

DESCRIPTIVE STUDY ON TIKTOK'S ROLE IN MANAGING STRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AT STKIP MUHAMMADIYAH, SOUTHWEST ACEH

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menyajikan kajian deskriptif kualitatif mengenai peran TikTok dalam membentuk pengalaman stres mahasiswa di STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya. Sepuluh mahasiswi Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris yang aktif menggunakan TikTok setiap hari diwawancarai untuk menggali keterkaitan antara fitur platform dan kondisi psikologis mereka. Analisis tematik menghasilkan dua tema utama, yaitu pengalaman stres yang berkaitan dengan penggunaan TikTok dan persepsi stres yang terkait dengan fitur-fitur platform, yang terbagi ke dalam sembilan sub-tema dengan total 558 referensi kode. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa TikTok berperan ganda: di satu sisi memberikan hiburan, informasi, dan pelepasan emosi, namun di sisi lain personalisasi algoritma, mekanisme perbandingan sosial, dan desain yang bersifat adiktif dapat memperparah kecemasan, mengganggu rutinitas akademik, serta mendistorsi persepsi waktu. Partisipan juga menggambarkan berbagai upaya regulasi diri, seperti membatasi waktu pemakaian dan menonaktifkan akun sementara, di samping pengaruh menenangkan dari konten bernuansa budaya Aceh dan keislaman. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa dampak TikTok terhadap stres mahasiswa tidak bersifat mutlak baik maupun buruk, melainkan dibentuk oleh motivasi individu, jenis konten yang diakses, dan konteks budaya, sehingga pendekatan literasi digital dari institusi pendidikan dinilai lebih tepat dibandingkan kebijakan yang bersifat membatasi secara ketat.

Kata Kunci: Tiktok, Stress, Mahasiswa, Kesehatan Mental.

ABSTRACT

This study offers a qualitative descriptive account of how TikTok shapes the stress experiences of university students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya. Ten English Education students, all daily TikTok users, were interviewed to explore the interplay between platform features and psychological well-being. Thematic analysis identified two overarching themes stress experience in relation to TikTok use, and stress perception tied to platform features spanning nine sub-themes and 558 coded references. Findings reveal that TikTok operates as a double-edged tool: it offers entertainment, information, and emotional relief, yet its algorithmic personalization, social comparison mechanisms, and addictive design can intensify anxiety, disrupt academic routines, and distort time perception. Participants also described self-regulation efforts such as usage limits and temporary deactivation, alongside the calming influence of locally rooted Islamic and Acehnese cultural content. These results underscore that TikTok's impact on student stress is neither uniformly harmful nor beneficial but is shaped by individual motivation, content exposure, and cultural context, pointing to the need for institutional digital-literacy guidance rather than restrictive policy.

Keywords: Tiktok, Stress, Students, Mental Health.

A. INTRODUCTION

The development of communication technology has transformed the way teenagers, especially college students, live their daily lives, and TikTok has emerged as one of the most prominent manifestations of this change. This platform is not just a mere entertainment platform, but an arena for self-expression, social interaction, and a source of information that

is deeply rooted in the younger generation (Jannah & Fitriyah, 2025). Comments, replies to posts, and even the like button create a never-ending interactive space, and at some point, this space even shapes how users perceive themselves (Sari, 2025). For college students, this process is crucial because exposure to constantly curated content has the potential to shift how they experience and respond to life's pressures. Concentration in studying is sometimes eroded, and time that should be devoted to assignments is instead absorbed by endless video scrolls. However, on the other hand, the lighthearted style of the content also helps some students become more open and sociable (Syarifuddin et al., 2025).

The relevance of this study lies in the position of students who find themselves at the crossroads of academic, social, and emotional pressures simultaneously. TikTok appears to be a double-edged sword: it provides a temporary escape from fatigue, but excessive use is associated with increased anxiety (Ramsden & Talbot, 2025). The social standards displayed through its content also erode users' self-perceptions (Ghifary et al., 2025). and ironically, efforts to seek social connection through this app sometimes turn into deeper emotional isolation (Aditomo et al., 2025). Mental health itself is understood as a state of emotional, psychological, and social well-being that influences almost every aspect of a person's life (Ulvi et al., 2022). so this study was initiated to explore TikTok usage patterns, levels of addiction tendencies, and the accompanying psychological impacts (Ayman & Embassy, 2025).

Students' academic engagement is also eroded by excessive social media use, as study time is often displaced by endless scrolls of content (Qi et al., 2024). What initially begins as entertainment can slowly shift into problematic usage patterns that lead to maladaptive behavior (Amin et al., 2022). The phenomenon of social comparison is a key mechanism: seeing others who appear richer, more successful, or happier can trigger feelings of inferiority, either through upward or downward comparison (Putra, 2018). Research on Instagram users shows that individuals who rely on external validation for their self-worth are much more susceptible to declining self-esteem as usage intensity increases (Stapleton et al., 2017), and a similar pattern is confirmed in Indonesian students, particularly due to a collectivistic culture that places social judgment as an integral part of identity formation (Sari et al., 2024).

