

Motivations and Consumption Patterns on TikTok among Higher Education Students

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Abstract: This study investigates TikTok's motivations and consumption patterns among higher education students. Given the increasing use of social media by young people and the emerging popularity of TikTok, the main objective is to identify the motivations that lead these students to use the platform and determine the types of content they consume and share. A mixed methodological approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Questionnaires were administered to 125 students, and structured interviews were conducted with 6 selected students. Based on previous studies and validated through a pre-test, the questionnaire collected data on social media usage, motivations for using TikTok, and types of content consumed and shared. The interviews explored issues emerging from the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire and provided a deeper understanding of the student's experiences. The results indicate that Instagram is the most used social network by students, followed by TikTok. The main motivations for using TikTok include entertainment, searching for content related to their interests, the need for relaxation, and keeping up with current events. Regarding the types of content, students prefer to consume humorous videos, product reviews, musical content, and popular challenges. However, most users adopt a passive role, consuming content without producing or sharing their own videos. The interviews confirmed these trends, revealing that students value TikTok as a source of entertainment and information, with little interest in active content creation.

The study concluded that TikTok plays an important role in the digital routine of university students, serving as a content platform that meets their needs for entertainment and information. Some findings suggest that understanding the primary motivations for using TikTok can inform strategies for utilising the platform effectively and integrating it into the learning environment. The study's identification of preferred content types (humorous videos, product reviews, musical content, and popular challenges) can guide the development of educational content that resonates with students. The fact that most students are passive consumers of TikTok content, primarily watching and engaging minimally, has implications for both students and educators.

For students, it suggests a potential for increased media literacy education to help them critically evaluate and interact with online content more actively. It presents an opportunity for educators to explore innovative ways to leverage TikTok's engaging format for educational purposes, encouraging active participation and content creation. Apart from expanding this study to larger samples, future research may explore some of these implications and look into the potential that TikTok may have as a learning tool and dilute its reputation of being just a mind-numbing and time-consuming app.

Keywords: TikTok, Social Media, Portuguese Students, Higher Education, Digital Consumption, Mixed Methods

1. Introduction

Social networks have taken on a central role in the lives of young people, providing new forms of communication, entertainment and access to information (Hashim et al., 2016; Desai, 2017). Among the various platforms available, TikTok has emerged as one of the most popular, standing out for its format of short and dynamic videos that hold the attention of users (Dias & Duarte, 2021), having had a special growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation catalysed significant changes in the use of the Internet and social networks by young people and expanded the importance of these platforms for communication and entertainment during periods of social isolation (Coelho et al., 2020; Yazdani et al., 2022). In Portugal, TikTok recorded substantial growth, rising from 4% of users in 2020 to 25.9% in 2023, being especially notable among young people aged 18 to 24, where use increased from 13.4% to 45.7% in the same period (Gustavo et al., 2023).

Despite TikTok's exponential growth, more studies are needed to investigate the motivations that lead university students to use this platform and the content they consume and share. Understanding these dynamics is key to identifying digital consumption trends among young people and assessing the impact of TikTok on their daily lives.

In this context, the main objectives of this study are to identify the motivations that lead students of a higher education institution in Portugal to use TikTok and to determine the types of content they consume and share. Through a mixed methodological approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, it was intended to deepen the understanding of TikTok usage patterns among these students, contributing to the existing literature and providing insights that can guide more effective educational and communication strategies, especially considering the platform's potential as a tool for engaging with young audiences.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social media has played a transformative role in how young people communicate and interact, offering new opportunities for expression and connection (Hashim et al., 2016; Desai, 2017). In the context of university students, these platforms have become essential for socialisation, entertainment and access to information relevant to their academic and personal daily lives.

The evolution of social networks has revolutionised the global communication landscape, especially among young people. These platforms allow instant communication, the sharing of multimedia content, the creation of online communities, and the involvement in discussions on various topics (Caneira, 2016; Couto, 2015). University students use social media as a key tool to establish and maintain relationships, collaborate on academic projects, and stay informed about current events (Hashim et al., 2016).

