



## THE EFFECT OF THE TIKTOK APPLICATION ON CHANGES IN STUDENTS' SOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN MEDAN

Ade Tegar Pramana Sianipar<sup>1</sup>, Elfi Yanti Ritonga<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author: [tegarsianipar14@gmail.com](mailto:tegarsianipar14@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

*TikTok has become one of the most widely used social media platforms by college students and has contributed to changing interaction patterns in the digital social space. This study aims to analyze the influence of TikTok use on changes in the social behavior of college students in Medan. The study used a qualitative phenomenological approach by comparing the experiences of active college students who use TikTok with senior students/alumni who were in college before the intensity of TikTok use increased. Data were obtained through Google Form-based essay responses and direct interviews with selected informants. The results show that TikTok influences college students' social behavior in five main ways: a decrease in the intensity of direct social interactions, an increase in the urge to follow trends, the emergence of a tendency towards addictive use that neglects time, the development of consumptive behavior, and a strengthening orientation towards self-image formation in the digital space. These findings indicate that TikTok not only functions as a medium for entertainment and information but also shapes the way college students communicate, interact, and define themselves in social life. Thus, this study confirms the relevance of McLuhan's theory of technological determinism in explaining changes in college students' social behavior amidst the dominance of digital media.*

**Keywords:** TikTok, social behavior, students, digital media, technological determination.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of short-form video-based social media has transformed the communication patterns of the younger generation, particularly college students, the group most engaged in digital space. TikTok occupies a crucial position in this landscape, combining a short audio-visual format, algorithmic personalization, and high interactivity, encouraging users to stay connected to a daily stream of content. In Indonesia, TikTok's reach is significant; a recent digital report indicates that by the end of 2025, TikTok ads will reach 180 million users aged 18 and over in Indonesia, equivalent to 78.2% of the local internet user base. The average Indonesian user spends nearly 45 hours per month on the platform. This situation demonstrates that TikTok is no longer simply an entertainment

medium, but rather a social space with the potential to shape students' daily communication habits, preferences, and behaviors (DataReportal, 2025; Deng et al., 2024).

Conceptually, TikTok's influence on social behavior lies not only in the content of its messages, but also in the medium's fast-paced, repetitive, visual, and instant-feedback-driven nature. This pattern makes TikTok function as a new social space, where users find entertainment, social validation, lifestyle inspiration, and behavioral references. For students, this platform can expand access to information and creativity, but at the same time, it also has the potential to trigger over-attachment, a focus on social recognition, and changes in how they build relationships and present themselves. Several recent studies have even shown that problematic TikTok use is linked to anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, body image issues, and narcissistic tendencies, so discussions about TikTok need to be placed within a broader framework than simply an entertainment app (Aryani & Reniati, 2023; Galanis et al., 2025).

In the Indonesian context, research on TikTok has progressed quite rapidly, but remains largely fragmented. Several studies have highlighted the link between TikTok and students' self-concept (Aryani & Reniati, 2023), social media addiction (Mauliddiyah, 2021), changes in social behavior among certain student groups (Mawara, 2023), the communication behavior of adolescent TikTok users (Rahmadania et al., 2024), and changes in lifestyle and mindset (Sinaga & Mailin, 2023). Some studies also place TikTok within the context of hyperreality, current trends, and the formation of social behavior on campus (Pahlevi & Utomo, 2024). However, these studies generally examine one specific dimension in isolation, thus failing to fully explain how TikTok shapes changes in students' social behavior more comprehensively.

Based on this review, there are important research gaps that still need to be addressed. First, there is limited research specifically examining students in Medan as an urban group living in a multi-campus higher education environment and deeply embedded in digital culture. Second, previous studies have often focused on a single group of active users without comparing them to senior students or alumni who attended college before TikTok's dominance strengthened. Third, previous research has not integrated changes in social behavior into multiple indicators, such as direct social interaction, trend-following orientation, time use, consumer behavior, and self-image formation. This is where this research's novelty lies: it presents a more comprehensive reading of changes in student social behavior due to TikTok use through a comparison of intergenerational student experiences in the local context of Medan.

To interpret these changes, this study uses a technological determinism perspective, which positions media not simply as a messaging channel but as a force that shapes how people think, interact, and behave. In the context of TikTok, the medium's short-form video nature, the "for you" page system, like and comment metrics, and the ease of trend reproduction can be understood as technological elements that drive the emergence of new social patterns among students. Thus, changes in the intensity of face-to-face interactions, the tendency to follow trends, consumption patterns, and orientation towards self-presentation can be read as consequences of the logic of digital media that works continuously in the lives of users (Mauliddiyah, 2021; Deng et al., 2024).

