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LEARNING IN EDUCATION**

**THE INFLUENCE OF TIKTOK ON UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC  
PERFORMANCES AND SELF-ESTEEM IN AZERBAIJAN**

Zumrud Babazada

[zbabazada@ada.edu.az](mailto:zbabazada@ada.edu.az)

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**ADA UNIVERSITY**

**MASTER OF ARTS THESIS OF**

Zumrud Babazada

APPROVED:

Dr. Rena Alasgarova, thesis supervisor:



---

Dr. Jeyhun Rzayev, committee member:



---

Dr. Namig Abuzarov, committee member:

*N. Abuzarov*

---

Dr. Ulviyya Mikayilova, Dean of the School of Education:



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**STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY**

I have read ADA's policy on plagiarism and certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis, entitled (The Influence of TikTok on Undergraduate Students' Academic Performances and Self-Esteem in Azerbaijan), is all my own work and does not contain any unacknowledged work. Hereby I declare that this master thesis, my original investigation and achievement, submitted for the master's degree at ADA University has not been submitted for any degree or examination.

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**Abstract**

Since TikTok becomes one of the fast-growing social media platforms in Azerbaijan, its possible negative or positive influences on students' academic lives and emotional states emerge concerns. This study explores the influence of TikTok usage on the undergraduate students' academic performances and self-esteem in Azerbaijan by using qualitative research methods. The aim of the study is to investigate how TikTok's content, algorithm, user patterns, and their time spent on TikTok affect undergraduate students' motivation, concentration, behavior, time management, self-esteem and academic outcomes. The data was collected from six undergraduate students from three different universities in Azerbaijan and one social media expert through in-depth semi-structured interviews. This study uses Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a theoretical background for data analysis, explaining the study findings through the three basic needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The results of the study demonstrated that while some participants found educational and motivational content beneficial in their academic lives, most reported negative effects of TikTok such as procrastination, reduced attention span, and lowered self-esteem. The findings also shed light on how social comparisons and feedback (e.g. likes, comments, reposts) on TikTok influence students' self-esteem levels and emotions.

**Keywords:** undergraduate students, TikTok's influence, academic performance, self-esteem, social comparison, Self-Determination Theory.

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## Table of Contents

<b>CHAPTER 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>7</b>
1.1. Statement of Problem .....	8
1.2. Purpose of Study .....	9
1.3. Research Objectives.....	9
1.4. Research Questions.....	9
1.5. Definition of Terms .....	10
<b>CHAPTER 2: Literature Review</b> .....	<b>11</b>
2.1. Effects of Social Media Usage .....	12
2.2. The Influence of TikTok on Self-Esteem: The Role of Social Comparison .....	15
2.3. Theoretical Framework .....	16
<b>CHAPTER 3: Research Design and Methodology</b> .....	<b>18</b>
3.1. Research Design .....	18
3.2. Research Site .....	18
3.3. Participants .....	19
3.4. Data Collection Techniques.....	20
3.5. Data Analysis .....	21
3.6. Trustworthiness .....	21
3.7. Ethical Considerations.....	21
<b>CHAPTER 4: Results</b> .....	<b>23</b>
4.1. TikTok Usage Patterns .....	26
4.2. TikTok as Motivation for Studying.....	29
4.3. TikTok as Distraction Tool.....	31
4.4. Social Comparison and Self-Esteem.....	34
<b>CHAPTER 5: Discussion</b> .....	<b>39</b>
5.1. TikTok and Student Autonomy .....	39
5.2. TikTok and Academic Competence .....	40
5.3. TikTok and Relatedness: The Role of Self-Esteem .....	42
<b>CHAPTER 6: Conclusion</b> .....	<b>45</b>
6.1. Limitations.....	45
6.2. Areas for Further Research.....	46
<b>References</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>53</b>

## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

Consider a young girl who constantly encounters videos of her supposedly perfect, successful peers on TikTok and spends her time watching videos rather than studying. Her comparisons to these idealized characters might cause her to begin to feel inadequate, while the videos may distract her from studying. This situation, which many young people today face, raises crucial questions: How is students' self-esteem shaped by the continual social comparison fostered by platforms such as TikTok? May social media platforms lead to lower academic performance? In a time when social media is widespread, it is necessary to understand the emotional and academic effects of it, as well as for university students.

Generally, users of social media platforms can create electronic profiles for themselves, share information about their lives and experiences, upload images, uphold relationships, and organize social activities, get to know new people, and notice others' lives, satisfy the need for belonging, and express their opinions, preferences, and emotions (Vogel et al., 2014). The social media platform like TikTok, which has specific algorithm-driven content and short videos, might influence students emotionally in different ways. Diverse studies proved the correlation between TikTok usage and academic performance. For example, according to study findings in the Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka, most of students are addicted to TikTok, and 87.5% spend more than two hours a day on social media. Most university students use TikTok during leisure time for self-expression and sharing their skills (Herath, 2020). The findings also demonstrate a positive correlation between time spent on TikTok, video posting, and video watching with lower academic achievement. It was shown that most undergraduates spend their free time on TikTok, with the primary drivers being satisfaction derived from sharing one's own abilities, information, thoughts, and emotions to others (Herath, 2020). Furthermore, the existence of the correlation between

TikTok usage and self-esteem has been proved by several research. One of the studies shows that there were 934 million short video users, most of them being TikTok users, in China as of December 2021 (Zhang, 2022). The study found that in the 1-4 scale, the average college student's self-esteem score was 2.99, showing their moderate confidence level. Besides, the average subjective well-being score was 3.97, referring to a higher feeling of happiness about their lives (Zhang, 2022). These scores demonstrate that students feel moderately satisfied about their lives, although they are not highly confident, proving the first hypothesis of that study: "College students' active use behavior of TikTok is positively correlated to self-esteem" (Zhang, 2022, p. 173).

### **1.1. Statement of Problem**

Although TikTok was one of the most used social media platforms with 6.10 million users in Azerbaijan in 2024 according to statistics (APA Economics, 2024), the emotional and academic effects of it have never been investigated. As there is a lack of understanding about the emotional influence of TikTok usage on students' self-esteem and academic performances in Azerbaijan, the research in this area is important for deeper understanding. Exploring a) how much time the students spend on TikTok and if this time hinders their studying; b) why they use it: for entertaining or educational purposes (e.g. as a learning tool); c) and the content of the videos they watch helps to have a deep understanding of the effects of TikTok on the students' academic performances. Also, by investigating how students' self-esteem is influenced by external factors, such as social comparison in TikTok, the educators can get deeper insights into the impacts of social media on students' emotional well-being.

## **1.2. Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the emotional influence of TikTok on Azerbaijani students' academic performance and self-esteem by using a qualitative research approach. The main audience for this study consisted of Azerbaijani undergraduate students, who use TikTok for both educational and entertaining purposes. In conclusion, this study offered significant perspectives for subsequent research initiatives centered around the influence of social media on education.

## **1.3. Research Objectives**

To achieve the research purpose, the following research objectives are determined:

- To explore the relationship between TikTok usage and undergraduate students' academic performance and motivation for studying in Azerbaijan.
- To explore the relationship between TikTok usage and undergraduate students' self-esteem in Azerbaijan.

## **1.4. Research Questions**

To reach research objectives, this study investigated two research questions:

- 1) What are the perceived effects of TikTok on the undergraduate students' academic performances in Azerbaijan?
- 2) What are the perceived effects of TikTok on the undergraduate students' self-esteem in Azerbaijan?

