

Social-Political Content Exposure on TikTok and Its Impact on University Students' Social Behavior

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Abstract

The rapid growth of short-video platforms has transformed how young adults engage with social and political information, potentially shaping their social behavior beyond formal political participation. This study examines the effects of exposure to social-political content and the intensity of TikTok use on students' interpersonal competence. Using a quantitative explanatory design, data were collected from 103 undergraduate students at a private university in Bandung, Indonesia, through a structured questionnaire. Social-political content exposure, TikTok usage intensity, and interpersonal competence were measured using adapted and validated scales. Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression. The results indicate that exposure to social-political content on TikTok has a positive and statistically significant effect on students' interpersonal competence, whereas TikTok usage intensity is negatively associated but not statistically significant. The regression model explains 31.7% of the variance in interpersonal competence, suggesting a moderate explanatory power. These findings highlight that the social impact of TikTok is driven more by the type of content consumed than by the frequency or duration of platform use. The study contributes to the literature by extending social learning and media effects perspectives to interpersonal outcomes, demonstrating that social-political content on short-video platforms can function as an informal learning resource that enhances communication and social interaction skills. In practice, the findings underscore the importance of promoting critical engagement with constructive digital content rather than focusing solely on limiting social media use. Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal designs and explore additional mediating factors to further understand the mechanisms linking digital content exposure and social behavior.

Keywords: Social-Political Content; Tiktok; Interpersonal Competence; Social Learning; Students

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed how individuals interact, learn, and construct social meaning. Social media no longer functions merely as a

communication tool; it has evolved into a complex social environment in which values, norms, and behavioral models are continuously shaped through algorithmic mediation and user participation. This transformation is closely linked to broader processes of digital disruption, which require individuals and institutions to adapt cognitively, socially, and behaviorally in increasingly volatile environments ([Bernadus & Prasetyaningtyas, 2023](#); [Bernadus, 2023](#)).

Among digital platforms, TikTok has emerged as one of the most influential social media applications for Generation Z. Its short-video format, algorithm-driven personalization, and high levels of engagement have positioned TikTok as a dominant source of information, entertainment, and social discourse among university students. Recent international studies indicate that TikTok is not only consumed for leisure purposes but increasingly serves as a medium for social commentary, political narratives, and civic discourse, particularly among young adults ([Vizcaíno-Verdú & Aguaded, 2023](#)).

Digital disruption reshapes not only technological infrastructures but also social behavior and adaptive capacities. [Bernadus and Prasetyaningtyas \(2023\)](#) emphasize that individuals operating in digitally disrupted environments must continuously recalibrate their cognitive and interpersonal competencies to remain socially effective. In higher education contexts, students simultaneously encounter digital platforms as learning spaces, identity arenas, and environments for social interaction. These conditions make university students a particularly relevant population for examining how digital exposure translates into social behavior.

From a social-psychological perspective, digital interactions yield ambivalent outcomes. On the one hand, social media can enhance perceived social support, emotional connectedness, and access to peer networks ([Pratidina et al., 2024](#); [Valkenburg et al., 2022](#)). On the other hand, algorithmic amplification, rapid content cycles, and emotionally charged narratives may weaken empathy, intensify social polarization, and alter patterns of interpersonal interaction ([Hussein et al., 2025](#)). These contrasting dynamics highlight the importance of examining not only how often social media is used, but what kinds of content users are exposed to.

Recent empirical research suggests that individual responses to digital content are mediated by cognitive orientation, learning preferences, and self-efficacy. [Fikri and Nuradina \(2023\)](#) demonstrate that students process digital information selectively based on learning style profiles, while [Ahmad, J., & Kartika, R. \(2025\)](#) and [Cholid and Nuradina \(2025\)](#) show that creative self-efficacy shapes how individuals transform digital exposure into adaptive behavior. These findings reinforce the argument that media effects are not uniform but contingent upon both content characteristics and individual cognitive engagement.