TikTok's algorithm is a key differentiator from other platforms, as it consistently delivers content aligned with its users' habits and preferences, a hidden mechanism that gradually shapes their way of thinking, interacting, and even their daily digital (Klug et al., 2021), while also weakening time management between entertainment and academic responsibilities such as completing assignments or reviewing course material (Miskan et al., 2025). Some academics refer to this type of design as addictive design, a digital ecosystem that systematically keeps users engaged in prolonged interactions far beyond their conscious awareness (Montag et al., 2021). This phenomenon is exacerbated by time distortion, the inability of users to accurately estimate how long they are actually immersed in a stream of content, making an hour feel like only ten minutes (Qin et al., 2022).

The cumulative impact is far from mere speculation. A synthesis of dozens of studies involving nearly one hundred thousand participants consistently shows an inverse relationship between the intensity of short video consumption and mental health outcomes, with stress and anxiety being the two most robust consequences across cultures and age groups (Nguyen et al., 2025). Among adolescents, this situation appears even more clinically concerning, as those exhibiting the highest intensity of use and addictive behaviors are four times more likely to experience psychosocial disorders than more controlled peers (Brand et al., 2024). Informal interviews with female students in Indonesia also revealed dissatisfaction with body image and the habit of using TikTok filters to mask perceived flaws, a symptom of excessive social comparison that leads to decreased self-confidence, stress, and a tendency to avoid social

interactions (Yunani et al., 2025). Indonesia's Generation Z, which accounts for almost a quarter of the national population based on the 2020 BPS census, recorded more than two-thirds of its sample as active TikTok users, with usage orientation shifting from mere communication to a means of entertainment and escape from routine (Evita et al., 2023).

Most previous studies examining the relationship between TikTok and students' psychological distress have relied solely on quantitative approaches, measuring frequency and duration of use and then correlating these with stress scores through statistical tests (von Fedak & Langlais, 2024). Ironically, this methodological rigor has its own consequences, as measurements based solely on usage duration are considered too shallow to encompass psychological complexities such as personal motivations, subjective assessments, and individual emotional contexts (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). This leaves a wide research gap, particularly in the Indonesian context, where in-depth studies on the relationship between TikTok usage intensity and adolescent psychological aspects are rare (Kis et al., 2024).

The phenomenon of addiction to short video apps can be understood through two complementary theoretical frameworks: Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which views users as active subjects who choose content to fulfill their psychological and social needs, and the media effects perspective, which highlights the platform's structural power in reshaping consumption patterns. Empirical findings among Serbian university students confirm that entertainment and relaxation motives dominate TikTok usage. However, it is precisely these seemingly benign usage patterns that are most susceptible to becoming dependent, especially when psychological distress triggers compensatory motives as a bridge to addiction (Stamenković & Mitrović, 2023). TikTok's personalization algorithm, on the other hand, does not simply respond to user preferences but actively creates a feedback loop that deepens the dependency itself (Liu et al., 2021). Social comparison also operates both upward and downward, and exposure to content depicting idealized beauty standards or lifestyles has been shown to increase upward comparisons, which then trigger appearance-related anxiety, particularly in university students who are in the vulnerable phase of identity formation (Tian et al., 2025).

A study that combined digital overload with students' academic engagement revealed three main pathways linking social media to stress: unhealthy social comparison, pressure from feedback systems like likes and comments, and information overload resulting from a constant stream of content (Tafesse et al., 2024). TikTok's relationship with stress is also paradoxical, as the platform can be both a coping mechanism and a source of stress (Sun et al., 2023). A systematic review of 26 studies with 11,462 participants found a prevalence of TikTok use of 80.19 percent, with the highest rates among those aged 18 to 29, and a consistent association between usage intensity and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Jain et al., 2025). However, another systematic review revealed a disturbing finding: the majority of studies viewed TikTok solely through institutional and public health lenses, while users' own voices, particularly their most personal inner experiences, received little representation (McCashin & Murphy, 2023).

Based on this gap, this study chose a descriptive qualitative approach to explore how TikTok shapes the stress experiences of students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya, focusing on content exposure, interaction features, and algorithmic influences. This approach is considered most effective in answering the "how" and "why" questions that have been overlooked in quantitative studies (Fadli, 2021). This approach is also seen as better able to capture the complexity of individual experiences in greater depth compared to quantitative approaches, which tend to be more measurable and generalized (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). In addition, a qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the meaning and context behind social media use behavior that cannot be explained through numerical data alone (Lim, 2025).

The novelty of this research lies in four aspects. First, it delves deeply into students' subjective experiences, differing from previous research that has focused on a general quantitative relationship between social media use and stress. Second, it focuses not simply on usage intensity but on the specific roles of recommendation algorithms, interaction features such as likes and comments, and social comparison mechanisms in an integrated manner topics rarely discussed together. Third, it presents a local context, namely students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya perspective largely absent from global academic discussions about TikTok and mental health, which tend to be dominated by large urban contexts. Fourth, it integrates aspects of students' content exposure, digital interactions, and emotional-cognitive processes into a more cohesive analytical framework, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how TikTok shapes students' experiences of stress.

B. METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the influence of TikTok usage on stress levels among university students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh, selected due to the high penetration of social media within its academic community. Ten students (aged 22–24) from various study programs participated, selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) had actively used TikTok for at least six months; (2) accessed TikTok for a minimum of one hour daily; (3) were willing to share information openly; and (4) were not experiencing any clinically diagnosed psychological disorder. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 30–60 minutes, conducted face-to-face on campus, covering patterns and intensity of TikTok use, types of content consumed, emotional responses, and participants' perceptions of stress. All sessions were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure of (Braun & Clarke, 2024), involving repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding, categorization, theme development, theme review, and construction of a descriptive narrative. This process was supported by NVivo software to track code frequency and generate a visual map of thematic relationships. The credibility of the findings was strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, data source triangulation (via observation of TikTok usage behavior and participants' voluntarily shared digital diary entries), and researcher reflexivity maintained through reflective journaling. Ethical considerations were addressed rigorously: participants received a written information sheet, provided written informed consent, retained the right to withdraw at any time, had their identities protected through pseudonyms, and had their data stored in an encrypted system. This study obtained ethical approval from the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants profiles

The participants in this study were 10 students from the English Education Study Program at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh. All participants were aged between 22 and 24 years and were identified as active TikTok users, with a minimum usage intensity of one hour per day. This uniform academic background within a single study program provided a consistent context, while also enabling a more focused exploration of experiences related to the influence of TikTok on stress levels among female students of English Education.

Data analysis process

Interview process

The interviews were conducted over a period of one week, with each participant

attending a single in-depth session. In total, 10 students from the English Education Study Program were interviewed to gather comprehensive qualitative data on their TikTok use and stress experiences. Interviews were scheduled flexibly around participants' class schedules and personal availability, and were conducted either on campus or at participants' homes, depending on their preference, to ensure comfort, privacy, and openness throughout the discussions.

Table 1. Interview process

No	Participant	Duration of Interview	Amount of Words (In Indonesia)
1	STD1	31:54 Minutes	2.954
2	STD2	19:04 Minutes	2.829
3	STD3	20:20 Minutes	2.634
4	STD4	29:48 Minutes	3.622
5	STD5	27:57 Minutes	3.333
6	STD6	19:08 Minutes	2.141
7	STD7	18:46 Minutes	2.615
8	STD8	21:44 Minutes	2.386
9	STD9	22:42 Minutes	3.287
10	STD10	19:54 Minutes	2.091
	Total	03:49:00	27.892

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the interview data collected from the ten participants involved in this study. A total of ten semi-structured interviews were conducted, resulting in a combined interview duration of 3 hours and 49 minutes and 27,892 Indonesian words of transcribed data. The interview duration ranged from 18 minutes 46 seconds to 31 minutes 54 seconds, indicating that each participant had sufficient time to describe their experiences in detail.

Among the participants, STD1 had the longest interview duration (31 minutes and 54 seconds), followed by STD4 (29 minutes and 48 seconds) and STD5 (27 minutes and 57 seconds). Meanwhile, STD7 participated in the shortest interview, lasting 18 minutes and 46 seconds. Despite these differences in interview duration, all participants provided rich and relevant information regarding their experiences of using TikTok and the relationship between TikTok use and stress.

Regarding the interview transcripts, the total number of transcribed words reached 27,892 words. STD4 produced the largest transcript with 3,622 words, followed by STD5 with 3,333 words and STD9 with 3,287 words. In contrast, STD10 generated the shortest transcript with 2,091 words, while STD6 produced 2,141 words. The variation in transcript length reflects the natural differences in participants' communication styles and the depth of their responses during the interviews. Overall, the large amount of qualitative data provided a strong foundation for conducting thematic analysis and identifying meaningful patterns across participants' experiences.

Figure 1. Thematic map of themes

The analysis generated two major themes, which were further divided into 9 sub-themes consisting of multiple codes. Across all interviews, 558 coded references were identified, demonstrating the richness of participants' experiences concerning TikTok use and stress.

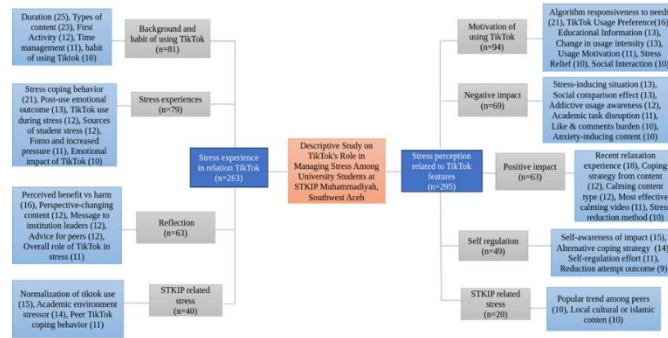


Figure 1. Thematic Map of TikTok & Stress among STKIP Students

Theme 1: Stressful Experiences in Relation to TikTok Use

This section focuses on exploring and discussing the first main theme derived from the analysis of interviews with 10 students from the English Language Education Study Program at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh, which relates to their experiences of stress related to TikTok use in their daily lives. The analysis shows that almost all participants agreed when asked about the relationship between TikTok and their stress. A total of 263 statements from several codes and 4 sub-themes showed their agreement with the theme, with various explanations. The details of each sub-theme are as follows.

