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# A Multidimensional Examination of College Students' TikTok User Profiles and Behavioral Motivations in the Context of Mediated Existence

Mingyue Li<sup>1,2</sup>, Catherina Ugap<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim, Perak 35900, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>School of photography, Communication University of China, Nanjing 211172, Jiangsu, China

*\*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the landscape of mediated existence, conducting an in-depth analysis of the user profiles and behavioral motivations of college students on TikTok. The research reveals a paradigm shift within this group from instrumental use to ontological dependence, constructing multidimensional identities through the demystification of demographic characteristics, the examination of psychological profiles, and the exploration of embedded social relationships. It further argues that deep gamification logic fuels sensory addiction and emotional compensation, while algorithmic collusion exacerbates cognitive alienation and fragmented thinking. This paper aims to elucidate how digital technologies reshape youth lifestyles, offering profound theoretical insights into the crisis of subjectivity in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Mediatization; TikTok User Profiles; Behavioral Motivation; College Students

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## 1. From “Technological Empowerment” to deep embedding in “Modes of Being”

In the present era, as the digital wave sweeps through like a torrent, mediated existence has transcended mere technological context to evolve into a fundamental social reality. Mobile smart devices are no longer merely physical gadgets held in one's hands; they represent a modern echo of McLuhan's concept of “extensions of man”—nearly becoming newly born organs of the body, extending the individual's sensory tentacles infinitely with an all-pervasive presence. This normalization of “body extension” has dissolved the boundaries of physical space<sup>[1]</sup>. The daily trajectories of university students are now encoded in real-time within fluid digital networks, blurring the lines between online and offline existence until they become seamlessly integrated.

Against this backdrop, short-video platforms like TikTok have constructed a vast “digital co-presence” space that transcends mere entertainment to embody profound social metaphors. This virtual realm reconfigures the coordinates of time and space, where college students seek group identity, perform idealized selves, and even reproduce social relationships. The shifting lights and shadows on screens reflect contemporary youth's fragmented projections and compensations for the real world. The information weave spun by algorithmic recommendation systems transforms this

space into a complex entity where spiritual refuge coexists with social anxiety.

Therefore, the logical starting point of this study no longer confines itself to superficial analyses of the utilitarian “instrumental use” of short videos. Instead, it keenly observes a profound “ontological dependency” undergoing a paradigm shift. Behavioral motivation has quietly shifted from the utilitarian goal of information acquisition to a psychological imperative for affirming one’s existence. Exploring this evolution from “use” to “being” is particularly urgent and profound for understanding the spiritual landscape and existential predicaments of youth in the digital age<sup>[2]</sup>.

## **2. Multi-dimensional profile of college student TikTok users**

### **2.1. Demystifying and re-examining demographic characteristics**

As quintessential “digital natives,” college students appear to share an innate uniformity in embracing emerging media technologies. Beneath the surface, however, significant generational divides and social stratification simmer beneath the surface. This “native” identity is far from monolithic, with technological dividends distributed unevenly across different subcultures. Within TikTok’s vast traffic pool, young users rapidly fragment into distinct “tribes” separated by rigid barriers based on differences in interests, aesthetics, and even discernment capabilities. Some circles immerse themselves in anime-inspired collages, while others navigate the edges of academic science communication and hardcore technology<sup>[3]</sup>. This compartmentalized existence means that even students within the same university—or even the same dormitory—can inhabit entirely parallel “time zones” within TikTok’s information silos. The fragmentation of aesthetic tastes fuels the polarization of information consumption. What’s often hailed as a “viral sensation across the entire internet” is frequently just a celebration confined to specific circles. This invisible barrier forms an invisible wall within groups, hindering communication.

What’s even more thought-provoking is the “contrasting” interactions of highly educated groups on mainstream entertainment platforms. According to stereotypes, those with higher education should gravitate toward serious, elite media content. Yet real-world data reveals a paradoxical fusion of ‘rustic’ and “trendy” elements. College students’ behavior on TikTok often shatters preconceptions about class and academic background<sup>[4]</sup>. On one hand, they deconstruct grand narratives through deconstructive, playful meme-based banter in comment sections. On the other, they meticulously search for specialized terminology to engage in deep “information foraging.” This seemingly contradictory behavior—rapidly switching between lowbrow and highbrow, seriousness and entertainment—is actually a psychological defense and balancing strategy for students navigating intense academic pressure and social competition. The mass entertainment platform has become their “safe haven” to escape academic oppression, while unexpectedly serving as a new field for capturing social dynamics and validating theoretical knowledge. Far from diminishing their intellectual identity, this “contrast” demonstrates contemporary youth’s survival wisdom—navigating the gap between elite and popular culture with agility through a more down-to-earth, vibrant approach.

