Gender Motivations for TikTok Content Creation: A Comparative Study of Male and Female Students' University Students

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Abstract

TikTok has rapidly become a leading platform for youth self-expression and digital participation, yet little is known about how gender influences motivations for content creation. This study explores gender-based differences among South African university students, addressing a key gap in the literature. Using a mixed-methods design, 100 students (50 male, 50 female) were surveyed and focus groups with 25 participants were conducted to examine content types and motivational drivers, over a three-month period. Findings reveal clear distinctions: female students are primarily motivated by self-expression, social connection, and stress relief, favoring fashion, lifestyle, and dance content. Male students, by contrast, focus on entertainment, follower growth, and raising awareness, often creating comedy and educational videos. These patterns reflect broader social norms and platform dynamics, emphasizing different gratifications by gender. The study is guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory in understanding these gendered motivations is essential for fostering more inclusive and responsive social media environments. It offers practical insights for educators designing digital literacy interventions, as well as for platform developers aiming to enhance inclusivity and user engagement.

Keywords: TikTok, content creation, gender differences, university students, social media motivation, Uses and Gratifications Theory

1.   INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed how people communicate, entertain, and express themselves globally[1], and billions of users now participate in this digital ecosystem, making it a central hub for interaction, enabling anyone with internet access to express their views and share information[2]. Platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram dominate this space, but TikTok has revolutionized content creation and consumption. Unlike its competitors, TikTok presents itself as the leading platform for short-form mobile videos[3], approximately 63% of users are drawn by its addictive, bite-sized clips, and creative tools[4] . This

innovation has sparked trends, challenges, and viral content, fostering a unique online community[5].

Among these platforms, TikTok stands out not only for its format but also for the distinct ways users engage with it where users are motivated by amusement, escapism, self-expression, and social belonging [6]. In terms of gender preferences, female university students are more likely to create TikTok content for self-representation, identity exploration, and serving as a form of social validation and support [7]. They create their content around beauty, fashion, and lifestyle, with audience engagement reflecting their tendency to interact socially with peers through the platform [9]. On the other hand, male students' focus on community building, performance, status, and influence [8].

Although TikTok utilisation patterns and psychological effects have been widely examined [2], the area of user behavior in creating content remains insufficiently explored. Limited research has been conducted to determine what motivates users to become active content creators rather than passive viewers. According to [10], self-expression is a significant motivator for creating content. While a lot is known about university students using TikTok passively, a gap was identified in the limited research about gender-specific reasons that drive South African university students to create content.

Therefore, this study aims to determine the gender-specific motivations and influencing gender motives that drive university students to create content on TikTok. By exploring the differences in content types, usage patterns, and underlying motivations between male and female students, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of digital self-expression in the context of evolving social media platforms. Ultimately, the findings may offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and platform designers interested in the intersection of youth culture, technology, and gender dynamics. Hence this research aims to answer the following question: what type of TikTok content are commonly produced by male and female University students and what are key motivations driving them to create the content?

The structure of this paper is outlined as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on TikTok usage, content creation, and gender-based media engagement. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, including the mixed-methods design, sampling strategies, and data collection procedures. Section 4 presents and discusses the key findings, highlighting gender differences in motivations and content types. Finally, Section 5 concludes the study by summarizing the main insights, discussing their theoretical and practical implications, and offering directions for future research.

2.　　LITERATURE REVIEW

TikTok has emerged as a prominent platform for student content creators, fundamentally transforming how young people engage with digital media and offering unprecedented avenues for self-expression and digital participation [11] Unlike traditional social media platforms that primarily facilitate passive consumption, TikTok's design actively encourages user-generated content through its intuitive interface and sophisticated editing tools. The platform's unique features lower the barriers to content creation, making video production accessible to users regardless of their technical expertise [12]. The role of TikTok's short-form video format has been instrumental in fostering creativity and engagement among students [13], as the 15 to 60-second constraint forces creators to distill their ideas into concise, impactful content that aligns with digital natives' consumption preferences.

