

TikTalk: The effects of mental health content on TikTok users

by

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Abstract

Over recent years, TikTok has undeniably become a highly popular social media platform, particularly among young adults (Feldkamp, 2021; McLachlan, 2023). Although numerous studies have been conducted on how social media might affect users' mental health (Milton, Ajmani, DeVito, & Chancellor, 2023; McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Zheluk, Anderson, & Dineen-Griffin, 2022; Kyparissiadis & Diamantaki, 2022; Miodus & Jimenez, 2021), there remains a sparse number of studies investigating how users perceive the effects of consuming mental health information on social media on their mental health awareness (Kyparissiadis & Diamantaki, 2022; McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Gallagher, 2022; Mandzufas, et al., 2023; Basch, Donelle, Fera, & Jaime, 2022; Zhu, Xu, Zhang, Chen, & Evans, 2019; Caron, 2022; Kong, Song, Zhao, Zhu, & Sha, 2021). The aim of this study is to investigate how users' perspectives and experiences concerning mental health are affected by their exposure to mental health content on TikTok. The selected research method for the current research study is the survey method, utilizing a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who are active TikTok users. The study aligns with the quantitative research paradigm and will test six hypotheses, suggesting potential effects or associations between TikTok use and various facets of mental health.

Keywords: TikTok, social media effects, mental health, online health information, mental health awareness, survey method, user experience, uses and gratifications

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Introduction

Mental health is a major global issue that affects people all over the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) one out of every eight people globally suffers from a mental health condition, with depression and anxiety disorders being the most common. Among these conditions, Gen Z and Gen Y young adults appear to be the most susceptible, as they experience elevated levels of stress (Kyparissiadis & Diamantaki, 2022). This may be linked to a variety of issues, including anxieties about their future prospects, economic uncertainties, and the widespread impact of technology and social media (Mojtabai, Olfson, & Han, 2016). The emergence of seismic global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian War in Ukraine, has aggravated the already precarious mental health of the general population. It is important to note, however, that mental health issues were already prevalent prior to these events, and their occurrence has only served to increase the frequency and severity of mental health issues worldwide. According to a survey conducted in early 2018, 91 percent of US Gen Zers aged 18 to 21 reported experiencing at least one physical or emotional symptom related to stress in the previous month (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Nowadays, one popular and easily accessible resource for people seeking mental health information, support, or advice is social media (Akhther & Sopory, 2022). A significant part of existing research has demonstrated the negative impact that social media can have on people's mental health (Beeres, Andersson, Vossen, & Galanti, 2021; Houghton et al., 2018; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Drouin, Kaiser, & Miller, 2012; Andreassen, Pallesen, & Griffiths, 2017; Song et al., 2014). However, other work suggests that social media use is correlated with increased well-being (Burke & Kraut, 2016; Dienlin, Masur, & Trepte, 2017; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014; Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014). Thus, it would be interesting for this antithesis to be further investigated by examining the effects that mental health content on social media can have on its users. Platforms like YouTube (Diamantaki & Ziavras, 2022; Osman, Mohamed, Elhassan, & Shoufan, 2022), Facebook (Burke & Kraut, 2016; Song et al., 2014), and Instagram (Arendt, 2019; Bogolyubova, Upravitelev, Churilova, & Ledovaya, 2018) have been thoroughly studied in the past as networking platforms where users can find educational content, mental health awareness campaigns, and advice from professionals and peers (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). TikTok is also one of the most popular social media platforms that many young adults use frequently to discuss mental health issues and locate health - related content (Drillinger, 2022).

While several research studies have been conducted regarding the potential effects of the platform on users' mental health (Milton, Ajmani, DeVito, & Chancellor, 2023; McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Zheluk, Anderson, & Dineen-Griffin, 2022; Kyparissiadis & Diamantaki, 2022; Miodus & Jimenez, 2021), there is a lack of studies that comprehensively examine both its potential benefits and adverse effects on people's mental health. Specifically, what needed to be further researched in the current

study were the potential benefits that TikTok offers to its users in terms of mental health, and the strategies to achieve them. Furthermore, there are still relatively few research studies (Kyparissiadis & Diamantaki, 2022; McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Gallagher, 2022; Mandzufas, et al., 2023; Basch, Donelle, Fera, & Jaime, 2022; Zhu, Xu, Zhang, Chen, & Evans, 2019; Caron, 2022; Kong, Song, Zhao, Zhu, & Sha, 2021) that specifically focus on the impact of TikTok health - related content on young adults' mental health. This includes examining the positive or negative, impact that mental health advice, support communities, and educational resources can have on young people's mental health, and how these could benefit or harm them when they are facing mental health issues. The current study was conducted to lead to interesting results regarding how the health advice and support offered through TikTok can prove to be beneficial for people seeking help and potentially outweigh the adverse effects that the use of other social media platforms can cause, such as addiction, anxiety, low self-esteem, or even depression.

As far as the timing is concerned, the period following the COVID-19 pandemic seemed ideal for conducting a research study focusing on the effects on people's mental health. Mental health related issues have been on the rise since the first outbreak of the pandemic (Panchal, et al., 2021; Racine, et al., 2021). Chronic - led stress and anxiety have emerged as the new hazardous epidemic especially for younger generations (Rudd & Beidas, 2020) making it essential to thoroughly investigate factors that can either improve or deteriorate their mental health. Additionally, the application of the Uses and Gratifications Theory in the current study shed light on the reasons why people increasingly use TikTok in their everyday lives and the needs they fulfil by using this platform.

The study adhered to the quantitative paradigm and examined the following Hypotheses, which suggested potential effects or associations between TikTok use and various aspects of mental health, such as awareness, symptoms, help-seeking behavior, stigma reduction, and psychological well-being.

H1: Regular exposure to mental health - related content on TikTok is associated with lower levels of users' perceived symptoms of anxiety, loneliness, and depression.

H2: There is a positive correlation between regular exposure to mental health content on TikTok and users' perceived levels of awareness of mental health issues.

H3: TikTok users who utilize the platform as a source of mental health support are more likely to recognize the need for professional help with mental health issues when necessary.

H4: TikTok users who utilize the platform for mental health advice and support report a significant decrease in perceived stigmatization of mental health issues.

H5: TikTok is regarded as the most favored social media platform for acquiring mental health advice and support.

H6: TikTok is generally perceived as an unreliable source of advice on mental health issues. Perceived reliability is increased in the sample that utilizes the platform for mental health content.

Overall, this study's goal was to contribute to an understanding of how TikTok, as a social media platform, influences the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals in relation to mental health. By examining these factors, the study also aimed to provide insights that can inform interventions, policies, and strategies designed to promote mental health and well-being among TikTok users.

Literature review

In order to carry out the current research study effectively and have a more comprehensive understanding of the subject, many different areas will have to be investigated in depth. Prior studies conducted on relevant topics can help the researcher have a better understanding of the identified problem and offer some useful insights that will help both in forming the most appropriate research hypotheses, which will add to the existing knowledge, as well as in better analyzing the results. Findings on the relationship between social media and mental health will be presented, particularly focusing on the positive and negative effects of TikTok on people's fragile mental health. Moreover, TikTok's special characteristics as a platform will also have to be presented in order to better understand the reasons behind its impressive popularity among young audiences during the last years. In this context, media theories which suggest that the usage of communication media is a rational choice based on psychological needs and motives will also be utilized to examine and explain TikTok's popularity. A description of the historical background of the psychological support offered online is also going to be included in the examination of the existing literature, as it can prove to be very useful for the reader to fully comprehend the subject examined in the current study.