This study aims to analyze the influence of TikTok usage on changes in the social behavior of students in Medan and identify the most prominent forms of change in their social lives. This research is important because it provides academic contributions to the

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development of studies on digital communication, new media, and student social behavior, while also offering practical contributions to universities, lecturers, and students in developing more critical digital literacy. By positioning TikTok as a medium that shapes students' social realities, this study is expected to not only explain the impact of the platform's use but also emphasize the need for reflective awareness so that students can utilize TikTok productively without losing the quality of social interactions in the real world (Pahlevi & Utomo, 2024; Aryani & Reniati, 2023).

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand the meaning of students' experiences using TikTok and the changes in social behavior they experienced in their academic and social lives. A phenomenological approach was chosen because this study sought to explore informants' conscious experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of TikTok as a digital medium that influences their interaction habits (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was conducted in Medan City, involving students from several universities. In this qualitative study, the terms population and sample were not used; instead, the study used informants purposively selected based on certain criteria: active students in semesters 3–7 who regularly use TikTok, as well as senior students or alumni who were studying before TikTok usage intensified. A total of 20 informants were recruited, consisting of 10 primary informants, namely active students who use TikTok, and 10 comparison informants, namely senior students/alumni.

Data collection was conducted using two complementary techniques. First, data were obtained from open-ended essay responses via a Google Form completed by 10 active student TikTok users to capture their experiences, habits, and perspectives in writing. Second, data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 10 senior students/alumni as comparative informants to obtain a picture of changes in student social behavior before and after TikTok's dominance in campus life. In this study, the researcher acted as the primary instrument, designing the questionnaire, conducting data collection, interpreting the meaning of the informants' experiences, and reflectively categorizing the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The collected data were then analyzed using an interactive analysis model through the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions to systematically identify patterns of social behavior change (Miles et al., 2014).

To ensure data validity, this study employed technical and source triangulation by comparing data from the Google Form, face-to-face interviews, and comparing the perspectives of active and senior students/alumni. Furthermore, researchers double-checked the consistency of informants' responses and carefully interpreted the data to ensure that the findings remained within the context of the experiences conveyed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From a research ethics perspective, all informants were provided with an explanation of the research objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and guaranteed confidentiality. Informants' names were used solely for academic purposes with the consent of the participants, and all data were used solely for scientific analysis. With these procedures, this study is expected to be methodologically sound while

simultaneously fulfilling the principles of credibility and ethical responsibility in qualitative research (Neuman, 2014).

### 3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

#### **The Influence of TikTok on the Social Behavior of Students in Medan**

Research results show that TikTok is no longer positioned by students solely as a form of entertainment, but rather as a digital space that helps shape their daily rhythms, interaction patterns, and social behavioral orientations. On the one hand, informants acknowledged that TikTok provides benefits in the form of entertainment, fast information, learning resources, and opportunities to express creativity more openly. However, on the other hand, the high intensity of use has directly influenced changes in the way students socialize, manage their time, follow trends, consume goods, and build their self-image in the digital social space. Thus, TikTok's influence in the context of students in Medan is ambivalent: facilitating access to information and expression, but simultaneously encouraging a transformation in social behavior that increasingly relies on the logic of digital media (Aryani & Reniati, 2023; Mauliddiyah, 2021).

The most immediately apparent impact is a shift in patterns of direct social interaction. Several informants acknowledged that TikTok's presence makes them more comfortable in private spaces than interacting face-to-face. Fadhilah stated, *"I think the TikTok app makes me happier being alone, and I prefer to stay home if there's no urgent need to go out, because with TikTok I don't feel lonely."* This statement was reinforced by Muhammad Fauzan Azima and Rangga Bayu, who emphasized that even when gathering, attention is often diverted to TikTok. Lucky Nudiansyah, an additional informant, assessed that students' current socializing style *"places more emphasis on content and social media."* These findings suggest that TikTok has shifted some of the functions of conventional social interactions to screen-mediated interactions, so that physical presence is not always accompanied by full social engagement (Rahmadania et al., 2024).