### **2.2. An introspective view of the psychological map**

Beneath the demographic surface lies the core of the college student TikTok user profile: a complex and subtle psychological map. Behind the bizarre and bizarre short video streams lies the profound loneliness and intense compensatory needs of contemporary youth. While mobile internet has vastly connected the world, it has also, to some extent, intensified the loneliness experienced by atomized individuals. University students often face the dual pressures of academic competition and interpersonal alienation, creating a stark contrast between real-life silence and online clamor. TikTok’s immersive experience offers an illusion of “presence.” Bathed in the screen’s soft glow, they achieve fleeting spiritual resonance with distant strangers through likes, comments, and shares. This algorithm-driven sense of “understanding” partially fills the void of emotional expression in reality, allowing loneliness to find strategic compensation and solace amid virtual clamor<sup>[5]</sup>.

Meanwhile, the “frontstage” presentation of self takes center stage in this psychological landscape. Goffman’s

“dramaturgical theory” is vividly enacted on TikTok. College students meticulously select background music, filters, and effects, even crafting script-like captions to freeze and amplify life’s high points, thereby constructing a near-perfect “ideal persona.” This “frontstage” performance isn’t merely about seeking others’ envy and attention; it’s also an inward act of self-affirmation and psychological suggestion. Yet this perfect facade comes with immense anxiety—an over-sensitivity to data feedback, a constant worry over like counts, and a fear that the “backstage” self—the real, even ordinary one—might be exposed. This tug-of-war between “disguise anxiety” and “exhibition impulse” defines the psychological norm for college students on short-video platforms: they are both the directors of this grand performance and the actors imprisoned by this very evaluation system.

### 2.3. Structural embedding of social networks

TikTok is not merely a projection of individual psychology but also a vessel structurally embedded within social relationship networks. The “differential hierarchy” of traditional Chinese society has been reimagined in the digital age. In real life, interpersonal relationships ripple outward like stones dropped into water, expanding in concentric circles based on closeness and distance. Within TikTok’s social logic, however, these ripples undergo inversion and restructuring. College users often engage in remarkably high-frequency interactions with “weak ties”—strangers connected through shared interest graphs—collectively forming strong emotional bonds. These geographically transcending weak ties with strong connections provide individuals with more diverse social support and a sense of belonging. In contrast, real-life strong ties—such as roommates and classmates—often exhibit a state of “weak maintenance” due to physical proximity and blurred privacy boundaries. While they may follow each other on TikTok, their interactions are limited to casual likes. Some even deliberately block real-life connections on social media to preserve private territory<sup>[6]</sup>. This adjustment in social strategy reflects contemporary youth’s redefinition of intimacy and their evolving defense mechanisms.

Moreover, the tribal clustering of subcultural groups stands as a defining feature of TikTok’s social ecosystem. Based on specific interest graphs—whether within Hanfu circles, esports communities, or niche music subcultures—college students swiftly find kindred spirits, forming tightly knit tribal clusters. This clustering transcends mere content consumption; it becomes a ritual for constructing identity. By employing specific slang, symbols, and participating in particular challenges, they delineate boundaries between “us” and “them” within the vast ocean of traffic. These community barriers serve both as a means to resist mainstream cultural hegemony and as a way for groups to seek internal security. However, such highly homogeneous gatherings also carry the risk of an echo chamber effect, where collective cognition becomes increasingly narrow through constant self-reinforcement. This warrants vigilance and critical scrutiny when examining the motivations behind these behaviors.

## 3. The deep psychological mechanisms underlying college students’ behavioral motivation

### 3.1. Physiological dependence from an embodied cognition perspective

Embodied cognition theory posits that cognition is rooted in bodily experience and its interaction with the environment. Within the digital ecosystem constructed by TikTok, the dominant intervention of audiovisual language directly impacts college students’ physiological senses, forming a power dynamic akin to “sensory domination.” Short videos frequently employ high-saturation colors, intensely impactful background music, and rapid-fire editing. This meticulously calculated sensory combination aims to instantly capture users’ attention through direct neural stimulation<sup>[7]</sup>.

This fragmented narrative style precisely aligns with—and arguably exploits—the cognitive vulnerabilities of the human brain in an era of information overload. Within mere seconds, these self-contained loops deliver instant cognitive feedback and emotional surges without demanding complex logical reasoning. For college students perpetually under academic pressure and mental strain, this effortlessly acquired “thrill” is highly addictive. It not only harvests attention but also delivers a quick, shallow tap on the brain’s reward system, causing the linear logic and sustained focus required for

deep reading to retreat step by step in the face of sensory overload.