The effects of peer – to – peer support on mental health

Peer-to-peer support is a concept that has been defined in many different ways. Back in 1990, Riessman (Restructuring help: A human services paradigm for the 1990s) described it as a procedure, through which people, who are dealing with similar kinds of problems or have experienced comparable situations, come together to provide and get support based on their understanding that this support comes from shared experience. Mead, Hilton, and Curtis (2001) described it as “*a system of giving and receiving help*”, which is based on the fundamental values of respect, shared accountability, and a common understanding of what is beneficial. The Mental Health Foundation in the UK has defined it as “*The help and support that people with lived experience of a mental illness or a learning disability can give to one another*” (Mental Health Foundation UK, n.d.), while Penney (2020) suggested that the word “*support*” generally describes the genuine empathy, motivation, and help that individuals with similar experiences can provide to each other in a mutually beneficial relationship. As

far as *peer-to-peer support*, in particular, is concerned, she described it as the support provided by people who share common characteristics. Similar terms such as “*peer-delivered services*” or “*peer mentors*” are interchangeable in the academic literature and will be referred to as “*peer-to-peer support*” or just “*peer support*” in the current study.

Although it was formally established as a service in community mental health care in the 1990s, *peer-to-peer support* seems to have been practically in use as back as the end of the 18th century (Weiner, 1979) and it is thought to have its roots even before the earliest asylums (Shaw, 2014). According to the existing literature, *peer-to-peer support* historically, even at its earliest applications, appeared to enhance the mental health of individuals. Prior research has pointed out the significance of people feeling a sense of community and belonging to a group (Brewer, 1991). As McKenna and Bargh confirm with their study (1998), belonging to a social group is thought to improve confidence and self-worth and at the same time decrease self-doubt. It has also been repeatedly found in the past that connecting with people who share similar experiences may significantly aid in a person's inclusion in society, individual well-being, as well as in his/her recovery from serious mental illnesses (Davidson, et al., 1999). Many more studies have confirmed that including peer support in mental health services improves the recovery process and can have profound beneficial impacts on the patients, such as increased self - confidence, self - determination, hope, and increased participation during the process (Puschner, et al., 2019; Klodnick, Sabella, Brenner, & Krzos, 2014; Pettitt, 2003).

Mead, Hilton and Curtis (2001) also highlight, the fact that individuals with mental illnesses “*have suffered from social and cultural exclusion and as a result have developed a sense of self that reinforces the “patient” identity*”. The authors argue that accepting this identity can be empowering and, in this context, they describe peer support as a movement that promotes autonomy and community-building by inspiring people to live their “*most authentic lives and to take pride in their achievements*” (Mead, Hilton, & Curtis, 2001). In a study conducted by Houston, Cooper and Ford (2002) on formalized Internet support groups for depression, it was discovered that participants who used a support group frequently (defined as more than 5 hours in 2 weeks) had a higher chance of experiencing an improvement regarding their depression than participants who did not use the group so frequently or not at all. Other studies also highlight the fact that people with mental health issues can substantially benefit from their online engagement with others, as well as by sharing their own unique daily experiences, which makes them feel part of a community (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016). Moreover, according to Prescott, Hanley, and Ujhelyi (2017), online forums can also prove to be an effective type of peer support - based “*medicine*” that provides both educational and emotional support to those who are facing mental health issues. There are even studies that have discovered that peer support can lead to positive results that can even be superior compared to those offered by professional mental health care providers (Burke, Pyle, Machin, Varese, & Morrison, 2019; Davidson, et al., 2004; Sells, Davidson, Jewell, Falzer, & Rowe, 2006).

As far as young people are concerned, peer support seems to substantially help them to better handle the stigmatization associated with mental illnesses (Ojeda, Munson, Jones, Berliant, & Gilmer, 2021; Vojtila, Ashfaq, Ampofo, Dawson, & Selby, 2021). Additionally, research shows that young people view peer support as more trustworthy than professional support, since, through this kind of services, peers talk about their own struggles and share their own experiences with mental illness (Gopalan, Lee, Harris, Acri, & Munson, 2017). To further support these findings, a research conducted by Rideout & Fox (2018) demonstrated, as early as 2018, that one-third of young adults in the US, between the ages of 14 and 22, had already connected with peers online, with more than 90% of them reporting the experience was indeed beneficial.

Perry & Pescosolido (2015), while recognizing the importance of social connection for people suffering from mental illnesses, added another aspect to this discussion by commenting that peer support is neither solely beneficial nor harmful. Specifically, they suggested that a person who faces a severe mental disorder usually decides to connect and talk with other people facing similar issues, in periods of increased unsteadiness and this makes peer support extremely important as a service. However, as they stress, the choice of who to connect with may either have a seriously negative impact on a person with a severe mental illness or significantly improve his/her mental health state (Perry & Pescosolido, 2015).

Despite the fact that the biggest part of the existing literature underlines the positive effects of peer support to people suffering from mental illnesses, there have been studies that challenge this idea, stressing that mixed intervention effects have been recorded and that there is still “limited to moderate” evidence regarding these effects (Chinman, et al., 2014; Cabassa, Camacho, Vélez-Grau, & Stefancic, 2017). Kaplan, Salzer, Solomon, Brusilovskiy, and Cousounis (2011) conducted a randomized controlled trial to examine the efficacy of *peer-to-peer support* among patients with a schizophrenia spectrum or affective disorder. Participants who engaged more frequently in *peer-to-peer support* networks after 4 and 12 months reported higher levels of psychological distress than those who engaged less frequently or not at all. Moreover, although peer support has been utilized as a mental health care service, there are studies that suggest that, when compared to other types of psychiatric assistance, peer support does not show improved results (Lloyd-Evans, et al., 2014). Peer support has also been found to be very distinct —sometimes even opposite—to psychiatric care (Faulkner & Basset, 2012), as it has been argued that this kind of mental health care services can only be applied amongst individuals who are already close to each other and cannot effectively decrease symptoms of severe cases, just provide emotional support (Mead & Macneil, 2004). However, despite these studies challenging the evidence of the positive impact that peer support can have on people’s mental health, it must be underlined that the vast majority of the existing literature points out benefits such as empowerment of the patient, social connections, confidence, faster and better recovery process, as well as a decrease in hospitalizations to acute care (Charles, et al., 2020; Mutschler, Bellamy, Davidson, Lichtenstein, & Kidd, 2022).