In addition to changing interaction patterns, TikTok also influences students' orientation toward social trends. Ulya Syafrina Saragih said, *"If we don't follow current trends, we'll definitely look like we're behind the times,"* while Frisan Malik Abdul Jabbar Anli explained that someone can sometimes become the subject of ridicule for not being aware of viral trends. In this context, TikTok serves not only as a medium for content distribution but also as an arena for reinforcing new social standards that demand users remain relevant, up-to-date, and connected to popular culture. As a result, students are not simply enjoying the content but are also encouraged to adapt their appearance, language, tastes, and even their interactions to remain perceived as "up-to-date" by their peers. This drive to constantly follow trends demonstrates that digital media operates not only at the level of information consumption but also at the level of social identity formation (Sianipar & Kaloeti, 2019; Rahmadania et al., 2024).

Another finding relates to changes in time management and consumption habits. Daffa Pohan stated, *"Sometimes we spend almost 5 to 6 hours playing TikTok without realizing it, and even 2 to 3 hours before bedtime,"* demonstrating the strong addictive tendencies of the app. At the same time, Nada Agustiani revealed that TikTok often entices users to buy or try something because of recommendations for food, fashion, and various other products. This finding is reinforced by Fitri Sagala, who believes that *"everything is based*

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on TikTok standards," from fashion and consumption to how they view relationships. This potentially leads students to embrace what goes viral as a necessity. Thus, TikTok not only captures attention but also influences students' consumption decisions and activity priorities in their daily lives (Sinaga & Mailin, 2023).

Another prominent influence is the formation of self-image based on digital recognition. Qemal Ezra Harahap stated that "TikTok has become the biggest trigger in the transfer of the real world to the virtual world today. Everything is TikTok and must meet TikTok standards, so many people crave recognition from the virtual world." This statement demonstrates that for some students, TikTok has become a primary space for constructing identity, gaining validation, and presenting a version of themselves deemed worthy of appreciation. In this context, TikTok's influence extends beyond visible behavioral changes to a deeper psychosocial dimension: how students understand themselves, gauge social acceptance, and assess their self-worth through digital responses such as views, comments, and likes. This makes self-image increasingly tied to the expectations of a fast-paced and competitive digital public (Mawara, 2023).

When analyzed through technological determinism theory, these findings confirm that communication technology is not neutral but rather shapes how people think, feel, and act. McLuhan emphasized that media is not simply a channel for messages, but a force that organizes the social experiences of its users. In this case, TikTok's ephemeral, fast-paced, visual, personal, and algorithmic format has created a new pattern in student life: attention becomes fragmented, direct interaction decreases, and social orientation shifts toward digital performativity. Therefore, changes in student social behavior in Medan are not only driven by TikTok content, but also by the nature of the medium itself, which continuously shapes new social habits (Mauliddiyah, 2021).

This analysis can also be deepened through the concepts of FoMO and social comparison. When students feel compelled to stay on top of trends, follow certain styles, and maintain their digital presence, TikTok use has shifted from a recreational activity to a psychosocial need related to social acceptance and the fear of being left behind. This situation explains why TikTok can simultaneously encourage addictive, consumerist, and self-image-oriented behavior. Within this framework, TikTok operates as a symbolic ecosystem that not only provides entertainment but also produces constantly updated social standards and pressures users to conform. Thus, the findings of this study demonstrate that TikTok's influence on the social behavior of students in Medan occurs simultaneously structurally and culturally: it changes habits, influences relationships, and reconstructs the social dimensions students use to interpret their daily lives (Przybylski et al., 2013; Sianipar & Kaloeti, 2019; Rahmadania et al., 2024).

### **Forms of Social Behavioral Changes Caused by TikTok Use**

The results of this study indicate that changes in students' social behavior due to TikTok use do not occur in a single aspect, but rather appear in several interrelated forms. Based on field data, these changes are evident in a decrease in the intensity of direct social interactions, an increased urge to follow trends, the emergence of addictive use, the development of consumptive behavior, and a strengthening orientation toward self-image formation in the digital space. These findings demonstrate that TikTok is not only a

medium for entertainment but also a symbolic environment that influences how students socialize, manage their time, consume goods, and present their identities to others.

The first form of change is evident in students' tendency to socialize less in person. Fadhilah stated, *"I think the TikTok app makes me happier alone, and I prefer to stay home if I don't have an urgent need to go out, because with TikTok I don't feel lonely."* This finding was corroborated by Muhammad Fauzan Azima and Rangga Bayu, who stated that even in social situations, attention is often still focused on TikTok. On the other hand, Lucky Nudiansyah, an additional informant, assessed that students' current socializing style *"prioritizes content and social media."* These statements indicate a shift from face-to-face interactions to a sense of togetherness that is physically present, but psychologically fragmented by the attachment to digital screens.

