. How often and addicted to TT are Latakia University students?
3. Which are the significant psychological issues that are related to the use of TT by the study sample?
4. Which recommendations and suggestions are possible to minimise the causes and effects of TT addiction among the study sample?

Research Hypothesis

H0: There is no statistically significant relationship between the level of TT use and mental health indicators among the students ($\alpha \leq 0.05$).

Literature review

The article by Al-Qahtani (2025) is called *Mental Health in the Age of Social Media: Impacts and Trends* and it is intended to explore the influence of social media on psychological health. The study employed a descriptive analytical approach which relied on literature review, and it established that platforms play a significant role in generating anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, poor sleep quality and poor social relationships. It proposed increasing the publicity regarding the dangers of overuse and encouraging responsible and moderate online usage.

In the article, Al-Ruhaydān (2025) assessed the perception of mothers with regards to children favouring social media and their effect on mental health through the article titled, *Social Media Networks and their Relationship to Children's Mental Health*. Applying the descriptive approach and

surveying 657 mothers with kindergarten children in Hafr Al-Batin, the findings indicated that the most popular television was the YouTube, which was primarily used at night and that the mental health differences differed depending on the gender of children and the age and educational background of mothers. The research suggested developing the application of awareness and incorporating digital safety education into the school curriculum.

The article by Bakr (2024) discussed mental conditions affected by social media in the framework of Mental Disorders in the Digital Age. Introducing a descriptive analytical method, the study has found that the over-use can increase anxiety, depression and isolation through negative social comparisons and time-wastage, and that any positive interaction can have neutralising effects. It suggested the increased awareness and promotion of digital wellbeing and approaches towards moderate and healthy usage.

In his research study, Al-Qarni (2023) used an online survey that was descriptive in nature to study the social media addiction and psychological security among secondary students in Jeddah, with a total of 204 participants participating in the survey. These results demonstrated an inverse association between addiction and psychological security, meaning that they are more susceptible to stress. It has also been identified in the study as a gap in the curriculum of schools that push students into the emotional outlet of the social media and suggested improving the family awareness and educational programmes.

Mahmoud (2023) used a field study in Omar Al-Mukhtar University to test the relationship between social media and the mental health of 116 female students of psychology. The results, achieved through the application of correlational descriptive techniques and mental health scales, did show a medium positive correlation between social media use and mental health scores, where the levels of usage were around 69. Variations were evident in the academic years but not hours of using the internet.

With a population size of 400, Mohamed (2022) tested the association between social media use by the Egyptian youth, depression, and loneliness through a descriptive correlational research design. The findings showed that WhatsApp was the most popular platform, then Facebook, and YouTube with the most depressed females. There was positive correlation between heavy use and depression and also between following political or satirical material and psychological distress.

Al-Juhani (2022) investigated the impact of social media on the mental health and social adaptation among 300 students at Al-Baath University in terms of correlational descriptive research and validated scales. The results showed that there was a strong correlation between mental health and social

adjustment and no gender disparity in mental assessment. The disparity in adaptation was towards females and students in theoretical colleges.

The study by Jafar (2022) investigated how social media addiction and loneliness were related, with the help of 100 university students undertaking an addiction and loneliness scale. Findings indicated that too much use enhanced psychological loneliness, particularly during political, economic and post-COVID social unpredictability. The research suggested the enhancement of counselling interventions to decrease the level of digital addiction and its emotional implications.

The study by Tinzit & Santosh (2022) focused on exploring the relationship between mental health and online social networking and emotional intelligence, in which the authors applied a descriptive analytical approach. Findings indicated that there are negative correlations between social media use and mental health (-0.133) and emotional intelligence (-0.198) with the younger users reporting lower emotional intelligence and the older adolescent girls reporting more psychological problems associated with excessive use.

