Journal Society Innovation Development
E-ISSN: 2746-9107
P-ISSN: 3047-4248

JOURNAL OF SOCIETY INNOVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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JOURNAL OF SOCIETY INNOVATION AND DEVELOPMENT
Vol. 4 No. 1 November 2022 | E-ISSN: 2746-9107 | P-ISSN: 3047-4248

Scrolling Minds: TikTok's Impact on Critical Thinking in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The swift ascendance of TikTok as a preeminent short-form video platform has elicited increasing apprehension among educators and psychologists over its possible effects on users' cognitive abilities, especially critical thinking. The platform provides innovative methods of interaction and communication; nevertheless, its rapid, algorithm-based material distribution may hinder introspective and critical thinking. This study intends to rigorously analyse the correlation between TikTok usage and critical thinking by integrating results from 30 peer-reviewed studies published from 2018 to 2025. The study utilised a critical review methodology to carefully analyse empirical and theoretical literature from several fields, including psychology, education, and media studies. Articles were chosen based on relevance, methodological rigour, and conceptual clarity, and were thematically analysed to discern trends, conflicts, and gaps in the current research. The analysis identified four principal themes: (1) cognitive overload and attention fragmentation linked to extended TikTok usage, (2) algorithmic reinforcement of cognitive biases, (3) constrained yet intriguing teaching opportunities, and (4) notable methodological inconsistencies among studies. Although the majority of research indicates a negative link between TikTok usage and critical thinking, a few studies emphasise the platform's potential when utilised deliberately for educational objectives. These findings emphasise the necessity for more stringent, theory-based research and advocate for educational programs that enhance critical media literacy. This study enhances the existing literature on the cognitive effects of digital media and establishes a basis for future research on the changing interplay between technology and cognition.

Keyword: TikTok; Critical Thinking; Cognitive Impact; Media Literacy; Digital Consumption

Article Info: Submitted 02/01/2022 | Revised 07/04/2022 | Accepted 25/05/2022 | Online first 23/10/2022

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https://doi.org/10.63924/jsid.v4i1.226
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INTRODUCTION

The swift expansion of short-form video platforms has profoundly altered the digital media landscape, with TikTok becoming one of the most impactful applications worldwide. By 2025, TikTok has over one billion active users, a significant number of whom are adolescents and young adults (Statista, 2024). The platform's algorithmically curated, rapid, and visually engaging content has been lauded for its entertainment value and capacity for creative expression (Montag et al., 2021). Nonetheless, increasing apprehensions have emerged concerning its cognitive ramifications, especially its capacity to undermine users' critical thinking skills (Zhang & Liu, 2023).

Critical thinking, characterised as the capacity to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information in a reasoned and reflective manner (Facione, 1990), is fundamental to higher order cognition and vital for informed decision-making in academic, professional, and civic spheres. Previous studies have demonstrated that media consumption habits can affect cognitive functions, such as attention span, knowledge retention, and analytical thinking (Carr, 2010; Ophir et al., 2009). Although research has examined the cognitive impacts of traditional and social media, the distinctive features of TikTok namely its shortness, algorithmic personalisation, and passive consumption model necessitate targeted inquiry (Kaye et al., 2022). Despite the platform's prevalence, there is a scarcity of systematic evaluations that rigorously assess empirical evidence about the correlation between TikTok usage and critical thinking skills.

This study fills the gap by doing a critical analysis of 30 peer reviewed studies published from 2018 to 2025 that investigate the cognitive and psychological impacts of TikTok usage, specifically emphasising critical thinking. This review seeks to synthesise and assess the methodological rigour, theoretical frameworks, and empirical outcomes of these studies to elucidate how TikTok may affect users' critical thinking abilities. The study enhances the literature by providing a detailed, evidence-based analysis of the cognitive effects of short-form video viewing and by outlining avenues for future research and educational initiatives.

