



International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Scholarly Publisher
RS Global Sp. z O.O.
ISNI: 0000 0004 8495 2390

Dolna 17, Warsaw,
Poland 00-773
+48 226 0 227 03
editorial_office@rsglobal.pl

ARTICLE TITLE

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YOUNG USERS

DOI

[https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.4\(48\).2025.4318](https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.4(48).2025.4318)

RECEIVED

29 October 2025

ACCEPTED

21 December 2025

PUBLISHED

29 December 2025

LICENSE



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THE IMPACT OF THE TIKTOK APP ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG USERS

Michał Ziemba (Corresponding Author, Email: michal.ziemba98@gmail.com)

University Clinical Hospital in Białystok, Białystok, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0003-2200-431X

Anna Ziemba

University Children's Clinical Hospital in Białystok, Białystok, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0005-8386-7199

Katarzyna Giedzic

University Clinical Hospital in Białystok, Białystok, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0003-0081-6341

Rafał Kulgawczuk

University Clinical Hospital in Białystok, Białystok, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0003-8707-3674

Klaudia Zackiewicz

University Clinical Hospital in Białystok, Białystok, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0009-4778-7211

Agata Wińska

University Clinical Hospital in Białystok, Białystok, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-3455-5432

Oliwia Sędziak

Faculty of Medicine, University of Opole, Opole, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0003-2128-0662

Hanna Pietruszewska

Medical University of Lodz, Lodz, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-7626-2996

Agata Ogórek

Lower Silesian Center of Oncology, Pulmonology and Hematology, Wrocław, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-2916-5368

Irmina Czerepak

District Hospital Complex in Olesnica, Olesnica, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0009-9964-3439

ABSTRACT

Introduction: In the 21st century, media significantly influences mental health. The TikTok app allows easy creation of videos and its algorithm adapts content to users' interests.

Aim: The following paper aims to analyse the impact of TikTok on the mental health of young users in the context of mood, eating and addiction disorders.

Materials and Methods: Due to the dominance of users aged 16-24 on the TikTok platform, the research focused on the impact of the app on adolescent and young adult mental health. A review of papers available in bibliographic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar and Web of Science was conducted, using the keywords: "TikTok", "mental disorders", "mental health", "eating disorders", "social media".

Description of knowledge: Using TikTok can have both positive and negative effects. Positive aspects include an increased sense of social connection, reduction of stress and anxiety, and promotion of mental health issues by professionals. However, the app also carries risks, such as addiction, FOMO, misinformation, cyberbullying, impact on sleep quality and exposure to harmful content, and most importantly, exacerbates symptoms of mood and eating disorders. In order to minimise the negative effects of TikTok use, education about the potential risks is necessary.

Conclusion: TikTok has the potential to have a positive impact on mental health as long as users use it consciously and in moderation, and the platform, educators and parents take steps to minimise the negative effects of children and young people using the app.

KEYWORDS

TikTok, Mental Health, Mental Disorders, Social Media, Mood Disorders, Eating Disorders

CITATION

Michał Ziemia, Anna Ziemia, Katarzyna Giedzicz, Rafał Kulgawczuk, Klaudia Zackiewicz, Agata Wińska, Oliwia Sędziak, Hanna Pietruszewska, Agata Ogórek, Irmina Czerepak. (2025). The Impact of the TikTok App on the Mental Health of Young Users. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 4(48). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.4(48).2025.4318

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Introduction

In this age of rapidly evolving technology, it is impossible to undermine the impact of social media on everyone's lives. In the 21st century they are already relevant in every aspect of life - from work to leisure time. It is no wonder that interest has begun to be taken in the impact of social media on health topics, and mental health in particular. Mental disorders, despite being recognised as one of the most common causes of disability worldwide, have only relatively recently received due attention from the scientific world. Although, according to a Report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission entitled 'Health at a Glance: Europe 2018', up to 17.3 per cent of people in EU countries had mental health problems in 2016, only a proportion of them seek help from a specialist in psychiatry or psychology. This may be due to the low knowledge of those concerned about their mental health, as well as the stigmatisation of people with mental illness. And from now on awareness on how education influence mental health rises. Nowadays, teaching is done through various media, not forgetting the one that reaches young people the most - social media. [1] Tiktok was founded in 2016 in China and already had 2 billion users in April 2020. The app entered the Polish market in 2017, and according to a Mediapanel study, TikTok had 9.8 million users in Poland in March 2024. By 2020, 90 per cent were under the age of 18. The above figures show that of all the social media outlets present, TikTok is one of the fastest growing platforms. The app allows users to publish short clips on any topic. The templates and background music available on the platform make the process easy to use, even for the youngest users. One of the tools that makes this platform so popular is the algorithm, which selects the most interesting material based on the user's previously viewed and liked content. [2,3,4]

Aim

The aim of the following paper is to provide a fuller picture of TikTok, with a focus on understanding the potential risks and challenges of using this platform in a mental health context. Delving into these issues will provide a better understanding of what steps can be taken to minimise the negative effects associated with the use of TikTok and other similar apps. It will also answer the question of how to use the platform's potential to promote good habits and education.

