The Perceived Role of Tiktok as Emotional Support for Student-Parents in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has become a significant platform for emotional support among student-parents navigating academic and caregiving demands. This study assessed the perceived role of TikTok as emotional support for student-parents at the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines-Claveria. Employing a quantitative descriptive research design, data were collected through a modified Online Social Support Scale from 45 student-parents using a total enumeration sampling method. Results revealed that most student-parents frequently viewed music, educational, and parenting content on TikTok, highlighting the platform's dual role in entertainment and practical support. Participants rated TikTok highly in providing comfort (60.1%), reassurance (68.8%), and encouragement (60.1%), reflecting its effectiveness in reducing stress and feelings of isolation. The theoretical framework integrated Social Penetration Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Social Support Theory to explain how TikTok fosters emotional well-being through relatable and community-driven content. The study concludes that TikTok acts as a meaningful coping resource that enhances the emotional resilience of student-parents. It recommends integrating TikTok-based content in mental health interventions within educational settings to better support student-parents. Future research should expand to diverse academic contexts to validate these findings.

Keywords: TikTok, emotional support, student-parents, social media, comfort, reassurance, encouragement, mental health.

INTRODUCTION

Balancing academic and personal responsibilities is a significant challenge for college students worldwide, particularly for those who are also parents. Globally, student-parents face unique stressors such as financial difficulties, caregiving responsibilities, and feelings of isolation, which can significantly impact their emotional well-being and academic performance. These challenges highlight the need for robust emotional support systems to foster resilience and improve outcomes in educational settings. International research suggests that adult students often experience limited emotional support from traditional sources such as family and friends, driving them to seek alternative avenues like social media. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become popular tools for emotional support. TikTok, in particular, has grown into a global phenomenon, with over 1 billion users worldwide, serving as a significant platform for connection and interaction, particularly among younger populations. While TikTok offers opportunities for emotional support through features like liking, sharing, and commenting, these interactions can elicit both positive and negative mental health outcomes depending on the feedback received.

In the Philippine context, university students face a range of academic and psychosocial stressors, making emotional support essential for their well-being. Social media has increasingly become a means to alleviate stress, enhance support systems, and foster connections among Filipino students. However, limited local research has explored TikTok's role in addressing the emotional well-being of student-parents, despite its growing popularity in the country. This study seeks to address this research gap by focusing on the USTP-Claveria

campus, where student-parents navigate the dual pressures of academic responsibilities and caregiving. It aims to investigate the relationship between TikTok usage patterns and the perceived emotional support of student-parents in this local academic setting.

The findings aim to contribute to understanding how social media platforms like TikTok can serve as tools for emotional support, with implications for both students and educational institutions. Hence, the present study aims to address these issues by creating a study that would link the role of TikTok as emotional support for student-parents. This study is critically needed to fill a significant gap in understanding the effects of TikTok on emotional well-being, particularly given the platform's unique interaction dynamics and rapid rise in popularity. Theoretical framework, such as the Social Penetration Theory of Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor explains how relationships develop through self-disclosure, which is essential in understanding how TikTok fosters emotional support among student-parents. Additionally, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) of Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz's (1974) posits that individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs. TikTok users are motivated primarily by entertainment, information-seeking, self-expression, and escaping boredom, and coping with stress. Furthermore, the Social Support Theory of Don Drennon-Gala and Francis Cullen (1994) explores how social connections and relationships can provide individuals with emotional, informational, and practical assistance during times of stress or challenge.

This study was used to evaluate how TikTok enhances the emotional support of student-parents. The study's objectives are to: (1) identify the type of content mostly viewed by student-parents while using TikTok; (2) assess the level of perception of student-parents on the role of TikTok as an emotional support tool in terms of: comfort, reassurance, and encouragement; (3) explore the insights and lived experiences shared by student- parents regarding TikTok's role in providing emotional support; (4) formulate an action plan that addresses the emotional and mental health needs of student-parents based on the findings of the study. This study specifically focused on student-parents who meet the following criteria: (a) currently enrolled at USTP-Claveria; (b) undergraduate students with at least one child; (c) those who are married, single, or separated; and (d) student-parents who are in their first year, second year, or third year. The research was conducted at the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines (USTP) Claveria, located in Misamis Oriental, with a total of 45 respondents. However, this research had certain limitations. First, it did not include the broader experiences of student-parents beyond their perceptions of TikTok as an emotional support tool. Only those within the specified age bracket were eligible for participation. Additionally, the study specifically focused on evaluating the perceived role of TikTok as enhancing emotional support for student-parents at the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines (USTP) – Claveria, Misamis Oriental.

