The Influence of TikTok Social Media on Adolescent Social Behavior in the Digital Era: A Case Study in Kendari City

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ABSTACT: This study examines the role of TikTok in shaping the social behavior and self perception of adolescents in Kendari City, Indonesia. Situated within an interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative descriptive case study was conducted involving 120 adolescents aged 15–18 years. Data collection employed participatory observation, baseline questionnaires, and semi structured interviews, analyzed through thematic coding and matrix displays. The findings reveal that TikTok usage fosters both positive and negative psychosocial outcomes. While 42% of respondents reported increased self confidence through creative engagement, 32% experienced social pressure to conform to trending challenges, and 12% reported negative social comparisons. Algorithmic recommendation systems were found to significantly influence content exposure and behavioral normalization, aligning with the emerging "algorithmic conformity" model. Peer interactions were enhanced through trend discussions and collaborative video creation; however, relational distancing was also observed. Content consumption was overwhelmingly entertainment driven, reinforcing homogenized digital cultures. This study contributes to the expanding literature on adolescent digital socialization by emphasizing the hybrid influence of peer dynamics and algorithmic architectures. The findings advocate for integrated digital literacy, emotional regulation, and platform transparency initiatives to promote healthier digital ecosystems for adolescents.

Keywords: Tiktok, Adolescent Social Behavior, Algorithmic Conformity, Social Media Psychology, Peer Interaction, Self Perception, Digital Literacy.

INTRODUCTION

The current global trend in adolescent social media usage reveals a marked increase in engagement with platforms that prioritize short, dynamic video content, notably TikTok. Research indicates that adolescents are rapidly adopting short video applications due to their ease of use, algorithm driven content curation, and capacity for creative self expression (Bossen & Kottász, 2020). The interactive

and immersive nature of TikTok has captured the attention of youth worldwide. This phenomenon has been further compounded by the aftermath of the COVID 19 pandemic, which led to increased screen time and a shift in digital communication patterns among adolescents (Montag et al., 2021). Moreover, evidence suggests that these platforms are evolving the way users consume content and are reshaping the landscape of social interaction on a global scale, as traditional social media are increasingly being supplanted by these newer, visually engaging media modalities (Montag et al., 2021).

TikTok's influence on identity formation is particularly noteworthy among teenagers in Southeast Asia, where rapid digitalization and cultural hybridity are transforming social norms. Adolescents in this region use TikTok as a medium for exploring self representation, negotiating peer recognition, and constructing multifaceted digital identities (Alamyar & Khotimah, 2023; Cervi et al., 2021). The platform's unique features such as its short video format, viral challenges, and personalized content recommendations provide a fertile ground for experimentation with self presentation in ways that blend local cultural expressions with global trends (Alamyar & Khotimah, 2023; Cervi et al., 2021). For instance, studies examining similar social media environments, such as the self identity construction among Palembang adolescents on Instagram, indicate that digital platforms encourage the construction and deconstruction of self identity by enabling users to manage their public personas and receive immediate peer feedback (Purnama et al., 2024). Although that work focused on Instagram, the mechanisms at play on TikTok appear to be analogous, as rapid visual feedback and creative freedom foster a dynamic environment for identity work (Zhu et al., 2024).

In summary, global trends show that TikTok and similar short video platforms have become integral to adolescent digital life, driven by their engaging, user friendly design and the social and creative gratification they offer (Bossen & Kottász, 2020). In Southeast Asia, where digitization and cultural exchange are accelerating, TikTok has emerged as a crucial platform for identity formation among teenagers, providing unique affordances that shape self perception and social interaction in an increasingly interconnected world (Cervi et al., 2021; Purnama et al., 2024). This dual influence both as a driver of global digital consumption trends and as an instrument for personal identity construction underscores the platform's significant role in contemporary adolescent life.

