Exploring Gender-Based Preferences in TikTok Influencer Following Among Students at University of Technology

Khulula Blessing Mthembu[1], Xolisa Philip Piyose[2], Phomolo Motsilili[3], Murimo Bethel Mutanga[4], Zvinodashe Revesai[5]

[1-4]Department of Information & Communication Technology, Mangosuthu University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

[5] Department of Information & Communication Technology, Reformed Church University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

E-mail: khulublessing@gmail.com[1], piyose.xolisa@mut.ac.za[2], motsilili.phomolo@mut.ac.za[3], mutangamb@mut.ac.za[4], revesaiz@rcu.ac.zw[5]

Abstract. The rise of short-form video platforms has fundamentally changed patterns of digital communication, with TikTok becoming a dominant influence in youth media consumption. However, gender-specific preferences in influencer choice remain underexamined, especially within African university settings. Based on Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), this qualitative exploratory study investigates how gender affects TikTok influencer following behaviours among 103 South African university students who were active TikTok users. Data were gathered via open-ended online questionnaires and analysed through Qualitative Content Analysis with dual-researcher coding to ensure reliability. Significant gender-based differences appeared in influencer preferences and motivational factors: male students (61% of the sample) mainly followed educational, motivational, and entrepreneurial influencers, seeking cognitive gratifications related to skill development and career prospects, while female students (39% of the sample) inclined towards lifestyle, beauty, and fashion influencers, prioritising affective gratifications like emotional resonance, identity exploration, and self-expression. Despite these differences, both groups valued influencer authenticity, relatability, and expertise over follower count or popularity metrics. The findings extend UGT application to algorithm-driven, short-form video platforms and show how gender influences digital media gratification-seeking behaviours, revealing TikTok as a multifaceted tool for identity building, emotional validation, and aspirational learning rather than just entertainment. These results inform gender-sensitive digital marketing, educational technology integration, and culturally relevant content creation for African youth markets, allowing universities to use these insights for more effective student engagement on social media. The study's focus on a single institution and its cross-sectional design limit broad applicability, indicating that future research should explore long-term influencer relationships and cross-cultural comparisons across African educational contexts.

Keywords: Gender differences, social media, influencer preferences, TikTok, university students, Uses and Gratifications Theory

1. Introduction

The proliferation of short-form video platforms has fundamentally transformed digital communication patterns, with TikTok emerging as the dominant force in youth media consumption globally. Since its international launch in 2018, TikTok has experienced unprecedented growth, reaching over 1.7 billion monthly active users by late 2024, with individuals aged 18-24 representing the platform's most engaged demographic [1]. Unlike traditional social networks that prioritize text-based or static visual material, TikTok's algorithm-driven, short-form video format creates unique engagement behaviours that merit specific academic investigation.

Within university environments, TikTok has evolved beyond mere entertainment to become a significant channel for educational material, career guidance, and social identity formation. University learners increasingly engage with influencers—creators who have established substantial followings and credibility within specific niches—as sources of inspiration, information, and social connection [2]. These personalities wield considerable power in shaping youth perceptions, behaviours, and aspirations, with research indicating that demographic alignment, particularly gender congruence, significantly enhances credibility and persuasive impact [3][4].

The South African higher education landscape presents unique dynamics that distinguish it from Western-dominated social media scholarship. Universities of technology in South Africa serve predominantly first-generation tertiary students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, many navigating complex intersections between traditional cultural values and contemporary digital identities [5]. These learners often face financial constraints, limited access to conventional mentorship structures, and pressure to achieve academic success while maintaining cultural connections. Within this framework, social media channels like TikTok serve multifaceted functions, operating as spaces for identity construction, peer learning, aspirational guidance, and cultural navigation [6].

Gender emerges as a critical variable in social media engagement behaviours, with substantial scholarship documenting systematic differences in how male and female users interact with digital material. Studies consistently demonstrate that male users tend to prioritize informational and achievement-oriented material, seeking cognitive gratifications related to skill development and knowledge acquisition [7][8]. Conversely, female users typically gravitate toward emotionally resonant material that supports identity exploration, social connection, and self-expression, reflecting preferences for affective and social integrative gratifications [9][10]. However, these patterns have been predominantly documented within Western settings and on platforms with different algorithmic structures than TikTok.

Despite growing recognition of TikTok's influence among youth populations, significant gaps persist in understanding gender-specific engagement behaviours within non-Western educational environments. Existing literature on influencer marketing has primarily focused on Instagram and YouTube, often within European or North American settings, with limited exploration of TikTok's distinctive algorithmic personalization features [11]. Furthermore, the cultural specificity of African university environments, where learners negotiate complex identity formations amid diverse social pressures, remains underexamined in social media scholarship [12].

This knowledge gap is particularly significant given Uses and Gratifications Theory's (UGT) emphasis on active media selection based on individual needs and motivations. UGT posits that individuals deliberately choose media material that satisfies specific psychological and social needs, including cognitive needs (information acquisition), affective needs (emotional experiences), personal integrative needs (identity reinforcement), social integrative needs (relationship maintenance), and escapist needs (entertainment and diversion) [13][14]. In TikTok's algorithm-driven environment, where personalization is paramount, understanding how gender influences gratification-seeking behaviours becomes crucial for comprehending contemporary youth media engagement.

The present investigation addresses these gaps by examining gender-based differences in TikTok influencer preferences among learners at a South African university of technology. Through qualitative

analysis of responses from 103 active TikTok users, this study investigates the primary question: How do gender differences shape university learners' preferences for TikTok influencers?

Specific objectives include: (1) identifying the types of TikTok influencers predominantly followed by male and female participants; (2) analysing the motivational factors driving gender-specific following behaviours; (3) examining how personality characteristics such as authenticity, relatability, and expertise influence engagement across gender lines; and (4) exploring category preferences including educational, lifestyle, entertainment, and motivational material among different gender groups.

This investigation contributes to the academic literature by extending UGT application to algorithm-driven, short-form video platforms while providing culturally specific insights into African youth digital behaviour. The findings have practical implications for gender-sensitive digital marketing strategies, educational technology integration in university settings, and culturally relevant creation for African youth markets. Additionally, the scholarship offers universities evidence-based approaches for enhancing learner engagement through social media channels.