METHODOLOGY

This research design employed in this study is a quantitative descriptive research design, which provided a systematic collection, organization, and analysis of numerical data to provide an overview of the perceived role of TikTok as emotional support for student-parents. The descriptive aspect focused on identifying trends, patterns, and relationships in the data, offering a detailed overview of the measurable perceptions and behaviors of the respondents. The study involved a total of 45 student-parents who are currently enrolled at USTP-Claveria. These respondents were identified through a total enumeration sampling method to administer the survey questionnaires. Total enumeration was employed, in which the entire population that met the defined criteria was included. In this study, the researchers modified the Online Social Support Scale (OSSS) questionnaire developed by Elizabeth Nick et al. (2018). This tool focused on measuring emotional support in online settings, which is the main focus of our study. The tool explored how student-parents feel emotionally comforted, reassured, and encouraged through the TikTok platform. The researchers conducted a face-to-face survey using a questionnaire to gather data. Ethical considerations in this study included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring that they clearly understood the purpose and scope of the research before agreeing to participate.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and all personal information was securely stored and accessible only to the researchers. Participation was entirely voluntary, with respondents having the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. The study complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173), and all data were handled in accordance with ethical research standards. Data analysis utilized descriptive

statistics to describe and analyze the quantitative data collected from the survey questionnaires. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation was used to summarize and describe the key data points related to TikTok usage, perceived emotional support, and the perceived effects of TikTok on the emotional status of student-parents. Tables 1 and 2 present the scoring range and reliability levels used for the adopted questionnaire.

Table 1. Scoring Range of the Emotional Support of Respondents using the Likert Scale Questionnaire

Point Value	Scale Range	Description	Interpretation
1	1.00-1.80	Never	Very Low
2	1.81-2.60	Rarely	Low
3	2.61-3.40	Often	High
4	3.41-4.00	Always	Very High

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha on the Reliability Level of the Survey Questionnaire

	Reliability Statistics	
Emotional Support	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**No. of items**
Comfort	.793	10
Encouragement	.724	10
Reassurance	.783	12

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Figure 8. Level of types of content viewed by Student-Parents
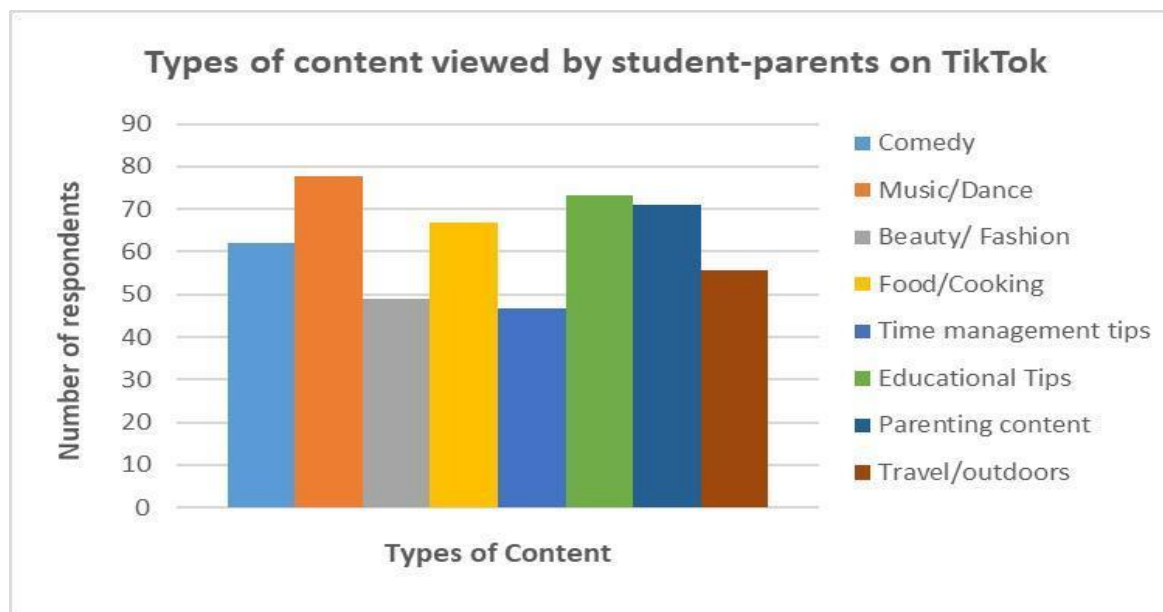
The figure 8 shows that most student-parents watch TikTok content about music and dance (77.8%), educational tips (73.3%), and parenting (71.1%). The high interest in music and dance content may stem from TikTok's design, which focuses on short, rhythmic, and visually engaging videos that appeal to users seeking quick entertainment. Lobo et al. (2022) found that this content not only entertains but also boosts creativity and helps reduce stress, which is helpful for students who have many responsibilities like parenting and studying. The strong interest in educational content suggests that student-parents use TikTok as a simple and easy way to learn.