Materials and methods

An analysis and synthesis of the existing literature that describes the impact of TikTok, as an example of the most prominent social media available today, on mental health was conducted. Given the significant predominance of 16- to 24-year-olds among the platform's users, the main focus was on the contribution of this app to adolescent and young adult health, with a particular focus on its impact on mood and eating disorders and social media addiction. To find relevant articles, a systematic review of recent papers available in bibliographic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar or Web of Science was necessary. The following keywords and their combinations were used: „TikTok“, „mental disorders“, „mental health“, „heating disorders“, „social media“ and many others.

State of knowledge

Although TikTok is often criticised for its negative impact on young users, it can undoubtedly have positive impacts as well. One example is the work of Dr Julie Smith, who is considered one of the first psychologists to use TikTok to spread mental health information. Currently, the @drjulie profile has already garnered 62.8 million likes and almost 5 million followers. The Polish web also has profiles that successfully promote information in the field of psychiatry and psychology - e.g. @panipsycholoszka has already gained 85,000 observers and more than 1.6 million likes. The research confirms the presence of many accounts with the potential to contribute to the availability of news in this field. The popularity of the aforementioned profiles demonstrates the audience's interest in mental health topics and the need to further promote educational content. These activities lead to the normalisation of mental disorders in society, which reduces the stigmatisation of sufferers. [5,6] Research has also shown that active use of social media, such as posting original content and sharing videos of interest with other users, increases feelings of connectedness. Young people who use TikTok often feel stronger social support compared to those who do not use the using the platform. [7] Using TikTok can also help reduce stress and anxiety. Short, funny videos provide entertainment and can act as a form of 'escape' from everyday problems. For example, according to a study conducted by Radovic and colleagues in 2021, TikTok users reported that the platform helped them forget stressful situations and improved their mood. The interactivity and ability to create content quickly can also act as a way to express emotions and creativity, which is also beneficial for mental health. Zhang and Wu's 2022 study notes that active participation in content creation on TikTok can act as a form of occupational therapy. [8,9] Unfortunately, despite the many positive aspects of the TikTok app, the dangers of young people accessing published content must not be overlooked. One of the biggest dangers of using the app on a daily basis is addiction. The excessive need to use TikTok, as with other social media, can be the result of several complex psychological and technological mechanisms that influence user behaviour. TikTok uses a system of rewards and amplifications, which is the primary psychological mechanism affecting addiction. Each like, comment or share of a video acts as an instant reward - stimulating the production of dopamine in the user's brain, leading to a sense of pleasure and satisfaction. The unpredictability of the number of likes and comments received keeps users constantly checking the app for more rewards. [10, 11] Short videos, lasting from a few seconds to a few minutes (on average around 1 minute), are ideally suited to the short attention spans of today's users - they provide instant entertainment, making viewers willing to watch them in short breaks throughout the day. In addition, the uninterrupted stream of new videos encourages people to keep scrolling and watch more content. The use of advanced personalisation algorithms adapts the content displayed to the user's interests, making the videos displayed increasingly relevant and engaging. There is also a feedback loop: the more the user uses TikTok, the better the algorithm understands the user's preferences, leading to even greater engagement and increased use of the app. TikTok's interactive features, such as duets, challenges or reactions to videos, also increase engagement, and getting positive feedback from other users reinforces a sense of social acceptance and belonging. Gamification elements in TikTok, such as gaining followers, participating in challenges or using filters and special effects, also contribute to addiction. [12] FOMO, or 'fear of missing out', is a term used to describe the fear of missing out on something important or interesting that is happening