The paper proceeds with Section 2 presenting the theoretical framework grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, Section 3 describing the qualitative methodology, Section 4 presenting findings and discussion of gender-specific patterns, and Section 5 concluding with implications for digital marketing, educational practice, and future directions in African settings.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework
2.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory Foundation
This investigation employs Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) as the foundational lens for examining learner engagement with TikTok influencers, with particular emphasis on how gender mediates these behaviors. UGT positions individuals as active agents in the media environment who intentionally select platforms and material that fulfill distinct psychological, emotional, informational, and social needs [11][12]. According to Brüns and Meißner (2024) [13], people make deliberate decisions about media consumption based on their perceived ability to satisfy specific requirements.

UGT identifies five primary gratification categories that drive media selection. Cognitive needs involve acquiring information and knowledge to understand one's environment and make informed decisions. Affective needs encompass seeking emotional experiences, pleasure, and mood regulation. Personal integrative needs focus on reinforcing values, beliefs, and identity construction. Social integrative needs address connecting with others and maintaining relationships. Finally, escapist needs involve diverting attention from everyday problems and stress relief [13][14].

2.2 UGT Application in Algorithm-Driven Platforms
TikTok's algorithmic architecture makes UGT particularly relevant for understanding influencer following behaviors. The platform's sophisticated personalization system shapes user experiences by curating material based on engagement patterns, viewing duration, and interaction behaviors [14]. This algorithm-driven approach creates individualized feeds that align with users' demonstrated preferences and needs.

The platform's design democratizes fame potential, allowing any user to achieve viral status through compelling material that generates substantial likes, views, and shares. This accessibility satisfies users' needs for social recognition and validation [15]. According to Bhandari and Bimo (2020) [16], TikTok engagements reflect broader motivations including entertainment, identity formation, social interaction, escapism, and information seeking.

Unlike traditional media where audiences passively consume predetermined schedules, TikTok's infinite scroll mechanism and personalized algorithm create an environment where gratification-seeking becomes continuous and immediate. Users receive instant feedback through metrics and algorithmic responses, creating feedback loops that reinforce specific gratification patterns.

2.3 Gender as a Mediating Variable

Gender operates as both a biological characteristic and social construct that significantly influences media consumption patterns. Research demonstrates that female users typically seek emotionally resonant, identity-affirming material such as beauty tutorials, lifestyle guidance, and motivational videos [7]. These preferences align with socialized expectations around emotional expressiveness, relationship maintenance, and appearance management.

Conversely, male users generally prefer material fulfilling cognitive or instrumental goals, including entrepreneurship guidance, educational tutorials, skill-building demonstrations, and humor [9]. This pattern reflects traditional masculine socialization emphasizing achievement, competence, and instrumental problem-solving.

These tendencies manifest differently within TikTok's unique environment. For example, a male learner might follow entrepreneurial influencers to gain career development insights, addressing cognitive needs, while a female learner might engage with lifestyle influencers seeking inspiration, emotional validation, or identity alignment. However, the platform's algorithm may also challenge traditional gender boundaries by exposing users to diverse material based on engagement patterns rather than demographic assumptions.

2.4 Integrated Theoretical Model

The theoretical framework integrates UGT's active audience perspective with gender theory to explain TikTok influencer following behaviours. Figure 1 illustrates this model, beginning with core UGT motivations entertainment, identity formation, and information seeking that drive media consumption. Gender identity shapes these motivations, influencing both the type and purpose of material consumed.

Influencer characteristics including relatability, authenticity, and expertise function as mediating factors, aligning with users' motivations to enhance engagement. The model demonstrates that TikTok influencer following behaviour results from dynamic interactions between individual needs, gendered preferences, and influencer attributes.

In the South African university of technology setting, where learners navigate complex transitions between traditional cultural values and contemporary digital identities, this integrated framework provides structure for understanding how individuals use social media to address specific developmental and social needs. The theory's flexibility accommodates cultural variations while maintaining focus on individual agency and purposeful selection.
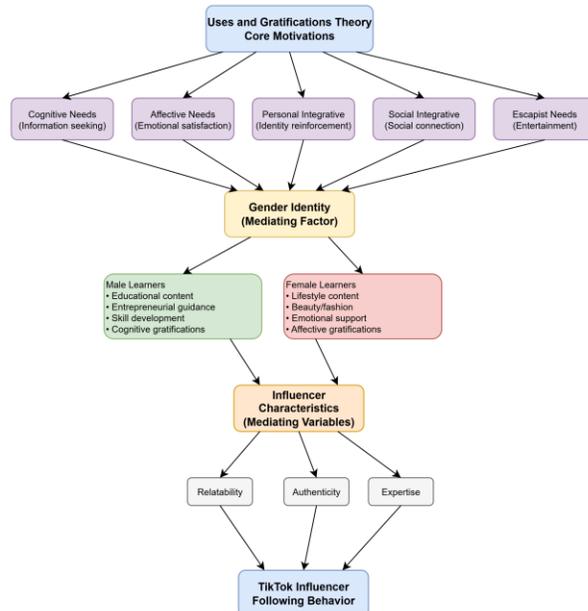

Figure 1. Relationship between UGT, Gender, and Influencer Following Behaviour

This theoretical foundation guides the qualitative inquiry into how male and female university learners differentially engage with TikTok influencers based on their distinct gratification needs and gendered socialization experiences.

3. Research Method

This investigation employed a qualitative content analysis approach to understand gender differences in TikTok influencer preferences among learners at a South African University of Technology. Data were gathered through an online questionnaire featuring open-ended questions, generating textual responses that were systematically analyzed to identify patterns and themes. While this approach differs from traditional qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, it enabled us to capture perspectives from a larger, more diverse sample while maintaining the richness necessary for interpretive analysis of gendered social media engagement behaviors.

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study utilized an exploratory qualitative content analysis design to examine gender differences in TikTok influencer preferences. Exploratory inquiry is appropriate when researchers possess limited knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation, as it enables open-ended exploration that reveals patterns, meanings, and relationships related to specific topics [17]. This design was deemed suitable because learners' influencer-following behaviors on TikTok and gender-based variations represent underexplored areas in existing literature, particularly within African educational contexts.