Within TikTok's ecosystem, social-political content represents a particularly influential category. Such content includes discussions of public policy, civic movements, social justice issues, and political opinions presented through short, visually compelling videos. Due to TikTok's recommendation algorithm, users are frequently exposed to social-political content incidentally, without deliberate information seeking. International studies confirm that incidental exposure on TikTok plays a significant role in shaping users' attitudes, emotional responses, and social interpretations of political issues ([Nguyen et al., 2023](#); [Theocharis et al., 2021](#)).

Social Cognitive Theory provides a robust framework for understanding how such exposure translates into social behavior. According to [Bandura \(1986\)](#), behavior emerges through reciprocal interactions between personal factors, environmental stimuli, and observed behavior.

In digital environments, social-political content functions as an observational learning stimulus, where users attend to models that receive social reinforcement through likes, comments, and shares. Over time, these reinforced behaviors may be cognitively internalized and reproduced in offline social interactions.

To operationalize social behavior in a theoretically grounded manner, this study adopts the concept of interpersonal competence. Interpersonal competence refers to an individual's ability to initiate interactions, disclose personal views appropriately, assert disagreement constructively, provide emotional support, and manage interpersonal conflict effectively. Prior studies suggest that exposure to contentious or emotionally charged digital content can significantly influence these competencies, either by enhancing discussion skills and social confidence or by increasing social anxiety and withdrawal ([Buhrmester et al., 1988](#); [Kross et al., 2021](#)).

Despite the growing international literature on TikTok and political communication, most empirical studies focus primarily on political participation or attitudinal outcomes. Quantitative evidence indicates that TikTok explains only a limited proportion of variance in political participation, suggesting that broader behavioral mechanisms remain underexplored ([Wina et al., 2024](#); [Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020](#)). This gap underscores the need to shift analytical attention from participation metrics toward everyday social behavior and interpersonal functioning.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how social-political content exposure and TikTok usage intensity influence university students' social behavior. Rather than assuming that longer usage duration necessarily produces stronger effects, this study differentiates between content-specific exposure and usage intensity, reflecting recent calls in media research to move beyond time-based measures ([Meier & Reinecke, 2021](#)). Focusing on undergraduate students at Universitas INABA Bandung, this research contributes empirical evidence from a local context while engaging with global theoretical debates on digital media effects.

Accordingly, this study aims to:

- (1) analyze the effect of social-political content exposure on students' social behavior,
- (2) examine the influence of TikTok usage intensity on social behavior, and
- (3) evaluate the combined effect of content exposure and usage intensity on interpersonal competence among university students.

By emphasizing content quality over usage quantity, this study seeks to refine contemporary understandings of social media effects and contribute to the literature on digital behavior, social learning, and youth interaction in algorithm-driven environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Learning and Social Cognitive Perspectives in Digital Environments

Understanding how digital media influences social behavior requires a theoretical framework that accounts for both environmental exposure and individual agency. Social Learning Theory posits that individuals acquire new behaviors by observing others in social contexts, without direct personal experience. Through processes of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, observed behaviors may be internalized and later enacted, particularly when those behaviors are socially reinforced. In digital environments, social media platforms provide abundant behavioral models through content creators, influencers, and peer interactions,

making observational learning a central mechanism of behavioral formation.

Social Cognitive Theory extends this perspective by emphasizing the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, behavior, and environment. Rather than viewing individuals as passive recipients of media influence, this framework highlights the role of cognitive processes in shaping how digital content is interpreted and translated into behavior. Self-efficacy, self-regulation, and personal values influence whether observed behaviors are accepted, rejected, or adapted. In the context of social media use, users actively evaluate content based on their beliefs, competencies, and prior experiences, which moderates the impact of exposure on social behavior.

Applied to TikTok, these theoretical perspectives suggest that exposure to social-political content does not automatically alter students' social behavior. Instead, behavioral outcomes emerge through cognitive engagement with observed models, perceived social reinforcement, and individual confidence in expressing opinions or managing interpersonal interactions. This theoretical foundation is particularly relevant to the examination of university students, who are simultaneously developing social identity, civic awareness, and interpersonal competence.