In the study by Senaa and Hammoudi (2022), 60 media students involved in a descriptive survey of Instagram use and its effects on the mental health of students in Kasdi Merbah University were studied. Results indicated moderate Instagram use, the primary motives of which were social interaction. Among the negative effects were addiction, envy and jealousy whereas positive effects resulted in relaxation and better feelings of attention and less loneliness.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory posits that individuals actively seek out media platforms to satisfy specific psychological and social needs, such as entertainment, stress relief, self-expression, and a sense of belonging. In the context of TT use among Latakia University students, the platform is often utilised to fulfil these motivations due to its accessibility, interactive features, and visually engaging content. However, excessive dependence on TT may transform these gratifications into sources of psychological strain, particularly when students begin to associate their self-worth or social acceptance with virtual engagement such as likes, views, and comments. Over time, this may lead to substituting real-life interactions with online connections, contributing to increased feelings of loneliness, weakened social relationships, and heightened vulnerability to anxiety and low self-esteem. Thus, the influence of TT extends beyond entertainment to shaping the psychological wellbeing of students when its use becomes unbalanced.

Methodology

Research Design

The present work assumes the descriptive analytical research design, wherein the researcher is expected to present the set of the correct descriptions of the TT usage patterns, and predictors of behavioural addiction among the students of Latakia University, and determine the correlation between the specific usage and the occurrence of the corresponding psychological issues. This method is based on gathering data on the target sample itself and using the statistical analysis to investigate such variables as the rates of daytime use, the signs of addiction, and the evidence of psychological problems including anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and distractibility, social withdrawal, and low-self-esteem (Al-Asouli, 2020, p.37).

Study Method

Data on the level of TT use, indicators of addiction, and associated psychological issues regarding the platform were collected and analysed using the descriptive analytical survey method among the study sample.

Population and Sample

The population under study is the sample of all of the students at Latakia University, which represent different academic fields and different academic levels.

The simple random sampling method was used to select the sample of undergraduate and postgraduate students who were officially registered at the university; 60 male and female students were selected in this method.

Table 1

Demographic, Social and Economic Characteristics of the Sample

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	30	50%
	Female	30	50%
Age	< 20 years	10	16.7%
	20–25 years	27	45.0%
	26–30 years	8	13.3%
	31–35 years	13	21.7%
	≥ 35 years	2	3.3%
Academic Level	First year	14	23.3%
	Second year	18	30.0%
	Third year	12	20.0%

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Marital Status	Fourth year	16	26.7%
	Single	22	36.7%
	Married	34	56.7%
	Divorced	4	6.7%
Employment Status	Public sector	33	55.0%
	Private sector	18	30.0%
	Unemployed	9	15.0%
Monthly Income	< 100 USD	3	5.0%
	100–150 USD	19	31.7%
	151–200 USD	20	33.3%
	200 USD >	18	30.0%

The findings in Table 1 show that the sample contains an equal number of males and females. In addition, the majority of the participants are aged between 20 and 25 years. The second and fourth academic year students constitute the greatest proportions. Most of them are married and work in the public sector where the income levels indicate that most of the participants fall in the middle-income group with a significant percentage ranging between 100 and 200 USD.

Instrument Reliability

As provided in Table 2, the Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.866 and this is a high coefficient or a strong level of internal consistency among the 15 questionnaire items. This finding shows that the measuring tool is highly reliable and stable, hence improving the validity of the results obtained using it. High internal consistency is also indicative of the fact that the participants gave coherent and consistent responses to the items depending on the measured themes.

Table 2

Reliability Coefficient of the Questionnaire
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.866	15

The research has a high level of validity because a simple random sample was used based on Latakia University students, which enhances the representativeness and reduces the selection bias. The validity of the application of an electronic questionnaire is highly improved because participants may present their answers freely as well as confidentially.

Besides this, the validity of the instrument was also tested by showing it to the course instructor so that he could review it as the expert in ensuring clarity, appropriateness, and relevancy of the items, hence face validity and content validity was confirmed.

Statistical Procedures

The SPSS Statistics, an extensive statistical analysis package will be used to gather and analyse data. The analysis will involve frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. These statistical treatments provide the possibility to properly and systematically organise the data and the possibility to ensure the study produces meaningful results and answers the research questions in an objective and rigorous manner.

Results

In this section, the statistical results are provided which included the characteristics of the participants, the distribution of the variables, and the findings of the correlation to analyse the relationship between using TT and mental health.

Results of Research Question 1: How often and addicted to TT are Latakia University students?