Despite its opportunities for creative expression and community building, TikTok also presents challenges, particularly concerning psychological well being. Research indicates that algorithmic recommendation systems have a multifaceted psychological impact on adolescent behavior. These systems curate content based on user interactions, which can lead adolescents to perceive a lack of transparency and experience feelings of manipulation (Cheng & Peng, 2024). Complementarily, adolescents often develop resistance behaviors as a response to these recommendation algorithms, mediated by their willingness and intention to disengage from content perceived as overly curated or homogenized (Lv et al., 2022). Additionally, transparency within algorithmic designs significantly impacts trust among adolescent users, not only in social contexts but also in educational and developmental settings (Ooge et al., 2023).

Social media platforms also significantly shape peer relationships and social validation processes among adolescents. Features such as likes, comments, and shares allow for immediate social feedback, critical in constructing self identity and social self worth. West et al. (2024) utilized a self determination theory framework to illustrate that social media platforms fulfill adolescents' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, these platforms can also heighten adolescents' sensitivity to peer acceptance, reinforcing social comparisons and emotional distress when expected social validation is lacking or contingent on algorithmically driven popularity metrics.

Adding to this complexity is the differential usage of TikTok across Indonesia's urban landscape. In megacities such as Jakarta, adolescents engage with TikTok through highly interconnected digital cultures, characterized by rapid content production and global trend participation. Conversely, studies in medium sized cities like Batam highlight localized cultural influences and distinct consumption patterns, reflecting a closer interplay between social media use and local identity construction. Adolescents in these settings often integrate local culture into their digital expressions, suggesting that infrastructural capacities, socio economic contexts, and cultural nuances drive unique user behaviors.

Nevertheless, systematic comparative studies between major urban centers and medium sized cities in Indonesia remain limited. There is a notable gap in empirical evidence regarding how TikTok's influence on adolescent social validation, identity construction, and peer relationships differs according to urban infrastructure and cultural milieu. Existing findings predominantly emphasize metropolitan dynamics, leaving the social media behaviors of adolescents in medium sized urban settings underexplored. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding the nuanced impacts of digital platforms across diverse urban ecologies.

Building upon these insights, the present study aims to analyze how TikTok influences adolescent social behavior in Kendari City, a medium sized urban area in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. This research focuses on mapping TikTok consumption patterns, examining mechanisms of compliance, identification, and internalization among teenagers, and exploring how these mechanisms interplay with the platform's algorithmic structures. Moreover, the study seeks to provide context specific recommendations for digital literacy education and platform moderation policies to mitigate potential psychosocial risks.

The novelty of this study lies in its exploration of TikTok's role in adolescent social behavior within a non metropolitan Indonesian context, contributing empirical evidence to a field that has predominantly centered on major cities. Furthermore, by integrating theories of social influence with contemporary understandings of algorithmic conformity, this study offers a theoretical extension that captures the increasingly non human mediation of adolescent socialization. Overall, this research aims to bridge existing gaps in the literature by shedding light on the localized digital experiences of adolescents and offering grounded insights for stakeholders seeking to foster healthier digital ecosystems.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive case study approach to explore the influence of TikTok on the social behavior of adolescents in Kendari City. The interpretivist paradigm underpins the research, emphasizing that social reality is multiple, subjective, and constructed through interactions between participants and researchers. As described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), naturalistic inquiry provides the philosophical foundation for maintaining the authenticity of context, rejecting experimental manipulation, and prioritizing an emic perspective. This orientation ensures that the nuanced experiences of adolescents using TikTok are captured in their own terms, reflecting the richness of their digital lives.

The case study design was selected to provide an in depth examination of a "bounded system" within specific spatial and temporal parameters namely, TikTok users aged 15–18 in Kendari City between January and March 2025. As alldorsson et al. (2021) recommend, the qualitative descriptive case study approach is particularly suited for exploratory inquiries that seek to map phenomena rather than test theoretical causality. The focus was not merely on identifying what adolescents do on TikTok, but also on how and why these behaviors are meaningful within their sociocultural context.