2.2 Media Effects Theory and the Shift Toward Content-Specific Exposure

Media Effects Theory provides a complementary lens for examining how media exposure influences knowledge, attitudes, emotions, and behavior. Early models of media effects emphasized direct and powerful influence, whereas later developments recognized that media effects are conditional, context-dependent, and shaped by audience characteristics. Contemporary media environments, especially social media, further complicate these dynamics by enabling users to simultaneously act as content producers, distributors, and interpreters.

In social media contexts, effects are no longer driven solely by exposure frequency or duration. Algorithmic personalization, interactivity, and emotional framing intensify selective exposure and repeated encounters with similar content. Short-form video platforms such as TikTok amplify these effects by prioritizing emotionally engaging and visually compelling narratives, which may encourage rapid cognitive processing rather than reflective evaluation. Consequently, recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between usage intensity and content-specific exposure when assessing media effects.

This distinction is critical in understanding why extensive time spent on social media does not necessarily translate into uniform behavioral outcomes. Users with similar usage intensity may encounter substantially different content streams, leading to divergent cognitive and social effects. Media effects in such environments are therefore shaped less by how often platforms are used and more by what types of content dominate users' algorithmic feeds.

2.3 TikTok as a Social Media Platform for Generation Z

TikTok represents a distinct evolution in social media architecture, characterized by short-form video content, high levels of user participation, and algorithm-driven content discovery. Unlike platforms that rely heavily on social networks or follower relationships, TikTok's recommendation system exposes users to content beyond their immediate social circles. This structure increases the likelihood of incidental exposure to diverse topics, including social and political issues.

For Generation Z and, in particular, university students, TikTok functions not only as an entertainment platform but also as a space for self-expression, information seeking, and social

interaction. Features such as comments, duets, and stitched videos enable dialogic engagement, allowing users to respond to, reinterpret, or contest content produced by others. Hashtags and trending topics further facilitate the formation of issue-based digital communities, reinforcing shared meanings and behavioral norms.

Within academic contexts, TikTok's influence extends to students' social orientation and interaction patterns. While the platform may support creativity, peer connection, and informal learning, intensive engagement also raises concerns regarding attention fragmentation, emotional overload, and altered interpersonal communication styles. These dynamics position TikTok as a relevant site for examining how digital exposure intersects with the development of social behavior among students.

2.4 Social-Political Content Exposure on TikTok

Social-political content on TikTok encompasses messages related to public policy, governance, civic participation, social movements, and political identity. Presented through short, visually engaging videos, such content often simplifies complex issues to enhance accessibility and emotional resonance. As a result, political communication on TikTok frequently blends information, entertainment, and personal narrative, blurring the boundaries between civic education and popular culture.

A distinctive feature of social-political exposure on TikTok is its incidental nature. Users may encounter political or social issue content without actively seeking it, as algorithmic recommendations prioritize relevance and engagement over intentional information retrieval. Incidental exposure has been shown to shape users' awareness, emotional reactions, and interpretative frames, even among individuals with low initial political interest.

From a social learning perspective, social-political content provides behavioral models for expressing opinions, engaging in debate, and responding to disagreement. Content creators who receive positive reinforcement through likes, comments, or shares may function as influential models, increasing the likelihood that their communication styles and social behaviors are observed, evaluated, and potentially imitated by viewers. Over time, repeated exposure to such models may influence how students navigate social interactions involving sensitive or contested issues.

2.5 TikTok Usage Intensity and Behavioral Outcomes

Usage intensity refers to the degree of engagement with a platform, typically reflected in attention, duration, frequency, and cognitive involvement. In social media research, usage intensity has often been treated as a proxy for media influence. However, recent findings suggest that intensity alone provides an incomplete explanation of behavioral effects, particularly in algorithm-driven environments.

