The Mediatization Effect of Tiktok and Smartphone Addiction: A New Role of Mediatization Effect Uncovered

Tong Jin[1], Kim Hua Tan[2], Nurul Lina Mohd Nor[3], Jamsari Alias[4], Norazila Mat[5], Nasruddin Yunos[6]

Abstract

In the new media era, users always rely on short video applications represented by TikTok, and the discussion on the essence and influence mechanism of this dependence phenomenon from the perspective of social communication and media theory is insufficient. Based on mediatization theory, it is necessary to further explore the mediatization effect of TikTok and its association with smartphone addiction. To validate the effectiveness of semi-structured interviews, this study conducted small-scale tests and preliminary thematic analysis on five Chinese college students. The research results verify that the performance of three key roles of mediatization effects proposed by Schulz (extension, substitution, and amalgamation) in TikTok can systematically affect users' smartphone use and generate addictive behaviors. The research results also found that there exists a new role of mediatization effect that can influence users' online engagement behaviors and lead to smartphone addiction. As it is a small-scale test, the study has sample size and data saturation limitations. However, this study enriches the mediatization theory and provides practical inspiration for the intervention of smartphone addiction and the governance of short video platforms.

Keywords: *Tiktok; Mediatization Effect, Addiction Behavior, Small-Scale Test.*

Introduction

With the rapid development of mobile Internet, short video applications have become one of the most popular social media platforms worldwide. These applications have attracted users' attention with unique short content, high interactivity and powerful algorithm recommendation system. Short video applications represented by Tik Tok, as a new social media platform under the development of digital technology, are increasingly becoming a key channel for smartphone users' communication, interaction and media consumption. Due to the rapid development of visual culture in the Internet era, short videos became a unique form of mass communication in the mid-2010s, promoting the transformation of traditional media in the era of integrated media (Tang, 2020). However, at the same time, smartphone addiction is becoming increasingly serious, becoming an urgent problem in modern society. Especially among Chinese college

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[1] Taylor's University, Selangor, Malaysia, PhD candidate of Philosophy in Media and Communication; Lishui University, Lishui, China, Lecturer; Email: chuck12580@gmail.com

[2] 2aylor's University, Selangor, Malaysia, Associate Professor Dr. Email: KimHua.Tan@taylors.edu.my, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3787-5006. (Corresponding Author).

[3] Taylor's University, Selangor, Malaysia, Dr. Email: nurullina.mohdnor@taylors.edu.my

[4] Pusat Pengajian Citra Universiti & Institut Islam Hadhari, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Dr. Email: jamsari@ukm.edu.my, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6447-899X.

[5] Faculty of Economics and Management, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Dr. Email: norazila@ukm.edu.my, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0827-1230.

[6] Pusat Pengajian Citra Universiti & Institut Islam Hadhari, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Dr. Email: nasrudin@ukm.edu.my

students, the use of smartphones has become an important part of their daily life and learning experience. Over 95% of Chinese college students own smartphones, with an average use of more than 4 hours a day (Zhang et al., 2021). In the ecosystem of smartphone applications, short videos and related technologies have reshaped communication, interaction, and information dissemination methods, and provided users with a "highly immersive and addictive user experience" (Anderson, 2020; Chen X.et al., 2021).

Current research focuses more on the media dependence and addiction phenomena caused by TikTok, meeting users' needs from a psychological perspective, while ignoring the co-evolution of technical logic and daily life situations, as well as the issue that media constrain users' fragmented daily lives (Zhou & Zhu, 2022). And it has not yet been deeply explored from the perspective of social communication (Tan et al., 2021) and mediatization effects. With a highly attractive and addictive content source, TikTok may represent an accelerated form of mediatization that profoundly influences young people's media usage habits and life experiences. Based on the theoretical basis of mediatization, this study reveals how TikTok accelerates the driving force of media embedding into daily life (Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018; Xie et al., 2023), provides valuable insights into the mediatization effect and systematically reveals its multidimensional path to contribute to smartphone addiction.