Gendered patterns in content creation reveal how societal norms and personal preferences influence digital self-expression. Female student creators demonstrate a marked preference for lifestyle content, with studies documenting a high frequency of vlogs, beauty tutorials, and fashion-related material [14]. This content typically emphasizes personal aesthetics, daily routines, and self-care practices, reflecting broader cultural associations between femininity and appearance-focused activities. In contrast, male student creators gravitate toward distinctly different content categories, with humor, gaming, and challenge-based content dominating their creative output [15]. This preference reflects traditional masculine performance norms that emphasize entertainment, competition, and technical skill demonstration.

The motivations driving gendered content creation are deeply rooted in psychological needs and sociocultural pressures that vary significantly between creators. Research indicates that societal beauty standards exert considerable influence on female creators' content strategies, with many feeling compelled to present idealized versions of themselves that conform to prevailing aesthetic norms [16]. Male content producers, conversely, tend to emphasize strategies that prioritize algorithmic success and virality over personal authenticity [15], reflecting a more instrumental relationship with the platform where content creation serves as a means to achieve external validation through metrics such as views, likes, and follower growth.

The psychological factors of social encouragement, self-presentation, and confidence building play crucial roles in shaping gendered content choices [17], while peer feedback and social validation significantly influence content creation decisions across genders [18]. However, the nature and importance of this feedback varies considerably between male and female creators, reflecting deeper

psychological and social differences in how validation is conceptualized and valued. Emerging research has also identified trends toward gender-neutral content and its reception among diverse student audiences [19], suggesting growing space for content that transcends conventional gender boundaries and potentially reflects broader societal shifts toward more fluid understandings of gender expression in digital

3.   METHODS

3.1.   Research Design

This study uses a mixed-methods research design to explore both the types of TikTok content created and the motivations behind content creation among male and female university students. This approach aligns with the study's aim to compare gender-specific trends by combining quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups. The quantitative component provides measurable data on the frequency and categories of content, as well as motivations such as entertainment or self-expression. Meanwhile, the qualitative component offers deeper insights into students' personal experiences and the reasons behind their content choices.

The mixed method approach allows for a fuller understanding of both what students post and why they post it. The decision to use mixed methods is supported by previous studies [20] , [21], [19], which show that combining numerical data with personal narratives leads to richer, more reliable findings. The study is guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which views users as active participants who engage with media to satisfy specific needs. UGT informs both the survey and focus group design, helping to categories motivations and explain how different content types may fulfil different gratifications. By applying this framework, the study is better equipped to understand gender differences in both content creation and motivation.

The study focused on four key themes—entertainment, self-expression, social connection, and validation, drawn from the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). These themes guided both the survey and interviews, helping to explore not only the types of content students post on TikTok, but also their underlying motivations.

3.2.   Population and Sampling

The study population consists of students enrolled at a South African University of Technology who are active TikTok users. This institution has an enrollment of approximately 13,000 students across three faculties: Management Sciences, Engineering, and Applied Health Sciences.

The sample for this study consisted of 100 university students, evenly divided between 50 male and 50 female participants through a combination of email invitations, targeted outreach via student WhatsApp groups and class announcements. Screening was used to confirm students regular TikTok usage and willingness to participate in the study. Priority was given to students who had posted original content on TikTok within the past three months to ensure relevance to the study's focus on content creation.

The study specifically targeted second- and third-year students across all three faculties, as they are more likely to have stable routines, established social media habits, and clearer motivations for content creation. From the broader sample, a focus group of 25 students was selected to participate in focus group discussions aimed at exploring deeper, qualitative insights into content types and motivational factors. These participants were purposively selected based on their level of TikTok activity, gender balance, and the diversity of content they produce. This purposive sampling ensured representation from both genders and a range of content creation styles, which was crucial for enriching the comparative analysis. This method was used to ensure that the data collected came from individuals with direct experience in TikTok content creation However, a limitation of purposive sampling is that it may introduce selection bias and limit the generalizability of the findings.