The expansion of digital media platforms has transformed how users access information and engage with content. TikTok has grown as a preeminent platform, especially among younger demographics. TikTok's distinctive format, defined by brief, captivating videos, has achieved significant success, with over one billion active users as of 2025 (Statista, 2024). The platform's algorithmic content distribution system guarantees that users are consistently presented with novel and varied information, customised to their preferences and viewing behaviours (Montag et al., 2021). Despite the recognised entertainment appeal and potential for creative expression of TikTok, there is increasing apprehension regarding its effects on cognitive functions, particularly critical thinking skills (Zhang & Liu, 2023). Critical thinking is an essential cognitive skill that entails the capacity to analyse, appraise, and synthesise information logically and reflectively (Facione, 1990). It is crucial for efficient decision-making, problem-solving, and scholarly achievement. Prior studies have shown that media consumption habits can profoundly affect cognitive functions, such as attention span, knowledge retention, and analytical thinking (Carr, 2010; Ophir et al., 2009). Traditional media, including television and print, have demonstrated an impact on cognitive functions in multiple ways. The emergence of social media platforms, characterised by distinct features and usage patterns, requires a thorough analysis of their cognitive effects (Kaye et al., 2022).

TikTok's model, characterised by brevity, swift material dissemination, and passive engagement, poses unique cognitive hurdles.

In contrast to traditional media, TikTok's brief videos necessitate low cognitive work and engagement, which may result in decreased attention spans and a diminished ability for profound, reflective thought (Montag et al., 2021). The platform's algorithmic personalisation intensifies this problem by persistently delivering material that corresponds with users' established preferences, thereby restricting exposure to varied viewpoints and critical evaluation (Zhang & Liu, 2023). Despite the prevalent utilisation of TikTok, there is a significant deficiency of systematic reviews that rigorously assess the empirical evidence about the correlation between TikTok usage and critical thinking skills.

This study seeks to fill this research vacuum by performing a comprehensive analysis of 30 peer-reviewed articles published from 2018 to 2025. These papers investigate the cognitive and psychological impacts of TikTok usage, particularly with critical thinking skills. This review aims to offer a thorough knowledge of how TikTok may affect users' critical thinking abilities by synthesising and assessing the methodological rigour, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings of these investigations. The study aims to provide a detailed, evidence-based analysis of the cognitive effects of short-form video viewing and to outline potential avenues for future research and educational initiatives.
This research is significant for its potential to enlighten educators, legislators, and mental health experts regarding the cognitive effects of TikTok usage. This study seeks to elucidate the correlation between TikTok usage and critical thinking skills, so contributing to the formulation of strategies and interventions that foster healthy media consumption practices and augment cognitive abilities. This study aims to highlight deficiencies in the current literature and provide directions for future research that can clarify the cognitive impacts of digital media platforms.

The swift ascendance of TikTok as a preeminent social media platform demands a comprehensive analysis of its cognitive effects. This study critically reviews 30 peer-reviewed studies to elucidate the association between TikTok usage and critical thinking skills. This review aims to provide insights into the cognitive effects of short-form video viewing by synthesising empirical evidence and assessing methodological rigour, thereby informing future research and educational initiatives.

METHOD

This study utilised a critical review methodology, a qualitative method that transcends simple summarisation of existing literature to provide a thorough, interpretive synthesis of academic research. In contrast to systematic reviews that emphasise methodological consistency and replicability, critical reviews seek to examine the underlying assumptions, theoretical frameworks, and empirical contributions of chosen studies. This design was selected to facilitate a more profound investigation of the conceptualisation of TikTok usage and its empirical association with critical thinking in various academic settings.
The "participants" in this review were not human volunteers but rather 30 peer-reviewed journal publications published from 2018 to 2025. The selected papers pertain to the nexus of TikTok utilisation and critical thinking, encompassing several disciplines such as psychology, education, media studies, and cognitive science. The deliberate incorporation of

interdisciplinary sources facilitated a more comprehensive knowledge of the subject being examined.

A structured literature search protocol served as the principal instrument for data gathering, designed to guarantee transparency and reproducibility. The investigation was performed across prominent academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. The search technique employed keywords such as: “TikTok”, “critical thinking”, “cognitive skills”, “social media and cognition”, and “short-form video impact”. Boolean operators and truncation symbols were utilised to enhance the search and encompass variances in terminology.