In Portugal, studies indicate that the use of social networks among young people is prevalent, with platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and, more recently, TikTok playing significant roles in students' daily lives (Martins, 2023; Gustavo et al., 2023). The preference for these platforms is associated with their functionalities that meet the needs of fast communication, access to information and personalised entertainment (Morais et al., 2011).

Launched in 2016, TikTok has quickly become one of the most popular social networks globally, especially among young people (Zulli & Zulli, 2020; Félix, 2023). The platform is distinguished by the format of short videos, usually between 15 and 60 seconds, which allow the use of a wide range of resources, such as filters, special effects, music and integrated editing tools (Dias & Duarte, 2021; Mou, 2020).

TikTok offers a highly personalised user experience thanks to its advanced algorithm that recommends content based on user interactions and preferences (B-Young, 2022; Carvalho, 2021). This feature has contributed to its rapid growth and high user engagement.

In Portugal, TikTok has seen significant growth. According to Gustavo et al. (2023), the number of Portuguese users of the platform increased from 4% in 2020 to 25.9% in 2023. This growth is even more pronounced among young people aged 18 to 24, from 13.4% to 45.7% in the same period. Such an increase reflects the growing adoption of TikTok as a platform of choice for content consumption and social interaction among young Portuguese.

Understanding the motivations that lead young people to use TikTok can be framed by the Theory of Uses and Gratifications, which postulates that individuals use the media based on the needs they want to satisfy (Rubin, 2008; Shao, 2009). The main motivations for using social networks include entertainment, information seeking, social interaction, escapism, and personal expression (Couto, 2015; Omar & Subramanian, 2013).

Specific studies on TikTok reveal that users are attracted to the platform due to its immediate entertainment potential, access to diverse content, and the ability to keep up with current trends (Meng & Leung, 2021; Omar & Dequan, 2020). Additionally, TikTok offers a form of escapism, allowing users to unwind and disconnect from daily worries (Brailovskaia & Teichert, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these motivations, with TikTok becoming a means to combat social isolation and maintain virtual connections (Coelho et al., 2020; Yazdani et al., 2022). University students, in particular, turned to the platform for entertainment and maintaining social interactions in a period marked by physical restrictions.

The content on TikTok is vast and diverse, ranging from humorous videos, dance challenges, and makeup and fashion tutorials to product reviews and educational content (Dias, 2023; Dias & Duarte, 2021). The platform encourages creativity and participation through tools that facilitate the production and editing of videos, as well as interaction with other users through comments, sharing, and collaborations (Schellewald, 2021).

Bossen and Kottasz (2020) identified that TikTok attracts passive users, who consume content without necessarily interacting or producing, and active users, who create and share their own videos. Passive users use

the platform primarily for entertainment and information, while active users are more engaged in self-expression and online identity-building activities (Figueiredo, 2022).

Viral challenges and trends, such as popular choreography and hashtags, play a significant role in TikTok's dynamics, fostering community and collective participation (Zulli & Zulli, 2020; Araújo & Karhawi, 2023). This culture of participation contributes to the continuous engagement of users and rapid content spread on the platform.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods within a case study framework. The objective was to analyse TikTok's motivations and consumption patterns among students from a Portuguese higher education institution, providing in-depth insights (Cantanhede, 2023). Mixed methods enabled a comprehensive analysis by combining quantitative data's breadth with qualitative depth, enhancing validity and understanding (Creswell, 2007). The quantitative component consisted of a Google Forms questionnaire, while structured interviews provided qualitative data (Silva et al., 2006). The questionnaire, adapted from Trigo (2021), was available for three days (October 27–29, 2023) and distributed via social media, targeting higher education students. 125 students participated voluntarily, predominantly female (80%, n=100), with 16.8% male (n=21) and 3.2% preferring not to disclose gender. Most respondents were 20–25, with 32.8% (n=41) between 23–25 and 31.2% (n=39) aged 20–22. Regarding education levels, 78.4% (n=98) were undergraduates, and 20.8% (n=26) were master's students. Participants came from diverse courses, ensuring sample diversity across academic disciplines. Structured interviews were conducted with 6 students (4 female, 2 male) aged 20–27. Four were undergraduates, and two were master's students. These interviews were selected for convenience to provide nuanced insights into TikTok use. The intentional selection ensured relevance to the study population, enriching the analysis and complementing quantitative findings. Overall, the mixed-methods approach provided a holistic understanding of TikTok usage among higher education students.