The study was conducted in five senior high schools (SMA/SMK) in Kendari City, selected based on the availability of stable 4G internet connectivity and institutional consent. A purposive maximum variation sampling strategy was employed to capture the diversity of adolescent experiences across gender, socioeconomic background, and academic tracks. An initial online screening survey involving 312 students was administered to identify eligible participants, from which 120 adolescents were selected. Information power guided the sample size determination, and thematic saturation was achieved by the twenty first of twenty four in depth interviews, indicating sufficient coverage of key patterns.

Data collection employed three complementary techniques to ensure methodological triangulation: participatory observation, questionnaire surveys, and semi structured interviews. Observational sessions were conducted twelve times, each lasting approximately 90 minutes, in informal school settings such as cafeterias and post class leisure areas. The observations captured spontaneous TikTok related interactions using a field note template that included date, time, event description, and analytic memos.

The baseline questionnaire consisted of 23 Likert scale items measuring TikTok access frequency, content type preferences, and self rated confidence levels. A pilot test involving 30 students outside the main sample yielded a Cronbach's alpha reliability score of 0.84, confirming the instrument's internal consistency. The semi structured interviews were guided by a flexible protocol comprising twelve core questions targeting motivations, social pressures, and relational changes associated with TikTok usage. Open ended probes facilitated the emergence of participant driven narratives. Each interview was audio recorded with consent, averaging 37 minutes in length, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data were managed and analyzed using NVivo 14 software. Following Dir et al. (2018) three cycle coding process, the first cycle involved "in vivo" and descriptive coding to honor participant language. The second cycle entailed pattern coding to identify broader conceptual categories. Finally, data were synthesized into thematic matrices as per Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) condensation display verification model, allowing systematic cross case comparisons and verification of emerging interpretations.

Ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings adhered to the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of data sources (observations, questionnaires, interviews) and member checking, wherein twelve key participants reviewed and validated the thematic summaries. Transferability was enhanced by providing thick descriptions of the research context, including the technological landscape and cultural dynamics of Kendari adolescents. Dependability was achieved through meticulous digital audit trails documenting every phase of the research process within NVivo, supplemented by chronological research memos. Confirmability was ensured by peer debriefing with two independent methodological experts, minimizing researcher bias and grounding interpretations firmly in the data.

Ethical considerations were central throughout the research. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Social Research Ethics Committee. Written parental consent and adolescent assent were secured prior to participation. Participant confidentiality was preserved through anonymization, with identifiers ranging from R01 to R120. Data were encrypted and stored securely on a university server employing AES 256 encryption standards. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without any adverse consequences, ensuring their autonomy and comfort.

Nonetheless, certain methodological limitations are acknowledged. The study's focus on a single urban area and age range limits the generalizability of the findings to broader adolescent populations. To mitigate reactivity bias, researchers engaged in prolonged field immersion (over six weeks) and maintained reflexive journals to continuously monitor and adapt to their positionality within the research environment. It is further recognized that the absence of digital trace data (e.g., platform usage logs) constrained the triangulation of observed behavior with actual app usage patterns. Future studies are recommended to integrate mixed methods approaches combining qualitative narratives with quantitative digital footprints to more comprehensively capture the complexity of adolescent social media interactions.

Through a carefully designed, ethically grounded, and methodologically rigorous qualitative case study, this research aims to illuminate the social dynamics and psychosocial implications of TikTok engagement among adolescents in Kendari City, offering both context specific insights and theoretical contributions to the broader discourse on adolescent digital life.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The present study explored the patterns of TikTok usage and its psychosocial impacts among adolescents in Kendari City. Findings are organized into five subsections: Respondent Profile, Content Consumption Patterns, Social Interactions, Self Perception, and Visualization of Usage Duration. Each subsection is supported by quantitative data and linked to relevant literature.