Peer – to – peer support adjusted to an online world

The launch of applications that encouraged engagement and collaboration also in the online world was made possible by Web 2.0, which gave Internet users easy ways to access information and online services (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Technological advancements in recent years have given users new opportunities, enabling them to gradually connect with one another even when they were physically apart (Madianou, 2016). This has led to the emergence of a new type of co-presence, known as “connected presence” (Licoppe, 2004). This way, peer support can nowadays be provided online, without the need for physical presence. Online interventions seem to have in fact some significant advantages compared to the traditional peer support services, as they remove geographic boundaries, they can be accessed and utilized whenever necessary, and they are usually much more affordable than conventional services (Clarke, Kuosmanen, & Barry, 2015). Peer support online is usually being provided in an informal way, as it is not connected to any professional medical care services, and it can be available to every user of the Internet. Ordinary users (non-professionals) can post topics for discussion on asynchronous platforms such as forums, discussion groups, and bulletin boards, where they can share their own knowledge and experience, seek support and talk about their concerns (Tanis, 2008). Apart from this, users can interact in real-time on synchronous platforms, such as chat rooms or even virtual worlds (Woodruff, Conway, Edwards, Elliott, & Crittenden, 2007). What was also widely popular online as a form of peer support, particularly before the emergence of social media, was the use of Internet support groups (ISGs), which could successfully foster the feeling of belonging to a community (Griffiths, Calear, & Banfield, 2009). The existing literature suggests that, as in the case of the offline - traditional peer support, online peer support can also prove positively impactful for young people’s mental health, leading to empowerment, improvement of self-esteem and coping mechanisms as well as to reduction of the social isolation (Melling & Houguet-Pincham, 2011).

Thanks to Web 2.0, users are, moreover, able to effortlessly publish and seek out mental health material, as well as build online groups and connections centered on issues related to mental health (Ellis, 2012). In addition to that, the broad expansion of digital media has provided new opportunities for raising mental health awareness as well as offering mental health services in countries all around the world (Arafat, Zaman, & Hawlader, 2021; Bucci, Schwannauer, & Berry, 2019; Zhou, et al., 2020; Hungerbuehler, Valiengo, Loch, Rössler, & Gattaz, 2016; Maulik, et al., 2017). Support groups, self-help programs, assessment, and psychotherapy software, as well as websites with pertinent, useful information, are just a few examples of how the Internet can prove beneficial in offering mental health advice (Suler, 2000). Besides the support offered through online interaction, the so-called “E-health” and “tele-medicine” are some more instances of how the digital transformation has proven incredibly helpful for people facing mental health problems. The significance of “E-health” and “tele-medicine” became indisputable especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when visiting a doctor or a mental health professional in person seemed like an extreme

option available only for rare and severe cases (Calo, Murray, Francis, Bermudez, & Kraschnewski, 2020). Due to these circumstances, the amount of medical treatment delivered via telehealth significantly increased (Amin, Rae, Ramirez, & Cox, 2020). The term “e-health” refers in general to all software programs that enable the online sharing of health information, previously between patients and clinicians, but nowadays even among patients (Hannemann, Götz, Schmidt, Hübner, & Babitsch, 2021).

The Uses & Gratifications Theory applied to the dominance of social media

Recent research studies examining the impacts of the online world on people's mental health have primarily focused on the role of social media platforms. The advance of technology during the last decades has been significant transforming various aspects of people's everyday lives (Ong & Toh, 2023). Social media platforms, as an integral part of the latest technological developments, have managed to cover different needs and offer different gratifications to millions of users worldwide (Whiting & Williams, 2013), including mental health services, as mentioned above. To delve deeper into the pervasiveness of social media in people's everyday lives and their impact on users' mental health, this thesis also draws from the Uses & Gratifications Theory, a recognized paradigm for analyzing media consumption motivation (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973).

The Uses & Gratifications Theory, introduced by Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch (1973), served as the antithesis of the hypodermic needle model of communication, which proposed that audiences cannot avoid being influenced by the media since messages may be directly "injected" into their consciousness, interfering with their thoughts in an anticipated, planned manner (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). On the contrary, Uses & Gratifications theory posits that audiences are active and selectively choose specific media to fulfill their specific needs. By focusing on three elements: the purpose for media use, user behavior, and media use outcomes (Park & Goering, 2016), the Uses & Gratifications theory aims to explain the psychological or social demands that drive people's motivations to engage in diverse media usage activities (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Specifically, this theory relies on five principle assumptions, which are: (1) that media use is goal-directed; (2) that audiences actively participate in the media they consume; (3) that media rival with other mediums for meeting needs; (4) that users are aware of their motivations for using specific media; and (5) that only users themselves can assess the value of media content and the gratifications obtained from media usage (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Lometti, Reeves, & Bybee, 1977). The Uses and Gratifications Theory, which operates from this audience-centered viewpoint, also asserts that individual psychological variations and environmental settings influence platform - specific motives and the satisfaction attained through the consumption of media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), while Uses and Gratifications Theory-based studies have also discovered that the needs and wants that drive media engagement and media use differ depending on the platform (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Kircaburun, Alhabash, Tosuntaş, & Griffiths, 2020). Apart

from Uses & Gratifications Theory, the Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) as well as the Needs-Affordance-Features (NAF) Model of Technology Use model share the same premises, suggesting that usage of communication media is a rational choice based on psychological needs and motives (Karahanna, Xu, Xu, & Zhang, 2018; Marikyan & Papagiannidis, 2023).

According to Statista (2022), the top reasons for using social media platforms worldwide included “*keeping in touch with friends and family*”, “*filling spare time*”, “*reading news stories*” and “*finding content (e.g. articles, videos)*”. Pertaining to TikTok, the focal point of the current study, most previous research agree on certain fundamental motivations behind its use. Falgoust et al. (2022) conducted interviews with college students aged 18-23 uncovering six primary needs fulfilled by TikTok: entertainment, easy access to communication, social interaction, social support, information acquisition and escapism from everyday life.

Interactivity, enjoyment and the sense of community were further confirmed by another content analysis study (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021), which, also introduced “realism”, “coolness” and “variety seeking”, as additional motivations. Bossen and Kottasz (2020) found that the need for entertainment was a significant driver for using TikTok in their survey study, while Lawrence (2020) identified motivations such as entertainment, spending time, and escapism. Moreover, what has been underlined in previous studies is that TikTok’s algorithm can serve the needs of each user differently, covering a wide range of gratifications that cannot be sufficiently encapsulated in just a few categories (Yaqi, Lee, & Liu, 2020).

Social media and mental health

It is worth highlighting the fact that seeking mental health content and advice has also been rising among the motivations of people using social media during the last years. A recent study in Saudi Arabia (AlMuammar, Noorsaed, Alafif, Kamal, & Daghistani, 2021) found that 76.1% of the participants were using social media for searching mental health information, confirming another, older Saudi Arabian study, which had also discovered that 68% of the participants were using social media platforms as a health information resource (Bahkali, et al., 2016). A rise in mental health - related use of social media has also been noticed in the US, where approximately one in ten Americans reported to use social media when searching for reliable information regarding mental health (Gordon, 2021). Moreover, 9% said they also use social media to research potential treatments, while 7% stated that they use it to explore potential negative effects of medications (Gordon, 2021). Prior to focusing specifically on the effects of TikTok mental health content on its users’ mental health, it is essential to generally examine the effects of social media use on mental well-being.