4. Results

4.1 Students' Use of TikTok

The analysis of the data collected through the questionnaire applied to the students allows us to understand the patterns of use of the TikTok platform among the participants of this study.

Of the 125 students who responded to the questionnaire, 92% (n=115) indicated using the TikTok platform, while only 8% (n=10) reported not using it (Figure 1). When asked about having an account on the platform, 98.3% (n=113) confirmed having an account on TikTok (Figure 2).

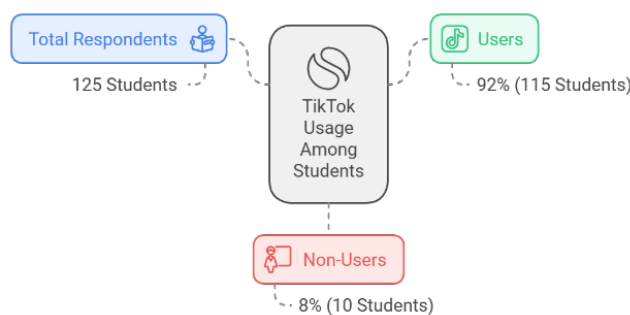


Figure 1: Use of the TikTok platform

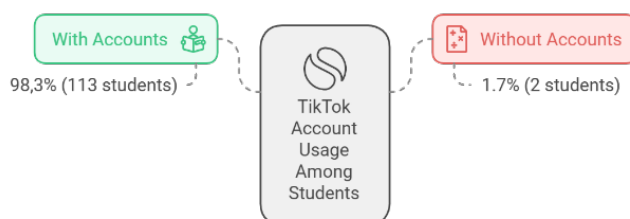


Figure 2: Account on the TikTok platform

Regarding the age at which they started using TikTok (Figure 3), 37.4% (n=43) of students started between 20 and 22 years old, 26.1% (n=30) between 17 and 19 years old, 15.7% (n=18) between 14 and 16 years old, and 11.3% (n=13) were between 23 and 25 years old when they started using the platform.

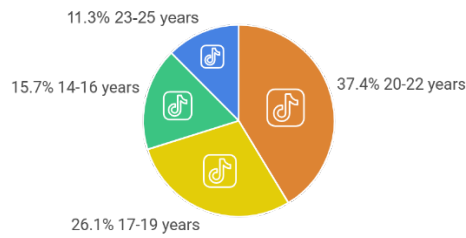
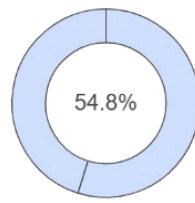


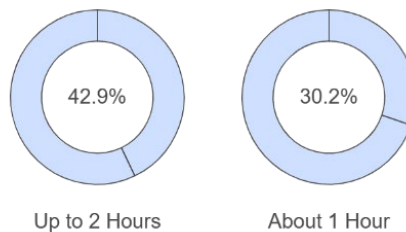
Figure 3: Age at Which Students Started Using TikTok

Regarding the frequency of use, Figure 4 shows that 54.8% (n=63) said they used TikTok daily, demonstrating regular use among users. Regarding the daily time spent on TikTok (Figure 5), 42.9% (n=27) of the students reported spending up to 2 hours a day on the platform, while 30.2% (n=19) indicated spending about 1 hour a day.



Daily Users

Figure 4: TikTok Usage: Daily Users



Up to 2 Hours

About 1 Hour

Figure 5: TikTok Usage: Time Spent

Regarding the social network most used by students (Figure 6), 58.3% (n=67) pointed to Instagram as their preferred platform, followed by TikTok with 21.7% (n=25), and WhatsApp was indicated by 11.3% (n=13). The least used networks included Messenger and BeReal, each with 0.9% (n=1), and Facebook and YouTube, each with 1.7% (n=2), and Pinterest with 2.6% (n=3).