Background of Study

In the development of modern society, the media has increasingly become a part of culture and society, even influencing all aspects of life. Mediatization is a multi-dimensional and essentially process-oriented concept (Strömbäck, 2008), and the theory of the influence of media on society and culture is proposed with the core concept of mediatization. The research on mediatization is not only limited to the definition and interpretation of the concept of mediatization, but also attempts to explain mediatization by combining the basic manifestations and functions of media in the communication process (Schulz, 2004). Therefore, the concept of mediatization has been proposed to explain the process in which media influence culture and society (Hjarvard, 2008). In other words, in the process of institutionalization and technologization, the media generates shaping power through communication behavior, which becomes part of the process of social change. As a generalized meta-process of social transformation related to media (Livingstone, 2009). It emphasizes that starting from the particularity of media, not only reflects changes in media and communication, but also cultural and social changes. Under the influence of mediatization, the power of media has an irresistible impact on social processes, which leads to the relationship between culture and society and media that exceeds the communication process of media itself (Jansson, 2018).

To better understand the relationship between mediatization, media and their development-related changes, it is crucial to consider the impact of mediatization on cultural and social development changes. For social change and the process of mediatization integration into cultural and social development, the key roles of the mediating effect proposed by Schulz (2004)—extension, substitution, amalgamation, and accommodation—provide a classic perspective for analyzing the role of mediatization in society. These effects respectively describe how media expand the function of social communication, partially or entirely replace traditional social activities, integrate with users' daily lives, and require various social fields to adapt to the operation mode of media to meet the existence of communication. Social media has gradually become the primary means for individual users to participate in cultural and social exchanges. Under the influence of mediatization, social media is combined with other non-media activities

(Schulz, 2004). Among them, extension, substitution and amalgamation are regarded as mediating a new communication construction for users' daily lives (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Knoblauch, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), forming a brand-new online communication mode as part of the communicative culture. Therefore, these three roles of mediatization effects are more suitable for research from individual perspective, highlighting the impact of mediatization on individual users. Mediatization is a one-way process in which media shapes society and a two-way interactive process. Social structures and cultural practices are constantly shaping media. The rise of dynamic algorithms and user-generated content (UGC) has profoundly impacted the mediatization process, and traditional theories have not fully explained these phenomena (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). Driven by the development of media technology and information technology, dynamic algorithms change how information is distributed and affect users' media usage behavior through personalized recommendation systems. User-generated content further blurs the boundaries between media producers and consumers, making the mediatization process more complex and dynamic. With the advent of the digital age, traditional media theory has gradually exposed its limitations when explaining emerging media phenomena (Chadwick, 2017; Hjarvard, 2013).

The Small-scale Test Methods

This small-scale test collected qualitative data on short video application usage behaviors and addictive tendencies through semi-structured interviews with five Chinese college students. The interview content covers multiple aspects, such as users' attractiveness to short video applications, dependent behaviors, and perception of the mediatization effect. After data collection, the interview contents were encoded and classified by thematic analysis. In this study, this small-scale test allowed researchers to clarify some issues to improve the interview protocol. Meanwhile, the small-scale test also allows for modifying the subsequent research methods and the contents in the interview outline.

The Participants

The participants are Chinese college students with a sample size of 5, and the relevant information is shown in Table 1. The reason for choosing this group is that they are digital natives, and Chinese college students have been at the forefront of information technology and have deeply integrated it into daily life, social interaction and educational pursuits (Chen L. et al., 2020; Hao et al., 2019). This group of people highly accepts emerging media technologies and frequently use smartphones and TikTok in their daily lives. Sample selection is based on purposeful sampling, ensuring that participants are representative and reflect the general situation of Chinese college students using short video applications.

Participant	Gender	Age	Average daily usage
P1	Female	19	3 or 4 Hours
P2	Female	18	About 4 hours
P3	Male	19	4 or 5 Hours
P4	Female	19	3 or 4 Hours
P5	Male	20	About 6 Hours

Table 1:Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Data Analysis Process

This study adopted the thematic analysis method to systematically analyze the interview data. First, the five participants' interview contents are transcribed and imported into the NVivo

software. Subsequently, combined with the research topic, a preliminary coding method combining induction and deduction was adopted to identify various features and phenomena related to short videos. On this basis, organize the relevant codes under potential topics. Through repeated review and optimization, core themes will be finally determined, including basic usage characteristics, types of demand satisfaction, manifestations of media effects, and dimensions of addiction manifestations. Each theme contains several sub-themes. This analytical process ensures the systematicity and reliability of the research results, providing a solid foundation for an in-depth understanding of the mediating effect of TikTok and its relationship with smartphone addiction.