More profoundly, the “infinite scroll” interaction design itself embodies a modern-day Sisyphus metaphor. As fingers mechanically glide across screens, an endless stream of new content surges from the bottom. This seemingly infinite yet inherently closed loop traps users in an “eternal present.” Each swipe becomes an unknown gamble, with the wager being nothing more than the negligible cost of attention. Within this repetitive, mechanical motion, college students easily slip into a “flow state” detached from the gravity of reality. This flow is not creative engagement but passive immersion—a state of intoxication where individuals surrender their agency in the game against algorithms<sup>[8]</sup>. The swipe becomes a ritualistic gesture; between screen flickers, the sense of time is utterly distorted, and physiological dependency quietly supplants rational control.

### **3.2. “Digital Refuge” from real-world pressures**

If sensory stimulation forms the physiological foundation of behavior, then emotional compensation and catharsis serve as the psychological engine driving college students’ sustained engagement. In a reality where GPA reigns supreme and competition is internalized, university campuses are no longer ivory towers but arenas brimming with uncertainty. TikTok offers them a “digital sanctuary” where they can retreat at any moment. Within this virtual realm, the weighty logic of reality is temporarily suspended, replaced by a set of rules centered on pleasure.

However, this pursuit of pleasure comes at a cost. Short videos often deliver fast-food emotional gratification, and the high-frequency sensory stimulation inevitably raises individuals’ pleasure thresholds, leading to a vicious cycle of dopamine-driven behavior. The delayed gratification that once required sustained effort and deep reflection has been displaced and supplanted by countless fleeting moments of pleasure lasting mere seconds<sup>[9]</sup>. This “happiness inflation” has significantly reduced college students’ tolerance for mundane real-world tasks, giving rise to a form of “reality dysphoria”—where the world seems utterly dull except for the brief moments when fingers swipe across screens.

Meanwhile, “depressive culture” and “lying-flat philosophy” have emerged as distinctive subcultural symbols on TikTok, mass-produced and consumed as another vital outlet for college students to vent their emotions. In their videos, they repost self-deprecating jokes about being ‘useless’ or “dead fish,” not truly intending to abandon life, but seeking validation of “empathy” through collective mockery. This symbolic consumption represents a defensive pessimism—deliberately appearing weak and diminishing oneself to alleviate anxiety and frustration stemming from mainstream evaluation systems. Amidst thousands of comments like “This is me” flooding the comment sections, individual loneliness dissolves and pain is treated as comedy. This collective validation gained through shared self-mockery becomes a crucial strategy for them to resist real-world pressures and maintain psychological equilibrium—though this strategy inherently carries a tinge of resigned compromise.

### **3.3. Utilitarian considerations in relationship maintenance**

College students’ motivation for using TikTok is deeply rooted in maintaining social connections and accumulating social capital<sup>[10]</sup>. Within the highly interconnected campus social network, TikTok has evolved into a unique form of “social currency.” Mastering the latest internet memes, knowing the hottest background music, and being familiar with the trendiest viral tourist spots are not merely personal entertainment pursuits—they serve as essential “social admission tickets” for integrating into peer groups.

This pursuit of trending memes reflects college students’ deep-seated fear of information asymmetry. Within social circles, whoever holds the power to interpret discourse commands the initiative in social interactions. Failing to catch a thrown meme signifies marginalization within an implicit social evaluation system, even being labeled “outdated” or out of touch with the times. To avoid this risk of collective exclusion, college students are compelled to maintain constant vigilance over TikTok trends—a vigilance that has morphed into a fundamental necessity for social survival.

Looking deeper, the likes, comments, and shares on TikTok are essentially an invisible transaction of emotional labor. Within this virtual interaction, an unspoken rule based on reciprocity quietly operates: classmates’ videos must

be “supported,” and friends’ updates demand instant likes<sup>[11]</sup>. This seemingly intimate interaction often strips away genuine emotional substance, evolving into a utilitarian social ritual. Each like represents a deposit into the bank of social obligations, and every comment serves to maintain the account of a relationship. Though invisible, this emotional labor consumes immense psychological energy. College students in this process are both holders of social currency and prisoners within this exchange system. Through careful calculation and performance, they sustain the illusion of a superficially thriving social life, yet struggle to conceal the barrenness that follows the absence of deep emotional connections.

## 4. Conclusion

The deep integration of college students into TikTok represents a contest between the reconstruction and alienation of agency in the digital age. The cocoon of algorithms and fragmented perceptions are quietly eroding the spiritual domain of deep thinking. Facing the implicit domination of technology, only by maintaining a sober rational tension between virtual revelry and silent introspection can one anchor one’s self-coordinates in the torrent of data. This prevents becoming a vassal of technology through algorithmic collusion, thereby reclaiming spiritual freedom and transcendence.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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