

The Role of Tiktok Influencers in Shaping the Climber Lifestyle of University Students in the Digital Era

Arwansyah bin Kirin¹, Najiah Athirah Jamaludin², Mohd Khairul Nizam³, Ramdan Baba⁴

^{1,2}Islamic Studies Department, Centre for General Studies and Co-Curricular, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Malaysia

³Centre For Diploma Studies, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Malaysia

⁴Persada Electrical & Engineering Work Sdn. Bhd., Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The development of social media, particularly TikTok has shaped the norms, identities and lifestyles of younger generations, positioning TikTok influencers as agents of digital socialization who may influence university students' tendencies toward a climber lifestyle through processes of imitation and social comparison. This study aims to analyze the role of TikTok influencers in shaping the climber lifestyle among university students in the digital era by examining forms of influencer impact, the mechanisms through which the climber lifestyle develops and its implications for academic, economic and lifestyle domains. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive–interpretive design using structured interviews with 20 student informants (10 male, 10 female and aged 20–27) selected via purposive sampling, the data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The findings reveal three main themes: (i) the academic domain : influencer content can enhance learning motivation and interest through concise and inspiring video formats, yet it may also encourage short term engagement and superficial learning if use is not well controlled; (ii) the economic domain : product promotions, discounts and trust in influencers trigger tendencies toward impulsive purchasing driven by Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), thereby influencing students' spending patterns; and (iii) the lifestyle domain : there is a tendency to emulate fashion, appearance and symbols of luxury to “*appear comparable*” in digital spaces, reflecting identity construction based on curated realities and continuous social comparison. Conceptually, the findings indicate a flow of influence that begins with exposure to influencer content followed by processes of social comparison the reinforcement of FOMO and ultimately translates into behavioral changes with implications for students' academic, economic and lifestyle dimensions. Overall, TikTok influencers play a multidimensional role with a dual-edged impact, potentially supporting academic motivation while simultaneously reinforcing status pressure, materialism and impulsive consumption therefore, strengthening critical digital literacy, screen-time management and financial and psychosocial well-being education is necessary to minimize risks and maximize the benefits of TikTok use among university students.

Keywords: TikTok, social media influencers, climber lifestyle, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Pagoh

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology in the 21st century has significantly transformed the landscape of human communication, particularly through the emergence of social media as the primary medium of interaction in everyday life. Social media refers to internet-based platforms that enable users to create, share and interact with content virtually yet seemingly in real time (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media is not merely a communication tool, it has evolved into a social ecosystem that shapes the norms, values and lifestyles of modern society. Nasrullah (2015) further emphasizes that social media functions as a space of self-representation that allows individuals to construct social identities virtually. In this context, university students, as digital natives, are the group most exposed to the influence of social media across multiple dimensions of their lives. In the era of digital globalization, applications such as TikTok have emerged as dominant platforms influencing the thinking patterns and behaviors of young people. Based on the Data Reportal (2024) report, TikTok has more than 1.5 billion monthly active users worldwide, with the majority comprising adolescents

and young adults. In Malaysia, social media use among youth has increased markedly with average usage time exceeding four hours per day (Shafiq Ismail, 2025). This phenomenon indicates that social media is no longer merely an entertainment tool but has become a powerful agent of socialization that shapes users' aspirations and lifestyles, particularly among university students. Alongside the rise in social media usage, a new phenomenon has emerged the role of social media influencers as agents who shape norms and social trends. Influencers refer to individuals who exert substantial influence over their followers through the digital content they produce, whether in the form of entertainment, education or lifestyle. A study by De Veirman et al. (2017) shows that an influencer's credibility and attractiveness can influence users' attitudes, beliefs and decisions. Within the TikTok context, content that is visual, concise and easily accessible positions influencers as a key reference point in shaping students' lifestyles.