Sub-theme 1: Background and habits of TikTok users

This section discusses 81 statements describing participants' TikTok usage patterns, including duration, content type, first access time, and their time management. When researchers asked about the duration of daily use, one participant responded with the following statement.

Interviewer: "How long do you usually spend on TikTok in a day?" STD1: "It can last for hours depending on my mood and the situation, for example, if I'm in a good mood, I can scroll through TikTok for 5 to 4 hours." (STD1, personal communication 03:54.0)

STD1's statement suggests that TikTok usage time is closely tied to mood, not just a scheduled routine. In other words, the better a participant's mood, the more time they spent browsing the app. Other participants echoed similar sentiments, albeit with different emphasis.

Interviewer: "Do you think that duration is reasonable or excessive?" STD4: "Actually, I think it's excessive, because I spend more time on TikTok than studying. It's actually quite excessive for me." (STD4, personal communication 05:52.0)

Here, STD4 shows self-awareness that its use has exceeded reasonable limits, especially because it is sacrificing study time. This differs from STD7's view that its use is still under full control.

STD7: "I think it's still reasonable, because I use it for entertainment and to broaden my knowledge, and it doesn't interfere with my study time." (STD7, personal communication 02:55.0)

Thus, STD4's statement regarding excessive use is actually in the opposite direction to STD7's statement which assesses that use is still proportional. This difference in opinion is consistent with STD10's more measured account of around two to three hours, depending on his daily activities, and STD2's admission of only stealing time to watch a couple of videos before closing the app. Other participants expressed similar views regarding the type of content they consumed.

Interviewer: "What type of content do you watch most often?" STD4: "Well, when it comes to content, there's nothing that I watch too often, because the content I watch is in line with the current FYP." (STD4, personal communication 02:40.0)

This STD4 statement highlights that the type of content consumed is not actually a fully conscious choice, but rather follows the flow of algorithmic recommendations that change every day. Regarding time management, STD7 emphasized his own discipline as follows.

Interviewer: "How do you manage your time in opening TikTok while on campus or in the middle of a lecture schedule?" STD7: "When there are lectures, I try to only open it during breaks, I don't open it when the lecturer is teaching so as not to disrupt concentration and understanding of the material." (STD7, personal communication 02:18.0)

STD8 also expressed a similar attitude, limiting himself to only using TikTok between 8 and 9 p.m. Thus, these three sets of statements, from duration, content type, to time management, complement each other and confirm that TikTok has become a regular part of the participants' daily lives, although the intensity and management methods vary from person to person.

Sub-theme 2: Stressful experiences

This section examines 79 statements describing how participants experienced stress while using TikTok, including coping behaviors and the accompanying emotional impact. When researchers asked about what they usually do when stress hits, one participant responded with the following statement.

Interviewer: "What do you usually do when you are stressed?" STD1: "What I usually do when I am stressed is eat first, after that I will go to the sea to calm my mind, then I will watch funny things to entertain myself." (STD1, personal communication 11:28.0)

STD1's statement shows that TikTok is not the first step taken when stress comes, but rather the final part of a series of self-soothing efforts. This is somewhat different from STD3, which actually chooses to resolve the source of stress first.

STD3: "It depends on the stress. If the stress is due to assignments, the only way I can relieve my stress is by doing the assignment itself. If the assignment is completed, my stress will automatically disappear." (STD3, personal communication 08:03.0)

In other words, statements from STD1 and STD3 both indicate that TikTok is not a single solution, but rather one option among several available coping strategies. Regarding the emotional impact after use, one participant expressed her experience.

Interviewer: "After using TikTok, do you feel better, worse, or no change?" STD9: "Thank God, it's better when I open the TikTok application. I feel better, nothing makes me stressed anymore." (STD9, personal communication 09:52.0)

However, not all participants felt the impact was always positive. STD7 noted a more ambivalent side, as follows.

times it's better, but there are times when it makes me even more confused or sad." (STD7, personal communication 07:45.1)

STD7's statement emphasized that TikTok's emotional impact is conditional, depending entirely on the type of content that happens to appear on screen. A similar view was reflected in STD9 and STD2's statements regarding the social pressure that arises from comparing oneself to others' achievements on one's timeline.

STD2: "It's normal, but sometimes, based on the content that comes across, if it's like encouraging words, it makes you feel motivated, but if it's actually about other people's achievements, it makes you compare yourself to others." (STD2, personal communication 07:57.0)

In contrast, STD8 argued that what is shown on TikTok tends to only highlight a person's good side, so he doesn't feel the need to compare himself at all. Thus, these statements complement each other and demonstrate that TikTok plays a dual role in participants' experiences of stress, both relieving and exacerbating it, depending on the context and content encountered.