Respondent Profile

The respondent profile exhibited significant demographic diversity, aligning with global research indicating that age, gender, and socio economic status shape TikTok engagement patterns (Huang et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025). Table 1 illustrates the characteristics of the 120 adolescents sampled. Age distribution leaned heavily toward mid adolescence (16 17 years old), comprising 60% of respondents, reflecting a critical stage of identity formation. Gender distribution was balanced, with 48.3% male and 51.7% female participants, minimizing gender based bias in findings. Regarding usage duration, 55% of adolescents reported using TikTok for 1 2 hours daily, consistent with global averages noted in Fortunato et al. (2023). Approximately 25% exceeded two hours per day, identifying a substantial "heavy user" cohort, while 20% used the platform less than an hour daily. These patterns indicate that TikTok has become entrenched in the daily routines of adolescents, with a notable tilt toward moderate to heavy usage.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	15 years	22	18.3
	16 years	34	28.3
	17 years	38	31.7
	18 years	26	21.7
Gender	Male	58	48.3
	Female	62	51.7
Daily TikTok Usage Duration	<1 hour	24	20.0
	1–2 hours	66	55.0
	>2 hours	30	25.0

Primary Data 2025

Content Consumption Patterns

Table 2 presents adolescents' preferred content categories. Entertainment content comprising dance videos, challenges, and comedy was overwhelmingly dominant at 68.3%, confirming literature stating that self expressive and gratification seeking content predominates adolescent TikTok use (Bossen & Kottász, 2020; Petrovic, 2022). Educational content was the second most consumed (21.7%),

highlighting the platform's potential as a micro learning tool. News consumption (5.8%) and other content such as sports and beauty tutorials (4.2%) were markedly lower, signaling the platform's primary orientation toward leisure rather than information dissemination. This skew aligns with findings that trend based, participatory content fosters higher engagement levels among youth.

Table 2. Content Consumption Patterns

Content Type	n	%
Entertainment	82	68.3
Education	26	21.7
News	7	5.8
Others	5	4.2

Primary Data 2025

Social Interactions

Table 3 captures TikTok's impact on peer relations. Sixty percent of respondents discussed TikTok trends regularly with peers, illustrating the platform's role as a "common conversation starter," reinforcing findings by Angelini et al. (2022). Additionally, 48% reported collaborative video creation, which fosters peer bonding and creative cooperation (Nesi et al., 2018). However, only 28% indicated that TikTok improved the closeness of their friendships, while 12% experienced relational distancing, echoing concerns that digital interactions sometimes substitute for richer offline communication (Angelini et al., 2022). These findings confirm that while TikTok facilitates peer engagement, its benefits are contingent upon complementary offline interactions.

Table 3. Social Interactions

Indicator	Yes (%)	No (%)
Discuss TikTok trends	60	40
Create videos with friends	48	52
Closer relationships	28	72
Distant relationships	12	88

Primary Data 2025

Self Perception

Table 4 addresses the psychological consequences of TikTok usage. Forty two percent of respondents reported increased self confidence, often tied to positive feedback mechanisms such as likes and comments, consistent with theories on social media validation (Sari & Sa'id, 2023). Meanwhile, 32% experienced pressure to conform to trending challenges, reflecting mechanisms of compliance and identification. Cultural openness was enhanced in 18% of participants, demonstrating TikTok's potential for cross cultural exchange (Bossen & Kottász, 2020). Alarmingly, 12% reported negative social comparisons, supporting prior findings that visual based platforms exacerbate body

dissatisfaction and social anxiety (Dondzilo et al., 2023; LUSIANA, 2024). These dual outcomes highlight TikTok's paradoxical role in adolescent self concept development.

Table 4. Self Perception

Indicator	Agree (%)	Neutral/Disagree (%)
Increased self-confidence	42	58
Pressure to follow trends	32	68
Cultural openness	18	82
Negative social comparison	12	88

Primary Data 2025

Visualization of Usage Duration

Figure 1 visualizes daily TikTok usage patterns. The donut chart vividly depicts that the largest segment (55%) spent 1 2 hours daily, representing moderate users. The orange segment (25%) indicated heavy users exceeding two hours per day, aligning with global concerns over excessive exposure leading to "algorithmic conformity" and potential mental health risks (Fortunato et al., 2023). The blue segment (20%) represented light users under one hour daily, primarily casual browsers.