Findings

TikTok Meets User Needs

Through analysis, it is found that the satisfaction of users' needs by TikTok is mainly manifested in three aspects: information acquisition, social interaction, leisure and entertainment (Park et al., 2013). The results of the thematic analysis indicate that the ability of users to obtain information has been strengthened. More and more people choose to use TikTok to search instead of traditional search websites. Users search for practical information such as beauty tutorials, local food, and knowledge information, which replaces the functions of search websites such as Google and Baidu. In the dimension of social interaction, TikTok's interaction mechanism has given rise to new social rituals such as "cultivating sparks" to promote online communication among users. Users establish connections with social networks through likes, comments and shares, and can even expand and strengthen the construction of offline relationships in this way (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021; Wang & Guo, 2023). On the other hand, entertainment needs have been magnified through precise matching pushed by algorithms. Funny short videos have become the main emotional regulation tool at present, and the quality advantage of their content has further consolidated user stickiness.

The Mediatization Effect of Tik Tok

The Verification of Schulz's Key Roles of Mediatization Effect

As a new information acquisition and socialization channel, TikTok has significantly expanded the users' media usage range. The study found that respondents generally use TikTok to obtain various information. TikTok breaks through the vertical information architecture of traditional media and forms a horizontal extension in entertainment, education, social networking, and other fields. At the same time, through the multimodal integration of audio-visual symbols, information reception is promoted from abstract cognition to embodied perception (Falgoust et al., 2022; Li & Hayes, 2024). In addition, TikTok also expands the way users obtain information through short videos, making it more intuitive and convenient. This composite expansion mechanism confirms that mediatization expands the human communication dimension by social time or spatial structures.

Short videos have replaced traditional entertainment to a certain extent. The study found that respondents reduced their use of traditional media (such as TV and newspapers) and instead using TikTok to meet entertainment needs. According to thematic analysis, it was found that the algorithm recommendation mechanism replaced the agenda-setting function of traditional media, which led to a decrease in the time users spend on traditional media (Wang et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2024). These performances of alternative traditional media emphasize the challenges brought by TikTok to the conventional media ecology, and also show the

alternativeness of mediatization to existing social life emphasized by Schulz.

The mediatization effect of TikTok also shows significant integration with user life. The interweaving of online behavior and offline identities is particularly obvious in TikTok. Users have established new social connections through TikTok's interactive functions (such as comments, likes, and sharing), and extend this user's digital self to offline and form a mutual structure with real identities, achieving a social interaction that integrates the virtual and the real (Akhtar & Islam, 2023; Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Huangfu et al., 2022). This amalgamation effect gave rise to a new social relationship topology, in which virtual space is no longer a supplement to the real world, but evolved into the "mediated reality" - a new social field dominated by algorithmic logic and deeply embedded in virtual and real elements.

Reconstruction: A New Role of Mediatization Effect

Based on the thematic analysis of this small-scale test, TikTok has spawned a new mediatization effect through the interaction between its technical logic and user practice—reconstruction (see Table 2 for related concepts). TikTok's algorithm distribution mechanism and UGC production model break through the regional separation of traditional media, reconstruct regional cultural elements through cross-cultural translation of audio-visual symbols and enter the user's vision. At the same time becomes a carrier of dissemination of new values. This two-way flow not only expands cultural visibility, but also reconstructs the cultural power pattern in the digital age. Secondly, users realize group identity through "hot memes" in short videos and complete the reproduction of corresponding content. Through imitation, mixing and viral transmission, these highly compressed cultural or language symbols gradually promote the penetration of platform native culture into offline life scenarios, realizing the nesting and reshaping of real interpersonal communication. Finally, TikTok reconstructs user participation with algorithms, functions and UGC co-creation mechanisms. Through tags, challenge activities, special effects editing and hot topic dissemination, users can transform from simple consumers to co-creators, creating a new data-driven, user-created and dynamically evolved new participation model for traditional culture.