The second form of change is the increasing urge to follow trends circulating on TikTok. Ulya Syafrina Saragih stated, *"If we don't follow current trends, we'll definitely look like we're out of touch,"* while Frisan Malik Abdul Jabbar Anli explained that people sometimes become the subject of ridicule for not being aware of viral trends. An additional informant, Lutfhia P. Maharani, also emphasized that circulating trends don't always have a positive impact, so students need to be more selective in choosing which trends to follow. This data suggests that TikTok has served as a platform for establishing new social standards, where connection to trends becomes a symbolic measure of relevance, modernity, and peer acceptance.

A third form of change is evident in students' increasingly fragile relationship with time due to repetitive and uncontrollable TikTok use. Daffa Pohan stated, *"Sometimes we spend almost 5 to 6 hours playing TikTok, without realizing it, and even 2 to 3 hours before bed."* Meanwhile, Ahmad Yasir and Muhammad Fadil, additional informants, compared this situation to the past, when students' free time was often spent hanging out with friends, having discussions, or participating in organizational activities on campus. This information suggests that TikTok has shifted time usage patterns from social-productive activities to digital content consumption, which tends to be passive, individual, and absorbs attention for long periods.

The fourth form of change relates to the development of consumptive behavior. Nada Agustiani explained that TikTok often entices users to purchase products due to the numerous recommendations for food, fashion, and other products displayed attractively on the screen. Similarly, Fitri Sagala stated that *"everything is now TikTok-standard,"* from fashion and consumption to perspectives on relationships, making it easy for students to turn viral content into a need. In this context, TikTok not only presents information but also constructs desires through lifestyle visualizations, endorsements, and the normalization of a fast-paced shopping culture. As a result, students are driven to consume not solely out of rational need, but also due to the symbolic influence of what appears popular and recognized in the digital space.

The fifth form of change is the strengthening of the orientation towards self-image and social recognition in the virtual world. Qemal Ezra Harahap stated that *"TikTok has become the biggest trigger for the shift from the real world to the virtual world today. Everything is TikTok and must meet TikTok standards, so many people crave recognition from the virtual world."* This view was reinforced by additional informants such as Reza Pahlevi and Riyanda Al-Fathira, who assessed that creativity on TikTok can indeed be a space for expression, but the line between self-expression and narcissistic urges is

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becoming increasingly thin. These findings suggest that TikTok plays a role in shaping how students view themselves, namely through the logic of visibility, public appreciation, and the need for constant digital validation.

When analyzed using McLuhan's theory of technological determinism, these changes confirm that digital media not only conveys messages but also shapes the social patterns of its users. TikTok's ephemeral, visual, fast-paced, algorithmic, and interactive nature creates conditions that encourage students to be constantly present in the content stream, following trends, comparing themselves, and adapting their social habits to the platform's logic. This finding also aligns with the concept of Fear of Missing Out, which explains the psychological urge to stay connected to what is happening so as not to feel left behind by others. It is also related to social comparison theory, which makes individuals continue to evaluate themselves through standards seen on social media (Mauliddiyah, 2021; Przybylski et al., 2013; Sianipar & Kaloeti, 2019). Thus, the form of change in students' social behavior due to TikTok cannot be understood as a change in ordinary habits, but rather as a social transformation produced by the continuous interaction between technology, popular culture, and the need for recognition in digital life (Aryani & Reniati, 2023; Rahmadania et al., 2024; Sinaga & Mailin, 2023).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the use of the TikTok application has a significant impact on changes in the social behavior of students in Medan. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study found that this influence is not only evident in the increased use of digital media in everyday life, but also in shifts in social interaction patterns, the urge to keep up with trends, the tendency for excessive use to the point of disrupting time management, the development of consumptive behavior, and a stronger orientation towards building self-image in the digital space. These findings confirm that TikTok functions not merely as a medium for entertainment and information, but as a medium that helps shape how students communicate, relate, and interpret their social presence. Academically, this study strengthens the relevance of technological determinism theory in explaining changes in social behavior in the digital media era, while practically, the results of this study demonstrate the importance of strengthening critical digital literacy so that students are able to use TikTok productively without losing the quality of social interactions in the real world.

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