Sub-theme 3: Reflection

This section discusses 63 statements that represent participants' evaluations after reflecting on their experiences using TikTok. When researchers asked about participants' views on the benefits and dangers of TikTok in general, participants responded with the following statements.

Interviewer: "In your opinion, does TikTok provide more benefits or does it actually have more negative impacts in managing stress?" STD5: "TikTok has provided more benefits during my time using it, but that depends on how you use it, if we use it wisely, TikTok is more beneficial." (STD5, personal communication 23:50.0)

This STD5 statement emphasizes that TikTok's benefits are conditional, depending on the user's discretion in utilizing it. A slightly different view is presented by STD10 as follows.

STD10: "Using TikTok can have quite a few negative impacts, as much of the content on TikTok is about things that make us want to get involved or want to possess." (STD10, personal communication 6:07 PM)

In other words, STD5 and STD10 both acknowledge the two sides of the coin when it comes to TikTok use, but with different emphases. This is reinforced by STD8's more reflective perspective.

STD8: "It actually depends on the individual. Why do I say that? Because many people really like to compare or focus on what they have on TikTok." (STD8, personal communication 18:28)

When asked about input for institutional leaders, STD1 conveyed the following concrete suggestions.

Interviewer: "If you were given the opportunity to convey something to the STKIP leadership or the head of the study program regarding TikTok and student stress, what would you like to convey?" STD1: "My suggestion to the STKIP leadership or the head of the English study program regarding TikTok and student stress levels, STKIP holds or creates a training or public lecture about TikTok addiction that can cause student stress or about education on TikTok." (STD1, personal communication 30:00.0)

A similar view was also expressed by STD7 who hoped that institutions would take a guiding role, not a prohibiting one.

STD7: "We hope the campus will not prohibit us but will guide us in using it in a better and more beneficial way." (STD7, personal communication 17:45)

Thus, these two statements complement each other and emphasize that participants want an educational, not a repressive, approach from the institution in responding to this phenomenon.

Sub-theme 4: Stress related to STKIP

This section discusses 40 statements that highlight the specific context of the STKIP environment in shaping participants' experiences of stress. When researchers asked about how common TikTok use was among STKIP students, participants responded with the following statements.

Interviewer: "Is TikTok usage common among your students?" STD7: "Very common, almost every student has this app, so there are often conversations that start from TikTok content." (STD7, personal communication 14:41.0)

STD7's statement shows that TikTok is not just personal entertainment, but has become part of everyday social interactions on campus. Apart from academic pressure, friendship relationships are also mentioned as triggers of stress. STD2 linked toxic friendship circles to increased psychological distress. Regarding coping behavior among peers, STD1 confirmed this collective pattern with the following statement.

Interviewer: "Do your friends at STKIP also use TikTok as a way to cope with stress?"
STD1: "My friends at STKIP also use TikTok to reduce stress, because TikTok presents funny content that can reduce stress levels in students." (STD1, personal communication 25:05.0)

Similar views were also expressed by 9 other participants (STD2, STD3, STD4, STD5, STD6, STD7, STD8, STD9, STD10), who generally agreed that the use of TikTok as an escape from stress is not merely an individual phenomenon, but rather a collective pattern that is rooted among STKIP students more broadly.

Theme 2: Perception of Stress Related to TikTok Features

This section focuses on exploring and discussing the second main theme derived from the analysis of interviews with 10 students from the English Language Education Study Program at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh, which relates to their perceptions of stress related to TikTok's specific features. The analysis reveals that nearly all participants provided diverse explanations for how TikTok's features, including its algorithm, content, and social interactions, contribute to their experiences of stress. This theme is divided into four sub-themes. The details of each sub-theme are as follows.

Sub-theme 1: Motivations for using TikTok

This section discusses how algorithms, content preferences, and participants' personal needs intertwine to shape their motivations for using TikTok. When researchers asked about the algorithm's ability to understand participants' information needs, one participant responded with the following statement.

Interviewer: "To what extent do you feel TikTok is able to meet your current informational or emotional needs?" STD1: "So far I feel TikTok is able to meet my informational and emotional needs, for information TikTok is very, very fulfilling because there are many references about the information I need when I have college assignments." (STD1, personal communication 09:48.0)

STD1's statement indicates that TikTok's algorithm is considered responsive to both academic and emotional needs simultaneously. A similar view was also expressed by STD7, who explained the mechanism more specifically.

STD7: "Pretty good, the algorithm adapts to what I like. When I'm stressed, entertainment content appears, and when I need educational knowledge, educational content appears more often." (STD7, personal communication 05:24.0)

In other words, STD1 and STD7's statements complement each other, emphasizing that TikTok's algorithm isn't just about entertainment, but also about adaptively reading its users' emotional states. This is also supported by STD3, who believes the algorithm understands their preferences very well, although STD5 points out the flip side of this convenience.