### **1.5. Definition of Terms**

The terms like “academic performance”, “self-esteem”, etc. were defined in this study to investigate these terms from one certain perspective. Academic performance generally reflects students’ proficiency in their courses and mainly measured by their participation in the lessons, grades, GPA, standardized test scores, etc. (Camel, 2020). Self-esteem is defined as “...how we evaluate our capabilities and ourselves” (Camel, 2020, p. 4) since this study will investigate students’ confidence level and perceptions of their abilities as indicated in the research questions.

## **CHAPTER 2: Literature Review**

To explore the research questions and gain deeper understanding of the topic, the literature review was done. A narrative review approach (Creswell, 2012) was used to do literature review to explore the existing knowledge about the impact of social media, including TikTok on students' academic performance and self-esteem in different countries. The focus of the literature view was the positive and negative effects of Social Media Networks (SMNs) on academic performance and results, concisely the influence of TikTok, the factors affecting students' self-esteem, etc.

In recent years, the growing interest of the students in SMNs has started to arouse some concerns in researchers' minds: "Is there a relationship between SMNs usage intensity and academic performance?" (Alshalawi, 2022, p. 4); "How do college students view using social networking sites for educational purposes?" (Niraula & Bohora, 2023, p. 275); or can social media usage lead to adverse effects like addiction? (Sherman et al., 2016), etc.

These types of concerns encouraged researchers to investigate the influence of different social media platforms on students' academic performance, outcomes, and well-being. Among the SMNs, TikTok has gained a specific interest with its algorithm-driven short videos, making this social media platform one of the most popular platforms globally with 46 million downloads in March 2024 (Laura Ceci, 2024). Despite some studies focused on the positive usage of TikTok, for example, using it as a teaching-learning tool (Febrianti et al., 2022), some researches revealed the negative effects of this platform, such as being time-consuming (e.g. Hill et al., 2024), addictive and distractive (e.g. Lau, 2017), having media multitasking effects: being active in social media and being engaged with different activities (e.g. studying) simultaneously (Van der Schuur et al., 2015), etc. Moreover, diverse studies explored the influence of TikTok on students' self-esteem

by using various variables as mediating factors; for instance, self-control (Ning & Inan, 2023), anxiety (Niraula & Bohora, 2023), social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014), etc.

### **2.1. Effects of Social Media Usage**

A large number of studies have shown that social media platforms, specifically TikTok affects students' academic performance in a negative way by playing a distraction role for them. One of the factors defining the "distraction role" is the time spent on SMNs, particularly on TikTok. According to one of the studies conducted with 306 college students in the USA, their academic outcomes (GPA) negatively correlated with the time spent on social media platforms with 39.5% of the respondents spending more time on TikTok than focusing on their studies (Hill et al., 2024). The research has shown that due to the time spent on TikTok, the students tend to develop "always-on" and "always-connected" lifestyle, hindering their ability to focus on the academic tasks (Hill et al., 2024). The findings of the surveys indicate that this negative correlation may be rooted from social media multitasking, which aligns with the results of a research made at the university in Hong Kong (Lau, 2017). Social media multitasking is defined as the process of completing different tasks and being active on social media platforms simultaneously. In these studies, the students were studying, while being online on social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc., which led to poor academic focus and results (Hill et al., 2024; Lau, 2017). As a result of an online survey completed by 348 undergraduate students in Hong Kong, "SMM (social media multitasking) was found to impede student learning, as reflected in students' CGPA" (Lau, 2017, p. 290). The same study revealed that social media did not support university learning, and it had no positive effect on the students' academic outcomes (Lau, 2017). Similarly, Landa-Blanco et al. (2024) found that social media addiction has a significant impact on academic engagement, according to the results of the survey that was conducted with 412 students in the

National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH). The research results demonstrated the existence of the adverse effects of TikTok on students' academic performance levels, in which self-esteem played the main mediating role: "...participants who use Instagram and TikTok report significantly higher levels of social media addiction and symptoms of depression and anxiety." (Landa-Blanco et al., 2024, p. 5). Different from the research that was conducted by Hill et al. (2024) and Lau (2017), in this research the main factor impeding academic performance was not the time spent on TikTok but the content of the videos, which affected the students' self-esteem and well-being negatively and led to depression (Landa-Blanco et al., 2024). Furthermore, Hassan Ali Raza (2022) uncovered another aspect of TikTok distraction: students not only watch but also make TikTok videos during the lecture time and avoid listening to the professor delivering the lesson at the Sargodha University in Pakistan. According to the results of the survey, students acknowledged TikTok usage as more interesting and engaging than their lectures (Raza, 2022). However, watching and creating TikTok videos during the lectures resulted in poor concentration on the delivered knowledge in the class, leading to disturbance of their academic performance (Raza, 2022). The findings of the study conducted at the PES University in India, demonstrated the same consequences as in Sargodha University: "...the student who regularly updates the status on TikTok, will definitely miss the class and there will not be concentration in the classes" (Swathi et al., 2020, p. 1042). The researchers also showed that regular usage of social media platforms leads to addiction, and consequently, shorter attention span in the university students, which hinders the learning process (Lau, 2017; Ning & Inan, 2023; Taulli, 2020).

On the contrary, another research that was conducted among pharmacy students emphasized the positive learning outcomes achieved by using TikTok (Febrianti et al., 2022). In this study, students were encouraged to create and upload videos of the findings of their projects

at the University to TikTok, which motivated them to have deeper investigation in the field. Additionally, according to the study, the students' perceptions of TikTok were optimistic: "The students also showed a positive response to the use of TikTok, in which 84% of the students found it easier to understand course materials by using TikTok, 80% of the students had better motivation to study course materials" (Febrianti et al., 2022, p. 2646). The usage of TikTok as a learning tool was also studied by Aziz et al. (2023) among KPTMAS students in Malaysia by saying that "The data also revealed a significant interest in TikTok usage for learning in Small Cities or Towns, with 68 females and 20 males actively engaged in educational pursuits." (p. 138). As these studies indicate, TikTok can be adapted as a teaching & learning tool in education to motivate students to perform better, which demonstrates the positive effects of this social media platform on education. Similarly, Ahmed & Qazi (2011) discovered that the time college students spend on social media platforms in Pakistan does not negatively impact their academic performance as the students manage their time effectively: "An interesting conclusion has been drawn on the basis of the findings of current study that students are managing their time efficiently and hence, use of SNSs does not harm their academic performance." (Ahmed & Qazi, 2011, p. 5029). These diverse perceptions may depend on other components, such as geographical and cultural factors, the aim of using social media platforms, etc. The cross-cultural study that investigates the differences of TikTok's users and its effects among the United States, Spain, and Chile, demonstrated that TikTok usage is associated with countries' national cultural values (Deng et al., 2023). The results of the surveys conducted with 556 TikTok users across the countries showcased the willingness of information seeking on TikTok among American respondents rather than using it for entertainment purposes (Deng et al., 2023).

Despite the studies demonstrating both positive and negative effects of the SMNs, including TikTok, on the students' academic performance, according to Hill et al. (2024) "...the gap between TikTok active users' perceptions of how social media apps influence their academic performance and their GPA was uncovered." (p. 4), showing the importance of the current study.