High usage intensity may increase the probability of exposure to social-political content, but it does not guarantee consistent cognitive or social outcomes. Users may engage with TikTok for diverse purposes, including entertainment, escapism, and social connection, each associated with distinct attentional states and interpretive processes. Consequently, intensive use may coexist with superficial processing, selective avoidance, or emotional disengagement, limiting its explanatory power for social behavior change.

This perspective supports the need to empirically disentangle usage intensity from content exposure when examining TikTok's social effects. Understanding whether behavioral outcomes

are driven by time spent on the platform or by the nature of content encountered is essential for advancing media effects research in contemporary digital contexts.

2.6 Social Behavior as Interpersonal Competence

Social behavior in this study is conceptualized as interpersonal competence, defined as the capacity to interact effectively with others across diverse social situations. Interpersonal competence encompasses multiple dimensions, including initiating relationships, appropriate self-disclosure, assertive expression of disagreement, emotional support provision, and constructive conflict management. These competencies are particularly salient in social-political interactions, which often involve divergent perspectives and emotional intensity.

Interpersonal competence is not a fixed trait but a context-sensitive set of skills shaped by learning experiences, social reinforcement, and cognitive evaluation. Digital environments introduce new interactional norms and challenges, requiring individuals to adapt traditional social skills to mediated contexts. Exposure to social-political discourse on platforms such as TikTok may strengthen certain competencies, such as confidence in expressing opinions, while simultaneously challenging others, including empathy and conflict resolution.

By framing social behavior as a multidimensional construct, this study moves beyond simplistic indicators of online engagement and focuses on how digital exposure relates to students' capacity to manage real-world social interactions. This approach aligns with contemporary calls to examine the broader social implications of social media use, particularly among young adults navigating increasingly hybrid online–offline social environments.

2.7 Research Gap and Hypothesis Development

Despite the growing literature on TikTok and youth engagement, empirical studies have predominantly focused on political participation, information acquisition, or attitudinal change. Compared with little attention has been paid to how exposure to social-political content influences everyday social behavior and interpersonal competence. Moreover, existing research often treats usage intensity as a primary explanatory variable, overlooking the role of content specificity.

This study addresses these gaps by integrating social learning, social cognitive, and media effects perspectives to examine how exposure to social-political content and the intensity of TikTok use jointly shape university students' social behavior. By differentiating content exposure from usage intensity, the study responds to recent theoretical and empirical critiques of time-based media measures.

Based on this theoretical synthesis, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Social-political content exposure on TikTok has a positive and significant effect on students' social behavior.

H2: The intensity of TikTok use has a positive and significant effect on students' social behavior.

H3: Social-political content exposure and TikTok usage intensity simultaneously influence students' social behavior.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, explanatory (causal) research design to examine the effects

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of exposure to social-political content on TikTok and the intensity of TikTok use on students' social behavior, conceptualized as interpersonal competence. Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire and analyzed using inferential statistics to test the proposed hypotheses.

3.2 Population, Sample, and Sampling Procedure

The population comprised 3,400 active undergraduate students of Universitas INABA Bandung (cohort 2022) across study programs. A probability sampling approach was used, employing simple random sampling, which provides each student an equal chance of selection.

The minimum sample size was estimated using the Slovin formula with a 10% margin of error:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2} = \frac{3400}{1 + 3400(0.1)^2} = \frac{3400}{35} = 97.14$$

Accordingly, the target sample was rounded to approximately 100 respondents. The final dataset used for analysis included 103 respondents (as reflected in the study dataset) and met the minimum requirement for multiple regression with two predictors.

3.3 Data Type, Source, and Data Collection

This study used primary quantitative data collected via questionnaire responses. All items were measured using Likert-type scales. The instrument was administered to participants through a survey distribution procedure. Prior to full deployment, a pilot test (try-out) was conducted with 20 respondents outside the main sample to ensure clarity and consistency of the items.

3.4 Measures and Instrumentation

Three constructs were measured using adapted instruments aligned with the TikTok and student context. All items used a five-point Likert scale with response anchors adapted to each construct.