In order to ascertain the prevalence of TT use and addiction among students, means and standard deviation were used to get the individual responses about the factors of excessive TT use.

Table 3

TT Usage Level Means and SD

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I use TT daily on a regular basis.	60	4.10	0.93
I spend more than one hour per day on TT.	60	4.07	0.76
I check TT immediately after waking up.	60	4.17	0.91
I find it difficult to stop using TT even when I want to.	60	4.17	0.69
I neglect my academic tasks because of TT.	60	4.12	0.96
I feel anxious or tense when I cannot access TT.	60	4.32	0.75
I use TT to escape problems or negative emotions.	60	4.23	0.95

Table 3 was used to demonstrate the most highly rated were feeling anxious when not able to access TT (Mean= 4.32), then using TT to get out of negative emotions (Mean = 4.23). Students also indicated that they could not stop using and check the application when they wake up. The least means were daily usage duration, which, however, is also high, which means general habitual and excessive use.

Results of Research Question2: Which are the significant psychological issues that are related to the use of TT by the study sample?

The means and standard deviations of the respondents were computed to determine the psychological issues related to the use of TT among the individuals.

Table 4
Psychological Issues related to the use of TT

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I frequently feel anxious or tense because of TT.	60	4.40	0.64
I feel sad or depressed after long use of TT.	60	4.17	0.78
I struggle to sleep after using TT before bedtime.	60	4.25	0.86
I find it difficult to concentrate because I think about TT.	60	4.18	0.75
My direct communication with friends and family has decreased.	60	4.35	0.76
My self-confidence has declined due to comparing myself with others.	60	3.58	1.17

Anxiety was the most frequent problem (Mean = 4.40) with decreased direct social interaction (Mean = 4.35) and sleep problems (Mean = 4.25) coming second and third, respectively. The least was the decrease in self-confidence (Mean = 3.58), but it is also significant.

Results of Research Question 3: Which recommendations and suggestions are possible to minimise the causes and effects of TT addiction among the study sample?

The means and the standard deviations of the results were calculated to determine the most notable recommendations that can be provided to minimise the causes and consequences of TT addiction.

Table 5
Recommendations and Strategies to Reduce TT addiction

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Setting a daily time limit reduces addiction.	60	4.95	0.22
Turning off TT notifications reduces excessive use.	60	4.75	0.44
I replace TT time with more useful activities.	60	4.92	0.28
I participate in awareness programmes about social media addiction.	60	4.83	0.38
I attend workshops on healthy social media use.	60	4.93	0.25
Availability of counsellors to address social media addiction.	60	4.85	0.36

According to the findings in Table 5, the most recommended one was to establish a daily time limit to use TT (Mean = 4.95). The attendance of the workshops on the healthy use of social media came in second place (Mean = 4.93), and the replacement of TT usage with more productive activities came in third (Mean = 4.92). The act of switching off notifications (Mean = 4.75) and the provision of counselling services more often (Mean = 4.85) was considered an efficient measure to reduce excessive TT consumption as well.

Hypothesis Results: There is no statistically significant relationship between the level of TT use and mental health indicators among the students ($\alpha \leq 0.05$).

Table 6.
Pearson Correlation Coefficient between the Variables

		Correlations	
		USE_MEAN	HEALTH_MEAN
USE_MEAN	Pearson Correlation	1	.496**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	60	60
HEALTH_MEAN	Pearson Correlation	.496**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	60	60

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table (6) indicates that there is a positive relationship between the mean level of TT use and the mental health of the participants with a Pearson correlation coefficient of (0.496) and a significant p-value (Sig. < 0.001). It means that the more people use the platform, the greater the variations in mental health, which is why it is critical to pay attention to the psychological effect on a person when using TT. Since the correlation was statistically significant, the null hypothesis (H0) is rejected.

Discussions

The results of the given research show that there is a number of important tendencies in the usage of TT by students and its psychological consequences. The demographic data shows that the sample was both male and female balanced. This balanced distribution enables the research to analyse TT usage without gender bias in order to give a more realistic picture of how the students in the university use it. Moreover, the highest number of the population lived within the age range of 20-25 years, which is connected to youths of university age since it is the period of intensive development in the social and academic sphere. It is also a high-risk population, which is subject to the possible effects of overconsumption of social media, such as behavioural and psychological disorders.