Daily TikTok Usage Duration among Teens in Kendari (n=120)
<1 hour
>2 hours
20.0%
25.0%
55.0%
1–2 hours
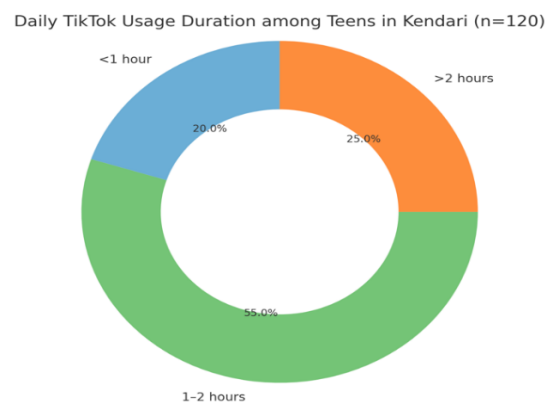
Figure 1. Daily TikTok Usage Duration among Adolescents in Kendari (n=120)

The proportionate visualization highlights the nuanced spectrum of TikTok engagement, from casual to compulsive use, echoing calls for critical digital literacy and well being interventions (Cai, 2023).

Overall, these results indicate that TikTok significantly shapes the social behavior and psychological development of adolescents in Kendari, serving as both a catalyst for creative engagement and a source of psychosocial vulnerability. The platform's impact manifests not only in how adolescents interact with peers and construct their identities but also in how they negotiate social validation within an increasingly algorithmically curated digital environment. These findings set the stage for deeper interpretive analysis in the discussion section, focusing on the mechanisms driving these observed patterns and their broader societal implications.

Algorithmic Conformity and Adolescent Behavior

The findings of this study resonate strongly with the "algorithmic conformity" model proposed by (Zhang, 2025), which suggests that adolescents are influenced not only by direct peer interactions but also by the curated environments fostered by algorithmic recommendation systems. TikTok's For You Page (FYP), driven by collaborative filtering algorithms, plays a crucial role in shaping users' exposure to specific types of content. The data from Table 2 and Table 3, where 68.3% of adolescents primarily consumed entertainment content and 60% discussed trends regularly with peers, demonstrate that algorithmic curation does not merely reflect user preferences but actively constructs new social norms. Adolescents are subtly nudged toward conformity through repeated exposure to popular trends, even without explicit peer pressure. This finding supports Shin et al. (2021), who argue that teenagers internalize algorithmically amplified norms, often perceiving them as organic peer standards. Moreover, Mambile & Ishengoma (2024) highlight that TikTok's real time learning algorithms reinforce behavior loops that sustain engagement and standardize digital identities, a phenomenon clearly evident among Kendari adolescents.

Psychological Impacts of TikTok Usage

The dual psychological effects identified in this study mirror prior research on social media's impact on adolescent mental health. As shown in Table 4, 42% of respondents experienced an increase in self confidence, while 32% reported feeling pressured to conform to popular trends. This bifurcation aligns with Rahmalia & Laili (2025) and Sari & Sa'id (2023), who observed that positive validation via likes and comments can bolster self esteem, but algorithm driven popularity metrics simultaneously intensify social comparison pressures. Additionally, the 12% of respondents who reported negative social comparison reflect Dondzilo et al. (2023) finding that appearance oriented content exacerbates body dissatisfaction and emotional distress. Thus, while TikTok serves as a tool for self expression and creativity, it also heightens vulnerabilities to psychosocial stress, reinforcing the need for critical digital literacy and emotional regulation interventions.

Peer Interaction Dynamics

TikTok's role in facilitating peer interactions was evident, with 48% of adolescents collaborating on content creation and 60% engaging in trend discussions. These findings align with Angelini et al. (2024) and Nesi et al. (2018), who suggest that short video platforms foster collective creativity and group identity. However, the ambivalent relational outcomes where only 28% reported stronger friendships while 12% experienced relational distancing highlight the nuanced nature of digital socialization. As Angelini et al. (2024) emphasize, digital interactions can enhance perceived closeness if they complement face to face engagement but can fragment relationships if they substitute offline

interactions. In the context of Kendari adolescents, TikTok appears to act as both a bridge and a barrier to authentic social bonding, depending on usage patterns and context.