A significant part of existing research has demonstrated the negative impact that social media can have on people’s mental health. Indicatively, a study by Beeres et al. (2021) found that, although there is no evidence to support a long-term association

between excessive social media consumption and mental health issues, there is a significant connection between social media use and depressive and anxious symptoms. Specifically, this study showed that the excessive use of social media could work as an indicator of the risk of mental health issues among adolescents, as people who used social media more were more likely to have higher degrees of psychological distress (Beeres, Andersson, Vossen, & Galanti, 2021). Similar findings were also reported by Houghton et al. (2018), who discovered that the increased use of screens by adolescents was connected with deterioration of their mental health, although there was again no proof that there is a longitudinal association between them. A negative association between the use of digital technology tools and the mental health of young people was also reported by Orben & Przybylski (2019), who found that overusing social media can have a negative impact on people's happiness and overall life satisfaction. Symptoms of anxiety caused by the need of people to constantly check the messages and notifications on social media, and by the so-called Phantom vibration syndrome (PVS), are also reported by Drouin, Kaiser & Miller (2012). Moreover, the addiction in using social media was found to be correlated with low self-esteem (Andreassen, Pallesen, & Griffiths, 2017), while another study suggested that people tend to use social media, and especially Facebook, more when they feel more lonely (Song, et al., 2014).

Although a significant number of studies indicate that there is an association between social media use and a decrease in well-being, other work suggests that social media use is correlated with increased well-being. Burke and Kraut (2016) found that using social media platforms can boost social support by encouraging a sense of connection and belonging among users, while Dienlin, Masur & Trepte (2017) suggested that social media, depending on their use, can also be useful resources for self-expression, identity development, and creative outlets. According to a study by Vogel et al. (2014), using social media can, moreover, increase the sense of social support and minimize symptoms of isolation and sadness, as online interactions can foster a sense of community among people who may not have many in-person interactions. Similar findings were reported by Best, Manktelow & Taylor (2014), who discovered that social media use was linked to higher self-esteem and better self-perception.

Apart from these benefits, social media use has also been associated with destigmatization of mental health issues (Koehler & Parrell, 2020). Stigma is defined as the shame, social rejection, or societal discrediting of people who are facing mental health issues (Kalichman, 2009; Goffman, 1963). It can be found in many forms such as self- stigma, when the patient himself/herself has a negative attitude towards his/her mental health problem, public stigma, when the general public has a negative attitude towards people suffering from mental health issues, professional stigma, when this kind of attitude comes from a professional in mental health care service and institutional stigma, which is the negative attitude of a culture or an organization towards mental health issues (Ahmedani, 2011; Corrigan, Powell, & Rüsçh, 2012). As previous studies have discovered, using social media platforms can help in decreasing mental health stigma due to the fact that they offer a place for personal stories to be shared and

unheard voices to be heard, without limitations in terms of time or space (Betton, et al., 2018). Moreover, they offer people the chance to initiate protests against mental health stigma (for example in the form of a hashtag) (Betton, et al., 2018) and at the same time provide limitless and easy access to information regarding mental health, a fact which can also contribute to increasing awareness (Latha, Meena, Pravitha, Dasgupta, & Chaturvedi, 2020). The decrease of mental health - related stigma is extremely important for people suffering from mental health issues, as it has been found that stigma can be a key barrier to seeking mental health treatment or help (Clement, et al., 2014; Corrigan, Druss, & Perlick, 2014).

It is also important to highlight the fact that, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, social media have been extensively used for health-related goals, offering people a valuable sense of social connection, and belonging to a community (Chen & Wang, 2021). Furthermore, social media platforms made it easier for people to access mental health resources, advice, and support, such as online support groups or counseling, which helped decreasing feelings of anxiety, isolation, and distress in challenging times (Torales, O'Higgins, Castaldelli-Maia , & Ventriglio, 2020). Rosen et al. (2022) also highlighted the fact that the majority of people were using social media in a positive way during the imposed lockdowns, such as for social support, finding new hobbies, or exercising.

In light of the above, it can be inferred that social media has become a popular and easily accessible resource for individuals seeking information, support, and community in relation to mental health (Akhther & Sopory, 2022). Platforms like Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, and TikTok provide spaces where users can find personal stories, educational content, mental health campaigns, and advice from professionals and peers (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Thus, many studies have been conducted examining the relationship of each social media platform with mental health.

Facebook

When it comes to Facebook, the platform with more than 2,9 billion active users in April 2023 (Data Reportal, 2023), a significant part of the literature has underlined the risks lurking in the potential addiction that could be provoked by using the platform excessively. The most common mental health issues that have been linked to excessive Facebook use are stress, insomnia, corporal symptoms, as well as depression in some more severe cases (Hanprathet, Manwong, Khumsri, Yingyeun, & Phanasathit, 2015; Pontes, Taylor, & Stavropoulos, 2018; Stockdale & Coyne, 2020; Pantic, et al., 2012).

Additionally, the social phenomenon known as “fear of missing out” (FoMo), described by British psychologists as the “*pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent*” (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013), has been linked to rising anxiety and concern among some Facebook users when they cease using the platform (Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2017). As far as the reasons why Facebook has been repeatedly connected to addiction, both

cognitive and psychosocial risk factors have been uncovered in various studies (Butt, 2021). One prevalent cognitive risk factor is the low self - efficacy among some users to reduce the time spent on the platform, which is mostly due to the fear that negative consequences like diminished socialization with friends will ensue (Yu, Wu, & Pesigan, 2016). This is also confirmed by findings that identify loneliness, a significant psychosocial risk factor associated with Facebook addiction, as a primary reason why users engage with Facebook (Yu, Wu, & Pesigan, 2016). Moreover, another motivation that has been connected to Facebook use and might lead to addictive behavior is the alleviation of boredom (Stockdale & Coyne, 2020). However, this motivation has also been associated with negative effects to mental health, as it is believed that individuals turning to Facebook to combat boredom may develop a dependency, gradually starting to perceive offline activities and engagements as less engaging (Stockdale & Coyne, 2020).

Despite the negative consequences mentioned above, several studies illustrate that the effects of Facebook on mental health heavily depend on the way the user utilizes the platform (Ziv & Kiasi, 2016). Brailovskai & Margraf (2017) discovered that Facebook use can bolster self - esteem by amplifying feelings of support, life satisfaction and mental strength (resilience), especially for individuals with lower self-confidence, who might find face-to-face communication challenging. Due to the benefits that Facebook can have by facilitating communication, many studies have reached an agreement that it is a platform appropriate for providing mental health support (Watkins, Allen, Goodwill, & Noel, 2017; Calder, et al., 2020; Szlyk, Deng, Xu, Krauss, & Cavazos - Rehg, 2020). It has also been supported that the ability provided by Facebook to its users to express themselves and their thoughts through their posts, is a way to identify individuals grappling with severe mental health issues, and potentially averting risky or fatal situations, such as suicide attempts (Egan, Koff, & Moreno, 2013). Regarding the social support provided on Facebook, which could also be described as an online type of peer-to-peer support, it has been associated with decrease in depression symptoms (Frison & Eggermont, 2015), lower levels of victimization (Cole, Nick, Zelkowitz, Roeder, & Spinelli, 2016; McConnell, Clifford, Korpak, Phillips II, & Birkett, 2017) as well as reduction in perceived loneliness (Lee, Noh, & Koo, 2013; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2016). However, studies specify that private communication on this platform is much more beneficial (Frison & Eggermont, 2015) compared to searching for social support through public posts, which can turn out to be even harmful for a person's mental health (Zhang, 2017).