The descriptive results also indicate that there is a very high engagement rate of the students with the platform on a daily basis, with all mean scores being above 4.0 in the five-point scale. This trend indicates a high level of reliance on TT, which is supported by the signs of behavioural addiction. It is worth noting that students expressed anxiety when they could not use the application and also complained of not being able to quit using it, even where they wanted to. These behaviours are evidently consistent with the patterns of the digital addiction, in which the further usage becomes compulsive and emotionally motivated.

The psychological outcomes of the use of TT were also observed. The most common concerns raised by the participants were having persistent anxiety and tension, a lack of face-to-face communication

with friends and family, issues with sleeping, as well as problems with concentrating. These results confirm that TT addiction is not limited to digital behaviour and has a strong impact on the mental wellbeing of students, their social relations and academic performance. Emotional stress caused by prolonged use such as sadness and lack of motivation is also a strong indication that overuse of social media can destabilise the mind.

Along with descriptive findings, statistical analysis has revealed a positive, statistically significant correlation between the severity of TT use and the worsening of mental health ($r = 0.496$, Sig. < 0.001). The relationship is opposite to the hypothesis that was initially set at the beginning of the study stating that there is no significant association. Rather, the results decisively reveal that the higher the use of TT, the higher the levels of psychological distress amongst the students, especially when they have not been sensitised and educated about safe and healthy media use.

In general, the research indicates the significance of the issue of digital addiction in educational institutions. Unregulated and overuse of social media applications can be added to apparent psychological disruptions, and that is why universities should create supportive psychological and counselling programmes that will assist students to manage their digital behaviour appropriately. To reduce the adverse effects of TT addiction among university students, the issues of digital literacy, emotional and balanced use of technology should be encouraged.

Conclusion

This paper examined how TT is utilised among Latakia University students and the psychological implications of overuse of the application. The results show that TT has already become part of the routine of students, and some of them show signs of digital addiction. There was a strong relationship between intensive use and anxiety, lack of face-to-face social interaction, disruption of sleep and loss of academic concentration. The statistical findings supported that there was a significant positive correlation between the severity of TT use and deterioration in mental wellbeing and that the greater the exposure, the more the emotional and behavioural stress. On the whole, the study confirms that TT is not just a leisure platform but a digital space that may affect the psychological health, social relations, and academic achievements of students. These findings are relevant to the need to discuss the issue of digital addiction as another element that should be considered to protect the wellbeing of students.

Implications

The results have a number of implications in practice in regards to education and policy-makers. Universities can also think about instituting awareness initiatives that will foster digital moderation and

inform students about the psychological dangers of overusing social-media. The student can be taught to adopt healthier online habits through the provision of easy access to psychological support services, such as counselling and online workshops on digital-wellbeing. Institutions can also make use of incorporating the recommendations on responsible digital behaviour in the campus life programmes and student support systems. More so, partnership with universities, families and community organisations can reinforce the initiatives of curbing digital addiction and student wellbeing in a broader way.

Limitations

A number of shortcomings must be noted. The small sample size and different participation rates of students reduce the ability to generalise the results to the overall population of the university. The research was purely self-reported, which may be prone to recall bias and social-desirability bias, especially in terms of assessing the amount of time spent on TT or symptoms of being digitally addicted. The narrow target of the students in Latakia University inhibits the geographical encompassment of the findings and might not incorporate variations among the other branches. These restrictions point to the risks of careless interpretation of the results.

To improve the external validity, future studies ought to study more campuses to attempt a more diverse demographic sample. It is suggested that longitudinal research should be used to monitor the digital-media behavioural changes and their psychological impact over time. More in-depth studies on the mechanisms of the connection between TT engagement and mental health outcomes might be achieved by mixed-method methodology such as interviews and behavioural observations. In addition, other research can be conducted on the differences in academic discipline, personality characteristics, and the influence of exposure to content created through algorithms on developing digital-addiction behaviour in young adults.

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