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was selected as the analytical strategy because it allows systematic examination of textual data while maintaining sensitivity to contextual meanings and patterns [19][20]. This method is particularly well-suited for analyzing open-ended survey responses where the goal is to identify themes and compare patterns across defined groups—in this case, male and female participants. While we acknowledge that QCA of questionnaire data lacks the interactional depth and probing opportunities inherent in interviews or focus groups, this approach offered distinct advantages: (1) the ability to reach a larger sample size (n=103) than would be feasible through intensive qualitative methods; (2) reduced social desirability bias as participants could respond privately without direct researcher presence; (3) standardized questioning that facilitated systematic comparative analysis across gender groups; and (4) practical feasibility given resource constraints and the need for institutional ethics approval for student research.

The methodology aligns with the investigation's goal of understanding the nuanced ways gender influences social media engagement decisions while acknowledging that our findings represent patterns across a broader sample rather than the deep individual narratives characteristic of phenomenological or grounded theory approaches.

3.2 Instrument Development and Validation

The investigation utilized a carefully designed open-ended questionnaire administered via Google Forms to capture comprehensive qualitative material about participants' TikTok influencer preferences and motivations. The instrument development process was grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, ensuring questions systematically addressed the five core gratification categories: cognitive needs (information seeking), affective needs (emotional satisfaction), personal integrative needs (identity reinforcement), social integrative needs (social connection), and escapist needs (entertainment and diversion).

Questionnaire development followed a three-stage validation process. Initially, an instrument was created based on established UGT scholarship and social media engagement literature, with questions specifically adapted for TikTok's unique features and the South African university environment. Subsequently, the draft underwent expert review by three social media researchers and two gender studies specialists to ensure construct validity and cultural appropriateness. Finally, cognitive interviews were

conducted with eight learners to assess question clarity, identify potential ambiguities or missing elements, and ensure questions would elicit sufficiently detailed responses for qualitative analysis.

The final instrument included four main sections: (1) demographic information encompassing gender, age, field of study, and academic year; (2) TikTok usage patterns including daily usage duration, primary engagement behaviors, and general content preferences; (3) influencer following behaviors with specific questions about influencer types followed, preferred categories, and following decision rationales; and (4) motivational factors exploring participants' underlying needs and gratifications sought through influencer engagement.

Key open-ended questions included:
- "Describe the types of TikTok influences you follow most often and explain why you follow them."
- "What motivates you to follow a particular influencer? Describe the factors that influence your decision."
- "How do the influence you follow make you feel, and what needs do they fulfill for you?"
- "Describe what makes an influencer authentic or relatable to you."

Key operational definitions were provided to ensure consistent interpretation. "Active TikTok user" was defined as someone who uses the platform at least three times weekly and regularly engages through likes, comments, or shares. "Influencer" was defined as creators with substantial followings who regularly post content aimed at influencing audience opinions, behaviors, or purchasing decisions. "Following behavior" was defined as the conscious decision to subscribe to an influencer's content and regularly engage with their posts.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

The online questionnaire was administered via Google Forms between [INSERT DATES if available]. Participants were recruited through university email systems and social media channels (Facebook and WhatsApp class groups), with clear instructions about participation criteria (active TikTok users currently enrolled at the university), estimated completion time (15-20 minutes), and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. The questionnaire link remained open for three weeks to maximize participation rates.

The online format offered flexibility and convenience, potentially increasing response rates as participants could respond at their preferred time and location. Additionally, the asynchronous nature of the questionnaire allowed participants time to reflect on their responses, potentially yielding more thoughtful answers than might emerge in immediate interview contexts. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically before participants could access the questionnaire.

3.4 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed for this investigation, involving deliberate selection of participants who met specific criteria relevant to the study objectives. Learners who were active TikTok users and currently enrolled at the university were targeted. The sample included both male and female participants to facilitate comparative gender analysis.

Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be currently enrolled at the participating University of Technology; (2) meet the operational definition of "active TikTok user"; (3) follow at least three TikTok influencers; and (4) provide informed consent for participation. No exclusion criteria were applied based on demographic characteristics other than gender, allowing for diverse representation within each gender category across different fields of study, academic years, and age ranges.

A total of 103 responses were collected. While this number may appear modest relative to the university's total student population, it was deemed sufficient for qualitative content analysis purposes, as the goal was not statistical generalizability but rather to understand core reasons for learner influencer-following behaviors and to identify recurring patterns in responses, particularly differences between male and female participants. Sample size in qualitative research is determined by information richness and pattern saturation rather than statistical power requirements [17].

3.5 Data Analysis Procedures
Responses were analyzed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), following the systematic procedures outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008) and Schreier (2012) [19][20]. This method is particularly suitable for organizing and understanding written responses by identifying patterns and grouping them based on similar ideas, making it especially appropriate for comparative analyses such as gender-based investigations.

3.5.1 Data Preparation and Familiarization.
Responses obtained from Google Forms were downloaded and saved in Excel format. Both primary coders (Authors 1 and 2) independently reviewed all responses multiple times to achieve deep familiarization with the data and develop preliminary impressions of patterns and themes. During this phase, we maintained analytic memos documenting initial observations, questions, and potential coding categories. This immersive reading process continued until both coders felt confident, they understood the breadth and depth of the dataset.

3.5.2 Initial Coding Phase.
The coding process followed an inductive approach, allowing codes to emerge from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories. Both coders independently worked through the dataset, identifying key words, phrases, and concepts from each response. These initial codes captured reasons why learners follow certain TikTok influencers and the characteristics they value.
For example:
- If participants stated they follow an influencer because they "make them laugh" or "provide entertainment," responses were coded as Entertainment/Humor
- Statements like "I learn new skills" or "they teach me about business" were coded as Educational Value
- Phrases indicating "I relate to their struggles" or "they understand what I'm going through" were coded as Relatability/Shared Experience

During this phase, each coder maintained a codebook documenting code definitions and example quotes. After independently coding approximately 30% of the dataset, the two coders met to compare coding approaches, discuss discrepancies, and refine code definitions. This process resulted in an initial codebook containing 47 distinct codes.*3.5.3 Categorization and Theme Development.*

Once initial coding was complete, similar or related codes were grouped into broader categories through an iterative process of comparison and consolidation. For example, codes such as "entertaining," "funny," "makes me laugh," and "lighthearted content" were grouped under the broader category Entertainment and Escapism. Codes like "teaches me skills," "provides career advice," "educational content," and "helps with assignments" were consolidated into Educational and Skill-Building Content.

This categorization process was conducted collaboratively, with both coders proposing category structures and discussing the conceptual coherence of groupings. Disagreements were resolved through extended discussion and reference back to the original data. Where codes could fit multiple categories, we made placement decisions based on the dominant function or gratification expressed in participant responses. This process resulted in eight major thematic categories and 23 sub-themes.