This phenomenon is closely related to the emergence of new lifestyles among young people, particularly the concept of "*social climber*" or the climber lifestyle. This lifestyle refers to individuals' tendencies to elevate their social status through outward appearance, social networks, and symbols of luxury (Alfiansyah, 2017). From the perspective of Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, individuals tend to compare themselves with others to evaluate their social standing. In the context of social media, this comparison becomes more intense because users are exposed to life representations that are often idealized and unrealistic. Moreover, this phenomenon can also be explained through Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which asserts that individuals learn through observing and imitating the behaviors of social models. Influencers on social media serve as such models and university students tend to imitate the lifestyle, dressing styles and spending patterns displayed. This indirectly contributes to the formation of a consumptive and materialistic lifestyle among university students. However, the influence of social media does not only bring positive effects, it also generates various negative implications for individual well-being. Previous studies have shown that excessive social media use can lead to psychological disturbances such as stress, anxiety and depression (Vidal et al., 2024). In Malaysia, the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) report indicates an increase in mental health issues among adolescents due to internet addiction (Awaluddin, 2018). In addition, social media use has been associated with decreased academic performance, social isolation and value shifts among students (Samin, 2012; Arip et al., 2013). At the same time, there are also findings suggesting that social media can benefit students in terms of information access and increased learning interaction (Dina & Siti, 2019). For instance, educational content shared by influencers, such as learning videos on TikTok, can increase students' interest in certain subjects. Nevertheless, issues arise when misleading content or negative influences shape students' perceptions of education, such as cases where influencers question the importance of formal education (Noor, 2024).

Although many studies have examined the influence of social media on students, most prior research has focused on general aspects such as social media use and academic performance, mental health or social behavior. However, studies that specifically examine the role of TikTok influencers in shaping the climber lifestyle among university students remain limited, particularly in the Malaysian context. This indicates a significant research gap in understanding the relationship between digital influence and the formation of university students' social identities in the contemporary era. Furthermore, prior research has given insufficient attention to the value dimension and the long-term implications of the climber lifestyle for individual and societal well-being. This phenomenon not only affects individuals financially and psychologically but may also influence social and cultural structures, including increased materialism and diminished values of moderation. Therefore, it is important to examine this phenomenon more deeply to understand influencer impact mechanisms and their implications for students' lifestyles. Based on the discussion above, this study aims to analyze the role of TikTok influencers in shaping the climber lifestyle among university students and to identify the factors that drive this tendency. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What forms of influence do TikTok influencers have on university students' lifestyles? (2) How is the climber lifestyle formed among university students? and (3) What are the implications of this phenomenon for students' academic, economic, and lifestyle aspects? To clarify the relationship between influencer content, psychological processes and behavioral implications, this study synthesizes the findings into a conceptual flow model that maps the process of climber lifestyle formation among university students. Such a visual approach is important for explaining complex social phenomena in a more systematic manner and for enabling readers to follow the analytical framework more clearly.

This study is expected to make significant theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it strengthens understanding of the application of social comparison and social learning theories in digital media contexts. Practically, the findings can assist educational institutions, policymakers and society in designing more effective intervention strategies to mitigate negative social media influences while leveraging its positive potential to foster balanced and ethical lifestyles among university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An early study often used as a foundation to understand the “*influencer*” phenomenon is by De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) through the article *Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude* in the *International Journal of Advertising*. The purpose of this study was to evaluate how influencer characteristics (particularly follower count) affect attitudes toward the influencer and the brand. The method used was an experiment (two experimental studies) and the main findings showed that influencers with a high number of followers tend to be evaluated as more “*likeable*” and perceived as more popular, which in turn can influence perceptions of opinion leadership. This study is relevant because it explains the basic mechanism of influencer “*impact*,” but it focuses more on marketing/brands and has not examined the formation of social lifestyles such as the climber lifestyle among university students. Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu (2019) assessed how social media influencers build credibility and parasocial relationships and their effects on consumers’ responses to promotions. This study commonly applies communication theory/source credibility frameworks to explain why users more readily trust and feel attached to influencers compared to traditional celebrities. A key finding is that influencers can cultivate attachment and trust through closer social media interactions, thereby strengthening persuasive effects.