3.3. Data Gathering Procedure

Data was collected using an online questionnaire and administered through Google Forms because of its accessibility and ease of use, particularly since students are typically tech-savvy and regularly engage with online tools, allowing for efficient distribution and a high response rate. The link for Google form was distributed via student communication platforms. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections. The first section collected demographic information, whilst the second section focused on TikTok usage patterns, such as frequency of content creation, types of content produced, and duration of app use. The third section explored motivational factors using a series of Likert scale items. These items were designed to measure the degree to which participants agreed with statements related to key motivational themes such as entertainment, self-expression, social connection, and validation. The questions were informed by existing literature on the Uses and Gratifications Theory to ensure they were conceptually grounded and relevant to the study objectives.

The survey collected quantitative data whilst the focus group collected qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews, which were conducted face-to-face with 25 students. The interviews took place in quiet, pre-arranged venues on campus to ensure a comfortable and focused environment for open discussion.

The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was designed to explore personal experiences and motivations that are not easily captured through survey responses. The questions were open-ended and guided by the same key themes used in the questionnaire, including types of content produced, individual motivations for creating the content, audience engagement, and gender-related influences. This approach allowed for deeper insights and flexibility in probing participant responses, providing valuable context to complement the quantitative findings.

3.4.   Data Analysis Technique

The collected data was analyzed in two parts: quantitative data from the questionnaire and qualitative data from the interviews. Responses from the Google Form were exported to Google Sheets for cleaning and organization. Descriptive statistics, including percentages, frequencies, and averages, were calculated to identify common motivations. Graphs and charts were created to visually compare male and female findings and highlight gender-based patterns and content types.

Interview recordings were transcribed and cleaned and the data was documented and analyzed thematically to uncover common trends. The types of content created by participants, such as videos, vlog posts, or social media content, were analysed and categorised by gender to identify distinct patterns and important insights. The approach began with attentively reading the transcripts to obtain a complete understanding of was said by the participants. Important phrases and concepts, such as "I post for fun" or "likes make me feel good," were underlined and coded. These codes were organized into broader themes for example, comments regarding delight and self-expression were categorized as "Personal Enjoyment," but comments about likes and followers were classified as "Social Validation". Once the themes were identified, they were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data. Each theme was clearly defined and given a name that captured its core message, such as "Social Connection" or "Follower Growths." The final themes were used to answer the research questions, with direct quotes from participants included to support and illustrate each theme.

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1.   Demographic Information

4.1.1.   Content Type Preferences by Gender

Analysis of the data revealed five dominant categories of TikTok content created by students: (1) fashion and beauty, (2) lifestyle/vlogs, (3) dance, (4) comedy, and (5) educational/informational content (see Table 1). These categories were derived

from a thematic analysis of participant responses and content audit data. Figure 1 shows a clear pattern in gendered content preferences. Female students were more likely to create content in the fashion and beauty and lifestyle categories, with 62% indicating a preference for appearance-oriented or daily routine-based content. Male students, in contrast, showed higher representation in comedy (54%), dance challenges (47%), and educational/informational content (33%). This pattern reflects traditional gender alignments in digital expression and performance.
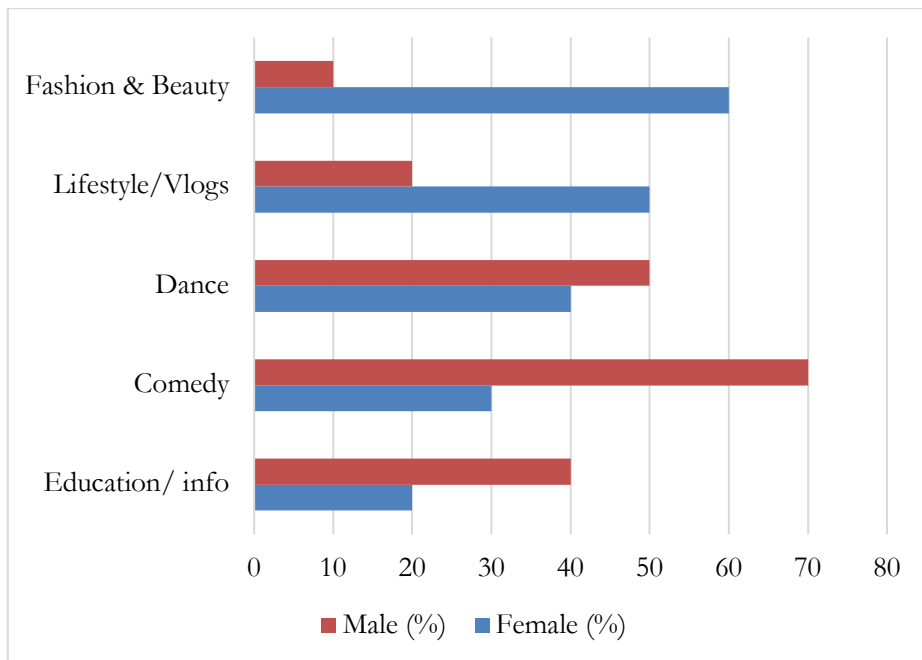