## **2.2. The Influence of TikTok on Self-Esteem: The Role of Social Comparison**

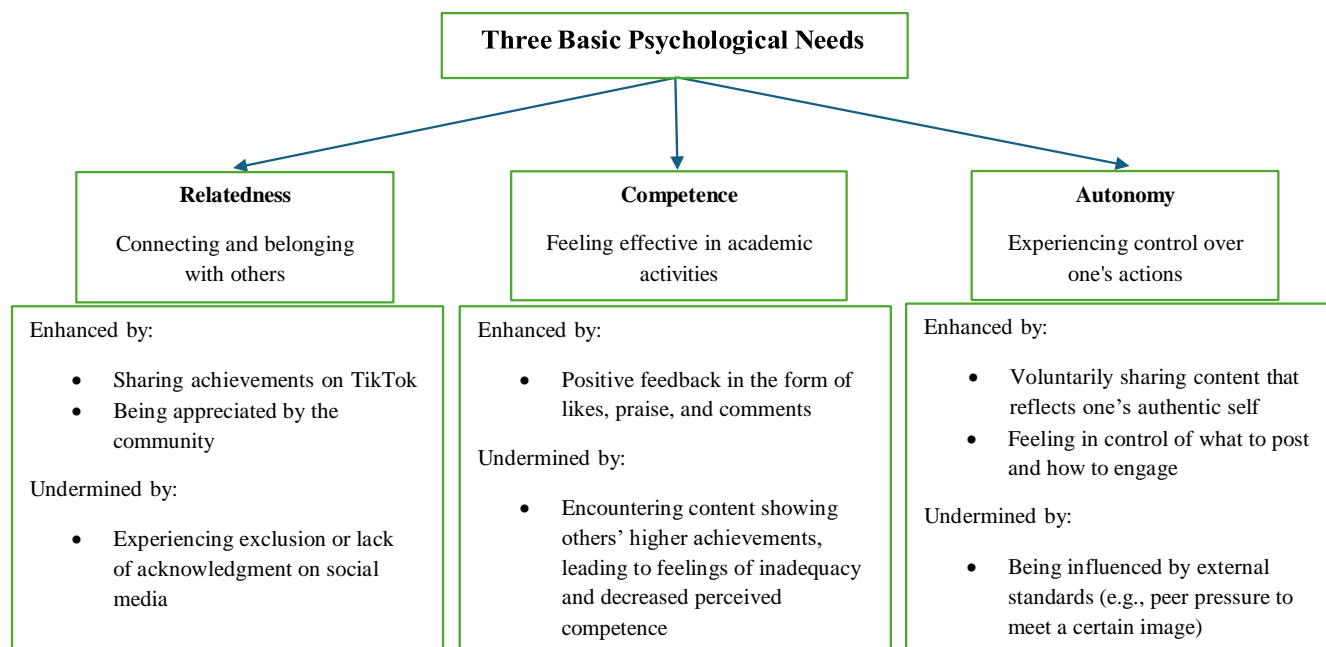
As an extensively used social media platform, the influence of TikTok on undergraduate students' self-esteem has also been investigated by many researchers. The study in Honduras found that social media addiction has a detrimental impact on self-esteem (Landa-Blanco et al., 2024). According to some studies, social comparison plays an important role as a mediating factor between usage of TikTok and students' self-esteem. Social comparison is defined as the process of perceiving information about other people in relation to oneself and it helps to fulfill the need for self-evaluation (Heejung, 2024). The research that was conducted by Heejung Chun (2024) investigates the role of two types of social comparison (ability-based and opinion-based) in education. Ability-based comparison is defined as the process of comparing oneself to other students through value-attached judgements and it leads to seeing other students as competitors in one class; opinion-based social comparison, however, is defined by the diverse interpretations of the students, resulting in seeing others as role models (Heejung, 2024). According to the results of the survey conducted with 398 students in South Korea, both types of the social comparison are highly associated with self-esteem of the students (Heejung, 2024). Furthermore, diverse research showed that social comparison may lead to anxiety in students. A study conducted by Kessler et al. (1995) demonstrated the negative emotional influence of anxiety on the students' academic outcomes. Adversely affected academic outcomes by anxiety can result in problems in completing education for the students: "...anxiety disorders are the most important for high school termination

and subsequent transitions” (Kessler et al., 1995, p. 1029). In this study, Kessler et al. (1995) utilized Festinger’s (1954) Social Comparison Theory as a theoretical framework, demonstrating that upward social comparison may be the main reason for anxiety in university students. Social comparison may be fostered by using different social media platforms, as supported by the study in the USA (Vogel et al, 2014). Vogel et al. (2014) indicated that social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc. enhance the exposure to upward social comparisons, which is a potential threat for the students to have lower self-esteem. The results of the study showed that the participants had poorer self-esteem after engaging in social media activities, for instance, observing others, which led to lower academic outcomes in their education (Vogel et al, 2014). Similarly, Zhang (2022) found that passively using such platforms, only watching the others’ “ideal selves” and not creating content, is correlated with the decrease in self-esteem. Another study demonstrated that the students, especially females perceive these social media platforms, mainly TikTok, as a competition, in which they tend to demonstrate their accomplishments, “living my best life” posts, etc.; however, it fosters unhealthy social comparison among the students (YouthSense, 2022).

### **2.3. Theoretical Framework**

The findings of diverse studies showed that TikTok usage may foster unhealthy social comparison among the students. The reason for such “unhealthy” comparisons is that students see the best versions of others and feel not competent enough, consequently leading to diminished self-esteem, according to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). To explore the research questions, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was used as a theoretical framework of this study. Ryan & Deci (2000) claims that human, as well as students’ motivation for studying and behavior is affected by three main needs: relatedness, autonomy, and competence. When these

three needs are met, the students are more likely to engage in activities with intrinsic motivation, and it leads to enhanced academic performance and better results (Wang et al., 2024). This theory explains how external factors, such as social comparison in this study, can influence students' self-esteem. When students watch TikTok videos and follow others on this platform, they may encounter the content where others share their achievements, better academic results, active engagement in educational activities or conferences, etc. These kinds of content may lead to unhealthy comparisons among students. SDT suggests that external unhealthy comparisons decrease students' autonomy and lead to lower academic performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Also, this theory explains the reason why students try to post their "best versions" on TikTok: it may be one of the psychological needs – the need for relatedness; students share the positive things happening in their lives to feel as a member of the community (Wang et al., 2024). The map connecting the TikTok use and SDT is described below:



## **CHAPTER 3: Research Design and Methodology**

This chapter introduces an overview of research design, methodology, data collection and analysis methods, the chosen research tools, selected research sites and participants.

### **3.1. Research Design**

To explore research questions of the study, qualitative research methods were used since they provided context-sensitive understanding and help to uncover the details of personal experiences (Dörnyei, 2007). Additionally, qualitative research helped to analyze the collected data by "...interpreting the larger meaning of the findings" (Creswell, 2012, p. 16). This study adopted exploratory research design to gain deep insights about the "perceived effects of TikTok on students' academic performance and self-esteem" (Schutt, 2012). Using exploratory research design provided the opportunity to find out "what meanings people give to their actions" (Schutt, 2012, p. 13), which is the core purpose of this study.

Furthermore, the interpretivist research paradigm was applied to understand what the undergraduate students' perceptions of using TikTok are. The goal of interpretivism is to perceive the connotations of diverse people towards reality (Schutt, 2012), which is one of the main objectives of this research.

### **3.2. Research site**

Purposive sampling, specifically, maximal variation sampling was used to sample the research sites to present various perspectives from different backgrounds, ensuring the validity of the study (Creswell, 2012). For this purpose, space triangulation was used to ensure the credibility of the research by choosing different venues for conducting interviews. Data triangulation is an effective strategy to ensure the credibility of my study; having diverse perceptions from multiple data

sources will reduce the potential single-research-site biases and enhance the validity of this qualitative research (Patton, 1990). Thus, three criteria were set to reach maximum variation among the research sites to ensure that the results reflect comprehensive experiences from diverse educational environments with different teaching methods, diverse majors, and geographical factors:

1. A contemporary university, which acknowledges modern teaching and learning methods.
2. A rooted university in the city with long-standing academic tradition, having a comprehensive range of disciplines.
3. A university that is in the non-capital city.