3.5.4 Comparative Gender Analysis.
With the final coding framework established, we systematically examined how each category and sub-theme appeared across male and female participants. This analysis focused on category prevalence and the specific ways each gender group discussed their influencer preferences. We created comparison matrices documenting:
- The frequency with which each theme appeared in male versus female responses
- Qualitative differences in how themes were expressed across gender groups
- The intensity or centrality of themes based on response length and elaboration

- Interconnections between themes (e.g., how educational content related to career aspirations for male participants)

This comparative layer enabled us to identify meaningful gender-based patterns in influencer preferences and the underlying gratifications sought.

3.5.5 Inter-Coder Reliability.

To ensure coding consistency, we calculated inter-coder agreement after the initial independent coding phase. Using Cohen's kappa, we achieved an agreement rate of $\kappa = 0.82$ for category-level coding, indicating substantial agreement beyond chance. For codes where disagreement occurred (approximately 18% of coded segments), we engaged in consensus discussions, returning to the original responses to determine the most appropriate coding. All disagreements were resolved before proceeding to the categorization phase.

3.5.6 Trustworthiness and Rigor.

Multiple strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of findings, following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research credibility:

Credibility (Internal Validity):

- Dual coding: Two researchers independently coded all data, with systematic reconciliation of differences through consensus discussion
- Peer debriefing: Weekly team meetings were held throughout the analysis process where all five authors discussed emerging themes, challenged interpretations, and questioned assumptions. These sessions were particularly valuable for surfacing potential gender biases in our interpretations
- Extended engagement with data: Multiple readings of the dataset over a six-week analysis period allowed for refined understanding and identification of nuanced patterns
- Transparent audit trail: Detailed records were maintained documenting coding decisions, category development rationale, and analytical reasoning. This included dated memos capturing our evolving understanding of the data

Dependability (Reliability):

- Systematic methodology: The structured, multi-phase analysis process was documented in detail, enabling potential replication
- Consistent application: Regular calibration meetings ensured consistent code application across the dataset
- Codebook refinement: The evolving codebook was version-controlled, with documentation of all definitional changes

Confirmability (Objectivity):

- Reflexivity practices: Researchers maintained reflexive journals documenting personal assumptions and potential biases (see Section 3.6)
- Data-grounded conclusions: All interpretations were supported by direct evidence from participant responses, with representative quotes retained for verification

Transferability (External Validity):

- Thick description: Detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures enable readers to assess applicability to other settings
- Purposive sampling documentation: Clear inclusion criteria allow others to identify comparable populations.

3.6 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity
Qualitative research requires explicit acknowledgment of how researcher characteristics, experiences, and assumptions may shape data collection and interpretation [17]. Our research team comprises five members bringing diverse perspectives to this investigation.

Research Team Composition: The primary research team included three male researchers (Authors 1, 2, and 4) and two female researchers (Author 3 and Author 5), all affiliated with South African or Zimbabwean higher education institutions. Authors 1-4 are faculty members in the Department of Information and Communication Technology at Mangosuthu University of Technology, the same institution where data were collected. Author 5 is based at Reformed Church University in Zimbabwe. Our team's gender composition (3 male, 2 female) partially mirrors the sample distribution, though with less female representation among researchers than would be ideal for studying gendered phenomena.

TikTok Usage and Digital Media Engagement: Our relationships with TikTok varied considerably. Authors 1 and 3 are regular TikTok users who engage with the platform daily, following influences across educational, entertainment, and lifestyle categories. Authors 2 and 5 use TikTok occasionally for research purposes but are not active content consumers. Author 4 is not a TikTok user, bringing an outsider perspective valuable for questioning assumptions that active users might take for granted. This mix of insider and outsider positions enriched our analytical discussions, as active users could contextualize platform-specific behaviors while non-users prompted us to explain and justify interpretations that might otherwise remain implicit.

Institutional Positionality: As faculty members at the participating institution, we occupied positions of authority relative to our student participants. This insider status provided advantages—we understood the institutional context, student pressures, and local cultural dynamics—but also posed potential analytical risks. We remained conscious that our educator perspectives might bias us toward valorizing educational content or viewing entertainment-focused engagement as less valuable. Our regular reflexive discussions explicitly addressed these tensions, particularly when analyzing male participants' emphasis on educational influencers (questioning whether we were over-interpreting this as evidence of goal-orientation versus simply reflecting socially desirable responses to academic researchers).

Cultural and Socioeconomic Backgrounds: All team members identify as South African or Zimbabwean, sharing cultural contexts with participants but spanning different ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic experiences. Authors 1, 2, 3, and 4 are South African nationals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, while Author 5 is Zimbabwean. This diversity prompted valuable discussions about how cultural expectations around gender might shape both participant responses and our interpretations. For instance, we questioned whether female participants' emphasis on emotional connection reflected genuine preferences or gendered expectations about appropriate feminine behavior in our cultural context.

Reflexive Analytical Practices: Throughout the analysis, we engaged in sustained reflexivity regarding how our own gender identities and experiences might shape our interpretations. Several specific moments exemplified this reflexive practice:

1. Challenging Initial Assumptions: During initial coding, we initially categorized "motivational content" as exclusively male-oriented based on early response patterns. However, when Author 3 (female) challenged this interpretation, closer examination revealed that female participants also engaged with motivational content but framed it differently focusing on emotional resilience and self-acceptance rather than career achievement. This prompted us to develop more nuanced sub-codes within the motivational category.

2. Questioning Gendered Value Judgments: We noticed a tendency in our early analytical memos to describe male participants' preferences using achievement-oriented language ("goal-directed," "strategic") while describing female preferences using more passive terms ("seeking validation," "looking for connection"). Author 5 pointed out this implicit value hierarchy, leading us to revise our descriptive language to avoid privileging instrumental goals over relational ones.

3. Examining Cultural Specificity: Our discussions repeatedly returned to the question of whether observed patterns reflected universal gender socialization, South African cultural contexts, or the specific institutional environment. We remained cautious about over-generalizing findings beyond our specific context while recognizing that some patterns aligned with international literature.