STD5: "I feel like TikTok can help reduce my stress and provide useful information, but if used excessively it can also interfere with my focus on studying and time management." (STD5, personal communication 06:49.0)

Regarding the main benefits felt, participants' answers varied quite a bit, including entertainment, reducing boredom, providing a source of reference for assignments, and improving personal skills. STD10 and STD3, for example, both emphasize the entertainment aspect as the main benefit. However, several participants admitted to using TikTok simply to fill their free time, such as STD8 and STD9, or for educational purposes, such as STD1, who said educational content broadened their horizons. Regarding educational information specifically, almost all participants confirmed that TikTok supported their learning process. STD1 detailed her experience.

Interviewer: "Have you ever obtained knowledge or information related to your studies through TikTok?" STD1: "I have obtained and continue to obtain information related to my studies through TikTok, such as methodology materials, psychology materials, and a great

deal of other materials." (STD1, personal communication 07:31.0)

A similar view was expressed by STD3 and STD9, who admitted to frequently learning dialects and speaking styles of native English speakers through TikTok videos, a relevant finding considering the participants' academic background in English Language Education. Regarding changes in intensity of use, participants' answers were split in two opposite directions. Some admitted to having improved since entering STKIP, such as STD3 who revealed his unique experience.

Interviewer: "Since entering STKIP, has the intensity of your TikTok usage increased or decreased? STD3: "Honestly, before entering STKIP, I never watched TikTok, there was no TikTok application on my phone. Because at STKIP, many of my friends used TikTok, so I was addicted to downloading it." (STD3, personal communication 06:17.0)

On the other hand, STD1 admitted that the intensity decreased after entering STKIP.

STD1: "Since I entered STKIP, the intensity of my TikTok use has decreased, because before I entered STKIP, I felt addicted to TikTok. So when I entered STKIP, I was given a lot of assignments by the lecturers, so I diverted my attention from TikTok to complete the assignments." (STD1, personal communication 09:00.0)

Thus, STD3 and STD1's statements are actually contradictory, indicating that academic pressure at STKIP can impact each individual differently, with some driven to seek escape, while others are driven to suppress their use to focus on assignments. Finally, in terms of social interaction, TikTok has also been reported to strengthen friendships, as STD1 noted.

Interviewer: "How does TikTok help you in maintaining friendships at STKIP? STD1: "TikTok helps me in maintaining friendships at STKIP when there are new trends that attract my attention to create TikTok trends with my friends, so I feel that our friendships are getting closer." (STD1, personal communication 06:44.0)

Sub-theme 2: Negative Impacts

section reveals the other side of TikTok use that actually increases participants' stress, including stressful situations, social comparison, awareness of addiction, distraction from academic work, the burden of likes and comments, and anxiety-provoking content. When researchers asked if they had ever felt stressed due to TikTok use, one participant responded with the following statement.

Interviewer: "Have there ever been situations where TikTok actually increased or worsened your stress?" STD7: "Yes, usually when I have a lot of assignments but I get so engrossed in watching TikTok that I lose track of time. After I stop watching, I panic because the assignment isn't finished and time is running out." (STD7, personal communication 10:03.0)

STD7's statement emphasized that the stress he felt didn't stem from the content itself, but rather from the awareness of wasted time. A similar view was expressed by STD5, who said he became more panicked and deadlines loomed due to spending too much time watching content that constantly appeared on his FYP.

Regarding social comparison, the majority of participants admitted to comparing themselves to others' achievements on their timelines. Similarly, STD6 and STD7 also acknowledged feelings of inferiority and a lack of self-confidence as a direct result of this habit. However, STD8 displays a more reflective attitude and is able to neutralize these negative impacts.

Interviewer: "Have you ever compared yourself to other people you see on TikTok? STD8: "Comparing exists, it's human nature, but then again, I indoctrinate myself, if people will only show the good things, the bad things will definitely not be published." (STD8, personal communication 13:33.0)

In other words, STD8's statement provides an important counterpoint, demonstrating

that the impact of social comparison can actually be mediated by an individual's critical awareness of the curated nature of social media content. Slightly different, STD4 admitted that he was completely unaffected by this kind of social comparison because he felt he already valued himself sufficiently.

Regarding awareness of addiction, almost all participants admitted to experiencing it, as STD5 and STD7 both admitted, initially intending to open the app briefly but ending up using it for hours without realizing it. STD9 even admitted to forgetting to eat because she was so engrossed.

STD9: "Yes, because TikTok provides entertainment , right? To the point where we get so engrossed in it that we forget the time. I even forgot to eat." (STD9, personal communication 14:53.5)

Disruptions to academic tasks also came under scrutiny. STD6 admitted that the pattern repeats itself quite often.

STD6: "Very often, because usually I open TikTok, then I also have an assignment, so I think, oh, I'll just open TikTok first, I can do the assignment later." (STD6, personal communication 12:53.0)

This is different from STD1 and STD9 who admitted that they were able to prioritize academic tasks before opening the application. In terms of the burden of the like and comment features, the majority of participants admitted that they were not too burdened, although a small number, such as STD5 and STD6, admitted that negative comments still left a mark on their minds. Finally, content that triggers anxiety is generally related to the pressure of final assignments and thesis defense, as stated by STD3.