Permission to do research in those sites was gained after sending the official letters to the Universities to address ethical considerations.

### **3.3. Participants**

Considering the factors, such as limited time frame, availability of the participants, institutional permissions, etc., six undergraduate students (three males and three females) and one social media expert were interviewed. To interview undergraduate students, simple random sampling was applied to include any undergraduate student since this sampling technique may provide the opportunity of equal distribution of the participants regardless of the factors, including age, gender, social status, etc. (Creswell, 2012). To apply this sampling strategy, the list of the students was taken from the administrators of ADA and Baku State Universities. Two of the students from ADA University and two from Baku State University agreed to voluntarily participate in the research. To choose the participants from Sumgayit State University, an online survey was distributed among the undergraduate students to get contact information about the

volunteers. The students who were not TikTok users were excluded from the list and two of the rest were chosen randomly to collect data. Also, to gain deeper understanding of TikTok's algorithm and its effects, a social media expert was invited to the interview.

### **3.4. Data Collection Techniques**

To study the influence of TikTok on the undergraduate students' academic performances and self-esteem, in-depth interviews were conducted. According to Patton (1990), "[t]he purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (p.426), which shows the alignment of this method to collect the needed data in this study. At each chosen university, two undergraduate students, in general six undergraduate students and one social media expert were interviewed. In-depth interviews can help the researchers to get deeper understanding of the phenomenon since the interviewees can express their opinions more independently (Patton, 1990). Interviews were mainly for 40-60 minutes each and five of them were held face-to-face, while two of them were held online due to the availability of the participants. Interviews were held in English and audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. Semi-structured interviews helped to adjust the questions or ask pop-up questions during the interview to get the needed information, answering the research questions in this study (Creswell, 2012). Interview questions were developed by adjusting the survey questions about the usage of social media in Azerbaijan, which were adopted by the "Social Research Center" (Social Researcher Center, 2024). Moreover, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used to develop interview questions addressing the problems related to self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965).

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

The data analysis process started after the data collection process. To analyze, the audio-recorded interviews were manually transcribed and coded to organize and manage the data for thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As of the next stage, the themes were developed based on the coded data, which were analyzed in the discussion part of the study.

### **3.6. Trustworthiness**

To ensure the reliability of the research and reduce researcher bias interview protocol was developed (Creswell, 2012). As Patton (1990) mentions, an effective interview protocol ensures the balance between the flexibility of the research and alignment with the research objectives. The interview protocol addressed undergraduate students' TikTok usage and its perceived effects on their academic performances and self-esteem, containing open-ended interview questions. Additionally, to ensure the credibility of the study, data triangulation was used, by conducting interviews in three diverse educational settings with different criteria mentioned above. Data triangulation is one of the most effective trustworthiness strategies to cross-check the data and interpretations (Eryilmaz, 2022). Lastly, peer review was done to ensure that the findings were plausible by the supervisor (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **3.7. Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered to ethical considerations in accordance with APA guidelines (2020) by ensuring informed consent was obtained from participants. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, data was anonymized, securely stored, and used only for research purposes. Interview questions were designed to avoid sensitive or overly personal topics unless necessary. Transparency was maintained by clearly explaining the study's goals and procedures to

participants, ensuring they understand their rights, including the ability to withdraw at any time. These practical steps align with APA's guidelines to respect participants' dignity, ensure fairness, and prioritize their well-being (APA, 2020).

## **CHAPTER 4: Results**

The findings are based on the results of semi-structured interviews collected from six students in three different universities and one social media expert, who gave deeper insights into the platform itself. The students major in different fields, including IT and Engineering, Public and International Affairs, Psychology, Business, Biological Science. Furthermore, one expert in the social media platforms was interviewed to get insights into specifically developed algorithms of TikTok and similar platforms and understand their possible effects on the students' academic lives and emotions. The participants' names are coded as follows: Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3), Participant 4 (P4), Participant 5 (P5), Participant 6 (P6), Social Media Expert (E1).

The strong relationship was found between Social Media Networks (SMNs) usage and undergraduate students' academic performances in the literature review (Alshalawi, 2022). Additionally, possible mechanisms underlying peer influence were emphasized in some studies, showing the effects of SMNs on students' self-esteem (Sherman et al., 2016). Thus, the interview questions of the current study were developed to explore the relationship between TikTok usage and academic performance & self-esteem, students' motivation for studying, and the role of social comparison as indicated in the aims of the study. The participants' answers to these questions formed the data for further analysis in order to answer the research questions, and the themes are created based on those answers and codes accordingly. Furthermore, one expert in the social media platforms was interviewed to get insights into specifically developed algorithms of TikTok and similar platforms and understand their possible effects on the students' academic lives and emotions. The table below (Table 1) demonstrates the codes, which were developed based on the participants' interview quotes and thematic interpretation of them accordingly. These initial themes

were further explored and contextualized to analyze the complexities of the influence of TikTok on academic performance, motivation, attention, and self-esteem in more detail.

**Table 1**

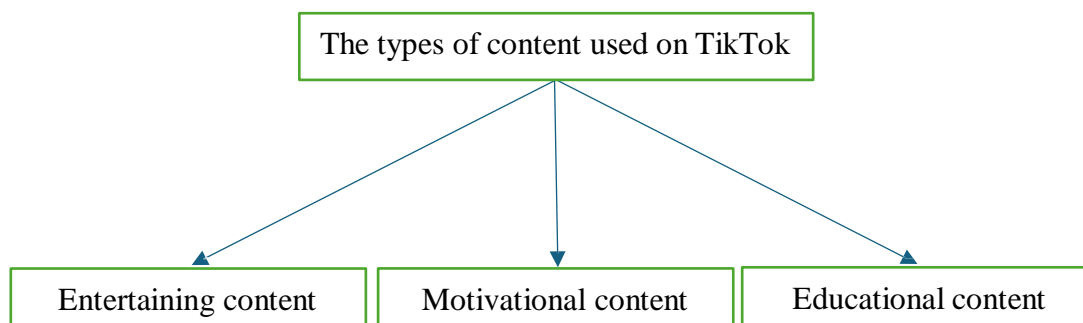
<i>Participant Quote</i>	<i>Theme/Code</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
“I like watching educational videos about study techniques or language learning.”	Educational content	Students value educational content when it is practical and immediately applicable
“I enjoy watching funny videos more than study-related ones, but then I feel guilty.”	Entertaining Content	Entertainment is a major attraction of TikTok, but it often competes with academic priorities, leading to time management conflicts and feelings of guilt.
“Seeing other students study on TikTok makes me feel like I should be studying too, like they motivate me. Also, the videos there makes me disciplined.”	Motivational content / Motivation for studying	Videos including self-improvement, productivity, discipline, and other people’s trying to be successful motivate students to study and be successful.
“I spend most of my day on TikTok. Sometimes I don’t even realize how much time has passed.”	Time spent on TikTok / Time management	Many participants struggle to track their time spent on TikTok, leading to procrastination and missing academic or personal responsibilities.
“I often catch myself scrolling for hours when I should be studying, but I just can’t stop.”	TikTok addiction / Procrastination	The addictive design of TikTok, with endless scrolling and algorithm-driven content, encourages excessive use, which can interfere with academic responsibilities and time management, in which students keep postponing their studies.