Instagram

Instagram is another social media platform which has been extensively studied in regard to its effects on people's mental health. Research illustrates that individuals who use Instagram excessively, report worse mental state compared to both "normal" or non-Instagram users (Schmuck, Karsay, Matthes, & Stevic, 2019), while they also report higher scores on different kinds of mental disorders such as depression, anxiety,

eating disorders or addiction to alcohol (Ceballos, Howard, Dailey, Sharma, & Grimes, 2018; Griffiths, Murray, Krug, & McLean, 2018; Yurdagül, Kircaburun, Emirtekin, Wang, & Griffiths, 2019). As Holland & Tiggemann (2016) stress, posting and receiving comments on visual content, explains why image - based social media platforms, such as Instagram, have been associated with eating disorders and negative effects on body image. Moreno et al. (2016), apart from confirming in their study that the excessive Instagram use can cause body image issues, also found that it can even lead young people to self-harm. As far as young women in particular are concerned, they seem to be the most affected group by Instagram use, regarding their mental health, as this image - based platform makes them compare themselves with unrealistic versions of others in a never-ending feed (Ulvi, et al., 2022). It is a common phenomenon for Instagram users to compare their everyday selves to carefully selected, frequently modified photographs of others (Fardouly, Pinkus, & Vartanian, 2017). As most users follow both friends and celebrities on Instagram, the lines between plain people and celebrities are getting blurred on the platform and users tend to compare their appearance to idealized photos, a fact which leads them to misleading social comparisons (Choukas-Bradley, Roberts, & Maheux, 2021). However, it should be underlined that the effects that Instagram's potential effects on mental health heavily depend on the way the user utilizes the platform (Abrams, 2021). Instagram users mostly tend to suffer from negative psychological effects when they engage in social comparison or crave for popularity online. Across all age groups, these activities have been associated with increases in depressive symptoms, social anxiety, and body image issues, as well as with self-esteem deterioration (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019). Moreover, as in the case of Facebook, cyberbullying and victimization seem to be positively correlated with time spent on Instagram (Longobardi, Settanni, Fabris, & Marengo, 2020).

On the other hand, studies have shown that Instagram can foster positive psychological effects, reducing levels of anxiety, despair, and loneliness while enhancing self-esteem (Mackson, Brochu, & Schneider, 2019). This is attributed to Instagram's feature, common to most platforms, of enabling its users to receive supportive feedback from other users through likes, comments, or real-time chatting (Mackson, Brochu, & Schneider, 2019). This practice is perceived as some kind of validation which has been found to increase their self-confidence and provide them with a sense of social support (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). In addition to this, it also mitigates loneliness and satisfies the need for belonging by enabling users to tag others in their posts and thus foster a feeling of community or by leaving comments on photographs to encourage more social engagement (Keep & Amon, 2017). Furthermore, health-related posts on Instagram have also been correlated with one's mental health and emotional wellbeing (Mullis, Nguyen, & Pappas, 2021). The Self-care information disseminated on social media, and Instagram particularly, can be useful for users seeking ways to alleviate their stress (Godfrey, et al., 2010). At the same time, being surrounded by people who promote or engage with self-care activities

makes it easier for anyone to prioritize their self-care and their mental health protection (Godfrey, et al., 2010).

YouTube

Another prominent social media platform pertaining to mental health - related issues, is YouTube (Giustini, Ali, Fraser, & Kamel Boulos, 2018). In their evaluation of how consumers react to information on mental health issues offered on social media platforms, Martini et al. (2018) found that Facebook and YouTube were the platforms used more often for seeking mental health information. In line with these findings, a study by Naslund et al. (2019) found that YouTube was utilized by 90% of teens who visited community mental health services at the time. Younger generations usually turn to YouTube for mental health - related information mainly for two reasons (Oliphant, 2013; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). The first one is because of the benefits that video has as a visual medium and the second one is the ability to browse anonymously (O'Reilly, et al., 2019). Access to useful psychoeducational content targeted at a range of different age groups, makes it a go-to platform for mental health communication (Godwin, Khan, & Yellowlees, 2017; Diamantaki & Ziavras, 2022; Lam, Tsiang, & Woo, 2017; Shu & Woo, 2020). In addition to the potential for information-seeking and information-providing on YouTube, media and health communication academics have also underlined among the platform's benefits the possibility that users have to connect and interact with each other within specific health groups (Frohlich & Zmyslinski-Seelig, 2012; Kuehn, 2011; Tian, 2010). According to a 2017 study (Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH)) on young people's social media use in the UK, YouTube was found to be the only social media network that had a beneficial effect on depression, anxiety, and loneliness in users between the ages of 14 and 24.

Additionally, YouTube comments can also prove to be useful for users suffering from mental health disorders, due to the fact that they can function as a peer support system (Naslund, Grande, Aschbrenner, & Elwyn, 2014). Both YouTube video creators and users, in the comments section, can significantly contribute to the decrease of stigmatization, by highlighting the advantages of receiving therapy (Gaus, Jolliff, & Moreno, 2021). This is of vital importance as decreased levels of stigmatization have been associated with help-seeking behaviors (Calear, Batterham, & Christensen, 2014; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010; Rowe, et al., 2014). The highest level of user engagement seems to be created in personal account videos, as according to two studies (Baquero, 2018; Devendorf, Bender, & Rottenberg, 2020), approximately 30 to 33 percent of depression - related videos on the platform were produced by amateur vloggers or by people who had personally experienced mental health disorders. However, studies stress that comments on YouTube videos can also have reverse effects on mental health, as, depending on the user, a comment might also urge others to avoid seeking professional help, criticize a clinical treatment, or give fake information about mental health care services (Gaus, Jolliff, & Moreno, 2021).

As in the case of all social media platforms previously mentioned, the excessive use of YouTube can possibly lead to harmful effects on users' mental health. In most

studies, any use of YouTube lasting more than two hours per day is deemed as being of high frequency and is linked to a higher risk of addiction (Klobas, McGill, Moghavvemi, & Paramanathan, 2019). Intense parasocial relationships with other YouTubers have been found to lead to YouTube addiction (Bérail, Guillon, & Bungener, 2019). A parasocial relationship is created when a person develops a relationship with someone they don't truly know, just by watching or reading about them in the media (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2015; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Extreme forms of parasocial relationships can have detrimental effects on mental health and emotional well-being (Maltby, et al., 2004). The most vulnerable and most easily affected category, on which excessive YouTube use seems to have the most negative effects, are young people up to the age of 29, who are the most susceptible to loneliness and mental health issues (Balcombe & De Leo, 2023). A recent study (Cara, Winstone, Sloan, Davis, & Haworth, 2022) examined the demographics of young adult social media users along with results related to their mental health in combination with the platforms they used (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube) and discovered that YouTube users were most likely to experience worse mental health outcomes. One possible explanation for this, apart from the creation of para-social relationships which, as mentioned above, can have harmful effects on people's mental health, is the negative correlation that has been found between YouTube use, sleep loss and cognitive failures (Mahmood-ul-Hassan, et al., 2022). The deterioration of sleep quality and sleep loss has been associated with reduction in pleasant emotions and intensification of negative emotional reactions, which can lead to the deterioration of mental health in general (Columbia University, 2022). However, it should be noted that the possible detrimental effects of YouTube depend on the way it is being utilized as well as the mental health situation of each user, since the most vulnerable children and adolescents can be more easily affected (Balcombe & De Leo, 2023).