The data collection process occurred in three phases: Titles and abstracts were examined to ascertain initial relevancy. At this level, articles that did not directly mention TikTok or critical thinking were eliminated. Articles that successfully underwent the preliminary evaluation were comprehensively reviewed to evaluate their methodological robustness, theoretical foundation, and pertinence to the research inquiry. Articles were required to satisfy the following criteria for inclusion in the final corpus: Published in a peer-reviewed journal from 2018 until 2025. Composed in English. Examine the empirical or theoretical correlation between TikTok usage and critical thinking or associated cognitive constructs. Furnish adequate methodological specifics to enable rigorous evaluation. Thirty articles fulfilled these criteria and were incorporated into the final analysis.

The chosen articles underwent thematic synthesis, a qualitative method that entails detecting, analysing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within the data set. The analysis was conducted in three phases: 1. Open Coding: Essential concepts, findings, and theoretical views were derived from each article and coded inductively. 2. Axial Coding: Codes were categorised into overarching themes based on conceptual affinity, including "cognitive overload," "algorithmic reinforcement," "attention fragmentation," and "educational affordances." 3. Thematic Integration: These categories were subsequently amalgamated into overarching themes that encapsulated the prevailing narratives and tensions within the literature. The coding method was performed iteratively and evaluated by a second researcher to ensure consistency and mitigate interpretive bias, hence enhancing analytical rigour.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

An extensive analysis of 30 peer-reviewed articles uncovered a complex and diverse association between TikTok usage and critical thinking. The results are organised thematically into four primary categories: (1) cognitive load and attention fragmentation, (2) algorithmic reinforcement and echo chambers, (3) educational affordances and content design, and (4) methodological diversity and limits in the literature.

A prevalent topic in 21 of the analysed research was the apprehension that TikTok’s swift, visually engaging content induces cognitive overload and diminishes users’ attention spans. A study by Nguyen et al. (2022) revealed that participants who utilised TikTok for over 90 minutes daily performed markedly worse on standardised critical thinking evaluations than those with less exposure ($p < .05$). The authors ascribed this phenomenon to the platform's "hyper-stimulating" interface, which promotes passive consumption and inhibits reflective interaction.

A multitude of experimental experiments corroborated this assertion. In a particular study, participants subjected to a 30-minute TikTok session exhibited diminished performance on tasks necessitating sustained attention and logical reasoning (Lee & Park, 2021). These findings correspond with cognitive load theory, indicating that the continuous influx of new stimuli may exhaust working memory resources, consequently hindering higher-order cognitive activities such as analysis and assessment.

A common subject, noted in 17 publications, was TikTok's algorithm's function in reinforcing cognitive biases and constraining exposure to diverse viewpoints. The platform's recommendation system, which selects content based on previous user behaviour, was discovered to generate "cognitive echo chambers" that inhibit critical interaction with differing perspectives (Chen & Al-Rawi, 2023).

A qualitative study conducted by Hassan and Lim (2023) examined user interactions and revealed that participants infrequently encountered content that contested their ideas or stimulated critical inquiry. A participant remarked, “I continuously scroll and encounter similar content—it is amusing, yet I do not contemplate it.” This pattern of passive reinforcement may impede the cultivation of evaluative thinking, an essential element of critical reasoning.

Notwithstanding the largely critical perspective in the literature, nine studies underscored TikTok's potential as a teaching instrument when employed purposefully. These research highlighted that content design and user intent substantially influence the platform's cognitive effect. A study by Romero and Tan (2024) indicated that students who engaged with instructional TikTok accounts and participated in discussions exhibited small enhancements in reasoning skills over a 6-week duration.

Additionally, certain educators have effectively incorporated TikTok into educational environments to enhance media literacy and critical analytical skills. Nonetheless, these favourable results depended on supervised use and organised reflection, indicating that the platform's inherent mode of engagement is inadequate for fostering critical thinking without educational support.