<p>“I find myself watching TikTok in class when I get bored. Lectures are too long, they just don’t keep my attention, and I cannot focus on them for a long time.”</p>	<p>Distraction / Shortened attention span</p>	<p>The rapid, high-stimulus nature of TikTok makes traditional learning environments feel slow in comparison, reducing students' ability to sustain attention during lectures, readings, etc.</p>
<p>“You don’t need to follow anyone on TikTok. The algorithm shows your content to the people who are likely to watch it. Even with zero followers, a video can go viral. It learns from your behavior—what you watch, skip, and interact with.”</p>	<p>TikTok’s algorithm/mechanism / Algorithmic influence</p>	<p>The expert highlights how TikTok’s For-You page functions based on behavioral data rather than follower count. This makes content discovery more algorithm-driven and personalized than on traditional social networks. As a result, the algorithm encourages prolonged usage and can foster dependency by always offering something instantly relevant.</p>
<p>“To control my usage, I use another phone just for studying. I don’t install TikTok there.”</p>	<p>Self-regulation strategies</p>	<p>Some participants use strategies to manage distractions, such as using different devices for academic and entertainment purposes, setting deadlines in usage, etc. These efforts reflect attempts to regain control over digital habits.</p>
<p>“When I see people my age achieving so much, I feel like I’m falling behind.”</p>	<p>Social comparison / Lowered self-esteem / Decreased self-confidence</p>	<p>Exposure to curated online content often leads to unrealistic comparisons, creating pressure and reducing self-confidence in academic performance.</p>
<p>“I love when my videos get lots of likes and comments. It makes me feel valued.”</p>	<p>Feedback from social media / Social Validation / A sense of belonging</p>	<p>Social media engagement provides immediate validation, reinforcing a sense of belonging within digital communities. While this can boost self-confidence, over-dependence on digital feedback may lead to a fragile self-esteem, where self-worth becomes tied to online</p>

		interactions rather than real-life relationships.
“I try to make my posts look perfect. I only share the good parts of my life.”	Identity performance	Users often curate content to present an idealized version of themselves. This selective self-representation is driven by the desire to align with social expectations, potentially differentiating their online persona from their real identity.

#### 4.1. TikTok Usage Patterns

The participants of this study were engaged in diverse types of content on TikTok, demonstrating their areas of interest. The table below illustrates the main types of content used by the participants, which is followed by the detailed description:



Four out of six participants mostly consumed motivational content, such as self-improvement, productivity, time management, and discipline-related videos. Participants described these videos as motivation for studying in their lives rather than direct academic support. According to their opinions, watching motivational content inspired them to improve themselves both professionally and academically. For instance, P1 claimed that although he did not receive academic knowledge from TikTok, the motivational content inspired him to study:

*“Actually, I don’t watch something academic specially, for example, I don’t watch tutorials related to my studies, but these motivational videos give me a reason to take my books and study.”*

While motivational content on TikTok aligned with students’ academic lives indirectly, participants watched a variety of other types of videos, aligning with their interests and hobbies, coded as entertaining content in Table 1. Entertaining content included some religious and psychological videos, DJ remixes and musical content, historical edits, military-themed videos, memes, cooking tutorials, beauty and skincare routines, fitness and gym-related videos, some dance performances, car-related content, and travel experiences. TikTok can be considered as a multipurpose platform according to this variety of content, encompassing different interest areas and providing entertainment value as well. This divergence suggests that the academic utility of TikTok is not universal but filtered through personal interest, academic discipline, and content consumption habits.

Educational content of this platform was also found to be effective in the participants’ academic performances, aligning with the findings of the research that reflected SMNs as a flexible educational tool for students (Niraula & Bohora, 2023). P2 sought for videos related to English language learning, namely advanced grammatical structures, C1-C2 level words and phrases to upgrade her language level and perform better in her studies:

*“And also, I watch the content about some high-level grammar rules, and maybe C1, C2 words. Because I want to improve my English level, and it will help me with my studies at the University.”*

Furthermore, P4 sometimes watched IELTS and SAT preparation videos, while P5 actively looked for IT-related materials, specifically, coding tutorials. Educational content was also

employed by P6, who found math tutorials and SAT tips effective to simplify complex topics. Despite these usage patterns of the educational content, not all participants used TikTok for academic purposes. P1 and P3 explicitly expressed that they did not engage with educational content, emphasizing TikTok's entertainment appeal.

Participants' time spent on TikTok also varied significantly. It was revealed that P1 was the least engaged with TikTok, using it for only 2-3 hours per week. While P3 and P4 maintained moderate levels with approximately 30 minutes daily usage, P2, P5, and P6 demonstrated a higher engagement, spending 2-2.5, 2-3, and 4-5 hours on TikTok per day respectively. The imbalance in engagement levels reflects different personal habits and priorities among the students. Some participants utilized TikTok as a casual leisure activity, yet others relied on it as a primary source of entertainment and engagement. Notably, those who reported higher usage expressed their challenges with time management, underpinning some concerns about the app's addictive algorithm. TikTok's algorithm is specifically designed with personalized content, which played a significant role in the students' usage patterns. This personalized content was explained by E1 as a system, ensuring that users continuously receive videos aligned with their interests. Additionally, E1 emphasized TikTok's unique ability to know people fast and promote the videos regardless of follower count, in comparison to other social media platforms:

*“On TikTok, you may have zero followers, but the algorithm can still promote your content. And TikTok knows what we like better than YouTube or Instagram.”*

This mechanism may be the main reason behind TikTok addiction as it encourages content creation and maintains prolonged user interaction. It was also noticed by the participants who said that for-you pages on TikTok quickly adapted to their preferences.

#### 4.2. TikTok as Motivation for Studying

Although TikTok is popular for its entertaining content, it played a role in motivation for studying for some participants. Several participants acknowledged the educational and motivational content in TikTok as the source to engage more actively with their studies and perform better academically at the Universities. Several studies uncovered that using TikTok as a learning tool play a role of motivation for studying for undergraduate students (Aziz et al., 2023; Febrianti et al., 2022). This result has also been found in the current study when students utilized TikTok as a learning tool for getting academic support.

P1 underpinned the help of motivational content in maintaining discipline in his academic performance:

*“When I watch motivational videos, it’s driving me to study or to perform something that is valuable.”*

He also emphasized the significance of some strategies, such as using two separate phones: one for only pleasure, the other one for educational purposes, in balancing entertainment and academic tasks. According to the participant’s explanation, he avoids taking the phone for entertainment purposes with him to the University, the library, and other educational places, making it impossible to be distracted by the possible notifications, calls, or messages from his friends on TikTok. By implementing this strategy, he ensures that social media did not interfere with his study routine. This also may indicate that the impact of social media depends on the self-regulation of an individual.

Furthermore, P5 considered TikTok a motivational and beneficial platform for discovering coding tips and course recommendations, which helped to enhance her technological abilities in her studies:

*“Since I study IT, TikTok sometimes shows me useful coding tips and course recommendations, which makes my work easier. These videos help a lot with my academic life, and also, learning through TikTok also increases my motivation to study.”*

She believed that TikTok had a positive effect on her studies by exposing her to relevant information in an engaging format. Additionally, P5 mentioned that seeing content about remote workers traveling the world motivated her to work harder academically:

*“I once saw a video about people who work remotely, earn money, and travel the world. That motivated me a lot.”*

P6 reported TikTok’s direct role in shaping his motivation for studying. Initially, his desire to study at the University stemmed from the videos on TikTok, which exposed the students’ academic lives, success stories, graduation moments, etc. This suggests that TikTok can serve as a tool for motivation for studying and being successful, potentially influencing students’ educational choices:

*“The first place that I decided to study at the university was from TikTok.”*

Despite TikTok’s role as a motivation for studying in these students, not all participants experienced TikTok as a positive academic influence. Although P2 engaged with grammar and vocabulary-related content, she explicitly avoided watching academic videos excessively on the

platform by skipping the educational videos when they appear on the for-you page. P3 and P4 reported no motivation for studying from TikTok, with P4 believing that educational content was less appealing than lifestyle trends.