Belanche, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021) stated in their study that credibility and followers’ tendencies to continue following and imitating influencers are shaped by promotional approaches and perceived authenticity, which may determine whether followers are motivated to emulate influencers’ styles and actions. In explaining why youth follow influencers, Croes and Bartels (2021) argued that this occurs through ad clicking and purchasing behaviors. Youth motivations extend beyond entertainment to include identity seeking, community and a sense of belonging which can drive behavioral responses. To link influencers with luxury culture and conspicuous products, Dinh et al. (2024) highlighted that *Social media influencers and followers’ conspicuous consumption* (PMC) is highly relevant because it evaluates how exposure to influencers triggers social comparison and FOMO, subsequently influencing tendencies to acquire conspicuous goods. Exposure to influencers may stimulate psychological processes (social comparison, desire to imitate, materialism and FOMO) that lead to conspicuous consumptive behavior. In the context of materialistic values and social media use, Ozimek et al. (2024) noted that materialism does not stand alone but is also driven by social comparison intensified by social media. To understand TikTok’s psychological effects and ideal internalization, Limniou et al. (2025) examined how TikTok use influences fitness ideal internalization, self-esteem and appearance perceptions. The study found that TikTok content promoting certain ideals can affect self-evaluation and appearance perceptions, helping explain TikTok’s strong role as an “*idealization*” machine that transfers norms and social standards to users. Finally, to add a Malaysian youth psychology dimension, Khairul Nizam and Sahharon (2024) investigated how the use of platforms such as TikTok/Instagram/Facebook affects youths’ self-esteem through mechanisms of social comparison and displayed ideal standards. The findings indicate that social comparison and ideal standards may weaken self-esteem, aligning with the idea that youth are driven to “*upgrade their image*” to compensate for underlying psychological inadequacies that are closely related to social climbing tendencies. However, this study does not specifically explain the role of TikTok influencers in shaping the climber lifestyle. Overall, previous studies agree that influencers and social media affect users through source credibility, parasocial relationships, social identification and psychological processes such as social comparison, FOMO and materialism (De Veirman et al., 2017; Belanche et al., 2021; Croes & Bartels, 2021; Dinh et al., 2024; Ozimek et al., 2024). Nevertheless, most of these studies focus on narrower outcomes such as brand attitudes, purchase intentions, impulsive buying or self-image rather than the climber lifestyle as a complex social phenomenon encompassing status orientation, symbols of luxury, social reputation and everyday lifestyle practices. Therefore, the study *The Role of TikTok Influencers in Shaping the Climber Lifestyle of University Students in the Digital Era* is expected to contribute by (i) focusing specifically on TikTok as the dominant platform and (ii) examining the “*climber lifestyle*” as a broader social outcome beyond purchasing behavior alone.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative design with a descriptive–interpretive approach using structured interviews to explore in depth how TikTok influencers shape the climber lifestyle among university students in the digital era. The choice of a qualitative approach aligns with the study’s aim of understanding meanings, experiences and informants’ interpretations of a complex social phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In terms of context, the research was conducted within a university student environment (e.g., campus/student communities actively using TikTok), focusing on daily social media use experiences, interactions with influencer content and effects on status orientation and lifestyle. This approach is relevant because the “*climber*” phenomenon is not merely outward behavior; it is closely linked to social identity, self-evaluation, peer norms and status aspirations, which are typically better explained through narrative data and in-depth interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The primary data source was interview-based primary data, while supporting data sources may include field notes and brief relevant documents (e.g., screenshots/observational notes on the types of TikTok content frequently watched by informants) to strengthen contextual understanding. Interviews were selected because they allow the researcher to explore the “*hows*” and “*whys*” of informants’ experiences in a directed manner, including sensitive issues that require trust and nuanced explanation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This study involved 20 informants, with each interview lasting approximately 15–30 minutes. The proposed informant selection criteria were as follows: (i) registered university students (diploma/degree), (ii) active TikTok users (e.g., accessing at least several times per week), (iii) following at least one TikTok influencer and (iv) willing to share experiences related to TikTok’s impact on academics, economics/spending and lifestyle. A total of 20 informants is typically sufficient for exploratory qualitative research and recruitment may be halted upon reaching data saturation, when new themes diminish (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sampling technique was purposive sampling because participants needed to have directly experienced the target phenomenon (TikTok influencer impact and tendencies toward a climber lifestyle). A sample size of 20 participants is considered appropriate for exploratory qualitative research, particularly when the population is relatively homogeneous and the research objectives are clearly focused as methodological studies indicate that thematic saturation can often be achieved within a relatively small number of interviews (Hennink et al., 2022).