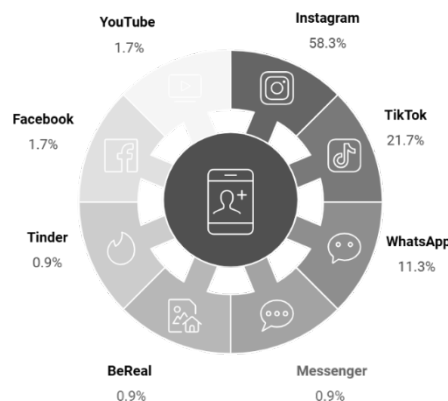


Figure 6: Social Networks Most Used by Students

When asked about the preferred social network to consume content (Figure 7), 58.3% (n=67) of the students chose Instagram, followed by TikTok with 27.8% (n=32). For content sharing (Figure 8), 75.7% (n=87) of participants prefer Instagram, while 13.9% (n=16) opt for TikTok.

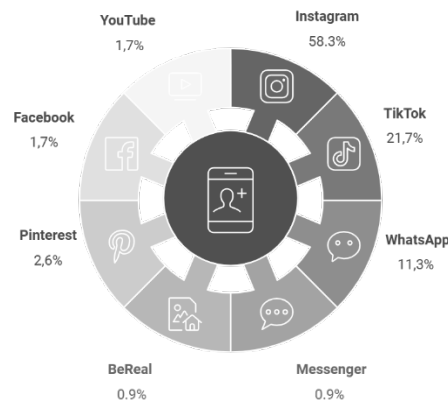


Figure 7: Social Networks Preferred for Consuming Content

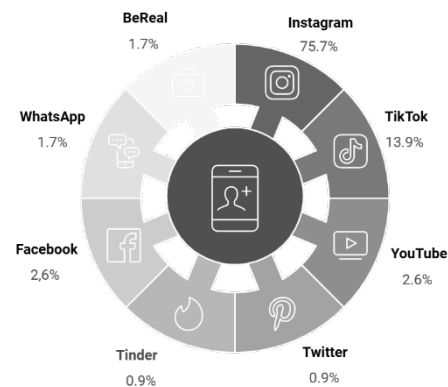


Figure 8: Social Networks Preferred for Sharing Content

The interviews carried out complemented the quantitative data. When asked, "How and when did you find out about this social network?" the six students interviewed said they had learned about TikTok mainly during 2020, coinciding with the period of confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding the time spent on the platform, respondents indicated spending between 10 minutes and 2 hours daily on TikTok, with an average of approximately 1 hour daily. Some students mentioned that, during the week, the time of use is shorter but can increase during weekends or vacation periods. Overall, the data collected shows that TikTok is a platform widely used by students, with a significant daily frequency and a usage time that varies, on average, between 1 to 2 hours per day. Instagram remains the most used social network for both consumption and sharing of content, but TikTok emerges as the second platform of choice among the students participating in this study.

4.2 Motivations for Using TikTok

Graph 1 presents the motivations for using TikTok. Students highlighted consuming content of personal interest (92.2% - 52.2% agree and 40% totally agree), relaxation (79.9% - 53.9% agree and 26.0% totally agree), and staying informed (72.3% - 48.7% agree and 23.5% totally agree) as their main motivations for using TikTok. Many also use the platform to explore extravagant content (54.8% - 39.1% agree and 15.7% totally agree), follow the daily lives of celebrities and people worldwide (53.7% - 37.4% agree and 15.7% totally agree), and connect with people who share similar interests (46.1% - 32.2% agree and 13.9% totally agree). Additionally, 44.3% (33.9% agree and 10.4% totally agree) use TikTok to forget problems, and 43.5% (35.7% agree and 7.8% totally agree) to avoid loneliness. Conversely, most disagreed with using TikTok as a source of income (79% - 66% totally disagree and 13% disagree), to get noticed (74.7% - 50.4% totally disagree and 24.3% disagree), or to show off (73.9% - 54.8% totally disagree and 19.1% disagree). Many rejected using it to get what they want effortlessly (72.1% - 47.8% totally disagree, and 24.3% disagree) or to share personal information (65.5% - 47% totally disagree, and 16.5% disagree). Similarly, 63.7% (35.7% totally disagree and 26% disagree) do not use it to express their true self, and 60.9% (47% totally disagree and 13.9% disagree) to update followers.