Table 1. Constructs, instruments, dimensions, and number of items

Construct (Code)	Instrument Source	Dimensions	No. of Items	Scale
Social-political content exposure (X1)	Social Political Content Exposure Scale (SPCES)	Attention; Absorption/engagement (Penghayatan)	12 (6+6)	1–5
TikTok usage intensity (X2)	TikTok Usage Intensity Scale (TUIS)	Duration; Frequency	8 (4+4)	1–5
Social behavior: Interpersonal competence (Y)	Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ), Buhrmester et al. (1988) , adapted	Initiation; Self-disclosure; Negative assertion; Emotional support; Conflict management	15 (3 each)	1–5

3.4.1 Social-political Content Exposure (X1)

Social-political content exposure was defined as the extent to which students are exposed to and cognitively–emotionally engage with social and political content on TikTok. This construct

was measured using 12 items adapted from SPCES, reflecting two dimensions: Attention and Absorption/engagement.

3.4.2 TikTok Usage Intensity (X2)

TikTok usage intensity referred to the level of students' engagement with TikTok in terms of duration and frequency of use. It was measured using 8 items adapted from the TUIS. In this study, usage intensity was treated as behavioral engagement rather than clinical addiction.

3.4.3 Social Behavior: Interpersonal Competence (Y)

Social behavior was operationalized as interpersonal competence, representing students' ability to interact effectively in social situations. This construct was measured using 15 adapted items based on the ICQ ([Buhrmester et al., 1988](#)), capturing five domains: Initiation, Self-disclosure, Negative assertion, Emotional support, and Conflict management.

3.5 Validity and Reliability Procedures

Instrument quality was assessed through:

1. Item validity testing (item–total correlation / significance level for each item),
2. Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency.

Items meeting the validity threshold were retained for the main analysis, and constructs with Cronbach's alpha above common acceptability standards were considered reliable for hypothesis testing.

3.6 Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using the following sequence:

1. Descriptive statistics to summarize respondent characteristics and variable distributions.
2. Instrument testing: validity and reliability.
3. Classical assumption tests for multiple regression:
 - Normality of residuals
 - Multicollinearity (e.g., VIF and tolerance)
 - Heteroskedasticity
4. Multiple linear regression analysis to estimate the effects of X1 and X2 on Y:

$$Y = a + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + e$$
5. Hypothesis testing:
 - **t-test (partial test)** to examine the individual effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable
 - **F-test (simultaneous test)** to examine the joint effect of X1 and X2
6. Coefficient of determination (R^2) to assess the proportion of variance in interpersonal competence explained by the model.

Table 2. Analytical procedures and decision criteria

Step	Analysis	Output	Decision Criterion
1	Descriptive statistics	Mean, SD, frequency	Interpret distribution patterns
2	Validity test	Item validity	$p < 0.05$ / acceptable item correlation
3	Reliability test	Cronbach's alpha	$\alpha \geq 0.70$ (acceptable)

Step	Analysis	Output	Decision Criterion
4	Normality	Residual normality	$p > 0.05$ (typical criterion)
5	Multicollinearity	VIF, tolerance	$VIF < 10$; tolerance > 0.10
6	Heteroskedasticity	Residual variance	$p > 0.05$ / no visible pattern
7	Multiple regression	β , t, F, R^2	$p < 0.05$ for significance

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Respondent Profile

A total of 103 valid responses were analyzed. Most respondents were in the 18–22 age group (67.0%), followed by the 23–27 age group (29.1%). Female respondents constituted 71.8% of the sample. Participants represented diverse academic programs, with the largest share from Psychology (41.7%), followed by Management (23.3%) and Communication Studies (15.5%). In terms of status, 69.9% were full-time active students, and 30.1% were active students while working.

Table 3. Respondent demographics (N = 103)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18–22	69	67.0
	23–27	30	29.1
	28–32	3	2.9
	33–37	1	1.0
Gender	Male	29	28.2
	Female	74	71.8
Study program	Psychology	43	41.7
	Management	24	23.3
	Accounting	11	10.7
	Communication Studies	16	15.5
	Other programs	9	8.7
Student status	Active student	72	69.9
	Active student and working	31	30.1

4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Overall, respondents reported moderate exposure to social-political content on TikTok, active usage intensity, and moderate-to-adequate interpersonal competence.