To increase variation in experiences, the researcher incorporated a maximum variation strategy (e.g., variations in gender, year of study, faculty, or level of TikTok activity) to enrich the findings and enable comparisons of experience patterns across informants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For data collection, structured interviews were conducted using a protocol developed based on the study objectives. The questions were structured according to the objectives of this study. The interview questions included: (1) Do you agree that TikTok influencers affect students’ academic life? (2) Can TikTok influencers influence students’ economic situation? and (3) Do TikTok influencers influence students’ lifestyle? This approach remains consistent with structured interviews while allowing informants’ narratives to be clearer, more organized and meaningful (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Interview procedures were implemented systematically: (i) the researcher provided an explanation of the study and obtained informed consent, (ii) set a comfortable location/medium for the interviews (face-to-face or online), (iii) conducted interviews following the protocol, (iv) recorded audio using a voice recorder to ensure transcription accuracy, and (v) transcribed recordings verbatim prior to analysis. The use of audio recording is a common practice in interview research because it reduces information loss and improves the accuracy of the analysis process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). For data analysis, this study applied Thematic Analysis because it is flexible, systematic and suitable for identifying patterns of themes emerging from informants’ experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed six main phases: (1) familiarization with data (repeated reading of transcripts), (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) writing the report based on themes. This six-phase framework helps structure analysis transparently and in an auditable manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To enhance the clarity of methodological reporting, the basic profiles of the informants are summarized in a structured demographic table. This approach aligns with the COREQ guidelines, which emphasize transparent reporting of participant characteristics, research context and research procedures in interview and focus group studies (Tong et al., 2007).

Demographic Profile of Informants

To improve the clarity and professional presentation of the methodology section, the informant profiles are presented in two formats: an individual demographic table and a summary of demographic categories. This arrangement enables readers to assess the characteristics of the study participants quickly and systematically.

Table 1: Respondent Demographics

Respondent	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Status
R1	Male	25	Malay	Student
R2	Female	21	Malay	Student
R3	Male	24	Malay	Student
R4	Male	27	Javanese	Student
R5	Female	25	Javanese	Student
R6	Male	24	Javanese	Student
R7	Female	23	Malay	Student
R8	Female	21	Malay	Student
R9	Female	21	Malay	Student
R10	Female	20	Malay	Student
R11	Male	21	Malay	Student
R12	Male	20	Malay	Student
R13	Male	21	Malay	Student
R14	Male	22	Malay	Student
R15	Female	20	Malay	Student
R16	Female	20	Malay	Student
R17	Female	20	Malay	Student
R18	Male	21	Javanese	Student
R19	Male	25	Javanese	Student
R20	Female	23	Malay	Student

Table 2. Summary of Informants' Demographic Categories

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Male	10	50.0
	Female	10	50.0
Age	20-22 Years	11	55.0
	23-25 Years	8	40.0
	26-27 Years	1	5.0
Ethnicity	Malay	15	75.0
	Javanese	5	25.0
Status	Student	20	100

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 20 informants were interviewed in this study and their profiles are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2. Overall, the composition of the informants reflects a balanced gender distribution, a young adult age range and a limited yet sufficient ethnic background to provide varied perspectives in exploring the phenomenon of the climber lifestyle among university students who use TikTok.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Climber Lifestyle Formation among University Students

TikTok Influencer Content

(Short-form videos, lifestyle content, product promotions, TikTok Shop, viral trends)

↓

Repeated Exposure and Identification with Influencers

↓

Social Comparison

(Desire to appear equal, aspiration to be perceived as successful, need for social recognition)