Figure 1. Content type preferences by gender

4.1.2. Motivational Patterns in Content Creation

As illustrated Figure 2, six primary motivational themes emerged from the data: (1) self-expression, (2) social connection, (3) stress relief, (4) follower growth, (5) entertainment, and (6) raising awareness. Female participants were more likely to cite self-expression and stress relief as their primary motivations in creating content, while male participants more frequently reported follower growth and entertainment as key drivers. Both groups reported social connection as a shared motivator, but with different underlying expressions, females emphasized emotional closeness, whereas males highlighted performance and peer recognition. Each of the identified motivations will now be examined in detail, with attention given to how they manifest across gender lines.
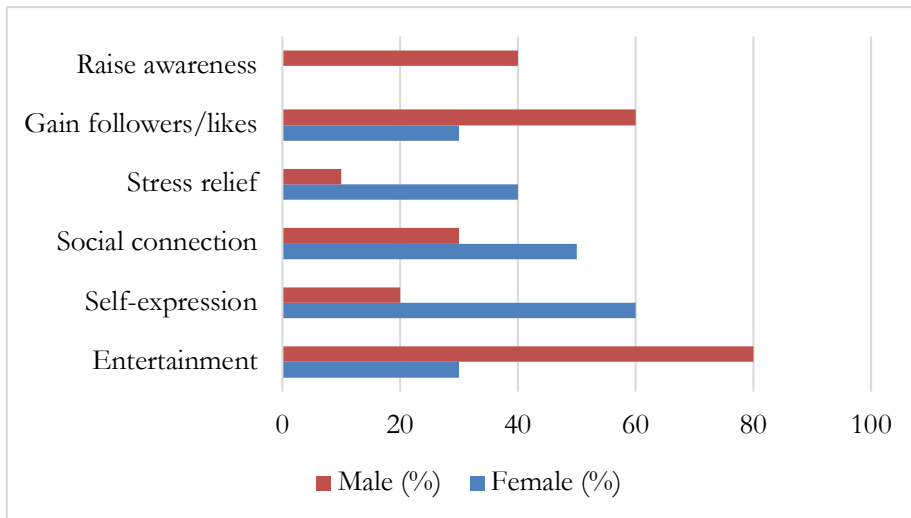
Figure 2. Motivations for content creation by gender