elsewhere. People experiencing FOMO fear that other people are having interesting experiences that they themselves are not experiencing, leading to feelings of anxiety and discomfort. FOMO is particularly associated with the use of social media, such as TikTok and Instagram. On these platforms, users see idealised versions of the lives of their friends, celebrities or influencers. The fear of missing out on something important is another powerful psychological mechanism affecting addiction. Users may feel the need to check the app frequently to keep up to date with the latest trends, videos or challenges. According to a 2019 study, 14% of Polish internet users are characterised by high levels of FOMO, while 67% of respondents experience it with medium severity. Experiencing high and medium levels of FOMO in the 15-19 age group is as high as 94%. The above data indicate a significant severity of the problem, particularly in the younger user group. [13, 14] Addiction to TikTok results from a combination of psychological and technological processes that together create a highly engaging platform. Understanding these mechanisms can help develop strategies to limit the time spent on the app and minimise its potentially negative effects on users' mental and social health. Mental health misinformation on TikTok is a growing problem that can have serious consequences for users of the app. Despite the active participation of people with training and knowledge in psychology and psychiatry, (such as those cited above), TikTok, as a platform for rapid content sharing, is particularly vulnerable to the spread of false or misleading information. Short and engaging videos can quickly become viral, meaning that information, even if it is wrong, can reach a huge number of users in a very short time. Although TikTok takes steps to moderate content, the scale of the platform's popularity means that many misinformative videos are not removed quickly enough. The dissemination of unscientific advice on the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, as well as health myths and stereotypes, can cause users to make poor therapeutic decisions, lead to further stigmatisation and create unwarranted fear, which will consequently hinder help-seeking. [15, 16] There is growing concern among the public about the impact of TikTok on users' mental health. Research conducted has focused primarily on the correlation between app use and mood disorders and suicide risk, as well as eating disorders. Numerous research papers indicate a link between heavy use of TikTok and an increased risk of depression and anxiety among young people. Exposure to idealised images and comparisons to other users can lead to low self-esteem and feelings of dissatisfaction with one's life, and ultimately to mood and eating disorders. Constant notifications, a flood of content and the pressure to create attractive videos can lead to chronic stress and over-stimulation, which also negatively affects mental health. Research shows that TikTok contains content related to self-harm and suicide, which can be dangerous for vulnerable users. Exposure to such content can lead to mimicking self-destructive behaviour. TikTok, like other media, may contribute to the so-called Werther effect, where publicising suicide cases leads to an increase in suicidal attempts among followers. [8, 17, 18] Research conducted by Amnesty International in collaboration with the Algorithmic Transparency Institute and AI Forensics reveals the negative impact of TikTok on health and the rapid proliferation of content harmful to mental wellbeing. Automated accounts were used which showed that even when a user was not searching for mental health content, after only about 5-6 h of scrolling, half of the suggested videos were already related to the above topics and could be potentially harmful. Of course, in the case of an independent search for this content, the time it automatically appears is much faster. Unfortunately, many of the videos romanticised the topic of self-harm and suicide. [19] In contrast, an anonymous survey was conducted in January and February 2021 in Italy among patients of a centre for the treatment of eating disorders in children and adolescents, asking participants about their frequency of use of TikTok, the most frequently viewed topics and hashtags, and experiences of bodyshaming. Unfortunately, this study showed that as many as 59% of respondents felt their self-esteem was lowered and 3.8% had negative experiences with comments about their appearance. A similar study conducted on TikTok's peer-to-peer popularity on Instagram also proves that more frequent viewing of 'fitspiration'-themed posts was associated with impaired self-esteem in women. [20, 21] Also contributing to mood and eating disorders is the ubiquitous hate and hate-speech, not only on TikTok, but also across the Internet. Anonymity and ease of commenting can lead to an increase in cyberbullying, which is a significant risk factor for mood disorders and suicide. In contrast, negative comments and criticism of outward appearance are a common occurrence on all social media platforms, including TikTok. Such experiences can lead to eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia or compulsive eating and negatively affect users' mental health. Based on available studies and reports, it can be summarised that cyberbullying is experienced by around 20% of users and bodyshaming affects between 15-20% of young people. In 2020 alone, TikTok removed more than 89 million videos, a significant proportion of which involved bullying and violence-related violations. [8,22,23,24] TikTok, like other social media platforms, can have a significant impact on users' sleep quality. Users often spend hours watching and creating videos, which delays the moment they go to bed. "One more video" can turn into long sessions of scrolling. Prolonged use of apps before bed

can result in falling asleep later, leading to a reduction in total sleep time. Watching dynamic and emotional videos before bed increases arousal levels, making it difficult to calm down and fall asleep. Additionally, the aforementioned FOMO can lead to frequent checking of apps, which increases stress and anxiety levels, negatively affecting sleep. Blue light emitted by smartphone screens can interfere with the production of melatonin, the hormone responsible for regulating the sleep-wake cycle. Reducing its levels makes it more difficult to fall asleep and reduces the quality of sleep. Conversely, late-night app use further disrupts the sleep cycle and leads to difficulties in maintaining consistent hours of sleep and wakefulness. [25] The publication of non-age-appropriate content on TikTok is a serious problem that can have negative consequences for younger users of the platform. As an app popular with children and teenagers, TikTok has a responsibility to protect its younger audience from potentially harmful content. However, despite moderation efforts, the problem persists. Videos depicting physical violence, psychological violence or aggression can have a negative impact on young viewers, shaping inappropriate attitudes towards violence. TikTok contains videos promoting the consumption of alcohol, drugs or smoking, which may encourage younger viewers to experiment with these substances. An analysis of the content published by users showed a tendency to more often share content in which alcohol consumption is associated with positive associations, while rarely reporting its negative effects. Although TikTok's developers are taking measures to protect younger users, such as the need to provide an age during registration, a restricted access mode or parental control functions (e.g. Family Paring) it is necessary to further spread awareness among careers about the dangers that uncontrolled use of the platform can bring. [26]