↓

Psychological Triggers

(Fear of Missing Out/FOMO, status pressure, aspirational self-image, social proof)

↓

Formation of the Climber Lifestyle

(Appearance imitation, consumption choices, digital self-presentation management)

↓

Implications

Academic: learning motivation / distraction and reduced focus • Economic: impulsive purchasing / symbolic consumption

Lifestyle: fashion imitation, display of luxury, curated identity

Figure 1 illustrates that the formation of the climber lifestyle does not occur spontaneously rather it develops through a chain of influences that begins with exposure to influencer content, followed by processes of identification and social comparison and is further reinforced by psychological triggers such as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and the desire for social recognition. This model helps explain that the implications for academic, economic and lifestyle dimensions are not isolated phenomena but are interconnected within a recurring mechanism of digital influence.

Table 3. Synthesis Matrix of Themes, Participant Quotations and TikTok Features Driving Behaviour

Main Theme	Summary of Findings	Participant Quote	Relevant TikTok Features
Academic	Influencer content can enhance students' motivation, interest in learning and academic enthusiasm, but may also lead to short-term engagement if usage is not well regulated.	"We feel more motivated to study because of the encouragement they provide." (R10)	Short-form videos, motivational content, edutainment, recommendation algorithms.
Economic	Influencers influence purchase intentions, particularly when combined with promotions, discounts, product reviews	"They tend to buy products sold on TikTok, especially when discounts are	TikTok Shop, live selling, flash discounts, product reviews, viral trends.

	and the pressure of FOMO.	offered.” (R19)	
Lifestyle	Students tend to imitate fashion, appearance and symbols of luxury in order to appear comparable to influencers in digital spaces.	“Many students tend to follow trends...” (R8)	Lifestyle videos, fashion content, daily vlogs, curated visuals, popular audio.

This synthesis matrix provides a clearer representation of the relationship between the identified themes, participants’ voices and specific TikTok features that act as catalysts for these behaviours. Presenting the findings in a matrix format helps reduce the density of narrative paragraphs while enhancing analytical clarity and the overall presentation of the study’s results.

Academic Aspect

From the academic perspective, the findings show that social media has a positive effect on students’ motivation and interest in learning. As stated, the strength of knowledge can serve as the best safeguard to ensure that social media sharing is beneficial (Nurin Nazurah Roslan, 2024). This can be seen through the interviews conducted, for example:

Nurul Izzati binti Nusri stated: *“For me, yes especially influencers who provide positive advice about academics today. We become more motivated to study because of the encouragement they give. Social media such as TikTok also has a positive effect on us because edited videos can further boost our spirit and emotions to continue studying.”* (Respondent 10, university student).

Zulfadli also shared his view: *“Yes. Positively, influencers and social media platforms can be a source of inspiration, motivation and additional learning for university students. They may provide study tips, insights into student life or connect students with communities that share academic interests and objectives.”* (Respondent 1, university student).

The respondents above stated that educational content shared by influencers can increase learning motivation through concise and engaging video formats. This supports recent findings indicating that TikTok use in higher education can enhance engagement and provide learning benefits when content is aligned with learning objectives (Yang, 2025; López-Carril et al., 2025). However, the literature also cautions that academic effects depend strongly on the purpose of use: use for information/academics tends to help, whereas excessive social/entertainment use may reduce achievement (Junco, 2012). Nevertheless, critical analysis suggests that the motivation generated may be temporary (short-term engagement) and may not necessarily translate into long term academic achievement. This is because *“edutainment”* content tends to emphasize entertainment rather than depth of knowledge, potentially producing surface learning rather than deep learning. Moreover, although these findings support prior studies (Dina & Siti, 2019), they should be balanced with evidence showing that excessive social media use can disrupt focus, sleep time and students’ cognitive functioning (APA, 2023). This indicates that social media functions as a *“double-edged sword”* in academic contexts. However, the climber tendency is not necessarily negative, it can *“climb”* toward academic productivity if digital literacy, account curation and screen-time control are present. In other words, the climber lifestyle is not necessarily negative in nature in certain contexts, it may also be interpreted as an aspiration for self-improvement including the enhancement of academic productivity, provided that students possess adequate digital literacy, the ability to curate the accounts they follow and sufficient control over their screen time.