Interviewer: "What kind of content makes you anxious, stressed, or overwhelmed?"
STD3: "But there are types of content that, for example, there are students who are having an exam but are constantly being bullied by their lecturers, right? That makes you think, makes you stressed." (STD3, personal communication 12:33.0)

Meanwhile, STD1 added that when he was watching TikTok for hours without a clear goal, all the types of content that appeared felt random and made him anxious, stressed, and overwhelmed all at once.

Sub-theme 3: Positive Impact

This section demonstrates that despite its potential risks, TikTok also serves as an emotional coping resource for participants, encompassing relaxation experiences, content-based coping strategies, the most relaxing types of content, and general stress reduction methods. When researchers asked when TikTok last truly helped participants relax, one participant responded with the following statement.

Interviewer: "When was the last time TikTok really helped you relax and de-stress?"
STD1: "The last time TikTok really helped me relax and de-stress was this morning. An example of the content I watched this morning that helped me relax was funny content." (STD1, personal communication 17:20.0)

A similar view was also expressed by STD5 and STD7, who each recounted an experience a few days ago, when feelings of tension due to college assignments gradually subsided after watching an entertainment video.

STD5: "A few days ago, when I was having a lot of college assignments , after watching some entertaining and motivational videos, I felt calmer and was able to return to my assignments with more focus." (STD5, personal communication 12:08.5)

Interestingly, the frequency of these experiences was quite high, with almost all participants reporting experiencing them "very often" or "almost every day," as confirmed by STD1, STD6, and STD8. Regarding coping strategies learned from TikTok content, participants' responses varied. STD2 described discovering stress management tips by

accident.

STD2: "There are some who pass by, suddenly, for example through that content, when I'm stressed, it's like they tell me what tips there are for when I'm stressed, whether to take it to sleep or do hobbies like that." (STD2, personal communication 09:12.5)

A more specific view was expressed by STD8 who admitted to having learned breathing techniques from a video.

Interviewer: "Have you ever learned any stress management strategies through TikTok content?" STD8: "I once saw a video that said that if we are stressed, we should inhale for five to ten seconds, then exhale through our mouth, that's possible, and you can also do that through meditation." (STD8, personal communication 11:44.0)

However, not all participants felt they gained a clear strategy from TikTok content. STD1 frankly admitted that this wasn't something he typically looked for.

STD1: "I don't get stress management strategies through TikTok, because that's something I rarely look for." (STD1, personal communication 16:40.0)

The types of content considered most effective in calming the heart vary widely, from humorous content, motivational videos, cooking content, short lectures, to inspirational interview videos. STD9 explains his preferences are a bit different from most.

STD9: "I'm more into videos like people giving interviews, for example, someone asks us about a situation, then we watch it from them, oh, this is how it turns out, from there we can learn to understand ourselves better in the future." (STD9, personal communication 10:49.5)

On the other hand, STD3 admitted that this method was less applicable to him because he rarely opened TikTok when he was stressed, even admitting, "TikTok has nothing to do with helping me relieve stress, maybe other people do, but when I'm stressed, opening TikTok makes me even more stressed." STD3's statement is an interesting exception amidst the majority of participants who felt the calming effects of the platform, while also emphasizing that TikTok's positive impact is not something that applies universally to every individual.

Sub-theme 4: Self-regulation

This section highlights participants' awareness and efforts in controlling the impact of TikTok on their mental health. When researchers asked whether participants were aware of TikTok's impact on their stress levels, one participant responded with the following statement.

Interviewer: "Do you realize how TikTok affects your stress level?" STD1: "I realize how TikTok affects my stress level when I watch it for hours, TikTok makes me stressed when I watch TikTok for too long." (STD1, personal communication 21:45.0)

STD6 expressed a similar awareness, stating that he was very aware that TikTok could increase or decrease stress depending on his usage patterns. However, not all participants had the same level of awareness. STD2, for example, admitted that he sometimes lacked awareness because his engrossment in scrolling actually made him more stressed.

Regarding alternative coping strategies outside of TikTok, participants' answers were quite varied, ranging from sleeping, listening to music, watching movies, playing games, to spending time with friends. STD1 lists the options in order.

STD1: "Besides TikTok, the strategies I use to manage my stress are as I mentioned earlier: healing, going to the ocean, eating, and so on. It could also include watching TV or watching movies that aren't related to the TikTok app." (STD1, personal communication 10:53 PM)

Concrete self-regulation efforts are reflected in the habit of limiting usage time, setting time reminders on cellphones, and deleting temporary accounts when tasks pile up, as explained by STD7.

STD7: "Yes, I try to manage myself, by setting time limits on my phone, making sure notifications are turned off during class or study hours, and temporarily deleting my account if

I have a lot of assignments." (STD7, personal communication 12:45.5)

However, these efforts are not always successful in the long run, as STD6 quite frankly admits.