Despite the possibility for negative effects on YouTube users' well-being, it is worth noting that the benefits of consuming mental health content on this specific platform seem to outweigh the risks.

The effects of TikTok on mental health

Another platform which many young adults use extensively to address mental health issues and find health - related content is TikTok (Drillinger, 2022). With a variety of creative tools and effects available, TikTok is a social media platform that enables users to create and publish brief videos. With 755 million users as of 2022 (Statista, 2022), this network has gained phenomenal popularity among young people. Most of the studies conducted on the reasons why TikTok has become extremely popular among these audiences over the last few years, agree that its algorithm is what makes this platform special, as it gratifies the personalized needs of its users better than other social media platforms (Xu, Yan, & Zhang, 2019; Wang, 2022). In fact, TikTok did not stand out by offering new pioneering characteristics or affordances but rather by offering to the users a new way to introduce themselves, transforming the self-

representation model from the “networked self” (Papacharissi, 2011) to an “algorithmized self” (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). This means that instead of providing users with a “stage” for presenting and creating their self through interaction with their social circles (Papacharissi, 2013), it offers them instead the opportunity to interact with different aspects of their own selves through the personalized algorithm (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

Although TikTok has received criticism for some of its content, specifically for the dissemination of fake news and inappropriate content, it has also been developed into a significant platform for sharing knowledge, advice, experiences, and support on mental health issues. While finding and watching enjoyable videos is the main motivation of active TikTok users (Kemp, 2022), the platform is also used by people to express their creativity, seek popularity, influence others and grow their social networks (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). Furthermore, TikTok can also serve as a public arena for the debate of health issues (Basch, Meleo-Erwin, Fera, Jaime, & Basch, 2021) as well as for giving health advice (Zenone, Ow, & Barbic, 2020) with varied degrees of information reliability (Basch, Meleo-Erwin, Fera, Jaime, & Basch, 2021; Song, Zhao, Yao, & Ba, 2022; Kong, Song, Zhao, Zhu, & Sha, 2021). Hashtags like #mentalhealth, #anxiety, #mentalhealthmatters, #mentalhealthawareness, #depression, #anxiety, #stress, #stressmanagement, #selfcare, #mindmatters, #mentalhealthblogger, #endthestigmaofmentalhealth, #mentalhealthsupport and #mentalhealthwarrior are frequently used to share content that relates to mental health on Tik Tok. The fact that the hashtags #MentalHealth and #MentalHealthMatters have received more than 16.4 billion and 13.5 billion views respectively, is indicative of this trend (Rosenblatt, 2021). Moreover, many mental health groups have also built a presence on the platform, while some users have even created dedicated profiles to offer advice and support (McCashin & Murphy, 2022). Realizing the increasing tendency of its users seeking mental health advice and support on TikTok, the platform announced in 2021 that it would introduce new features for users who were experiencing suicidal thoughts (Rosenblatt, 2021). These new capabilities included a global resource list of crisis hotlines, guidelines on how to interact securely with people who may be in crisis, as well as access to resources such as the “Crisis Text Line” helpline, anytime users search for hashtags like #suicide (Rosenblatt, 2021). Additionally, on its official website, TikTok provides a dedicated well-being guide, encouraging its users to “build a supportive environment for the community members” (TikTok, n.d.).

The benefits

Research shows that TikTok can play a crucial part in the public dialogue that has opened about mental health nowadays in two ways. The first one is by focusing on key concerns through content made by its users (Kyparissiadis & Diamantaki, 2022) and the second one is by creating a platform for these issues to be discussed in the general public (Basch, Yalamanchili, & Fera, 2021; Herrick, Hallward, & Duncan, 2021). Researchers found that young people enjoyed the opportunity to share their experiences

online, highlighting the easy access, the anonymity, the feeling of acceptance, the sense of control, and the reduction of stigma as significant reasons why they valued the platform (MacKinnon, Kia, & Lacombe- Duncan, 2021). TikTok can furthermore promote public knowledge, not necessarily restricted to mental health, and offer its users the chance to exchange opinions on issues of public interest, contributing this way to a broader and more inclusive discussion (Eghtesadi & Florea, 2020). Indicative examples showing that information sharing, and educational content production is now taking place on the platform are the hashtags #AcademicTikTok, #LearnOnTikTok, and #ProfessorsofTikTok, which include, inter alia, mental health information (MacKinnon, Kia, & Lacombe- Duncan, 2021).

One major difference that TikTok has, compared to other social media platforms, is the fact that the first thing a user sees when opening the application is a never - ending stream of videos, which the platform's algorithm predicts the user would enjoy, based on the videos that he/she has watched in the past (Gallagher, 2022). The difference is that these videos are not created by the user's friends and family but rather by strangers (Geysler, 2023). This can create two important advantages for a user searching for mental health content on TikTok. The first one is the anonymity guaranteed to them, as they can post any mental health – related video and not be seen by their friends and family and the second one is their ability to participate in mental health communities outside of their immediate networks (Gallagher, 2022). Furthermore, TikTok can function as an ideal platform for peer support provision, due to its high engagement rates (Herrman, 2019). Specifically, engagement rates can reach up to 18% for small creators on TikTok, while the same percentage for Instagram is 4% and for Youtube just 2% (Geysler, 2023). What is more, Generation Z, which constitutes almost half of TikTok users worldwide (42%) (McLachlan, 2023), reports to perceive video sharing as a source of confidence boost rather than a source of insecurity (Muliadi, 2020). Apart from video sharing, the comments on TikTok mental health – related videos, which can include personal experiences, praise or agreement with the creator, seem to also be beneficial for users struggling with mental health issues (Gallagher, 2022). Praising someone for their effort is of vital importance, especially for people suffering from mental disorders, as it has been found to be associated with boost in motivation for coping with challenging tasks (Droe, 2012). What is interesting in the case of TikTok's effects, is the fact that despite having been accused of increasing perceived levels of stress of its users (Fan, 2023), its mental health content seems, based on the aforementioned, to be beneficial in decreasing the anxiety and stress levels, while also helping them cope with symptoms of even more severe mental issues, such as depression (Gallagher, 2022; Droe, 2012).

In order to examine this antithesis, the follow hypothesis was formed:

H1: Regular exposure to mental health - related content on TikTok is associated with lower levels of users' perceived symptoms of anxiety, loneliness, and depression.

#PsychWardStories, where creators discuss their experiences with inpatient mental health treatment, is one of the most popular topics related to mental illness on TikTok, with 164 million people having watched videos with this hashtag (TikTok, n.d.). As a TikTok creator on #PsychWardStories underlines, she uses the platform as a coping mechanism for dealing with the daily challenges of mental illness, while another creator stresses that her main goal, when creating mental health – related videos, is to make people feel less lonely and add some humor to this difficult situation they are experiencing (Schofield, 2020). As Gallagher (2022) highlights, the fact that TikTok's algorithm only presents mental health content to users who will, most probably, respond favorably to it and want to see more of it, promotes a sense of community for users suffering from mental health issues.