4.2. Presentation of Findings

4.2.1. Self-Expression

Self-expression is a dominant motivator for many female university students when creating TikTok content. For them, the platform serves as a digital canvas to showcase individuality, creativity, and personal style. According to the data, approximately 60% of female respondents cited self-expression as their primary reason for content creation, with an equal percentage preferring fashion and beauty videos (60%) as shown in Figure 1. These genres provide a direct means to visually communicate their identity. One female respondent explained *"TikTok lets me be who I am. I love dressing up and posting my fashion looks helps me express my mood and confidence."* The respondent explicitly links fashion content to self-expression, framing TikTok as a space for authentic self-presentation. This sentiment is further reinforced by another participant, who describes beauty routines as a form of creative storytelling *"When I share my skincare routines or makeup transitions, it's not just about beauty it's about showing the creative side of me also."* Together, these responses show how female students use TikTok's creative tools like filters, effects, and sounds to tell their own stories. This makes TikTok more than just an app, it becomes a place where they can explore who they are and feel more confident. In contrast, male respondents placed little to no emphasis on self-expression with only (20%) on Figure 2. One male student who make funny videos said, *"it's more about making people laugh and going viral."* Another added *"You won't see me doing fashion stuff; I'm here for clout, not for styling."* These responses show that male students care less about expressing themselves and more about getting attention.

4.2.2. Social Connection

Social connection serves as a significant motivational factor for female university students engaging with TikTok. Quantitative data reveals that 50% of female respondents identify social connection as their primary motivation for content creation, with an equal proportion (50%) favouring lifestyle vlogs and dance challenges (Figure 1). These content formats facilitate interpersonal engagement through their collaborative nature. As one participant noted: *"When I post a dance challenge and my friends join in or duet me, it creates this feeling of community".* These findings demonstrate that female students utilize TikTok primarily as a social networking space rather than just a content-sharing platform. Through participation in trending challenges and sharing curated aspects of their daily experiences, respondents reported strengthening existing friendships while establishing new connections with peers sharing similar interests. This social function of TikTok appears particularly valuable for maintaining peer relationships in digital environments. In contrast, male students were less influenced by social connection, with only 30% indicating it as a motive (*Figure 2*). One male student who stated: "*I'm not really into the personal stuff; I'd rather make something funny that gets shared a lot".* Another echoed this sentiment: *"Lifestyle stuff isn't really my thing; it doesn't get the same attention".* These responses suggest male students predominantly treat TikTok as a performance space, where metrics of virality and visibility outweigh personal engagement. This preference may explain their limited engagement with lifestyle content, which typically requires emotional investment and relational authenticity.

This contrast suggests a gender-based divergence in how students approach digital relationships on TikTok. Female students are more inclined to use the platform to foster a sense of belonging and shared experience, while male students prioritize content that maximizes visibility and impact. TikTok, therefore, serves different relational purposes depending on the user's gender a space for connection and community for females, and a tool for performance and reach for males.

4.2.3. Stress Relief

For many female university students, TikTok serves not only as a social or creative outlet but also as a source of emotional and psychological relief. Approximately 40% of female respondents indicated that they create TikTok content as a means of coping with stress, gravitating toward dance routines and beauty tutorials (40% in Figure 1). These content forms offer light-hearted, expressive, and enjoyable activities that provide a break from academic and personal pressures, such as one of the students stated, *"Filming a dance video after a tough day just helps me chill out. It's like a mini escape where I get to forget everything else."* This reveals how physical movement and creative focus provide mental relief, like exercise. Another explained, *"When I do makeup tutorials, I'm not just making content, I'm calming my anxiety. It's something that*

gives me peace. "These reactions demonstrate how creative rituals can become coping mechanisms, providing therapeutic benefits through self-expression and routine. TikTok, in this context, is a digital platform for self-care and emotional control. The controlled creativity of dance choreography or step-by-step beauty routines provides female pupils with a sense of control, excitement, and a break from stress. In contrast, only 20% of male students reported using TikTok for stress relief (Figure 2), One male respondent noted, *"When I'm stressed, I'll watch funny videos or gaming clips rather than post. It's easier to zone out that way."* This highlights a key difference: while female students actively create content to manage stress, male students tend to use TikTok passively for distraction.