Theme	Initial concept
Reconstruction	The development of local culture
	Value communication
	Reconstruction of hot Meme language
	Reconstruction of Participation

Table 2: Theme Encoding Result (Reconstruction)

Addiction Representation Dimension

Short video and smartphone addiction not only affects an individual's current living conditions but also poses hidden dangers to their long-term development and mental health. Psychologically, apart from the distortion of time perception and information anxiety, users are prone to fall into self-identity confusion in the virtual social field constructed by short videos. In order to obtain virtual social feedback such as likes and follows, some people deliberately cater to mainstream aesthetics and fashion trends, shaping a false online image, which leads to a deviation between self-perception and true identity (Field, 2020; Lu et al., 2022). This kind of externally driven self-construction may bring temporary satisfaction in the virtual world, but

when returning to reality, the strong sense of disparity can trigger anxiety and depression. In terms of behavior, unplanned use and obstacles in study and work are merely superficial manifestations. Addicts often fall into a vicious cycle of "addiction - guilt - re-addiction", with their self-control and willpower continuously weakened (Montag & Hegelich, 2020). Even though they are aware of the drawbacks of over-watching short videos, they still find it hard to resist the temptation. They keep trying to quit but fail repeatedly, gradually losing control over their lives, lowering their self-evaluation, and greatly reducing their ability to plan for the future and their ability to act. They fall into an inefficient and confused life predicament, which affects their personal growth and the realization of their value.

Discussion

The results of this small-scale test indicate that, in addition to the three key roles of mediatization effects (expansion, substitution, and integration) proposed by Schulz (2004), the impact of TikTok on users' smartphone addiction behaviors also reveals a new role of mediatization effect and is conceptualized as "reconstruction". This represents an important extension of the existing mediatization theory, especially in an algorithm-dominated media environment. Unlike the traditional mediatization process of media organizations adapting to social dynamics, the reshaping algorithm media platform dynamically reconstructs user participation behavior through a continuous feedback loop. In the thematic analysis, it is emphasized that the initial concept of reconstruction is manifested in four interrelated mechanisms: the development of regional culture, the dissemination of values, the reconstruction of Internet language (hot memes) and participation behaviors. These mechanisms jointly demonstrate how TikTok mediates social interactions and actively changes users' communication practices, value systems and cultural expressions. This process goes far beyond mere creative expression and encompasses comprehensive behavioral reconstruction. Reconstruction is particularly evident in how TikTok's algorithm personalizes content feeds based on user engagement metrics and creates increasingly specialized interest communities. Through the analysis of TikTok's recommendation system, users' behavioral patterns are captured, analyzed and used to improve content delivery. Thereby influencing future behaviors (Kaye et al., 2021; Klug et al., 2021). This dynamic process creates "algorithm paddocks"—the digital spaces that users' worldviews and behaviors are gradually reshaped through algorithmic optimization (Thorson et al., 2021; Vaidhyanathan, 2018). At the same time, the user's behavior is reshaped through "algorithm intimacy" - in which the recommendation system can promote the triggering of user's neural responses and effectively reshape the user's hedonistic evaluation mechanism (Gillespie, 2018). These processes constitute a profound form of behavioral governance that goes far beyond creative self-expression. This theoretical advancement is particularly important for understanding how short video platforms promote addictive behaviors. The reshaping process creates a self-reinforcement cycle in which users' attention is increasingly captured and directed by algorithmic systems designed to maximize participation, gradually changing their media consumption patterns and potentially leading to dependencies (Throuvala et al., 2021).

The findings significantly extend mediatization framework. Schulz's theory mainly conceptualizes mediatization as media adaptation to social logic. Although it also discusses the impact of media logic on society, it mainly focuses on analyzing the adaptation of organizations to media logic (AlAhmad, 2023; Schulz, 2004). In contrast, this research shows that TikTok's algorithmic logic actively reshapes cultural customs and social interactions, forcing users and society to adapt to their technical support. Such a reshaping process demonstrates how society adapts to media in an algorithmic environment, which is also consistent with the difference