What is more regarding TikTok's benefits as a platform providing mental health advice, is that, apart from familiarizing users with mental health – related terminology, it also offers them the validation that they are not the only ones who suffer from a mental disorder or illness, while giving them a strong sense of community where people facing the same difficulties can share their experiences and support each other (Amato, 2022). As Basch et al. confirm (Basch, Donelle, Fera, & Jaime, 2022), from the top liked videos included in their study, 72% included comments which provided support or validation, while 62% of them described different mental health illnesses and disorders leading to a significant increase in mental health awareness. TikTok is often referred to as a resource for “humanizing” content about mental health. It improves the knowledge of people about sensitive mental health issues and enables therapists to explain concepts and overviews of diagnoses to a larger audience (Onebright Mental Health, 2022). This “humanization” of mental health issues and mental health illnesses and disorders seems to also lead to their destigmatization, especially among young people (Tavassoli, 2022).

One characteristic example of this is the Tourette's syndrome, which only affects 0.05 to 3.00 percent of individuals worldwide (Freeman, et al., 2000) and is frequently the target of stigmatization (Cox, et al., 2019). However, it has a massive following on TikTok, with almost 10 billion views (Tavassoli, 2022). This shows that people suffering from Tourette's syndrome might be positively affected by the awareness brought to their illness and its symptoms on TikTok (Tavassoli, 2022). The decreased levels of stigmatization have also been connected with a more positive attitude towards help seeking behaviors (Calear, Batterham, & Christensen, 2014; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010; Rowe, et al., 2014), a fact which makes the “humanization” of mental health information on TikTok even more important. Moreover, apart from destigmatization itself, increased mental health awareness and mental health literacy has also been positively associated with confidence in dealing with mental health symptoms as well with more positive attitude towards seeking professional help (Confectioner, et al., 2021). Of course, it should be underlined that, even though the mitigation of stigma is widely accepted as a positive effect of TikTok's open discussion on mental health issues, Moseley (2023) underlines a risk that hides behind that. As she highlights, mental health content uploaded by non-professionals could sometimes

increase the stigma, that already exists around mental health illnesses, by disseminating information that could easily be misunderstood or misinterpreted (Moseley, 2023).

Based on the aforementioned, the following hypotheses were formed in order to be tested in the current research study:

H2: There is a positive correlation between regular exposure to mental health content on TikTok and users' perceived levels of awareness of mental health issues.

H3: TikTok users who utilize the platform for mental health advice and support report a significant decrease in perceived stigmatization of mental health issues.

H4: TikTok users who utilize the platform as a source of mental health support are more likely to recognize the need for professional help with mental health issues when necessary.

Moreover, based on TikTok's astonishing popularity during the last years and taking into consideration all the benefits mentioned above, the following hypothesis was also formed, in order to examine whether its benefits outweigh the benefits of other social media platforms providing mental health content:

H5: TikTok is regarded as the most favored social media platform for acquiring mental health advice and support.

The disadvantages

Despite all the benefits mentioned above, TikTok has also been harshly criticized about the misleadingness of the mental health advice disseminated on the platform. A 2022 study (Yeung, Ng, & Abi - Jaoude, 2022) published in the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry is indicative of how harmful and misleading the mental health information provided on TikTok can be. Specifically, the researchers of this study examined the top 100 videos about ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), 52% of which were found to be medically inaccurate, 27% were solely based on the authors' personal experiences, while only 21% were found to be helpful compared to diagnostic criteria (Martin, 2023). Another study conducted by the medical group "PlushCare" (PlushCare, 2022) found similarly negative results. Medical experts examined 500 TikTok videos with the hashtags #mentalhealthtips and #mentalhealthadvice to evaluate the recommendations and advice for accuracy and potential risk. The researchers came to the conclusion that 14.2% of the videos included in the study, contained potentially harmful content, while 83.7% of the mental health advice provided was false (Martin, 2023). Moreover, what also raised concern was the fact that only 9% of the users giving advice on the platform were qualified to do so, while in 99% of videos, there was no notice stating that the author was unqualified to offer mental health advice (PlushCare, 2022). What makes the dissemination of misinformation even more concerning, is the potential growth of self-diagnosis cases, which have been recorded by TikTok users (Martin, 2023).

Drawing from all the above regarding the dissemination of misleading and false information, the following hypothesis has been formed to examine how TikTok users perceive the platform's reliability.

H6: TikTok is generally perceived as an unreliable source of advice on mental health issues. Perceived reliability is increased in the sample that utilizes the platform for mental health content.

Moreover, apart from the criticism regarding the misinformation provided on critical issues, such as mental health – related topics, TikTok has also been criticized about its “increasingly personal nature”, which might replace users' social interaction (Paul, 2022). Although all social media platforms have been criticized about this possible negative effect on their users, TikTok's increased popularity during COVID-19 pandemic is often considered as “an illustration of the impact that it had on people's lives” (Paul, 2022). In addition to this, TikTok videos have raised concerns about the fact that they sometimes might prove to be “triggering” and harmful to certain viewers (Basch, Donelle, Fera, & Jaime, 2022). Furthermore, despite the platform's popularity, a recent study (Pruccoli, De Rosa, Chiasso, Perrone, & Parmeggiani, 2022) found that TikTok was associated, during the COVID-19 pandemic, with decrease in its users' self-esteem (in 59% of the respondents), with a small percentage even reporting experiences of body-shaming.