Discussion

This review suggests that TikTok's effects on adolescent mental health is not clearly harmful or beneficial; rather, it seems to depend more on who is using the platform, how they engage with it, and what the algorithm displays to them. [27] On the one hand, creator-oriented participation and credible psycho-educational content can cultivate a sense of connection, offer pragmatic coping tools, and reduce stress in some users. [28] On the other, intensive, late-night, and mostly passive scrolling sessions - especially of appearance-related or self-harm-related —tends to co-occur with mood disorders, eating disorders, and sleep disruption. [29][30]

These seemingly divergent pathways likely arise from the same design features: short, high-arousal videos, infinite scroll, personalized recommendations, and rapid social feedback that together reinforce repeated checking and longer sessions. [31]

There are several mechanisms plausibly link platform use to mental health outcomes. Variable social rewards and highly tailored “For You” recommendations may promote reinforcement-based habits, particularly in youth with high sensitivity to social cues. [32] When activity is focused on the evening, arousal and blue-light exposure may delay sleep onset and reduce total sleep time, with impacts next-day affect regulation. [29][30] Parallel, exposure to idealized bodies and lifestyles encourages upward social comparison; when coupled with body-shaming or hostile feedback, these comparisons may accelerate anxiety, low self-esteem, and eating-related concerns in vulnerable subgroups. [31][33] An additional cause for concern is the rapid amplification of self-harm topics after minimal prior engagement, which risks normalizing maladaptive behaviors, crowding out recovery-oriented content. [27][34]

The general pattern is consistent with the broader social-media literature: connections are typically small to moderate, vary from person to person, and are sensitive to mode of use (active versus passive) and type of content. [35] The discrepancies between studies are not surprising. Many are based on cross-sectional studies and self-reported exposure, while algorithms and content ecosystem are rapidly evolving, changing what constitutes “typical” use means across cohorts. [27][35] Differences in samples - clinical versus community populations - further influence the magnitude of effects and the visibility of harms.

This naturally has implications for clinical and public-health. Routine screening for platform-specific risks (nighttime scrolling, FOMO-driven checking, exposure to self-harm or appearance-related content) can be incorporated into adolescent visits without significant burden. Brief digital hygiene tips – controlling notification, scheduled use, setting bedtime restrictions, and choosing trustworthy sources – are an inexpensive first step. [28][29] For youth with mood or eating disorders, shared safety plans should explicitly address content filtering, supervision during high-risk periods, and escalation pathways when harmful material appears.

Platforms policies can complement individual-level strategies. Slower access to sensitive content, notifications about taking a break from scrolling, and deliberate injection of counter-content (e.g., health access

resources) can weaken harmful cascading effects without erasing the platform's pro-social utility. [27][34] Continued investment in swift moderation of promoting self-harm content, hate speech, and age-inappropriate material, as well as greater transparency and researcher to independent audits, would strengthen accountability.

Finally, the evidence base would benefit from long-term cohort studies with objective telemetry, content tagging, and subgroup analyses to determine harm thresholds and windows of protection. Pragmatic studies testing sleep-promoting defaults settings, time limits, or mental health are feasible and necessary. [35] In summary, TikTok can enable connection and education, but it can also reinforce pathways to distress; targeted guidance for families and clinicians, combined with thoughtful product safeguards, can help tilt the scales towards benefits while reducing foreseeable risks.

Conclusions

The research presented above provides a comprehensive picture of the impact of TikTok on the mental health of its users. As a platform with a huge reach and rapidly growing popularity, TikTok represents both a potential source of support and education and a threat to mental health. In order to minimise the negative effects of using TikTok and other social media, a number of measures need to be taken. First and foremost, it is important to educate users about the potential risks and promote informed use of the platform. TikTok should continue and expand its content moderation efforts to more effectively eliminate misinformation and harmful material. Parents and guardians should be aware of the risks associated with young people's use of social media and monitor activity among their wards on these platforms. Schools and educational institutions should also integrate the topic of mental health and informed use of social media into their curricula. It is worth mentioning that the TikTok platform itself is aware of the presence of negative effects of user-published content and has issued advice on excessive use of the app at night and has enabled assistance for people who scorn suicide-related content. [36,37]

TikTok, like other social media, has the potential to positively impact on mental health, provided users use it consciously and in moderation. However, the use of these resources requires commitment from the platform, educators, parents and the users themselves. It is necessary to look for new solutions to minimise the negative effects of using the use of apps and to develop behaviour and actions that have a positive impact on the mental health of the youngest users.

Conflict of interest statement: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

All authors have read and agreed with the published version of the manuscript.

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