According to Dwi Anisa et al. (2023), TikTok works as a convenient platform or tool for informal learning, offering short lessons that fit into the busy lives of student-parents. Parenting content is also very popular (71.1%), showing that TikTok is becoming a place where student-parents can find advice and support from others in similar situations. Research by Santos and Reyes (2021) shows that student-parents often look for

relatable content on social media to get parenting tips, emotional support, and time-saving advice. Comedy content was also widely watched (62.2%), which may reflect the need for emotional relief and balance among student-parents. Humor is known to help reduce stress. Lobo et al. (2022) mentioned that students often watch comedic content on TikTok to cope with academic and family pressures, especially during breaks or between study sessions. Food and cooking content was also popular (66.7%), showing how student-parents use TikTok to find quick meal ideas and budget-friendly recipes. Wang (2024) found that TikTok is a well-liked source for food-related inspiration, especially for younger users who look for creative and simple meal ideas that fit into their family routines.

On the other hand, time management tips (46.7%) and beauty/fashion content (48.9%) were watched less often. The lower interest in time management content might be because people think such topics are better suited for more organized platforms like productivity apps or longer educational videos (Villanueva & De Vera, 2021). Beauty and fashion content, while common on TikTok, may not be a priority for student-parents who focus more on practicality and functionality because of their caregiving responsibilities (Cruz & Hernandez, 2020). This implies that student-parents actively use TikTok not only for entertainment but also as a source of practical support, particularly in areas like education, parenting, and meal preparation. Their high engagement with these content types reflects a need for relatable, time-efficient, and informative media that fits into their busy routines. This suggests that TikTok can be a valuable platform for delivering targeted content and support services that align with the unique needs of student-parents.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage of the level of perception of the student-parents in the role of TikTok on Comfort

Range	Frequency	Percentage	Interpretation
Not watching TikTok	3	6.7	
1.0 – 1.8	0	0	Very Low
1.81 – 2.60	0	0	Low
2.61 – 3.40	17	37.9	High
3.41 – 4.0	27	60.1	Very High

The data in Table 3 shows that most student-parents perceive a high to very high level of comfort in the role of TikTok, with 60.1% falling under "Very High" and 37.9% under "High." No respondents rated their comfort as "Very Low" or "Low," and only a small proportion (6.7%) reported not watching TikTok at all. This indicates that nearly all student-parents find TikTok beneficial for providing comfort, potentially serving as entertainment, relaxation, or stress relief.

Most student-parents (98%) who watch TikTok perceive the platform as providing a high or very high level of comfort. No respondents reported discomfort (i.e., "Very Low" or "Low") in association with TikTok. A minority (6.7%) do not engage with TikTok, suggesting widespread exposure and acceptance among this sample.