Table 4. Distribution of social-political content exposure (X1)

Category	n	%
Very rarely	10	9.7
Rarely	15	14.6
Sometimes	50	48.5
Often	22	21.4

Very often	6	5.8
Total	103	100.0

Table 5. Distribution of TikTok usage intensity (X2)

Category	n	%
Never	9	8.7
Once	18	17.5
More than once	40	38.8
Often	31	30.1
Very often	5	4.9
Total	103	100.0

Table 6. Distribution of interpersonal competence (Y)

Category	n	%
Very low / not aligned	6	5.8
Low / not aligned	20	19.4
Moderate	45	43.7
High	28	27.2
Very high	4	3.9
Total	103	100.0

4.3 Instrument Validity and Reliability

All measurement items met the validity threshold ($r\text{-count} > r\text{-table} = 0.1937$; $p < 0.01$). Internal consistency was acceptable to excellent across constructs. Cronbach's alpha values indicated that X1 and Y were reliable, and X2 demonstrated very high reliability.

Table 7. Item validity and internal consistency

Construct	Number of Items	Validity (r range)	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Social-political content exposure (X1)	12	0.412 – 0.841	0.765	Reliable
TikTok usage intensity (X2)	8	0.703 – 0.845	0.917	Highly reliable
Interpersonal competence (Y)	15	0.409 – 0.818	0.808	Reliable

All measurement items demonstrated satisfactory construct validity, as indicated by item–total correlation coefficients exceeding the critical value ($r > 0.1937$, $p < 0.01$). Internal consistency was acceptable to excellent across constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.765 to 0.917. These results confirm that all instruments were reliable and suitable for subsequent statistical analyses.

4.4 Classical Assumption Tests

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4.4.1 Normality

The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test indicated that the residuals were normally distributed (Asymp. Sig. = 0.200 > 0.05), meeting the normality assumption.

Table 8. Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test (residuals)

Statistic	Value
N	103
Test statistic	0.069
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.200

4.4.2 Multicollinearity

Tolerance values (0.798) were above 0.10 and VIF values (1.253) were below 10, indicating no multicollinearity between predictors.

Table 9. Multicollinearity diagnostics

Predictor	Tolerance	VIF
X1: Content exposure	0.798	1.253
X2: Usage intensity	0.798	1.253

4.4.3 Heteroskedasticity

Using the absolute residual (ABS_RES) approach, neither predictor was significant ($p > 0.05$), indicating no heteroskedasticity.

Table 10. Heteroskedasticity test (ABS_RES as DV)

Predictor	B	t	p-value
X1	-0.081	-1.215	0.227
X2	-0.011	-0.172	0.864

4.5 Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression was conducted to test the effects of social-political content exposure (X1) and TikTok usage intensity (X2) on interpersonal competence (Y). The estimated regression equation was:

$$Y = 25.165 + 0.681X_1 - 0.129X_2$$

Table 11. Regression coefficients (unstandardized)

Predictor	B	Std. Error
Constant	25.165	3.556
X1: Content exposure	0.681	0.104
X2: Usage intensity	-0.129	0.098

These coefficients indicate that greater exposure to social-political content is associated with higher interpersonal competence, whereas usage intensity is negatively associated with interpersonal competence.

4.6 Model Fit and Hypothesis Testing

4.6.1 Simultaneous effect (F-test)

The overall regression model was statistically significant ($F = 23.212$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that X1 and X2 jointly predicted Y.

Table 12. ANOVA (model significance)

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value
Regression	2074.937	2	1037.468	23.212	0.000
Residual	4469.471	100	44.695		
Total	6544.408	102			

4.6.2 Partial effects (t-tests)

The t-tests showed that exposure to social-political content (X1) had a positive and significant effect on interpersonal competence ($\beta = 0.607$, $t = 6.562$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, TikTok usage intensity (X2) was not significant ($\beta = -0.121$, $t = -1.309$, $p = 0.194$).