STD6: "I did delete the TikTok app, but it only lasted for a few hours, and then I reinstalled it." (STD6, personal communication 13:58.5)

This STD6 statement illustrates how difficult it is to maintain a commitment to reducing use, even though the initial intention is quite strong. However, a number of participants who managed to reduce the intensity of their use reported quite positive results. STD7 recounted his experience as follows.

Interviewer: "Have you ever tried to reduce your TikTok usage?" STD7: "Yes, I did. I drastically reduced it during exam time. At first, I felt like something was missing or I was bored, but over time, I became more focused, finished my assignments on time, and felt calmer and more peaceful." (STD7, personal communication 13:23.5)

In other words, STD7's statement confirms that the process of reducing TikTok usage, although difficult at first, can ultimately have a positive impact on students' productivity and inner peace.

Sub-theme 5: Stress related to STKIP

section of this theme highlights contextual factors within the STKIP environment that influence participants' perceptions of TikTok features, including popular trends among fellow students and the influence of local cultural and Islamic content. When researchers asked about TikTok trends that are currently popular among students, one participant responded with the following statement.

Interviewer: "Are there any particular TikTok trends or content that are popular among fellow students?" STD6: "Very many, as I've seen in the past, probably everyone knows about Velocity." (STD6, personal communication 16:03.0)

STD2 and STD3 expressed a similar view, both citing the velocity trend as the most popular trend among students at the time. STD1, STD10, and STD8 focused more on the viral "kicau mania" trend. Interestingly, not all participants embraced the trend. STD4, for example, emphasized that he wasn't a trend-follower, despite frequently seeing his friends do so.

Regarding local cultural and Islamic content, the majority of participants admitted that this type of content helped relieve their stress. STD5 explains in depth how both types of content bring him a sense of calm.

Interviewer: "Does TikTok content with Acehese cultural nuances or Islamic values help you deal with stress?" STD5: "Islamic content such as short sermons, religious motivation, or reminders to be more patient and grateful often make me feel calmer. Likewise, Acehese cultural content reminds me of my identity and the environment in which I live, so I feel more comfortable and closer to Acehese culture." (STD5, personal communication 22:19.0)

A similar view was expressed by STD7, who said that Islamic content provides peace of mind when his heart is restless, as well as STD4, who admitted to liking Acehese history content in particular. Thus, the entire series of statements in this sub-theme shows that students' perceptions of TikTok features cannot be separated from the socio-cultural and religious contexts in the STKIP environment where they are studying.

This study essentially aims to examine how TikTok relates to stress experienced by English Language Education students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh, and the results are quite interesting because it turns out to be not as simple as initially imagined. Of the ten participants interviewed, two major themes emerged that are closely related to each other. The habit of using TikTok, which is heavily influenced by mood, actually fits when associated with the Uses and Gratifications Theory of Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), a theory that

explains that people open social media not because they are forced to, but because they want to fulfill certain needs, whether it is entertainment, information, or simply a place to escape when tired. In addition, the fact that TikTok can reduce stress at one time but actually worsen it at another time, can also be explained by the theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) on stress and coping, which essentially states that stress is not an automatic reaction, but depends on how a person assesses the situation they are facing, so that the same viewing duration can be considered normal by one person but considered excessive by another.

The habit of comparing oneself to others' achievements on the timeline is also in line with Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, considering that the TikTok algorithm often displays content of other people's achievements continuously, although some participants managed to neutralize this effect because they were aware enough that content on social media tends to show only the good side. The self-regulation efforts made by participants, such as limiting usage time or temporarily deleting the application, also fit with Bandura's (1991) Self-Regulation Theory, although in practice these efforts often fail midway and are repeated, which actually shows that self-regulation of digital media is not something that can be tried once and immediately succeeded. So it can be concluded that TikTok has a two-sided position for female students, not only a source of stress, but also not a single solution, because everything depends on how individuals interpret, assess, and regulate their own use, so that an educational approach regarding digital literacy is much more appropriate than simply banning the use of TikTok outright.

A. CONCLUSION

This study traced how TikTok shapes stress among university students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh, and the findings show a platform that is genuinely two-faced, offering entertainment and useful academic information alongside a convenient outlet for unwinding, while its very engaging features, an adaptive algorithm, an endless feed, and constant social comparison, quietly erode students' sense of time, fuel feelings of inadequacy against peers' curated lives, and pull focus from academic obligations until deadlines feel overwhelming. The habits students form and how they perceive the platform's algorithm reveal that this stress is tied directly to TikTok's mechanics, where mood-driven scrolling can tip casual use into a genuine burden, and the recommendation system, though responsive to academic and emotional needs, can trap users in addictive loops resistant to temporary deactivation, though several participants notably drew on local Acehese and Islamic content as a distinctive coping resource, pointing to a cultural and religious dimension rarely explored. Overall, TikTok's effect on student stress cannot be reduced to a single verdict, since it depends on individual motivation, content type, and self-regulation, suggesting institutions like STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh would benefit more from digital literacy initiatives than restrictive measures, though as a small qualitative study, these findings call for further research across other groups and settings in Indonesia.

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