These results suggest that TikTok plays a positive role in providing comfort to student-parents, with its use linked to significantly high perceived well-being or relaxation. The absence of low-frequency responses highlights a generally favorable perception, and the minimal non-user group suggests TikTok's reach and relevance in this demographic. This can inform further studies on the potential psychosocial benefits of digital platforms like TikTok among student-parents. International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction (2024) conducted a study that found that university students often use TikTok to relieve academic stress temporarily. The platform provides a distraction from academic pressures, offering a calming influence and a means to unwind. However, the study also noted that TikTok use could lead to addictive behaviors and upward social comparisons, which might negatively affect psychological well-being. This finding aligns with research suggesting that social media platforms like TikTok can serve as sources of entertainment and stress relief, helping individuals unwind after demanding activities (Diol, 2021).

Also, Alarcon (2025) highlighted TikTok's role as a mental escape for students, demonstrating its value in providing relaxation. Notably, a minimal number of participants (6.7%) reported not watching TikTok, suggesting its pervasive use within the sample population.

The absence of respondents in the "Very Low" and "Low" categories further underscores the platform's positive reception. Factors such as engaging content, humorous videos, and relatable material may contribute to this perception. Vombatkere et al. (2024) found that TikTok's recommendation algorithms effectively personalize content, enhancing user satisfaction and comfort.

Similarly, Zhou (2024) noted that personalized recommendations improve engagement, leading to higher levels of perceived comfort. Additionally, Tan and Yoon (2024) emphasized that TikTok's algorithmic personalization influences user satisfaction, which supports the platform's role in promoting comfort. Regasa and Ettisa (2023) further supported these findings, indicating that TikTok's engaging content fosters emotional relief and enhances well-being. This implies that schools and support groups can use TikTok as a tool to reduce stress for student-parents. They could suggest positive, relaxing videos as part of mental health programs. Counselors may also recommend uplifting content to help student-parents cope with stress as well as for content creators and marketers, having an understanding of what student-parents enjoy watching can help in making videos that connect with them. Creating relatable, funny, or inspiring content can increase viewer engagement and satisfaction.

Table 4. Frequency and percentage of the level of perception of the student-parents in the role of TikTok on Reassurance

Range	Frequency	Percentage	Interpretation
Not watching TikTok	3	6.7	
1.0 – 1.8	0	0	Very Low
1.81 – 2.60	0	0	Low
2.61 – 3.40	18	40.1	High
3.41 – 4.0	27	60.1	Very High

The data in Table 5 demonstrates that student-parents overwhelmingly perceive TikTok as providing a high level of reassurance, with 60.1% reporting "Very High" and 40.1% "High" levels of reassurance from the platform. There are no reports of "Very Low" or "Low" reassurance, and only 6.7% indicated that they do not watch TikTok.

Nearly all student-parents who use TikTok experience either high or very high levels of reassurance. None of the respondents reported low or very low reassurance, suggesting a strong positive association between TikTok use and feelings of reassurance. A small minority (6.7%) are non-users, indicating widespread adoption among the sample.

This table suggests that TikTok acts as a significant source of reassurance for student-parents, functioning as a supportive and affirming digital environment for most of them. The platform seems to address their needs for affirmation and confidence, as indicated by the high percentages in positive response categories. The absence of negative responses (low reassurance) further emphasizes its relevance and psychological benefit for its users in this demographic. Liu et al. (2021) in the Journal of Social Media Studies support this, indicating that TikTok's personalized content fosters a sense of belonging and helps alleviate feelings of loneliness, likely contributing to the high levels of reassurance reported. Another 28.9% reported a "High" level of reassurance, which still indicates a positive experience with the platform which still points to TikTok's effectiveness in offering comfort and emotional support.

This finding is consistent with research from the International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction (2023), which highlights how TikTok's tailored content, such as stress-relief videos and relatable experiences, positively influences users' mental health. A small percentage (6.7%) indicated they do not watch TikTok, while no respondents reported feeling "Low" or "Very Low" reassurance. This consistent positivity reflects TikTok's role in helping users feel supported. This absence of negative feedback reflects the overwhelmingly positive influence of the platform, supporting findings from the Journal of Social Media and Mental Health (2020) that TikTok is perceived more positively in terms of emotional support compared to other platforms.