4.2.4. Follower Growth

Follower growth emerges as a shared motivation among both female and male university students, yet the underlying intentions and content strategies reveal a notable gender difference. For female students, around 30% reported follower growth as a key motive (*Figure 1*). However, their content preferences fashion (60%) and vlogs (50%) suggest that their growth efforts are deeply intertwined with personal storytelling and self-expression. Rather than chasing virality alone, they aim to build authentic connections with their audience. As one female respondent explained, *"I like the idea of growing my audience, but I won't change who I am just to get views. My content reflects me."* These statements indicate that for many female students, follower growth is a secondary outcome of sharing meaningful, identity-driven content, not necessarily the primary goal. In contrast, male students exhibit a stronger focus on follower growth, with 60% explicitly identifying it as a primary motivator (*Figure 2*). Their preferred formats comedy (70%) and dance videos (50%) tend to be highly performative and optimized for virality. As one male student shared *"I post videos to get more followers. The funnier it is the more followers I get."* And Another said, *"If something's not working, I'll switch it up."* These responses point to a more strategic and external motivation: gaining visibility, likes, and digital recognition. Males seem to approach content creation with a performance mindset, tailoring their posts to trends and audience preferences rather than personal narrative. This distinction reflects how TikTok's competitive and algorithm-driven environment is navigated differently by gender. While both genders value audience reach, their means and meanings behind follower growth diverge males aim for virality, and females focus on connection and storytelling.

4.2.5. Entertainment

Entertainment stands out as the most dominant motivation for male university students creating TikTok content, with 80% citing it as their primary goal (*Figure 2*). Males tend to favour comedy (70%) and dance videos (50%), as these formats are highly engaging, shareable, and often trend-driven, maximizing their chances

of capturing a large audience. One male student explained, *"Comedy gets views. If you're funny, people follow. That's how you grow."* This highlights a performance-oriented mindset, where content is designed to entertain and attract broad visibility. In contrast, only 10% of female students identified entertainment as a core motive (*Figure 2*), even though 30% create comedy content (*Figure 1*). However, for females, entertainment often takes a secondary role to more intrinsic motivations. As one student explained, *"I like making people laugh, but I'm more into sharing my life or talking about things that matter to me."* This suggests that while female students engage in entertainment genres, their content is often relational or identity driven, prioritizing personal storytelling over mass appeal. The gendered divide reflects broader differences in platform use, male students often treat TikTok as a stage for performance, driven by external goals like visibility and audience engagement. This shows how entertainment meets both external and personal motivations, varying by gender.

4.2.6. Raise Awareness

Raising awareness motivates a notable portion of male university students, with approximately 40% creating TikTok content aimed at educating viewers and addressing social issues (*Figure 2*). These males tend to prefer educational or informative content formats (40% in Figure 1), which enable them to spread knowledge and advocate for causes they care about. One male student expressed this motivation clearly, *"I post videos about social issues to spread info and make a difference."* this indicates that for many males, TikTok serves as a platform for social impact and advocacy. In contrast, female students show no mention of raising awareness as a primary motive (*0% in Figure 2*), Females' preference for personal and relational content suggests a greater emphasis on creativity and emotional connection rather than information dissemination. This contrast highlights a clear gendered difference, males are more likely to use TikTok as a tool for educational outreach and social influence, while females prioritize content that reflects their identity and fosters interpersonal bonds. Raising awareness as a motive underscores TikTok's potential as an educational platform, particularly among male users seeking to make a positive impact through their content.

4.3. Discussion

This study explored the gender-based motivations driving TikTok content creation among South African university students, revealing consistent patterns across content types and motivational drivers. Female participants primarily created fashion, lifestyle, and dance videos and were motivated by self-expression, stress relief, and social connection. Male participants were more likely to produce comedy and educational content, driven by motivations such as entertainment, follower growth, and raising awareness.

These findings support prior literature that identifies gender as a significant influence on social media engagement, particularly on platforms like TikTok that prioritize visual storytelling. As [1] highlights, TikTok's algorithm personalizes content based on user engagement, which may amplify already existing gender-based content patterns by reinforcing user preferences through feedback loops. Female students' preference for beauty and lifestyle content aligns with research by Kumar [14], who found that young women often internalize social media beauty standards and express identity through aesthetic-oriented content. Similarly, [16] noted that TikTok contributes to shaping body image and personal representation, influencing the type of content female users are drawn to create.