Analytic Memos and Audit Trail: Each researcher maintained analytical memos throughout the coding process, documenting interpretive decisions, questions, and evolving understandings. These memos became particularly important during consensus discussions when coding disagreements arose. For example, when coding a male participant's discussion of following fashion influencers—a pattern we initially considered counter to stereotypical masculine preferences—our memos documented our discussion about whether this represented genuine interest in fashion or strategic learning about professional presentation. Ultimately, the participant's own language emphasized "how successful people dress for business meetings," leading us to code this under professional development rather than aesthetic interest.

We acknowledge several limitations arising from our positionality. First, our predominantly male research team may have inadvertently overlooked or underemphasized aspects of female participants' experiences that an evenly gendered or female-majority team might have foregrounded. Second, as adults and educators, we may have interpreted youth digital practices through generational lenses that participants would not recognize. Third, despite our African contexts, we work in Westernized academic environments and may have unconsciously applied Western theoretical frameworks in ways that don't fully capture indigenous or local meaning-making practices.

These reflexive acknowledgments do not invalidate our findings but rather contextualize them as situated interpretations emerging from our particular standpoints, shaped by ongoing dialogue and critical self-examination throughout the research process.

3.7 Ethical Considerations
Ethical approval was obtained from the Reformed Church University (RCU601|2025) prior to data collection. The study adhered to principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures taken to protect their anonymity. No identifying information was collected beyond basic demographics, and all data was stored securely with access restricted to the research team. Given the online nature of data collection, particular attention was paid to data security, with responses accessible only through password-protected accounts.

4. Results
This section presents findings in three parts: participant demographics, a comprehensive coding framework, and thematic patterns from qualitative content analysis. Results demonstrate distinct gender patterns in TikTok influencer preferences while revealing important commonalities across groups.

4.1 Participant Demographics
The investigation collected responses from 103 learners at a South African University of Technology. Among participants, 61% identified as male (n=63) and 39% as female (n=40), as shown in Figure 2. All respondents were active TikTok users, reporting platform usage at least three times weekly with regular engagement. The sample showed diversity across Information and Communication Technology (41%), Engineering (23%), Business Management (18%), and other programs (18%). Ages ranged from 18 to 29 years (M = 21.3, SD = 2.1).
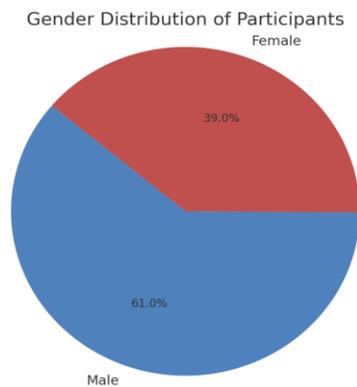
Gender Distribution of Participants

Figure 2. Gender distribution

This distribution enables meaningful comparative analysis. The sample size for each gender group was sufficient for qualitative content analysis, allowing identification of recurring patterns and thematic saturation.

4.2 Coding Framework and Analytical Overview
Qualitative content analysis yielded twelve major themes organized into two primary orientations: instrumental and cognitive gratifications predominantly associated with males, and affective and identity gratifications predominantly associated with females. Several themes cut across both groups.
The coding process began with 47 initial codes, refined into twelve major themes presented in Table 1. Each theme encompasses multiple sub themes capturing nuanced variations. Table 1 documents theme definitions, representative quotes, and gender distributions, serving as both audit trail and foundation for detailed analysis.

Table 1. Comprehensive Coding Framework for TikTok Influencer Following Behaviours

Major Theme	Sub themes	Definition	Representative Quotes	Gender Distribution
Educational and Skill Building	Programming tutorials; Business strategies; Career guidance; Professional development	Material providing practical knowledge and skills applicable academically or professionally	*I follow this guy who teaches programming concepts in short videos. He breaks down complex coding problems into simple steps.* (Male, ICT)	Male: 47/63 (75%); Female: 6/40 (15%)
Goal Oriented Motivation	Achievement focus; Success strategies; Productivity methods	Motivational material with instrumental focus providing concrete strategies	*I follow motivational speakers who show you how successful people think and plan their lives. It's not just inspiration, it's instruction.* (Male, Engineering)	Male: 31/63 (49%); Female: 8/40 (20%)
Gaming (Strategic)	Game strategy; Skill improvement; Competitive techniques	Gaming material focused on skill development rather than entertainment	*I follow players who explain their strategies and teach advanced techniques. It's like studying, but for games.* (Male, ICT)	Male: 18/63 (29%); Female: 2/40 (5%)

Major Theme	Sub themes	Definition	Representative Quotes	Gender Distribution
Lifestyle and Beauty	Routines; Fashion; Beauty tutorials; Self-care; Budget tips	Material supporting identity formation and self-presentation	*I follow girls who show real morning routines. They talk about struggling with self-confidence and finding your style.* (Female, Business)	Male: 5/63 (8%); Female: 28/40 (70%)
Emotional Authenticity	Mental health; Personal struggles; Vulnerability; Failure stories	Material demonstrating emotional openness and realistic challenges	*I follow influencers who are real about their struggles. When they talk about anxiety, I feel less alone.* (Female, Business)	Male: 12/63 (19%); Female: 31/40 (78%)
Creative Inspiration	Artistic material; DIY projects; Personal style; Budget creativity	Material encouraging artistic expression and individual creativity	*I love creators who show you how to express yourself on a student budget.* (Female, ICT)	Male: 7/63 (11%); Female: 26/40 (65%)
Relationship Navigation	Dating advice; Family dynamics; Conflict resolution; Boundary setting	Material addressing interpersonal relationships and social dynamics	*Influencers help me understand how to deal with family expectations while being independent.* (Female, Business)	Male: 6/63 (10%); Female: 19/40 (48%)
Cultural Identity	African experiences; Cultural heritage; Local situations; Representation	Material addressing culturally specific experiences and African perspectives	*I follow South African influencers who understand our specific struggles as Black students.* (Male, ICT)	Male: 26/63 (41%); Female: 22/40 (55%)
Credibility and Expertise	Professional qualifications; Track record; Evidence based material	Evaluation focusing on credentials and authority rather than popularity	*I don't follow someone just because they're popular. I check if they know what they're talking about.* (Male, Business)	Male: 41/63 (65%); Female: 14/40 (35%)
Relatability	Similarity to self; Student life; Accessible personality; Shared struggles	Preference for influencers demonstrating similarity and shared circumstances	*I prefer influencers who feel like they could be my friend, not someone living in a mansion.* (Female, Business)	Male: 28/63 (44%); Female: 36/40 (90%)
Community Connection	Comment engagement; Interactive discussions; Belonging; Collective identity	Active participation and connection with other followers	*I love reading comments and seeing other people who feel the same way. We're all in this together.* (Female, Business)	Male: 11/63 (17%); Female: 24/60 (60%)

Major Theme	Sub themes	Definition	Representative Quotes	Gender Distribution
Mental Health Support	Mood management; Stress relief; Coping strategies; Anxiety reduction	Strategic use for emotional regulation and psychological wellbeing	*When I'm stressed about exams, I watch certain creators who calm me down. It's like therapy.* (Female, ICT)	Male: 9/63 (14%); Female: 29/40 (73%)

4.3 Thematic Analysis Findings

Analysis revealed distinct patterns in influencer following behaviors differentiated by gender. While both groups actively engaged with influencers, significant differences emerged in preferred material types, engagement rationales, and valued attributes.