Economic Aspect

From the economic perspective, the findings show that TikTok and influencers have a significant influence on students’ spending patterns because they can shape purchase interest. This can be observed from respondents’ interview responses, such as:

Nor Syahindah binti Sarman stated: *“For students who... do not know how to manage or control their spending, I think it affects them because... they will be attracted to buy items sold on TikTok, especially when*

there are discounts. They will also... more easily buy items advertised by influencers because they are trusted. This is very likely to happen to people who experience FOMO (Fear of Missing Out).” (Respondent 19, university student).

Puteri Dayana binti Jainudin also stated: “In my opinion, yes, I agree because influencers and TikTok social media can influence students’ economic situation because influencers promote the items they use and... they show the positive side, so students want to follow what the influencer does and what the influencer has like Khairul Aming, okay again, he sells products under his brand such as a pan; he shows that the pan has good quality.” (Respondent 20, university student).

Respondents indicated that product promotions, discounts and trust in influencers encourage them to purchase items that are not necessarily needed, particularly driven by FOMO. This is highly consistent with digital marketing research: (i) influencer credibility/likeability and perceived popularity influence user attitudes and decisions (De Veirman et al., 2017), and (ii) FoMO is associated with higher social media engagement and impulsive behavior (Przybylski et al., 2013). Moreover, studies specifically on TikTok Shop have also reported FoMO mechanisms that drive impulsive buying among young users (Hong-Ngoc, 2025). Critically, these findings show that students’ consumer behavior is not fully rational but is influenced by emotions and digital social pressure mediated by platform algorithms. This aligns with Dinh et al. (2024), while extending understanding by showing that FOMO is not merely an individual psychological phenomenon but is reinforced by digital ecosystem structures such as limited-time offers, viral trends and social proof that accelerate purchase decisions. The implication is that students are not merely passive users but become part of a recurring digital consumption loop.

Lifestyle Aspect

For the lifestyle dimension, the findings show that students tend to imitate fashion, style and “*looking luxurious on camera*,” which can be explained as a modeling process and social identity construction in line with Bandura’s (1977) theory and evidence that youth view influencers as trendsetters/role models (Hamid et al., 2022). In the Malaysian context, studies on influencer marketing also show that disclosure and paid posts can influence brand perceptions and youth purchase intentions (Khair, 2023). Lifestyle practices are easier to adopt through TikTok social media platforms because social media celebrities influence youth to imitate the lifestyle of personalities they admire. Through the interviews conducted, we can observe respondents’ views on this issue, for example:

Aina Syahmi Binti Mazlan stated: “Yes. What I can see is that nowadays many university students follow trends. For example, if there is an influencer they like wearing a new outfit or style, they will follow it. Not only that, it is also possible that these students are willing to spend a lot of money to follow other people’s lifestyles that look more luxurious and happy, even though we do not know what happens behind the phone camera.” (Respondent 8, university student).

Siti Raihana binti Sharif also stated: “Yes, this... can be said because many students consider influencers as role models, so they will follow influencers’ ways or lifestyles.” (Respondent 9, university student).

Respondents indicated that they are willing to spend more to appear comparable to influencers. Critical analysis of these findings suggests that the “*climber*” phenomenon is not merely outward imitation but reflects a social identity crisis among university students who attempt to construct an “*ideal self*” based on curated digital realities. Moreover, perceptions of luxury displayed on social media often do not reflect actual realities, thereby creating a reality perception gap that may lead to psychological stress and dissatisfaction. These findings strengthen Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) while also suggesting that, in the digital era social comparison has become more intense, continuous and difficult to avoid than in previous eras. Nevertheless, the term “*climber*” can be interpreted as a form of aspirational lifestyle not merely imitation, but a social strategy to “*upgrade one’s self-image*” within campus communities that may affect well-being (e.g., social comparison, feelings of inadequacy or pressure to appear “on trend”). In other words, the climber lifestyle is not necessarily negative in nature in certain contexts, it may also be interpreted as an aspiration for self-improvement including the enhancement of academic productivity, provided that students possess adequate digital literacy, the ability to curate the accounts they follow and sufficient control over their screen time.