### **4.3. TikTok as Distraction Tool**

While some participants described how TikTok supported their motivation and academic engagement, a recurring topic was its role as a major distraction. Even the participants who found TikTok effective in their academic performances, they also expressed their struggles with excessive time spent on the platform, its addictive nature, procrastination, and difficulties with concentration. This contrast highlights an uneven potential of TikTok to foster academic motivation and raises questions about whether TikTok reinforces existing academic interests or creates meaningful new ones.

P1 recognized the possible challenges, including addiction to TikTok, that he may encounter by using this platform and followed what successful people advise for self-improvement:

*“I’ve watched some people who are great in their field, in their professional lives, in their studies. They also advise having control over your time in social media in phone.”*

Other respondents also described their difficulties controlling the time spent on TikTok and overuse, even though they had academic assignments and deadlines to meet. This aspect of SMNs was recognized as “time-wasting behavior” in another qualitative research, referring to the excessive use of social media by students (Niraula & Bohora, 2023). P2 and P4 believed that TikTok is addictive, and they admitted that the time passed quickly due to the app’s algorithm, which suggested infinity of video pool to scroll. Both students recognized their self-regulation

problems, leading to distraction from their studies and procrastination of assignments. While P2 could not control her TikTok usage and made time for scrolling the videos there even if she had a busy day, P4 felt unable to quit the app due to social obligations like maintaining streaks on TikTok, showcasing TikTok addiction in both situations. Missed academic deadlines, delayed lessons and assignments, sacrifice of sleep, etc. demonstrated the negative influence of TikTok on the students' academic performances:

*“I was late 10 minutes to my lesson because of TikTok... when I don't have time, I make time for scrolling videos. TikTok really stops my academic learning, like academic success. As a person, I can control everything if I want. But I don't know, sometimes I think that TikTok controls me.” – P2*

The reflection of TikTok's control over the individuals indicates the fear of losing one's autonomy because of external technological influence. This moment reflects behavioral addiction and resonates with the addictive nature of the platform. “[S]ometimes I think that TikTok controls me” is a powerful statement, which highlights the psychological burden that the participant encounters to maintain the academic focus.

*“I became a real procrastinator due to TikTok... I should sacrifice my sleeping time because I couldn't complete deadlines on time. It's kind of addiction, like a drug, like alcohol, like smoking.” – P4*

Similarly, P3 and P6 found TikTok the most addictive social media app, admitting the excessive use as an unhealthy habit and distraction from studying. According to the participants, TikTok significantly interferes with studying and reduces academic performance. P6 experienced

academic improvement and scored high in IELTS when he deleted the app for eight months. However, nowadays it seems impossible for him to stop or reduce the TikTok usage due to the infinite scrolling although he acknowledges the negative effects of it, according to his self-perceptions:

*“I spend most of my day on TikTok nowadays because there is nothing more interesting for me than TikTok. If I don’t go through my for-you page, I don’t think I can even go to sleep. We just scroll, scroll, scroll, and don’t even see how much time we’ve spent.”*

P3 also expressed his interest in both scrolling the videos and sharing them with his friends, not only in his leisure time, but also during lectures at the University, which shows the distraction role and negative influence of TikTok on the academic performances of the students:

*“I can say the time I spend on TikTok is more than I spend on education. Because when you enter the app, you cannot leave. You will spend at least one hour there... If I like the lesson, I will try to listen. If not, I prefer to watch videos.”*

Moreover, some respondents, including P1, P4, and P5, acknowledged that watching short-form videos on TikTok for a long time may lead to shortened attention span and make it harder to focus on longer tasks. Participants see TikTok’s algorithm and short videos as the reason behind their struggles with concentration, which is also supported by the social media expert (E1). P4 expressed her ideas as follows:

*“When you watch TikTok for like two hours, you are getting addicted to watching one-minute-long videos, and then when suddenly a 15-minute video comes, you cannot watch it.”*

Additionally, P5 reported that he became impatient and found it challenging to focus on long tasks, such as reading the course materials, listening to the long lectures, etc. due to shortened attention span:

*“Regarding university lectures, I have no choice but to listen. If they were shorter, I’d prefer it. But since they aren’t, I must pay attention, even though it really tests my patience.”*

These perceptions demonstrate that excessive TikTok usage results in distraction and shortened attention span, which is the biggest obstacle to consolidating the information in the lectures and while reading the academic materials. Consequently, the lack of focus leads to lower academic performance, showcasing the role of TikTok as a distraction tool from studies.

#### **4.4. Social Comparison and Self-Esteem**

As indicated in the study, one of the main aims of this research is to explore the influence of TikTok on students’ self-esteem. Through literature review, it was revealed that social comparison may be the principal mediating factor between these variables, leading to anxiety and lowered self-esteem in students (Kessler et al., 1995). Thus, some interview questions in the current study were developed to get deeper insights into this topic. According to the results, social comparison varied in degrees of impact on self-esteem. Some participants described a direct influence of it on their confidence and motivation, while others reported using comparison as inspiration or claimed to be unaffected by it.

It was disclosed that several participants compared their academic performances: their GPAs, grades, achievement levels, etc., to their peers on TikTok. Although P1 initially mentioned that seeing successful students with high grades discouraged him to persevere to improve his academic

performance, later he had a shift in his perspective, deciding to envision their success and get motivated:

*“When I see someone who gets A’s and they share it on TikTok, I say, ‘Oh, that’s impossible for me,’ and I do not even try first. However, then I try not to do so. Instead, I envision the future that they have as reality.”*

Having a similar experience, P2 shared her concerns on language proficiency, comparing herself to the native English speakers that she had seen on TikTok. She acknowledged both positive and negative effects of social comparison: she admired their fluency, which also led to self-doubts about her English level and lower self-confidence. However, as in the case of P1, she reported that those speakers ultimately motivated her to improve her own language skills:

*“Mostly, I watch foreign people, how they talk in English, like native speakers, really, and I get admired. But at the same time, I start to compare myself and I feel a little bit bad, it lowers my self-confidence to be honest. But then I start to do something to make my English better.”*

While some participants described using comparison as motivation, others admitted feeling emotions like jealousy or frustration. The influence of social comparison on self-esteem was also observed in P4’s answers to the question, focusing on time management skills and multitasking. As per her responses, it was revealed that she felt inadequate when she saw peers who excel in different areas and manage their time to complete all the academic tasks efficiently. The negative effect of social comparison was obviously seen on her self-esteem, by leading to decreased self-confidence in the areas where she struggled:

*“I feel inadequate when I see others can manage this time problem and complete all their academic assignments, tasks, but not me.”*

Alongside P4, P3 also explained that when he saw individuals who were more knowledgeable or successful than him, he felt a mix of sadness and anger, affecting his self-esteem negatively. Unlike P1, who reframed social comparison as motivation, P3 did not attempt to change his own behavior or academic performance in response to what he saw on TikTok:

*“If I see someone more educated than me, I feel a mix of sadness and anger, jealousy to be exact.”*

In addition to comparing academic achievements, unrealistic beauty standards and lifestyle expectations were also found to have negative effects on the students' self-esteem. In this regard, P2 and P4 were namely impacted by other factors on TikTok, noting that constant exposure to seemingly “perfect” people on TikTok affected their self-esteem negatively. P2 noted that she often saw body images she wished she had, which led her to compare herself to influencers and models on TikTok. Similarly, as P4 felt pressured to meet beauty standards that were widely promoted on the platform, she expressed her frustration over how social media creates an unattainable standard and the influence of TikTok on her decision-making process:

*“When you see that you have problems, you can't make that much money, you are not as successful as them, you want to exclude yourself from society. TikTok has a great effect on the way I did plastic surgery... everyone has a perfect, flawless nose, so I thought I do not look good enough.”*

The participant's decision to undergo plastic surgery demonstrates the powerful role of social comparison in shaping self-perception and behavior. The belief that "*everyone has a perfect, flawless nose*" points to the internalization of the beauty standards outside, and these standards are promoted through the content on TikTok. This internalization has led to lowered self-esteem, pushing the participant toward irreversible physical change to feel acceptable in the community.