4.3.1 Male Participant Preferences.

Male participants demonstrated pronounced preferences for educational, motivational, and entrepreneurial material, reflecting cognitive and personal integrative gratifications. Analysis revealed 47 of 63 males (75%) explicitly mentioned following influencers offering practical knowledge and career guidance.

Educational and Skill Building Dominance. The most prominent theme involved pursuing educational material enhancing academic or professional capabilities. Participants explained: *I follow this guy who teaches programming concepts in short videos* and *the influences I follow are mostly about business and entrepreneurship. They share real strategies.* Twenty three males specifically mentioned field related material, suggesting strategic consumption extending classroom learning. The emphasis linked closely to economic concerns and career anxieties, with phrases like *preparing for the job market* and *building marketable skills* appearing throughout responses.

Goal Oriented Motivation. Thirty one males described following motivational influencers with distinctly instrumental focus. One articulated: *I follow motivational speakers who show you how successful people think, not just tell you to work hard.* Participants valued concrete frameworks, routines, and methodologies rather than emotional encouragement alone, explicitly contrasting valued material with *empty motivation* or *toxic positivity.*

Gaming with Strategic Focus. Eighteen males followed gaming influencers but focused on strategic material improving performance. One explained: *I follow players who explain strategies and teach advanced techniques. It's like studying.* Skills learned transferred to academic domains, particularly programming and engineering.

Credibility Emphasis. Forty one males emphasized influencer credibility and demonstrated expertise. Participants noted: *I check if they actually know what they're talking about* and *I look for influencers who have done what they teach.* This expertise seeking behavior appeared particularly strong among technical field students, who applied academic evaluation criteria to influence material.

South African Influences. Twenty-six males explicitly mentioned following influencers addressing challenges specific to young African men, including unemployment and resource constrained entrepreneurship. One explained: *These African entrepreneurs understand starting a business with no capital.* Influencers functioned as surrogate mentors providing guidance unavailable through family or institutional structures.

Long Term Orientation. Males preferred consistent, high quality material over viral trends. Thirty-four mentioned unfollowing influences become inconsistent or overly commercial. Participants described building digital libraries, returning to specific videos repeatedly, indicating deep sustained engagement.

4.3.2 Female Participant Preferences.

Female participants exhibited distinctly different patterns, with preferences aligned with affective and social integrative gratifications. Analysis revealed 34 of 40 females (85%) prioritized emotional connection, identity exploration, and self-expression.

Lifestyle and Beauty as Identity Tools. The most prominent theme involved lifestyle and beauty influencers serving sophisticated identity formation functions. Participants explained: *I follow girls who show real morning routines. They talk about struggling with self-confidence* and *Beauty content helps me experiment with who I want to be.* Twenty-eight females mentioned influencers addressing body image and self-esteem within beauty material. Several defended lifestyle materials, noting: *Learning to present yourself professionally matters for internships. It's not just vanity.*

Emotional Authenticity. Thirty-one females valued influencers demonstrating emotional authenticity. Participants articulated: *I follow influencers who are real about their struggles. When they talk about anxiety, I feel less alone.* Several described parasocial relationships function as emotional support systems, with specific creators serving mood regulation functions. This sophisticated media use demonstrates agency in leveraging digital relationships for psychological wellbeing.

Creative Inspiration. Twenty-six females followed influencers encouraging creativity and artistic expression. Participants noted: *I love creators who show you how to express yourself on a student budget.* The emphasis on accessible, budget conscious creativity reflected economic realities. Creative material served multiple needs: identity expression, joy from creative process, and distraction from stress.

Relationship Navigation. Nineteen females discussed following influencers addressing dating, family relationships, and peer dynamics. One explained: *Influencers help me understand how to deal with family expectations while being independent.* Material addressed boundary setting, communication strategies, and conflict resolution, skills essential for social functioning.

Cultural Identity. Twenty two females mentioned following African influencers addressing culturally specific experiences. Participants explained: *I follow South African influencers who understand our specific struggles as Black students* and *Seeing African creators succeed globally makes me believe I can too.* The representation theme intersected with beauty standards, with participants valuing influencers celebrating natural hair and diverse body types beyond Eurocentric norms.

Relatability Over Expertise. Thirty six females preferred influencers demonstrating relatability over distant success. Participants articulated: *I prefer influencers who feel like they could be my friend, not someone in a mansion.* This relatability emphasis revealed different evaluation criteria than males applied, prioritizing shared experience over expertise.

Mental Health Support. Twenty nine females described strategic use for emotional regulation. One explained: *When I'm stressed, I watch certain creators who calm me down. It's like therapy.* Participants created personalized emotion regulation strategies, knowing which influencers to access for specific emotional needs. This sophistication suggests nuanced understandings of their psychological patterns.

Community Building. Twenty four females mentioned active participation in comment discussions. One explained: *I love reading comments and seeing other people who feel the same way.* Comment sections became social spaces for shared experience, mutual support, and identity affirmation, with several describing making actual friendships through shared influencer interest.

4.3.3 Cross Gender Commonalities.
Despite distinct preferences, both groups emphasized relatability, authenticity, and personal interest alignment as more important than follower count or popularity. Both demonstrated sophisticated media literacy, actively evaluating quality and alignment with personal needs. Cultural representation appeared important across both groups, with participants valuing influencers understanding South African realities. Both groups described TikTok serving functions beyond entertainment, positioning it as multifunctional tool supporting education, career development, identity formation, and emotional regulation.