Table 13. t-test results (coefficients)

Predictor	B	Beta	t	p-value	Decision
X1: Content exposure	0.681	0.607	6.562	0.000	Supported
X2: Usage intensity	-0.129	-0.121	-1.309	0.194	Not supported

Hypothesis decisions

- H1 supported: content exposure significantly predicts interpersonal competence.
- H2 not supported: usage intensity does not significantly predict interpersonal competence.
- H3 supported (model-level): predictors jointly explain variation in Y (based on F-test).

4.6.3 Coefficient of determination (R^2)

The model explained 31.7% of the variance in interpersonal competence ($R^2 = 0.317$), with Adjusted $R^2 = 0.303$, indicating a moderate explanatory power in the context of behavioral research.

Table 14. Model summary

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of Estimate
0.563	0.317	0.303	6.685

4.7. Discussion

This study examined the effects of exposure to social-political content and the intensity of TikTok use on students' interpersonal competence. The findings offer several important insights into how social media functions not merely as a communication platform but as a social learning environment shaping behavioral outcomes among young adults.

4.7.1 The Effect of Social-Political Content Exposure on Interpersonal Competence

The results demonstrate that exposure to social-political content on TikTok has a positive and statistically significant effect on students' interpersonal competence. This finding aligns

strongly with the core propositions of Social Learning Theory and Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasize that individuals acquire behavioral patterns through observation, cognitive processing, and social reinforcement rather than through direct experience alone.

In the context of TikTok, social-political content creators act as salient social models whose behaviors, communication styles, and interaction strategies are repeatedly observed by users. Through processes of attention and retention, students internalize these models and subsequently reproduce them in their own social interactions. This mechanism is consistent with prior research indicating that exposure to civic and political content on social media can foster communicative confidence, perspective-taking, and social engagement among young users.

Importantly, the present findings extend existing literature by shifting the analytical focus from political participation to interpersonal competence as a broader social outcome. While previous studies often emphasize voting behavior, online activism, or political efficacy, this study shows that social-political exposure also contributes to fundamental social skills, including initiating discussions, articulating disagreement, offering emotional support, and managing interpersonal conflict. This suggests that political content consumption may indirectly strengthen everyday social functioning by encouraging dialogue, empathy, and reasoned argumentation.

From a media effects perspective, the results support the view that media influence operates through content characteristics rather than mere exposure volume. Social-political content that is framed in accessible, narrative-driven, and interactive formats may stimulate reflective engagement rather than passive consumption. Consequently, TikTok's short-video format, when used to communicate social and political issues, appears capable of translating complex societal topics into socially meaningful learning experiences.

4.7.2 The Non-significant Effect of TikTok Usage Intensity on Interpersonal Competence

In contrast to content exposure, TikTok usage intensity did not significantly affect interpersonal competence. Although the regression coefficient indicated a negative sign, the relationship was not statistically significant. This finding challenges assumptions that increased time spent on social media necessarily leads to stronger social or behavioral effects.

From a theoretical standpoint, this result is consistent with Social Cognitive Theory, which posits that behavior is shaped by the interaction between environmental stimuli and individual cognitive processes. Usage intensity reflects behavioral frequency and duration but does not capture the qualitative nature of cognitive engagement. Students may spend extensive time on TikTok without engaging with socially meaningful or cognitively stimulating content, thereby limiting its influence on interpersonal development.

This finding also aligns with recent discussions on media fatigue and information overload, in which excessive exposure to digital content can reduce users' sensitivity and responsiveness. High-frequency use may foster habitual scrolling behavior rather than reflective learning, weakening the potential for behavioral internalization. As such, intensity alone may be an insufficient predictor of social outcomes when content relevance and user motivation are not considered.

Moreover, the non-significant effect underscores an important distinction between media use and media influence. While TikTok is deeply embedded in students' daily routines, its social impact appears contingent upon what is consumed rather than how often it is accessed. This

reinforces the argument that content-specific exposure is a more precise explanatory variable than generalized usage metrics in behavioral research.