In line with this, Tucker and Smith (2018) emphasize that social media platforms, including TikTok, provide essential emotional reassurance for college students, including student-parents, who often rely on such platforms

to cope with stress and feelings of isolation. Similarly, Chung and Lee (2019) suggest that social media, particularly TikTok, fosters reassurance by offering social support and validation, which plays a critical role in enhancing emotional well-being among students dealing with academic and personal challenges. These studies reinforce the role of TikTok in promoting reassurance, emotional support, and overall well-being for student-parents.

The findings imply that TikTok plays a significant role in providing emotional reassurance and support to student-parents. Given the high levels of reassurance reported, it suggests that platforms like TikTok can be an important tool for addressing the unique emotional needs of student-parents, offering them a space for connection and validation. This highlights the potential of social media as a supportive resource for student-parents, especially in navigating the challenges of balancing academic, personal, and parental responsibilities.

Table 5. Frequency and percentage of the level of perception of the student-parents in the role of TikTok on Encouragement

Range	Frequency	Percentage	Interpretation
Not watching TikTok	3	6.7	
1.0 – 1.8	0	0	Very Low
1.81 – 2.60	0	0	Low
2.61 – 3.40	13	28.9	High
3.41 – 4.0	31	68.8	Very High

The Table 1 shows that student-parents who watch TikTok overwhelmingly perceive the platform as a significant source of encouragement, with 68.8% rating their level of encouragement as "Very High" and 28.9% as "High." None of the respondents reported "Very Low" or "Low" encouragement, and only 6.7% do not watch TikTok.

The majority of respondents (97.7%) who use TikTok felt either highly or very highly encouraged by the platform. There are no reports of low or very low encouragement, signifying a universally positive perception among users regarding TikTok's role in providing encouragement. The percentage of non-users remains consistent with previous tables at 6.7%.

These results indicate that TikTok serves as a vital channel for encouragement among student-parents, with most feeling greatly supported and uplifted by the platform. The absence of negative perceptions highlights TikTok's consistently affirmative impact, and the high rate of "Very High" responses underscores its significance in promoting a sense of encouragement in this demographic. This positive perception may be related to the content style, community support, or relatable experiences shared within the platform, suggesting its potential value for well-being and self-confidence among student-parents. Ammari et al. (2018) found that social media platforms, including TikTok, create communities where individuals, particularly student-parents, receive significant encouragement from peers facing similar challenges.

Fraser et al. (2020) also highlighted the importance of online communities in offering emotional support and motivation, which is crucial for student-parents balancing academic responsibilities with caregiving. Moreover, Shao et al. (2019) noted that platforms like TikTok foster an environment of positive reinforcement, where student-parents can find encouragement and validation, which plays a critical role in reducing stress and enhancing motivation. This implies that TikTok is a helpful source of emotional support for student-parents, especially when they feel tired or stressed. The high mean score of 3.25 showed that many student-parents agree that TikTok gives them encouragement and motivation. This means schools and counselors can suggest helpful TikTok videos, like mental health tips or motivational content, to support student-parents.

TikTok can also help build online support communities where student-parents feel less alone. Lastly, it can be used to share real stories so others can understand the challenges student-parents face. According to Zhou and Lee (2021), in their study "The Impact of Short Video Apps on User Well-being", they found that users benefit from engaging with content focused on mental health and self-development. TikTok's algorithm, which promotes interest-based content, helps users receive personalized motivational support, improving emotional awareness and resilience [31]. Also, Ostic et al. (2021) conducted a review on "Mental Health and Social Media

Use" and concluded that social media platforms foster peer validation and connection. Their findings revealed that individuals who experience social or emotional struggles often seek comfort through digital platforms, where interactive features such as likes, comments, and shares contribute to emotional upliftment.

Naslund et al. (2020), in their article "The Future of Mental Health Support is Digital," emphasized that digital platforms are increasingly becoming venues for informal mental health support, particularly for those who experience stigma or lack access to formal services. They highlighted how platforms like TikTok provide users with relatable content that helps normalize their experiences and reduce feelings of isolation. Lastly, Montag et al. (2019), in "Digital Media Use and Mental Health: Current Evidence", argued that intentional engagement with motivational and educational content can improve users' mood regulation and stress management. They found that social media use, when guided by purpose and self-awareness, contributes positively to emotional well-being. Romm et al. (2018), in their study "Social Media and Emotional Resilience Among College Students", concluded that inspirational and realistic online content enhances psychological resilience and promotes coping strategies in academic environments.