4.4 Discussion
4.4.1 Male Cognitive Gratifications and Educational Focus.
Male participants predominantly sought influencers providing practical knowledge and intellectual stimulation, positioning TikTok as purposeful self-development tool. This instrumental orientation reflects

cognitive gratification within UGT. Findings align with existing scholarship demonstrating males prioritize achievement-oriented material. The emphasis appeared strongly shaped by South African economic realities, where unemployment remains high. Male instrumental media use reflects rational responses to structural constraints, using accessible digital resources to enhance employability. The credibility emphasis also indicates class conscious strategies for evaluating digital material in settings where misinformation proliferates.

4.4.2 Female Affective Gratifications and Identity Formation.
Female participants demonstrated strong preferences for emotionally resonant material supporting identity exploration. Engagement was driven by desires for emotional validation, relatability, and community belonging. These patterns align with affective and social integrative gratifications within UGT. Analysis reveals engagement with beauty and lifestyle material served complex identity work supporting self presentation strategies, cultural navigation, and aspiration development within resource constraints. The mental health theme deserves particular attention. Female strategic use for psychological self care represents sophisticated consumption where digital relationships supplement traditional support systems. The community building emphasis extends existing UGT applications, revealing how influencer followings facilitate horizontal peer connections beyond vertical creator follower relationships.

4.4.3 Influencer Characteristics as Mediating Factors.
Both groups emphasized that influencer characteristics play pivotal roles beyond material type alone. However, characteristics carried different meanings. Males emphasized expertise, credibility, and competence. Females prioritized emotional authenticity, vulnerability, and relatability. While both value authenticity, they operationalize differently based on distinct psychological needs. The finding that popularity metrics mattered less than perceived authenticity challenges influencer marketing assumptions. Gender differences in valuing expertise versus relatability reveal different knowledge authority frameworks. Males privileged hierarchical expertise models while females valued horizontal peer knowledge sharing where lived experience constitutes legitimate authority.

4.4.4 Theoretical and Cultural Implications.
Findings validate UGT's premise that users actively select media fulfilling specific needs, even within algorithmically driven environments. Learners demonstrated agency in following decisions and strategic evaluation. However, gender operates as socialized disposition and probabilistic tendency rather than deterministic category. Within the South African environment, TikTok serves functions beyond entertainment, addressing gaps in traditional institutional support systems. The platform provides mentorship substitutes, career guidance, mental health resources, and cultural community unavailable through formal structures. This compensatory function reveals both value of accessible digital resources and concerning reliance on unregulated sources for critical guidance.

4.4.5 Theoretical Contributions and Interpretive Insights.
Algorithm Mediated Gratification Reinforcement. Data suggest that in algorithmically mediated environments, gratification seeking becomes iterative and self-reinforcing. Male preferences for educational material create algorithmic feedback loops increasingly serving career oriented material. One noted: *At first I followed a few business accounts, but now my whole feed is about entrepreneurship. The algorithm knows what I want.* This represents fundamental UGT refinement. Users construct their media environment through ongoing interaction with algorithmic systems amplifying specific gratification pathways. While enhancing efficiency, this may limit exposure to diverse perspectives and reduce discovery of new interests. Female engagement with identity focused material creates algorithmic echo chambers of emotional validation. One reflected: *Sometimes I wonder if I actually like this style or if TikTok keeps*

showing it until I think I do. The pattern raises critical questions about whether users actively select material or algorithms increasingly select users for particular pathways.

Gendered Digital Labor and Capital Accumulation. Patterns reflect gendered forms of digital labor extending beyond simple preferences. Male focus on skill building represents investment in human capital development, using leisure time for instrumental purposes aligned with economic productivity. Female engagement with beauty, lifestyle, and emotional material constitutes complex identity work and emotional labor. As one articulated: *Learning to present yourself professionally matters for internships. It's not just vanity.* Gender shapes not only what gratifications are sought but which are legitimized as valuable. Male instrumental use aligns with dominant narratives about productive digital citizenship. Female affective engagement risks devaluation despite serving equally important developmental needs and producing valuable social and cultural competencies.

Cultural Hybridity and Localized Gratifications. Findings reveal how global platforms enable culturally hybrid identity formations. Participants engaged with both international influencers accessing global youth cultures and local African influencers addressing culturally specific challenges. Male participants following African entrepreneurship influencers sought business knowledge plus culturally relevant role models understanding resource constrained environments. Female participants following African beauty influencers sought aesthetic guidance plus validation of African beauty standards and strategies for negotiating between traditional expectations and contemporary self-expression. This suggests UGT categories may need expansion to include cultural integrative needs: media material helping users navigate between multiple cultural realities, integrate diverse identity elements, and see themselves represented in culturally specific ways.

Parasocial Relationships as Mentorship Substitutes. Twenty six males and seventeen females explicitly described influencers filling gaps left by absent role models or financially inaccessible career counseling. This extends UGT by highlighting that social integrative gratifications can compensate for structural inequalities in access to social capital. However, this raises concerns about quality and reliability of guidance from influencers who may lack professional qualifications or accountability. The reliance creates vulnerability to exploitation, misinformation, and harmful advice. Digital platforms both address and obscure structural inequalities, providing accessible resources while potentially obscuring systemic failures requiring institutional accountability.

Gender as Fluid Boundary. While analysis focused on gender differences, notable within gender variation and cross gender commonalities complicate binary frameworks. Fifteen percent of females followed educational influencers while nineteen percent of males valued emotional authenticity, suggesting gender shapes but does not deterministically dictate preferences. Individual differences in gender identity expression, personality traits, disciplinary cultures, and situational circumstances interact with broader gendered patterns producing diverse engagement styles.

Implications for UGT Evolution. These insights suggest directions for evolving Uses and Gratifications Theory: incorporating how algorithmic mediation shapes and constrains gratification seeking behaviors; integrating capital theory to illuminate how media consumption produces different capital forms with varying market values; expanding gratification categories to include cultural navigation and representation needs; recognizing how media consumption compensates for absent structural supports; and moving beyond binary gender frameworks to examine how multiple identity dimensions interact. These refinements maintain UGT's emphasis on audience agency while incorporating critical attention to structural constraints, algorithmic mediation, and cultural power dynamics shaping contemporary digital media engagement.