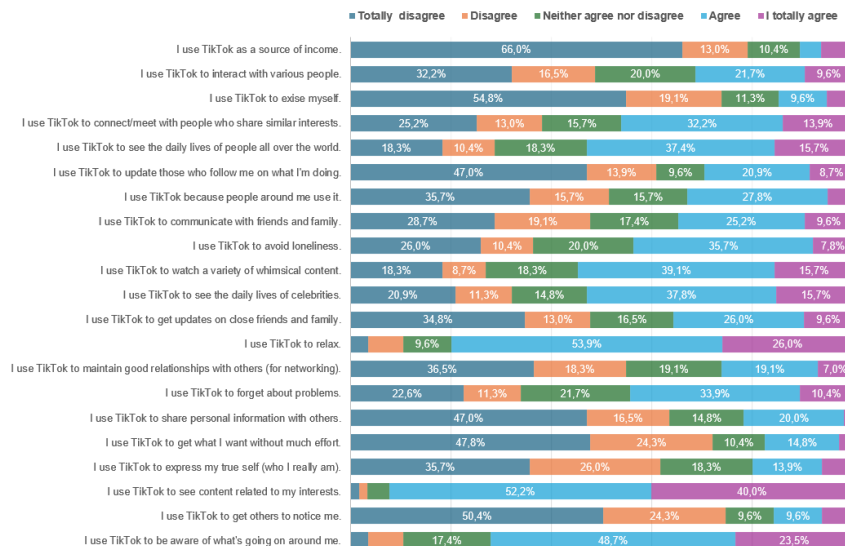


Figure 9: Motivations that lead to the use of the TikTok platform

The interviews complemented the quantitative data, deepening the understanding of individual motivations. Respondents consistently highlighted entertainment and fun as the top reasons for using TikTok. Many said that they started using the platform during the confinement imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, looking for a way to distract and occupy their free time. For example, one student mentioned that TikTok was an alternative to decreasing social distancing, allowing him to experiment and share videos with close friends. Another interviewee said that he uses the platform to keep up to date on what is happening in the world in a different and didactic way. Updates on trends and viral content also emerged as a significant motivation. Students appreciate TikTok's ability to keep them informed about memes, challenges, and other popular content, reinforcing the connection with today's youth culture. The ease of access to diverse content, from comedy videos to makeup and fashion tutorials, was also mentioned as a factor that increases the platform's appeal. Although some students have experimented with creating and sharing content, most assume a passive user role, consuming the available videos without necessarily contributing to their own productions. This is in line with the results of the questionnaire, where motivations related to content creation or self-promotion had low levels of agreement.

In summary, the results show that students' motivations for using TikTok are strongly associated with entertainment, the consumption of content aligned with their personal interests and the search for relaxation. The platform is valued as a means to unwind, occupy free time, and stay current on current trends and events. Motivations related to direct social interaction, self-promotion or networking seem less relevant for this specific group of users. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic emerges as an important factor that has catalysed the increase in the use of TikTok, highlighting how social contexts and global events can influence social media consumption habits.

4.3 Types of Content Consumed and Shared on TikTok

The results (Graph 2) indicate that most students use TikTok mainly to consume content other users produce, assuming a predominantly passive role on the platform. In the questionnaire, 94.8% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they use TikTok to watch other users' videos or follow their profiles, far surpassing sending messages, comments or creating videos of their own. This shows that content consumption is the main activity of students on the platform.