The study supports the idea that media, especially in short and impactful formats, help students manage pressure and build mental strength. The findings show that TikTok plays a significant role in providing emotional support to student-parents, particularly in the form of encouragement. The study's result, with a high overall mean of 3.25 and over 60% rating encouragement as "very high", confirms that TikTok is more than just an entertainment app; it acts as a coping tool during stressful times. Student-parents use the platform to access motivational videos and mental health content, which help them reflect on their struggles and regain emotional strength.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that TikTok serves as a significant emotional support resource for student-parents at USTP-Claveria. Nearly all participants who engage with TikTok perceive a high degree of comfort, reassurance, and encouragement from the platform, with "Very High" ratings consistently dominating the data. This suggests that TikTok's environment, shaped by its algorithmic recommendations and community-driven content, fulfills the social and emotional needs of student-parents as they navigate demanding academic and caregiving roles.

The theoretical framework adopted is Social Penetration Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Social Support Theory, which underscores the unique mechanisms through which TikTok delivers emotional resources. Through personalized, relatable, and interactive content, student-parents can experience genuine emotional relief, affirmation, and motivation. Engagement with entertainment, educational, and parenting videos addresses both the practical and affective challenges faced by this demographic, helping to decrease stress and isolation, and potentially boosting overall resilience.

Moreover, the overwhelmingly positive perception of TikTok with no respondents reporting negative emotional impacts in terms of comfort, reassurance, or encouragement, reinforces the platform's role as a coping tool. This is particularly relevant in the context of Philippine student-parents, who may have limited access to traditional support mechanisms due to their unique life circumstances. The findings are consistent with prior research indicating the efficacy of short-form digital platforms in fostering a sense of belonging, providing mental health benefits, and motivating users to overcome everyday challenges in academic and domestic life.

In summary, TikTok emerges not just as a source of amusement but as an essential coping resource for student-parents, enhancing their emotional resilience and supporting their well-being in a holistic manner. This positive role has important implications for educators, counselors, and policymakers interested in leveraging social media for mental health intervention and community-building efforts.

RECOMMENDATION

Integrate TikTok-Based Content into Mental Health Interventions. Educational institutions, mental health practitioners, and student support offices should develop TikTok-focused programs that curate playlists or channels featuring uplifting, educational, and practical content aimed at student-parents. These may include motivational videos, stress-relief routines, educational mini-lessons, parenting advice, and coping strategies. Incorporating these resources into formal mental health and academic support programs can help address stress

and feelings of isolation, offering student-parents accessible, relatable, and dynamic emotional support. By making TikTok an intentional part of student-parent assistance strategies, campus mental health services can meet students where they already spend time and draw on those digital habits for positive outcomes.

Promote Responsible and Constructive Platform Use. While TikTok offers clear emotional benefits, it is equally important to empower student-parents to navigate potential risks such as digital burnout, distraction, or overuse. Schools should establish media literacy workshops that emphasize the importance of balanced engagement, critical consumption of online content, privacy, and digital boundaries. Guidance counselors and educators can help student-parents identify content that is constructive and affirming, while cautioning against excessive use and encouraging personal reflection on media impacts. This course of action ensures that TikTok remains a tool for support, rather than an additional source of stress or comparison at all times.

Foster Community and Peer Networks Through TikTok. Student support groups and organizations on campus can establish TikTok communities where student-parents share relatable experiences, coping tips, and emotional validation. By encouraging peer-to-peer interaction via short-form video, educational institutions can nurture a sense of belonging and community support among student-parents. These spaces should be moderated and guided to ensure positive and helpful exchanges, which are critical for the resilience and mental health of members.

Encourage Further Research and Evaluation. Given the high positive ratings and the emergence of TikTok as an emotional resource, researchers are encouraged to conduct follow-up studies that examine the platform's impact in diverse academic institutions and cultural contexts. Mixed-methods research, including qualitative interviews and longitudinal studies, would provide deeper insight into how TikTok shapes emotional trajectories and coping skills over time. Investigating both benefits and risks will help optimize future interventions and maintain best practices for digital support. This continuous evaluation will ensure TikTok's effective integration into mental health strategies without unintended consequences.

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