4.7.3 Joint Effects and Explanatory Power of the Model

The simultaneous analysis of social-political content exposure and TikTok usage intensity revealed a moderate explanatory power, accounting for approximately one-third of the variance in interpersonal competence. This indicates that social media-related variables meaningfully contribute to social behavior, underscoring the multifactorial nature of interpersonal development.

The moderate R^2 value reflects the complexity of social behavior formation, which is influenced by a wide range of contextual and personal factors beyond media exposure. These may include family socialization, peer networks, educational environments, personality traits, and offline social experiences. The findings therefore support a complementary rather than deterministic view of social media's role in shaping behavior.

Theoretically, the results reinforce the principle of reciprocal determinism, whereby media content functions as an environmental stimulus that interacts with users' cognitive interpretations and prior social experiences. Social-political content may function as a catalyst that enhances interpersonal competence when aligned with users' values and reflective capacities, but it does not operate in isolation.

4.7.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by integrating social learning and media effects frameworks to explain interpersonal outcomes rather than narrowly defined political behaviors. The findings suggest that social-political content on short-video platforms can act as a form of informal civic education that extends beyond political awareness into everyday social competence.

Practically, the results imply that universities and educators should not merely discourage social media use but instead promote critical and purposeful engagement with digital content. Encouraging students to engage in constructive social and political discussions may help cultivate communication skills, empathy, and conflict-management abilities that are essential in pluralistic societies.

For policymakers and platform stakeholders, the findings highlight the importance of supporting content that encourages dialogue and social reflection. Algorithmic prioritization of informative and balanced social-political content may amplify positive social learning effects while mitigating risks associated with misinformation or polarizing narratives.

4.7.5 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and the reliance on self-reported measures may introduce response bias. Future research could employ longitudinal or experimental designs to better capture dynamic learning processes over time.

Additionally, future studies may examine mediating variables, such as critical thinking, political interest, or emotion regulation, to further elucidate how exposure to content translates into interpersonal competence. Comparative studies across platforms could also clarify whether these effects are specific to TikTok's affordances or generalizable across social media

ecosystems.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of exposure to social-political content and the intensity of TikTok use on students' interpersonal competence. The findings provide clear evidence that exposure to social-political content on TikTok plays a significant role in shaping students' social behavior, whereas the intensity of platform use alone does not exert a meaningful influence.

The results indicate that students who are more frequently exposed to social-political content demonstrate higher levels of interpersonal competence, particularly in communication initiation, opinion expression, emotional support, and conflict management. These findings reinforce the argument that social media operates as a social learning environment in which content serves as a critical stimulus for behavioral development. In contrast, the non-significant effect of TikTok usage intensity suggests that the duration or frequency of platform use is insufficient to account for variation in social behavior, even when controlling for content type.

Theoretically, this study extends social learning and social cognitive perspectives by demonstrating that content-specific exposure on short-video platforms can contribute to the development of interpersonal skills beyond traditional political outcomes such as participation or political efficacy. By focusing on interpersonal competence as the dependent variable, the study broadens the scope of media effects research and highlights the relevance of social-political content in everyday social interactions among university students.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that efforts to enhance students' social competence should prioritize content quality and critical engagement rather than imposing general restrictions on social media use. Educational institutions may benefit from integrating digital literacy and reflective media consumption into student development programs, thereby encouraging students to engage in constructive social and political discourse. For platform stakeholders, the results underscore the potential value of promoting content that fosters dialogue, empathy, and responsible communication.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The use of a cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation, and the reliance on self-reported data may introduce subjective bias. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal or experimental approaches and to examine additional mediating factors such as critical thinking skills, political interest, or emotional regulation. Expanding the analysis to different platforms or cultural contexts may also enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Overall, this study concludes that exposure to social-political content on TikTok has a meaningful impact on students' interpersonal competence, underscoring the importance of content-driven engagement in understanding the social implications of digital media use.

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