Beyond comparison, social media platforms may also influence self-esteem when an individual posts his/her achievements, lifestyle, etc. and receives feedback from other people. Accordingly, several participants shared insights on their own posting habits and how they related to self-esteem. Although P5 did not post academic achievements on TikTok, she shared them on other social media platforms, such as Instagram and LinkedIn. The positive feedback in the form of likes and comments boosted her self-esteem and motivation to continue what she does:

*"When I share these achievements, I receive feedback, likes, comments, and replies, which affect me positively."*

Likewise, P1 and P4 shared their feelings when they posted their academic achievements or talents and reported that receiving positive comments and likes boosted their confidence and self-esteem. Since P4 believed that TikTok encouraged people to present an idealized version of their lives, she also tried to create an image of perfection. These attempts to seem perfect and idealized in photos or videos on the social media platforms indicate participants' efforts in identity performance, as coded in Table 1. The feedback she got to these aesthetically pleasing and well-planned content – receiving likes, comments, and views, – created a sense of belonging:

*“Seeing positive comments encourages me. It boosts my confidence, and not only confidence, but it gives the positive feeling that you may need sometimes. I feel more relaxed when I get likes, positive comments like everyone... it makes people feel like they belong to a community.”*

P6, however, stated that he did not engage in social comparison and was unaffected by social media feedback. He used TikTok primarily for business purposes rather than social validation:

*“It gives motivation to work on yourself, but we all understand it negatively affects academic performance.”*

The findings revealed the divergence in TikTok’s usage and influence, having an educational and motivational value for some students, while the majority acknowledged its negative emotional and behavioral effects on their academic performances. The main struggles encapsulated time management issues, procrastination of academic affairs, and reduced concentration due to the platform’s addictive nature. Furthermore, constant exposure to idealized lifestyles and appearances led to feelings of inadequacy and lowered self-esteem.

## **CHAPTER 5: Discussion**

Since this study uses Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as the theoretical framework, the findings are analyzed based on three basic psychological needs of the students: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. By analyzing the results of interviews and how TikTok affects students' academic performances and self-esteem, this discussion explores if these psychological needs are supported or hindered. Additionally, the results demonstrated a high level of alignment with the conducted literature review, which is analyzed below.

### **5.1. TikTok and Student Autonomy**

Autonomy refers to an individual's ability to regulate behavior according to personal values and goals, according to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy is explained in the context of education as a need that allows students to make independent choices about their study habits, time management, and engagement in academic activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to the findings of this study, some students attempted to maintain autonomy and control their study habits by setting personal boundaries for TikTok use; however, others struggled with self-regulation, leading to distraction and procrastination.

Inability to regulate and reduce the time spent on TikTok was one of the most challenging factors encountered by the participants of this research, hindering student autonomy. It was revealed that even if several participants acknowledged that TikTok played a distraction role and influenced their concentration on academic tasks negatively, they had trouble with quitting the app. This factor aligns with research by Lau (2017), which found that social media multitasking reduces students' ability to focus on academic tasks, leading to poor academic outcomes. As

indicated in the research findings, TikTok's specific algorithm, which allows students to spend much time among the infinite short-video pool, makes it difficult for users to disengage. This factor reinforces habitual usage patterns that compromise autonomy. Other studies have also shown that this kind of algorithm-driven engagement extends screen time to the maximum by continuously curating personalized content, hindering users from setting their limits on consumption (Hill et al., 2024). As a result, many students lose control over their time and spend more hours on the platform even if they need to spend time on their studies (Hill et al., 2024). Despite these struggles, some participants in this study developed effective strategies to regain autonomy over their TikTok usage. A better self-regulation was established by designating separate devices for academic and entertainment purposes, setting app usage limits, and restricting screen time in this study. Similarly, the results of the previous literature demonstrated that as students managed their time effectively, their academic performances were not harmed by social media platforms (Ahmed & Qazi, 2011). These strategies align with SDT's emphasis on promoting autonomy through self-regulated decision-making: according to Ryan & Deci (2000), self-determination is fostered when individuals have control over their decisions, consequently, leading to strong intrinsic motivation. The difficulty in maintaining these self-imposed rules suggests that the TikTok users' autonomy is undermined by the algorithm of the platform.

## **5.2. TikTok and Academic Competences**

Competence is another core component of SDT, referring to the students' feeling of being capable and effective in academic performance in the educational setting and personal pursuits. The results of this research demonstrated that TikTok had both positive and negative influence on students' perceived competence.

Although TikTok was firmly believed to be a distraction from the studies, some participants reported that it enhanced their motivation to study. When used intentionally for educational purposes, TikTok provided students with quick and more engaging academic content, such as coding tutorials, language learning resources, time management strategies, etc., and fostered competence in students. These findings align with research conducted by Febrianti et al. (2022), who found that TikTok could be used as an effective learning tool. The study showed that when students actively engage with educational content on the platform, the accessibility and its engaging format, support learning and motivation for studying outside traditional classroom settings (Febrianti et al., 2022). As the research suggests that passive consumption of educational content does not necessarily lead to meaningful learning outcomes, the motivation extent, which fosters competence, depends on how students interact with TikTok (Swathi et al., 2020). Different interaction forms led to different results in the current study too. While some participants considered study-related videos to be helpful in their academic lives, the constant exposure to entertainment and unrelated content weakened the effectiveness of TikTok as a learning tool. Similarly, previous studies also argued that social media's ability to enhance competence depends on its structured usage, where students actively seek knowledge, study strategies, etc. rather than consume content passively (Landa-Blanco et al., 2024).

While some participant answers showed the positive effects of TikTok on students' academic performances, the distracting aspect of this platform was undeniable. Some students' self-perceptions demonstrated that TikTok videos shortened their attention spans, making it challenging for students to concentrate on long academic content, including reading the educational materials, listening to long lectures at their universities, etc. As a result, students' needs for competence were undermined by TikTok usage. This phenomenon has also been widely

studied by various researchers, resulting in researchers noting that excessive exposure to short content on social media platforms lowers cognitive endurance, consequently reducing students' ability to focus on extended academic tasks (Landa-Blanco et al., 2024; Lau, 2017; Ning & Inan, 2023; Taulli, 2020). Furthermore, similar findings to the study in Pakistan were revealed, in which the students were found to watch TikTok videos even during the lectures (Raza, 2022). P3 shared the same interest in watching TikTok videos, emphasizing their entertaining aspect being more interesting than long and boring University lectures.

Moreover, the findings of the current study suggested that procrastination caused by TikTok usage led to decreased academic performance, with some students postponing assignments, tasks, losing valuable study time, and missing academic deadlines. This is consistent with the previous research, which found that this type of procrastination correlates with lower academic achievement since the students prefer to dedicate their time to social media entertainment rather than studies (Swathi et al., 2020). These findings emphasize the argument that even though TikTok can serve as a supplementary learning tool, its algorithm reinforces significant risks to students' ability to maintain focus and engage in deep learning. The algorithmic influence of TikTok has been explained by E1 in detail: unlike some other traditional social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, etc.), TikTok relies on behavioral data to drive engagement of students through short videos on For-You page. This kind of algorithm fosters engagement with the platform, influencing students' concentration and academic performance.