Content Consumption Patterns and Well being

The dominance of entertainment content (68.3%) and the minimal consumption of news (5.8%) observed in Table 2 underscore TikTok's recreational orientation. While trend based participation can foster belonging and enjoyment (Bossen & Kottász, 2020; Petrovic, 2022), the algorithm's reinforcement of limited content genres risks creating homogeneous digital experiences, as evidenced by the emergence of entertainment centric echo chambers. The findings echo Hamilton et al. (2024), who describe TikTok's echo chambers as more fluid and trend driven compared to the more static echo chambers of Facebook and Twitter. This dynamic environment rapidly cycles through aesthetic and behavioral norms, intensifying social comparison and diminishing exposure to diverse perspectives. Consequently, interventions should not only promote diversified content exposure but also cultivate adolescents' critical awareness of how algorithms influence their information landscapes.

Mechanisms of Self Perception and Social Comparison

The relationship between TikTok engagement and self perception is complex. Positive feedback loops evident from the 42% increase in self confidence validate adolescents' digital self presentations (Apriva & Nurnisaa, 2025). However, the platform's emphasis on popularity metrics facilitates upward social comparisons, a key mechanism underlying the 12% incidence of negative self perception. As Lusiana (2024) and Cai (2023) note, continuous exposure to idealized portrayals on TikTok heightens self objectification and fosters unrealistic standards of beauty and success. Adolescents internalize these standards, reinforcing self critical appraisals when personal achievements or appearances fall short. Thus, TikTok simultaneously offers a venue for self efficacy and a landscape fraught with self esteem challenges, contingent on individual interpretation and resilience.

Broader Implications and Recommendations

The study's findings affirm that TikTok significantly influences adolescents' social behaviors, self perceptions, and mental health, functioning as both a catalyst for positive engagement and a vector for psychosocial risk. As Sanger (2020) and Gabarrón et al. (2023) advocate, interventions must be multifaceted combining digital literacy, emotional regulation strategies, and algorithmic awareness. Educators should integrate critical algorithm literacy into curricula, empowering students to actively navigate and reshape their digital environments. Parents should shift from screen time policing to content dialogue approaches, fostering open discussions about online experiences. Platforms must incorporate well being nudges such as prompts for content diversity and usage breaks to mitigate

overexposure and algorithmic conformity. Regulators should mandate transparency in recommendation systems, allowing independent audits to safeguard adolescent well being. Overall, addressing the complex interplay of algorithmic influence, social validation, and adolescent development demands a coordinated response across educational, familial, technological, and policy domains.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the multifaceted influence of TikTok on adolescent social behavior, self perception, and peer interaction in Kendari City. The findings demonstrate that algorithmic curation significantly shapes behavioral norms, reinforcing both creativity and conformity among users. While TikTok fosters creative self expression and enhances self confidence for many adolescents, it also exacerbates social comparison pressures and emotional vulnerabilities through exposure to idealized content and algorithmically reinforced standards. Peer interactions were strengthened through collaborative participation in trends, yet relational distancing also emerged among users heavily reliant on digital engagement without sufficient offline support. Content consumption patterns revealed a dominance of entertainment driven material, contributing to a homogenous digital culture that minimizes exposure to diverse viewpoints. The study advances theoretical discourse by extending Social Influence Theory into the algorithmic domain, emphasizing "algorithmic conformity" as a distinct phenomenon. Practically, it underscores the urgent need for critical digital literacy, algorithmic transparency, and emotional resilience interventions. Future research should explore longitudinal patterns of digital conformity, cross cultural comparisons, and the efficacy of well being nudges and algorithmic interventions on adolescent psychological outcomes.

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