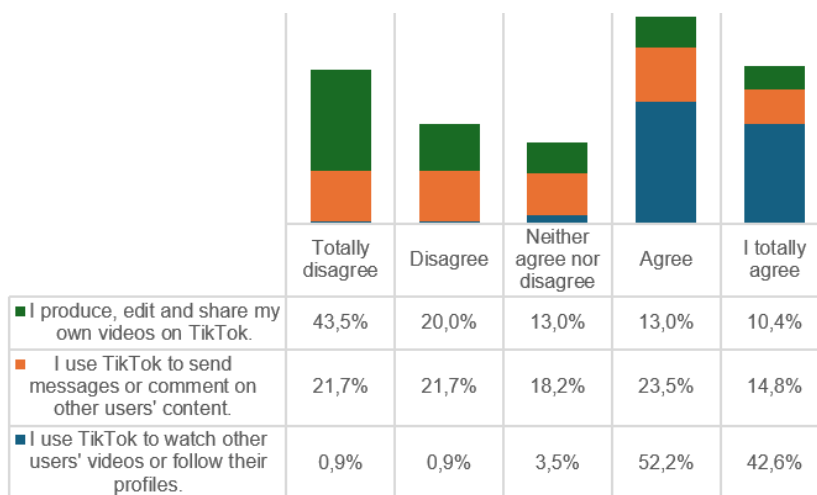


Figure 10: Types of use of the TikTok platform

Regarding the types of content consumed on TikTok (Table 1), students preferred humorous videos, curiosities, musical content, product reviews, and challenges as their top content consumed on TikTok. 84.3% (60% agree and 24.3% totally agree) consume humorous content, and 84.4% (54% agree and 30.4% totally agree) view curiosities about topics of interest.

Table 1: Types of content consumed on the TikTok platform

| | Totally disagree | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | I totally agree |
|--|------------------|----------|----------------------------|--------|-----------------|
| I use TikTok to watch Gaming Tutorials | 53,9% | 20,0% | 10,4% | 13,0% | 2,6% |
| I use TikTok to watch Product Reviews | 6,0% | 1,7% | 9,6% | 63,5% | 19,1% |
| I use TikTok to watch Make-up tutorials | 21,7% | 6,0% | 11,3% | 44,3% | 16,5% |
| I use TikTok to watch Daily routines | 12,2% | 6,0% | 13,9% | 46,0% | 21,7% |
| I use TikTok to watch Challenges | 15,7% | 5,2% | 16,5% | 47,8% | 14,8% |
| I use TikTok to watch Fashion Tutorials | 20,0% | 10,4% | 13,9% | 38,3% | 17,4% |
| I use TikTok to watch Transitions | 16,5% | 13,9% | 19,1% | 40,9% | 9,6% |
| I use TikTok to watch Humorous content | 1,7% | 1,7% | 12,2% | 60,0% | 24,3% |
| I use TikTok to watch Music content | 7,0% | 2,6% | 13,9% | 54,8% | 21,7% |
| I use TikTok to watch Choreography | 16,5% | 7,0% | 16,5% | 43,5% | 16,5% |
| I use TikTok to watch Curiosities about a area that interests me | 2,6% | 2,6% | 10,4% | 54,0% | 30,4% |
| I use TikTok to watch live streams | 34,8% | 21,7% | 12,2% | 26,0% | 5,2% |
| I use TikTok to follow people you know. | 13,0% | 12,2% | 18,2% | 36,5% | 20,0% |
| I use TikTok to follow Brands | 17,4% | 17,4% | 13,0% | 34,85% | 17,4% |

Additionally, 76.5% (54.8% agree and 21.7% totally agree) watch musical content, 82.6% (63.5% agree and 19.1% totally agree) enjoy product reviews, and 62.6% (47.8% agree and 14.8% totally agree) follow challenges. Make-up tutorials (61% - 44.3% agree and 16.5% totally agree), choreographies (60% - 43.5% agree and 16.5% totally agree), and fashion tutorials (55.7% - 38.3% agree and 17.4% totally agree) also have notable adherence. Conversely, gaming tutorials (73.9% - 53.9% totally disagree and 20% disagree) and live streams (56.5% - 34.8% totally disagree and 21.7% disagree) are the least consumed categories, showing minimal interest among users.