between exploring deep mediation and traditional mediation (Couldry, 2012; Couldry & Hepp, 2018). Schulz's framework emphasizes extension, substitution, amalgamation and accommodation as the key roles of mediatization effect, while reconstruction introduces a more bidirectional and recursive dimension. This new type emphasizes the dynamic reverse construction of user behavior by media in the algorithm era, enriching the connotation of mediatization theory. In the TikTok ecosystem, users do not just expand their communication capabilities, their communication preferences and behaviors are systematically reconstructed through algorithmic conditioning. This phenomenon is defined as algorithm culturalization in research on TikTok usage patterns for young people (Kaye et al., 2021). Compared with traditional mediatization theory, which mainly focuses on how media adapts to social structure and cultural practice, reconstruction emphasizes the profound impact of media technology on user behavior, cognition and social relations. It reflects how society adapts to the dynamic changes in media technology. In this study, TikTok's algorithmic recommendation mechanism and built-in functions not only changed users' content consumption patterns (AL-Zoubi, 2024), but also reconstructed users' participation patterns in culture. This dynamic reverse construction has not been fully explained by traditional media theory. This theoretical advancement is particularly important for understanding how short video platforms promote addictive behaviors. The reconstruction process creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which users' attention is increasingly captured and guided by algorithmic systems aimed at maximizing engagement, gradually changing their media consumption patterns and potentially leading to dependence (Montag et al., 2021).

Identifying reconstruction as a key role of mediatization effect provides valuable insights for developing more effective intervention measures for smartphone addiction. Traditional methods often focus on individual self-regulation or usage restrictions. However, the algorithmic mechanism for actively reshaping user behavior was ignored (Luo, 2023; Xiao & Huang, 2022). Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested to further investigate the relationship between mediatization and smartphone addiction and develop algorithmic transparency tools to make the operation mode of the content recommendation system visible. These tools can enable users to better understand how their viewing choices affect future content exposure and potentially disrupt the unconscious feedback loop that reinforces addiction patterns. Furthermore, the intervention strategies for addictive behaviors should strengthen the influence of the mediating effect on addictive behaviors and help users recognize how platform-specific communication practices enhance platform dependence through social reinforcement. Just as Throuvala et al. (2021) pointed out in the comprehensive review of the digital addiction framework, interventional therapy can incorporate the understanding of behaviors designed to reshape, shifting some focus from individual failure narratives to how the algorithmic environment affects society and culture.

Furthermore, there are several limitations of the research that must be admitted. The relatively small sample size composed only of Chinese college students limits the universality of the research results in other demographic groups or cultural contexts. College students represent a specific subset of TikTok users with specific usage patterns and sensitivities (Chen X. et al., 2021). Although this group is representative, it cannot fully reflect the mediating effects and addictive behaviors of users of different ages, occupations and social backgrounds. The exploratory nature of this preliminary study means that our conclusion should be regarded as temporary until it is verified through broader research. Although the current small-scale tests provide insights into reconstruction this new role of mediatization effect, and qualitative

methods can deeply explore users' behavioral and psychological changes, it still requires further verification of the universality and stability of this new type.

Conclusion and Future Study

This study proposes the concept of reconstruction and uses it as a key role of mediatization effect through in-depth discussion of the mediatization effect of TikTok and its relationship with smartphone addiction, which enriches the connotation of mediation theory. The research results show that TikTok not only affects user behavior through traditional mediatization effects such as extension, substitution and amalgamation, but also reshapes cultural development and communication models, as well as user behavior patterns through algorithms. This discovery emphasizes the dynamic reverse construction of user behavior by media in the algorithm era, and reveals how society adapts to the dynamic changes in media technology. In fact, the research results emphasize the systematic nature of smartphone addiction, and the mediatization effect can affect users' smartphone use and generate addictive behaviors. The findings also urge the development of algorithmic transparency tools and interventions to weaken compulsive participation under this algorithm recommendation mechanism. Although limited by its exploratory research on Chinese college students, this research lays the foundation for future research. Future research needs to combine vertical tracking with cross-cultural comparisons to explore in-depth mediatization effects of TikTok and its relationship with smartphone addiction. In addition, through further exploring the long-term impact of algorithm recommendation mechanism on user behavior and cognition, and how to optimize platform design through technical means to reduce its promoting effect on user addictive behavior. Ultimately advocate a balanced framework that prioritizes digital well-being without stifling creativity in an algorithm-driven society.

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Competing Interests

The author ensured there were no potential conflicts of interest associated with this article's research, authorship, and publication.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of Taylor University, Malaysia, with approval number HEC 2025/144.

Informed Consent

All participants received informed consent forms. All participants agreed to participate in the project and consented to the use of their data and the publication of relevant results for scientific research.

Author Contributions

TJ: Conceptualisation, research strategy, interview protocol, data analysis, manuscript writing, revision, and editing

KHT: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing, Quality assurance, project supervision, manuscript writing, revision, and editing

NL, JA, NM, NY: Quality assurance, editing.

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