5. Conclusion

This investigation examined gender-based differences in TikTok influencer preferences among learners at a South African University of Technology, employing Uses and Gratifications Theory as the analytical framework. The findings demonstrate that while all participants actively engage with TikTok influencers, engagement motivations and preferred influencer types vary significantly by gender. Male learners gravitate

toward educational, entrepreneurial, and skill-development influencers, reflecting cognitive and personal integrative gratifications. Female learners prefer lifestyle, beauty, and emotionally resonant material, prioritizing affective and identity-related needs.

Both groups consistently emphasized relatability, authenticity, and perceived expertise as primary engagement drivers, reinforcing UGT's central premise that users actively select media fulfilling specific psychological and social needs. Within this framework, TikTok operates as more than an entertainment platform it functions as a space for identity construction, emotional validation, skill acquisition, and social belonging.

The findings offer several practical applications for educators, marketers, and platform developers. Educational institutions could leverage these insights to develop gender-sensitive digital engagement strategies that align with learners demonstrated preferences. Digital marketers targeting university demographics should consider gender-differentiated strategies that acknowledge varying gratification needs, while platform developers could enhance recommendation algorithms that better serve diverse user needs.

This investigation's scope presents several limitations that inform interpretation of findings. The single institution focusses limits generalizability across South African higher education institutions, and the cross-sectional design captures preferences at a single time point. The sample size of 103 participants represents a small proportion of the university population, and the study relies on self-reported preferences rather than observational data of actual usage patterns.

Future research should explore longitudinal patterns in influencer preferences and cross-institutional comparisons across different South African university types. Mixed methods approach incorporating behavioural analytics alongside qualitative insights could provide more comprehensive understanding, while international comparative studies would contribute to global understanding of social media engagement patterns.

The investigation reveals that TikTok influencer preferences among South African university learners reflect complex interactions between gender socialization, individual needs, and cultural environments. The findings challenge assumptions about social media as purely entertainment, instead revealing sophisticated uses aligned with personal development and identity formation. These insights contribute to understanding how young adults navigate digital spaces for learning, growth, and cultural expression within their specific socioeconomic and educational situations.

6. References

[1] T. A. Shaikh, "Understanding the emergence and impact of social media platforms," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 26–30, Apr. 2024. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2904102630

[2] R. R. Marzo *et al.*, "The evolving role of social media in enhancing quality of life: A global perspective across 10 countries," *Archives of Public Health*, vol. 82, no. 1, p. 28, Mar. 2024. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.1186/s13690-023-01222-z

[3] Y. Hou, Y. Zhang, and Y. Zhu, "The TikTok miracle: Cracking the code of TikTok's platform strategy," *Strategy & Leadership*, Apr. 2025. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.1108/SL-10-2024-0114

[4] Q. Yin and K. B. B. Abdullah, "Analysis of gender discourse bias and gender discrimination in social media: A case study of the TikTok platform," *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, pp. 93–102, Jun. 2024. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v24i2.802

[5] K. Lokithasan, S. Simon, N. Z. Jasmin, and N. A. Othman, "Male and female social media influencers: The impact of gender on emerging adults," *International Journal of Modern Trends in Social Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 9, pp. 21–30, Sep. 2019. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.35631/IJMTSS.29003

[6] N. P. Khwela, S. K. Msosa, and B. A. Ntshangase, "Social media influencers and their role in the purchase pattern of products among females: Gender aspects of business leadership in the skincare

industry," *Business Ethics and Leadership*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 173–185, Dec. 2024. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.61093/bel.8(4).173-185.2024

[7] L. Hudders and S. De Jans, "Gender effects in influencer marketing: An experimental study on the efficacy of endorsements by same- vs. other-gender social media influencers on Instagram," *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 128–149, Jan. 2022. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1997455

[8] A. Rosana and I. Fauzi, "The role of digital identity in the age of social media: Literature analysis on self-identity construction and online social interaction," *Join: Journal of Social Science*, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 477–489, Jul. 2024. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.59613/a8yyff42

[9] C. Xu, F. Xiang, R. Duan, C. Miralles-Cardona, X. Huo, and J. Xu, "An analysis of factors influencing Chinese university students' major choice from the perspective of gender differences," *Sustainability*, vol. 15, no. 18, p. 14037, Sep. 2023. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.3390/su151814037

[10] X. Y. Leung, J. Sun, and A. Asswailem, "Attractive females versus trustworthy males: Explore gender effects in social media influencer marketing in Saudi restaurants," *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, vol. 103, p. 103207, May 2022. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103207

[11] S. Mlangeni, T. Nyawo, M. Nyathi, X. V. Mhlongo, and M. B. Mutanga, "Instagram through her eyes: Exploring female Instagram content creators' motivations for content creation," *Indonesian Journal of Information Systems*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 93–102, 2025.

[12] L. Gu, X. Gao, and Y. Li, "What drives me to use TikTok: A latent profile analysis of users' motives," *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 13, Dec. 2022. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.992824

[13] J. D. Brüns and M. Meißner, "Do you create your content yourself? Using generative artificial intelligence for social media content creation diminishes perceived brand authenticity," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, vol. 79, Jul. 2024. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.103790

[14] M. Boeker and A. Urman, "An empirical investigation of personalization factors on TikTok," in *Proceedings of the ACM Web Conference 2022 (WWW '22)*, Apr. 2022, pp. 2298–2309. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.1145/3485447.3512102

[15] N. Mlambo, M. Ncayiyane, T. Chani, and M. B. Mutanga, "Understanding influencer followership on social media: A case study of students at a South African university," *Journalism and Media*, vol. 6, no. 3, p. 120, 2025.

[16] A. Bhandari and S. Bimo, "TikTok and the 'algorithmized self': A new model of online interaction," *Selected Papers of Internet Research*, [Online]. Available: http://spir.aoir.org

[17] J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: SAGE Publications, 2013

[18] Revesai, Z., Mutanga, M.B. and Chani, T., 2025. Information Cascades in Professional Networks: A Graph-Based Study of LinkedIn Post Engagement. Journal of Applied Informatics and Computing, 9(4), pp.1088-1102

[19] S. Elo and H. Kyngäs, "The qualitative content analysis process," *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 62, no. 1, pp. 107–115, Apr. 2008. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x

[20] M. Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: SAGE Publications, 2012. [Online]. Available: https://www.sagepub.co.uk/schreier

[21] S. Scherr and K. Wang, "Explaining the success of social media with gratification niches: Motivations behind daytime, nighttime, and active use of TikTok in China," *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 124, Nov. 2021. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106893