Concerning the types of content produced and shared on the TikTok platform, most students do not create or share original videos (Graph 3). In fact, 92.3% (78.3% strongly disagree and 13.9% disagree) do not produce or share gaming tutorials. Similarly, 85.2% (68.7% strongly disagree and 16.5% disagree) do not perform live streams, 79.1% (68.7% strongly disagree and 10.4% disagree) do not create product reviews, and 80% (68.7% strongly disagree and 11.3% disagree) do not produce makeup tutorials. Other content types, such as challenge videos (73.9% - 63.5% strongly disagree and 10.4% disagree), fashion tutorials (75.7% - 63.5% strongly disagree and 12.2% disagree), daily routine videos (74.7% - 64.3% strongly disagree and 10.4% disagree), and videos with transitions (also 74.8%) are similarly not produced. These findings highlight a trend of passive consumption among students, reinforcing TikTok's role as a platform primarily used for entertainment and third-party content consumption.

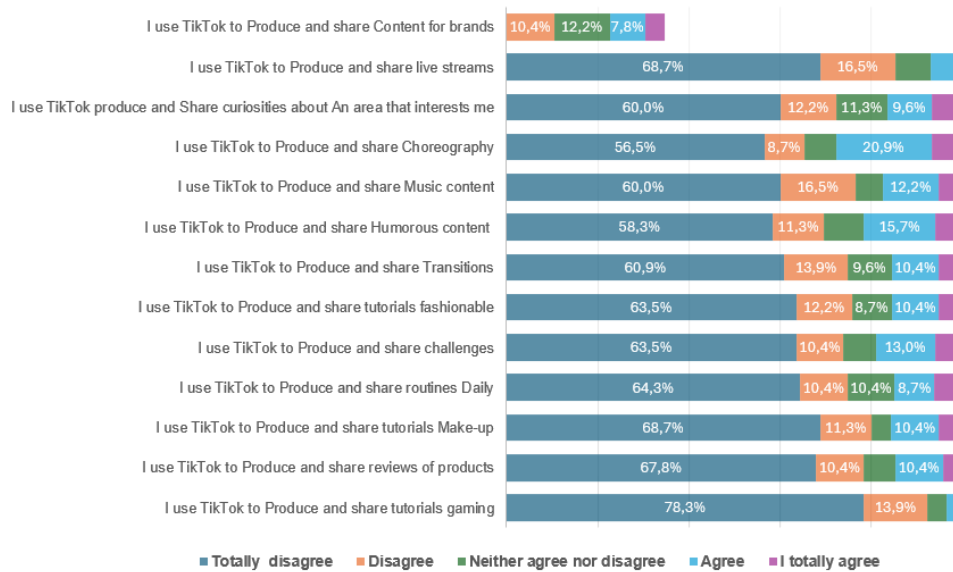


Figure 11: Types of content produced and shared on the TikTok platform

The interviews conducted with six students reinforce these results. When asked about the types of content they consume the most, students highlighted comedy videos, travel content, music, reviews, makeup tutorials, fashion and challenges. Student 1 said that the content he consumes most frequently is music, comedy and product reviews. Student 2 mentioned that he uses TikTok to get inspiration and to watch tutorials on makeup, clothing, branding, and travel. Student 3 indicated that the content that arouses the most interest is gaming videos and consumes comedy and gaming content. Student 4 stated that he watches fashion, beauty content, travel, and comedy. Student 5 said that the content that most arouses his interest is funny videos, quick tutorials, useful tips, and viral dances, and he shares and watches funny videos or participates in popular challenges. Student 6 prefers to make and watch dance or humour content.

As for sharing content, only 1 of the 6 students interviewed assumed that they would share videos on TikTok, specifically challenges that are currently popular. The rest said they did not share content on the platform, which corroborates the trend observed in the quantitative data that showed that most students are passive users.