In contrast, the prevalence of comedy and issue-awareness content among male creators reflects traditional masculine social performance norms. Males in the current study approached TikTok as a stage for strategic visibility, echoing the findings in [15] that male users often seek external validation through metrics like views and follower counts. This trend is further reinforced by the work in [13], who demonstrated that educational content on TikTok holds appeal among male students as a means of asserting intellectual credibility and social influence. The work in l [3] further argue that male students exhibit higher levels of hedonic and instrumental motivations, treating TikTok as a tool for performance, virality, and information dissemination.

These gendered motivations are well situated within the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which posits that media users are active agents who select platforms and content types to fulfill specific needs. Female students in this study engaged with TikTok for emotional expression and relational connection—mirroring findings in [8], who documented that young women use the platform as a therapeutic and expressive outlet. Meanwhile, male students emphasized utility-driven goals like gaining visibility or advocating for causes, consistent with the instrumental uses of TikTok identified by [9].

Practically, these results offer insight for platform developers, digital literacy educators, and content marketers. For example, universities may tailor digital literacy workshops to address the emotional needs and identity-expression goals of female students, while guiding male students in developing sustainable and ethical content strategies. Moreover, platform designers could create tools that balance algorithmic visibility with authenticity, ensuring that both expressive and educational content are equitably rewarded. Understanding the nuanced motivations by gender allows for more inclusive platform design and more targeted educational interventions.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the motivations behind TikTok content creation among university students, revealing significant gender-based differences in both content preferences and underlying drivers. Female students were primarily motivated by self-expression, social connection, and stress relief, often creating fashion, lifestyle, and dance content that allowed them to explore their identity and build community. In contrast, male students focused on entertainment, follower growth, and raising awareness, favouring comedy and educational videos that prioritized audience engagement and virality. These findings demonstrate how societal norms and platform algorithms shape distinct gendered approaches to content creation, with females viewing TikTok as a space for personal and communal fulfilment while males treated it as a performance-driven platform for influence.

The study's alignment with the Uses and Gratifications Theory highlights how individual needs, influenced by gender dynamics, guide media engagement. These insights have important implications for educators, platform developers, and policymakers. Universities could integrate digital literacy programs that address female students' concerns about judgment and male students' technical skill gaps. Meanwhile, TikTok could enhance features to better support female creators' emotional well-being and male creators' growth strategies. Future research should explore non-Western cultural contexts and longitudinal trends to further understand evolving motivations in social media content creation. Ultimately, this research provides valuable insights into the gendered nature of digital behaviour, offering a foundation for more inclusive and empowering support systems for young creators navigating the complexities of online platforms.

Although this study enhances understanding of how gender influences TikTok content creation among university students, several limitations restrict the scope of its insights. Firstly, the sample was limited to 100 students from a single University of Technology and recruited through purposive sampling. While ensuring active creators, this method risks selection bias and limits generalisability beyond similar contexts. Secondly, data relied on self-reported survey responses and focus group reflections: such methods are susceptible to social desirability bias, especially around sensitive topics like status-seeking and body image. Thirdly, the cross-sectional design provides only a momentary view of motivations; it cannot track how platform algorithms or life transitions alter content strategies over time.

Future work should therefore expand sampling across various institutions, including rural, private, and TVET colleges, and explicitly include non-binary and gender-diverse participants. Longitudinal studies could observe how algorithm updates, academic workloads, and evolving peer networks influence motives over time, while combining self-reports with digital-trace data (such as follower-growth

curves or view-through rates) would reduce response bias and show how stated motives correspond with observable behaviour. Finally, examining intersectional factors like socioeconomic status, field of study, and race or ethnicity, and evaluating how new monetisation tools or regional platform regulations impact student motivations, would create a more comprehensive, context-aware account of content creation.

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