### **5.3. TikTok and Relatedness: The Role of Self-Esteem**

Relatedness, the last psychological need of human beings according to SDT, refers to the need to feel connected to others, *related* to that specific community. All social media platforms,

including TikTok, play a significant role in fulfilling this need due to their function as a network, connecting people with each other. It was found that posting and sharing videos with friends on TikTok boost participants' sense of belonging, which indicates a high level of relatedness. When students share their academic achievements and get positive feedback (likes, positive comments, reposts, streaks) from TikTok and other social media platforms, their need for relatedness is fulfilled and self-esteem is enhanced.

For some participants of the study, TikTok provided a sense of belonging and motivation by exposing productive individuals and peers to them. Consuming the content, containing successful students and professionals, their stories, the strategies that they used, etc. on TikTok led to enhancement of aspiration and encouraged some students to set higher academic and career goals. When they compared themselves to better-doing individuals, they got motivated to reach that level of success. The results of the research in South Korea demonstrated similar results to the current study, by stating that opinion-based social comparison may lead to motivation as students see more successful people as role models (Heejung, 2204). However, at the beginning of their responses, each student admitted that they found to be as successful as those individuals impossible. Accordingly, studies have shown that these types of social comparison can lead to decreased academic performance, as students find to be successful impossible and challenging (Vogel et al., 2014).

Despite its potential to inspire students, TikTok also contributed to lower self-esteem, particularly in cases where students compared themselves negatively to others. Unrealistic lifestyle expectations and "perfect" images of the peers lowered the participants' self-esteem both in their academic and personal lives. The portrayal of high GPA, grades, academic achievements on social

media have been linked to self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, according to the perceptions of the students. These findings align with the study conducted by Zhang (2022), who found that comparing oneself to the others' "ideal selves" is highly correlated with decreased self-esteem.

The results of the research show that although TikTok usage fosters a sense of relatedness in students, it may lead to self-doubt and lowered self-esteem, mainly for the users who internalize unrealistic standards of achievement or appearance.

## **CHAPTER 6: Conclusion**

This study got insights about the influence of TikTok usage on the undergraduate students' academic performances in Azerbaijan, with a particular focus on their self-esteem through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. Analyzing the perceptions of the university students and social media expert insights allowed to uncover how TikTok's algorithm-driven content consumption shape motivation for studying, learning behaviors, study habits, and emotional well-being.

The current study's findings demonstrate that TikTok influences students' motivation, academic performance, and self-esteem in both positive and negative ways, and it both reinforces and undermines three basic psychological needs, depending on the usage patterns. While TikTok usage can enhance the needs for competence and relatedness when it is used for educational or motivational purposes, it also may decrease the need for autonomy, attention span, and self-esteem due to its addictive algorithm and social comparison figures. The study findings highlighted that the students experience fluctuations in motivation: sometimes they find educational value in the videos, reinforcing their inspiration; however, in some cases, they struggled with procrastination, dependency on TikTok, shortened attention span, and lowered self-esteem due to the requirement for social validation. These insights contribute to the ongoing debate on the educational role of social media, emphasizing the significance of self-regulation techniques in minimizing its negative impacts.

### **6.1. Limitations**

This study also has possible limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size of the research was relatively small due to time limitations, restricting generalizability of the findings.

Since the data collection method was interviews, the participants may have introduced biases to seem like better students, affecting the credibility of the study in a negative way. Roller & Lavrakas (2015) mentioned that "...in the face-to-face IDI, which can lead the interviewee to "more or less deliberately express what they believe the interviewer authority wants to hear..." (p. 60)

Furthermore, the results may be affected by some external factors, such as family environment, socio-economic status, personality traits of the students, etc. For instance, a student who is in a supportive family environment and/or higher socio-economic status may have less negative impact from external factors (e.g. TikTok). The study shows students with lower socio-economic status tend to be more negatively affected by social media, supporting this assumption (Skogen et al., 2022).

## **6.2. Areas for Further Research**

To build on the current findings, future research may expand the sample size to investigate the academic and emotional influence of TikTok on the students, by including more students from multiple universities, educational levels, and regions. Moreover, quantitative research or mixed methods can be used to measure the correlation between some variables, including time spent on TikTok and students' academic outcomes, social comparison and students' self-esteem levels, or how the content on TikTok influences students' motivation, etc. Future research also may provide valuable insights by examining the given variables by having experiment groups to compare the differences between the students who consume TikTok content and who do not or use TikTok for other purposes.

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## Appendices

### Interview Protocol

**Research Title:** The Influence of TikTok on undergraduate students' Academic Performances and Self-Esteem in Azerbaijan

**Aim/Objectives of the Study:** The aim of this study is to explore the emotional influence of TikTok on Azerbaijani students' academic performances and self-esteem. To achieve the research aim, the following research objectives are determined:

- To explore the relationship between TikTok usage and undergraduate students' academic performance and motivation for studying in Azerbaijan.
- To explore the relationship between TikTok usage and undergraduate students' self-esteem in Azerbaijan.
- To examine the role of social comparison and students' self-perceptions in TikTok usage.

[Have the interviewee read and signed the consent form.] [Turn on the tape recorder and test it.]

### Interview Procedure:

#### 1. Introduction (5 minutes):

- Introduce the researcher and the purpose of the study.
- Explain the format of the interview and reassure the participant of confidentiality.
- Obtain verbal and written consent to participate.

#### 2. Main Interview (40-50 minutes):

- Ask the participants 15 open-ended questions (below) to gain insight into their TikTok usage and its perceived effects.
- Use follow-up probes to clarify or expand on responses when necessary.

#### 3. Closure (5 minutes):

- Summarize key points discussed.
- Allow the participant to ask questions or add any final comments.
- Thank the participants for their time and contribution.

**Interview Questions:**

1. What types of content do you most frequently engage with on TikTok? How do these align with your personal interests, academic goals, or leisure activities?
2. Can you estimate the average time you spend on TikTok daily? How does this compare to the time you spend studying or working on academic tasks?
3. How does your TikTok usage influence your ability to concentrate on academic tasks, if at all? Can you share specific examples?
4. Have you ever come across TikTok content that positively impacted your academic performance or study habits? Can you share specific examples?
5. Have you ever missed academic deadlines, struggled to complete tasks, or skipped classes because of time spent on TikTok? If yes, can you explain how?
6. In your opinion, does spending time on TikTok support or hinder your academic performance? How does this impact your self-perception as a student?
7. Do you compare yourself to others on TikTok? If so, how does this comparison affect your emotions and self-esteem?
8. How does comparing yourself to peers who post educational content on TikTok influence your motivation to study or achieve academically?
9. How do you feel when comparing yourself to others on TikTok (e.g., equal, better, or worse)? What do you think contributes to these feelings?
10. How does using TikTok affect your satisfaction with yourself? Can you provide examples to illustrate your feelings?
11. How does TikTok usage influence your sense of pride in your achievements, if at all?
12. Has comparing yourself to others on TikTok ever caused you to doubt your abilities or self-worth? What specific types of content trigger these feelings?
13. How does feedback (e.g., likes, comments) on your TikTok content influence your self-esteem? Can you share examples?
14. Do you follow TikTok creators who inspire or boost your confidence? How do they influence you?
15. Have you considered reducing your TikTok usage? What motivated this decision, and did you follow through?