The results reveal that students use TikTok mainly to consume comedy content, product reviews, music, travel, makeup and fashion tutorials, dance and challenges. Creating and sharing original content is infrequent among students, with most taking a passive role on the platform. This use pattern indicates that TikTok is valued as a source of entertainment and information rather than a means for personal expression or social interaction through content creation.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to understand TikTok's motivations and consumption patterns among Portuguese higher education students. The findings reveal significant insights into the platform's use within this demographic. Instagram remains the most used social network, followed by TikTok, consistent with Martins (2023), who identified Instagram as the most popular platform among Portuguese youth. However, TikTok's rapid growth reflects trends that Gustavo et al. (2023) noted. Students use TikTok daily, spending about one hour per day, aligning with research highlighting TikTok's addictive nature due to its personalised algorithm and short video format (Araújo & Karhawi, 2023; Omar & Dequan, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point in TikTok adoption, with many students starting to use it during confinement for entertainment and social interaction, corroborating Coelho et al. (2020) and Yazdani et al. (2022). The main motivations were consuming interest-based content, relaxation, and staying updated, aligning with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Rubin, 2008). Other studies also found entertainment and information-seeking as key motivations (Meng & Leung, 2021; Omar & Dequan, 2020).

However, motivations like self-promotion, networking, or direct communication had less relevance, diverging from Figueiredo (2022), who highlighted TikTok's role in self-branding among Generation Z. In this study, students primarily used TikTok for passive consumption, with minimal interest in creating or sharing content,

echoing Bossen and Kottasz's (2020) findings. Humour, product reviews, music, and challenges were the most consumed content, consistent with Dias and Duarte (2021).

The trend toward passive consumption reflects Shao's (2009) segmentation of active and passive users, with most students seeking entertainment without contributing content. This behaviour may stem from privacy concerns, a lack of public exposure interest, or satisfaction from consuming content. While TikTok encourages creativity (Schellewald, 2021), the low participation in content creation contrasts with its global image, suggesting cultural factors or sample-specific behaviours.

These findings have several implications. TikTok's importance in students' digital lives highlights the need for engaging, relevant content in communication strategies rather than encouraging active participation. The pandemic's influence underscores the importance of contextual factors in shaping digital behaviour. Additionally, the reduced emphasis on self-promotion or social interaction may reflect cultural or generational differences, warranting further exploration.

This study aligns with existing literature, emphasising entertainment and humorous content as dominant motivations (Dias & Duarte, 2021; Meng & Leung, 2021). However, the contrast between TikTok's global branding as a creative platform and students' passive use suggests the need for further research into cultural and demographic nuances.

6. Conclusions

The present study achieved its objectives by identifying the motivations that lead students of a higher education institution in Portugal to use TikTok and by determining the types of content they consume and share. TikTok is widely used among students, positioning itself as the second most popular social network after Instagram.

The main motivations for using the platform are entertainment, the search for content related to personal interests, relaxation and updates on current events and trends. Students prefer humorous content, product reviews, music, tutorials and challenges. Most participants take a passive role on the platform, consuming content without producing or sharing their own videos.

These results highlight TikTok's importance in university students' digital routine and suggest that the platform is valued primarily as a source of entertainment and information rather than a means of personal expression or active social interaction. Understanding these dynamics can contribute to developing more effective educational and communication strategies that meet this audience's preferences and consumption habits.

While the study provided important insights, it is important to recognise some limitations. The sample was predominantly composed of female students, which may influence the results and limit the generalisation of the data. In addition, the sample size and focus on a single institution may restrict the representativeness of the results concerning the wider universe of university students in Portugal.

It is recommended that future research broaden the sample to include a greater diversity of participants in terms of gender, age, fields of study and educational institutions. It would also be relevant to explore the reasons behind the preference for passive content consumption, investigating possible barriers to video creation and sharing, such as privacy concerns, lack of trust or technical skills. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess how motivations and patterns of using TikTok evolve over time, especially as the platform develops new features and influences young people's cultural trends.

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