Digital Literacy Intervention Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

Based on the findings of this study, higher education institutions should not view this issue merely as a matter of social media usage discipline, but rather as a challenge related to digital literacy, emotional regulation and identity management within platform-based environments. In this context, universities are encouraged to develop more critical and targeted digital literacy interventions, particularly to help students recognize how algorithms, trend culture, sponsored content and mechanisms of social proof influence their judgments and decision-making processes. This recommendation is important because recent studies indicate that TikTok functions not only as an entertainment platform but also as a space for micro-learning and digital skill development therefore, its use should be guided through appropriate digital literacy rather than being rejected entirely (Yang et al., 2025). Furthermore, universities may design specific interventions to address Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), such as social media awareness workshops, reflective training on social comparison, screen-time management modules and digital well-being programs that help students distinguish between actual reality and curated digital representations. This recommendation is supported by the FoMO-R framework, which suggests that education about the mechanisms of FOMO, the development of self-regulation strategies such as positive self-talk, content filtering and digital response management techniques can help reduce FOMO-related stress among social media users. From a practical campus perspective, the findings of this study also highlight the importance of integrating digital financial literacy into student development programs, particularly in relation to impulsive purchasing behaviors that occur through TikTok Shop, limited-time promotions and influencer product endorsements. At the same time, university counseling centers can play a significant role by implementing psychoeducational interventions addressing social comparison, status pressure and self-esteem development, thereby strengthening students' resilience against the norms of luxury and curated lifestyles frequently displayed in digital spaces. In other words, an effective institutional response should not merely focus on restricting the use of social media applications, but rather on empowering students with the capacity to critically evaluate, filter and manage digital influences in a mature and reflective manner.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that TikTok is no longer merely an entertainment medium, rather it functions as a digital social structure that shapes students' aspirations, norms and identities through the influence of TikTok influencers. The findings show that this influence operates in layered and simultaneous ways across three main dimensions academics, economics and lifestyle highlighting the "dual-edged" nature of social media in students' lives. Academically, influencer content can foster learning motivation, provide inspiration and offer quick access to ideas and learning strategies in the form of "edutainment." However, this motivation may not be stable in the long term because concise, attention-oriented content formats can promote superficial learning and there is also a risk of disrupted focus when use exceeds academic purposes. Economically, the TikTok ecosystem through influencer promotions, discounts and viral trend mechanisms creates digital social pressure that drives impulsive purchases, especially when students experience FOMO and rely on social proof for decision-making. In terms of lifestyle, the tendency to imitate appearance, fashion and symbols of luxury shows that the climber phenomenon among students is not merely outward imitation but is closely linked to the construction of an "ideal self" and self-image management within campus communities shaped by curated digital realities. Furthermore, the structured presentation of findings in the form of a conceptual flow model, a demographic profile and a thematic synthesis matrix indicates that the 'climber' lifestyle phenomenon should be understood not merely as an issue of individual behaviour but as an outcome of the interaction among platform design, digital social influence and the psychosocial vulnerability of university students.

Therefore, the study's implications call for a more balanced approach educational institutions are encouraged to strengthen critical digital literacy and self-regulation skills student development programs should incorporate financial education as well as psychosocial well-being and relevant stakeholders should consider ethical guidelines for influencer content and marketing. Nonetheless, this study is limited in terms of sample size, informant context and the use of structured interviews. Furthermore, this study did not systematically record several background variables that could potentially strengthen the interpretation of the findings, such as the academic discipline and the average daily screen time of the participants. Future research is recommended to employ mixed-method or quantitative designs to test more causal relationships and to examine moderating factors such as gender, socioeconomic background, types of TikTok content and levels of digital literacy to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of climber lifestyle formation in the digital era.

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