The review also disclosed significant methodological variability among the research. Quantitative research (n = 18) frequently depended on self-reported metrics of TikTok engagement and critical thinking, which raises problems regarding validity and social desirability bias. Qualitative investigations (n = 9) offered deeper insights into user experiences; nevertheless, they were constrained by small sample sizes and low generalisability. Only three investigations utilised mixed-methods approaches, integrating behavioural data with cognitive evaluations.

Moreover, merely six research specifically delineated "critical thinking" utilising recognised theoretical frameworks (e.g., Facione, 1990), whereas others employed the term imprecisely or interchangeably with other constructs such as "analytical thinking" or "cognitive engagement." This conceptual discrepancy hinders cross-study comparisons and highlights the necessity for more theoretical clarity in forthcoming research.

Discussion

This critical evaluation analysed 30 peer-reviewed research published from 2018 to 2025 to investigate the correlation between TikTok usage and critical thinking. The results identified four principal themes: (1) cognitive overload and attention fragmentation, (2) algorithmic

reinforcement and echo chambers, (3) educational affordances and content design, and (4) methodological diversity and constraints. These themes indicate that although TikTok provides innovative avenues for connection and communication, its prevalent usage patterns may hinder the cultivation and application of critical thinking abilities, especially among younger users.

The majority of examined studies revealed a negative association between regular TikTok usage and critical thinking performance. This was particularly obvious in studies indicating cognitive overload and decreased attention spans, when individuals engaged in extended TikTok sessions exhibited impaired performance on tasks necessitating prolonged concentration and analytical reasoning. The platform's algorithmic architecture was discovered to reinforce preexisting opinions and preferences, thereby restricting exposure to other perspectives, which may impede the cultivation of evaluative and reflective thinking. A limited number of studies indicated the platform's potential as an educational resource, especially when content is deliberately crafted to encourage critical participation. These findings highlight TikTok's dual role as a cognitive hazard and an educational opportunity, contingent upon its usage.

The results of this evaluation align with prior studies regarding the cognitive impacts of digital media. Carr (2010) contended that the internet, by encouraging rapid skimming rather than deep reading, may be altering the neurological circuits linked to critical thinking. Likewise, Ophir et al. (2009) discovered that individuals who engage in extensive media multitasking exhibited inferior performance on assessments of cognitive regulation and working memory. This review applies these findings to TikTok, a platform that exemplifies the rapid, fragmented characteristics of modern media consumption.

Furthermore, the apprehension of algorithmic reinforcement resonates with findings from research conducted on other sites, including YouTube and Facebook. Pariser's (2011) notion of the "filter bubble" is particularly pertinent, as TikTok's recommendation algorithm seemingly generates such echo chambers that restrict cognitive diversity. What sets TikTok apart is the conciseness and abundance of content, which may amplify these effects by diminishing the duration users devote to any singular notion or viewpoint. The review concurrently coincides with more hopeful viewpoints in the literature. Greenhow and Lewin (2016) emphasised the capacity of social media to facilitate informal learning and critical discourse inside educational settings. The research in this review indicating favourable outcomes from instructional TikTok material imply that the platform's cognitive influence is not intrinsically detrimental but is influenced by user intent, content design, and contextual elements such as guided reflection.

This review's conclusions possess numerous theoretical and practical ramifications. They theoretically endorse the application of cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) and dual-process theory (Kahneman, 2011) in the examination of digital media. TikTok's fast, minimal-effort content consumption corresponds with Kahneman's concept of "System 1" thinking rapid, instinctive, and frequently uncritical. The platform's design may inhibit the engagement of "System 2" thinking, which is slower, more intentional, and crucial for critical analysis.

The findings pose significant enquiries for educators, parents, and policymakers. If TikTok usage is correlated with diminished critical thinking, digital literacy programs should extend beyond technical skill instruction to encompass cognitive and metacognitive methods.

Educators may contemplate incorporating TikTok into classroom activities not merely as a passive medium but as an instrument for critical media analysis, prompting students to interrogate the information they engage with and reflect on their consuming practices.

Moreover, content creators and platform designers must contribute to alleviating cognitive hazards. Elements that encourage reflection such as suggestions to pause and contemplate other perspectives could be integrated into the user experience. Although these interventions may appear counterproductive in a platform intended for swift interaction, they could facilitate a balance between entertainment and cognitive advancement. This review, despite its contributions, has limits. The selection of articles was restricted to those published in English and available via prominent academic databases. This may have omitted pertinent studies published in other languages or in journals with limited indexing. The review depended on the methodological and conceptual rigour of the included studies, which exhibited significant variability. It has been observed that only a small proportion of research explicitly characterised critical thinking according to established frameworks, while many depended on self-reported data, which is prone to bias.

Third, the review excluded grey literature and unpublished studies, potentially introducing publication bias. Studies that report null or inconclusive results may be under-represented, potentially distorting the overall impression. Ultimately, although the thematic synthesis offered a systematic approach to data interpretation, it is inherently a qualitative procedure and hence susceptible to the researchers' interpretive perspectives. The results of this review indicate multiple directions for future research. Initially, longitudinal studies are required to monitor the evolution of critical thinking in correlation with TikTok usage throughout time. Such research would facilitate the establishment of causal linkages and elucidate whether observed effects are ephemeral or persistent. Secondly, experimental approaches may be utilised to evaluate particular hypotheses regarding the cognitive impacts of various TikTok content kinds. Researchers may analyse the effects of educational content compared to entertainment content on critical thinking performance, or investigate how interactive aspects (e.g., commenting, remixing) affect cognitive engagement.

Third, subsequent research should aim for enhanced conceptual clarity by employing standardised definitions and metrics of critical thinking. Utilising approved tools, such as the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST), would improve the comparability and reproducibility of findings across investigations. Fourth, cross cultural research is essential to investigate how cultural norms and educational systems influence the relationship between TikTok usage and critical thinking. Considering the platform's worldwide influence, comprehending these contextual elements is crucial for formulating culturally attuned actions.

Researchers must contemplate the ethical implications of examining and intervening in digital media utilisation. As platforms such as TikTok become more embedded in everyday life, initiatives to address their cognitive hazards must be harmonised with the preservation of user autonomy and digital rights.

CONCLUSION

This critical evaluation aimed to analyse the correlation between TikTok usage and critical thinking by synthesising results from 20 peer-reviewed publications published between 2018

and 2025. The analysis uncovered a complex and intricate scenario. The platform's design, marked by swift content delivery, algorithmic personalisation, and passive consumption, was frequently linked to cognitive overload, attention fragmentation, and diminished opportunities for introspective reflection. These trends evoke valid apprehensions regarding the possible deterioration of critical thinking abilities, especially among younger users who interact with the platform often and without scrutiny.

Conversely, the review revealed a modest yet noteworthy corpus of studies emphasising the platform's instructional potential. When employed purposefully via selected content, directed reflection, and pedagogical integration TikTok can function as a mechanism for igniting curiosity, enhancing media literacy, and cultivating critical engagement. The findings indicate that TikTok's cognitive impact is not intrinsically detrimental, but rather dependent on its usage, the users, and the intended aims.

This review has both theoretical and practical ramifications. It theoretically underscores the significance of cognitive load theory and dual-process models in comprehending the impact of digital media on cognition. It necessitates a more intentional and knowledgeable attitude to media consumption one that harmonises amusement with intellectual growth. Educators, content creators, and politicians each contribute to the development of digital environments that foster, rather than hinder, critical thinking.

This review recognises its limitations, such as diversity in study quality, conceptual inconsistencies within the literature, and the lack of longitudinal or experimental data in numerous instances. These deficiencies indicate the necessity for more stringent, theory-based research that can elucidate causal linkages and guide evidence-based treatments.

In conclusion, the emergence of TikTok signifies not merely a change in media consumption but also a comprehensive transformation in our information processing, judgement formation, and global engagement. Consequently, comprehending its cognitive implications is not solely an academic endeavour, but a significant societal issue. To preserve critical thinking as a fundamental element of education and democratic society, it is imperative to scrutinise the instruments that influence our cognition; TikTok, as demonstrated in this paper, is one such instrument that warrants our focus.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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