Theoretical framework conclusion

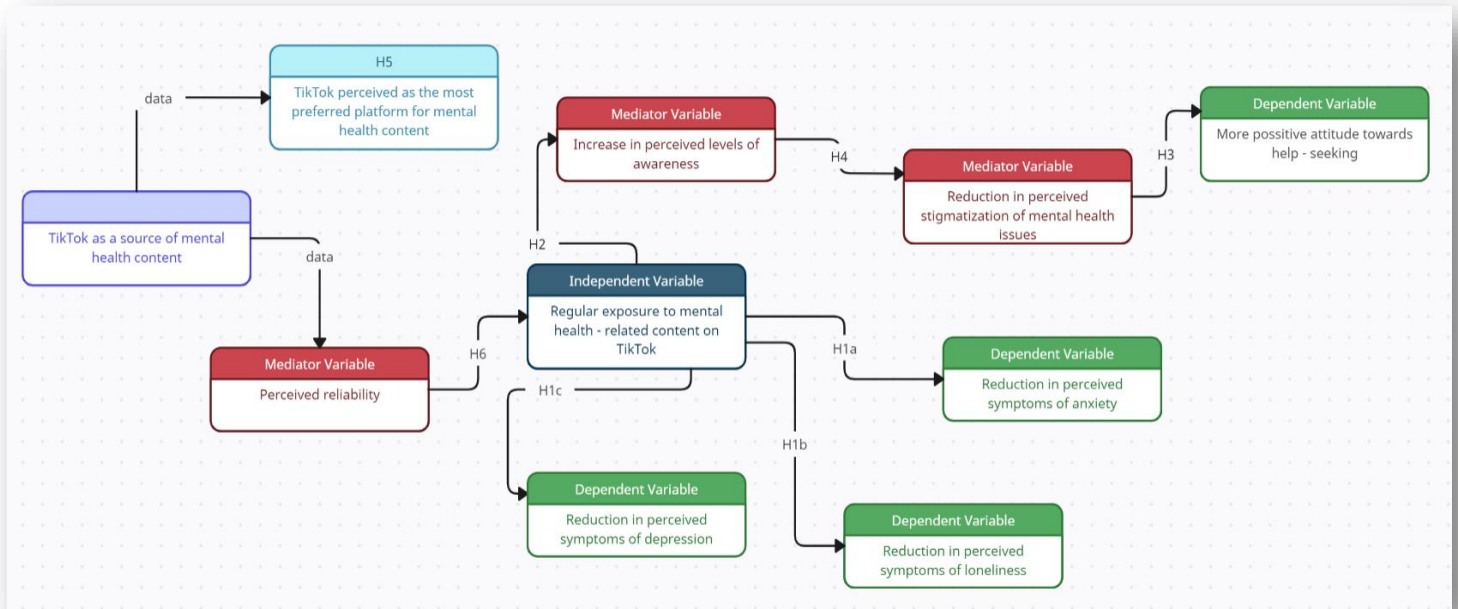
What can be concluded from the theoretical framework presented above, is the fact that TikTok, as all the social media platforms, can have both detrimental and beneficial effects to its users. Long time since, even before the prevalence of Web 2.0, *peer-to-peer support* has been found to be significantly helpful for people dealing with mental health – related issues, mainly due to the fact that it successfully fosters a sense of community among them (Brewer, 1991; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Davidson, et al., 1999). Moreover, it has been associated with improvements of mental health state by increasing self-confidence, self-esteem, hope and participation of the patient in the treatment process (Puschner, et al., 2019; Klodnick, Sabella, Brenner, & Krzos, 2014; Pettitt, 2003). Nowadays, that the dominance of social media is profound, it seems that *peer-to-peer support* has been transferred to the online world and specifically to the social media platforms (Clarke, Kuosmanen, & Barry, 2015; Ong & Toh, 2023). Although, online *peer-to-peer support* has some important advantages compared to the traditional *peer-to-peer support*, such as no limits regarding time and space (Clarke, Kuosmanen, & Barry, 2015), it can also hide risks for the users' mental health and particularly the mental health of those being more vulnerable to mental health – related issues (Beeres, Andersson, Vossen, & Galanti, 2021; Houghton, et al., 2018; Drouin, Kaiser, & Miller, 2012; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Song, et al., 2014). YouTube (Diamantaki & Ziavras, 2022; Osman, Mohamed, Elhassan, & Shoufan, 2022), Instagram (Arendt, 2019; Bogolyubova, Upravitelev, Churilova, & Ledovaya, 2018) and Facebook (Burke & Kraut, 2016; Song, et al., 2014) have all been studied in the

past in regards with their effects on mental health and have been found to be both useful and harmful depending on the way they are being utilized.

TikTok, which has undeniably become a highly popular social media platform especially among young adults (Feldkamp, 2021; McLachlan, 2023), has also been rising among the platforms providing mental health – related content (Drillinger, 2022). Its special algorithm, which allows every user to watch exactly the type of content they are looking for (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Yaqi, Lee, & Liu, 2020; Xu, Yan, & Zhang, 2019), makes it an ideal platform for users who want easy access to a never-ending stream of mental health - related issues (Gallagher, 2022), while maintaining their anonymity, since their feed and their posts are not seen by friends and family but mostly by strangers (Geysler, 2023). Among TikTok’s benefits, community building is also included, as the platform offers a space for people suffering from mental health – related problems to share their experiences and offer support to each other (Basch, Donelle, Fera, & Jaime, 2022; MacKinnon, Kia, & Lacombe- Duncan, 2021). Taking into consideration the positive effects of *peer – to - peer support* both offline and online, it can thus be suggested that the support offered on TikTok can have positive effects on people’s mental health and be associated with a significant decrease in symptoms of anxiety, loneliness and depression (H1). Furthermore, TikTok has also been praised about the fact that, through the video content it provides, it helps in “humanizing” knowledge related to mental health, making it easier for anyone on the platform to learn more about complex concepts or mental health symptoms (Onebright Mental Health, 2022). This can help in turn to increasing mental health awareness among the platform’s users, who utilize it as a source of mental health advice (H2). Research has found that an increase in mental health awareness is positively associated with decrease in perceived stigmatization regarding mental health issues (H4) (Tavassoli, 2022), which in turn has been found to increase the willingness of people to seek professional mental help when needed (H3) (Calear, Batterham, & Christensen, 2014; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen , 2010; Rowe, et al., 2014). Taking into account the aforementioned benefits that TikTok has as a platform, it could be suggested that it has nowadays replace other social media platforms, such as YouTube, in becoming the most preferred platform for mental health – related content (H5).

However, what also needs to be further examined is whether users are aware of the dissemination of fake news and false information on TikTok (Martin, 2023; PlushCare, 2022) and whether they trust it as a reliable source (H6). TikTok’s unreliability could possible overweigh some of its benefits, since it cannot effectively help in increasing mental health awareness or assist in destigmatization of mental health - related issues if it provides information that are not correct or true. The current study aims to evaluate if TikTok, and particularly mental health content on TikTok, can indeed prove to be beneficial for people suffering from mental health problems, while also examining whether users are aware of the risks hiding behind this type of content provided on the platform.

The conceptual framework visualized below can help in better presenting the hypotheses examined in the current study.



Methodology

Research Design

The method that was used for the current research study was the survey method. This approach is particularly advantageous due to its ability to collect information from a large number of participants in a quick and cost-effective manner, compared to other research methodologies (Jones, Baxter, & Khanduja, 2013).

This rapid data collection facilitates the generalization of results, ensuring that the study's findings have broader implications and can guide subsequent research (Wimmer & Dominick, 2009; Tanner & Johanson, 2018). This feature makes it particularly useful and effective for researching topics that encompass a large and varied population, such as social media users (Kempf-Leonard, 2005). Moreover, surveys, can yield useful quantitative data, which can be used to quantify the level of agreement or disagreement concerning specific mental health issues (Frechtling, 2002).

Answering the questionnaire online is convenient and practical for both researchers and participants (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). Regarding the participants, it facilitates candid responses to questions, as anonymity can eliminate the fear of exposure (Ong & Weiss, 2000; Manfreda, Bosnjak, Berzelak, Haas, & Vehovar, 2008). Additionally, it, reduces the potential bias in the responses due to the reduced influence of the researcher, resulting from the social presence effect (Mayer, 2021). Of course,

these benefits of the online questionnaire are valid under the condition that all personal data are anonymized, as in the current study. Furthermore, online questionnaires give participants the flexibility to respond at their leisure, which can increase participation rates (Krosnick & Presser, 2009; Couper, 2000). As far as the benefits for the researchers are concerned, online surveys allow for adjustments or changes to be done quickly and easily, while they also make the distribution of questionnaires to large populations much more convenient than in the past, as a questionnaire can now be sent simultaneously to hundreds of people in different areas with just one click (Lavrakas, 2008).

Moreover, the processes of data collection and analysis are automated for online surveys, significantly reducing the time and effort traditionally required by the researcher for these tasks (Fowler, 2009). This efficiency allows for a broader and more diverse sample, enabling a more accurate representation of the target population and enabling safer generalization of findings (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). Additionally, the online survey method is cost effective, given that it eliminates the costs of printing and distributing the questionnaires on paper (de Leeuw, Hox, & Dillman, 2008). Furthermore, the online survey method is cost-effective, eliminating expenses associated with printing and distributing paper questionnaires (de Leeuw, Hox, & Dillman, 2008).

However, the survey research method has limitations (Andrade, 2020). For instance, self-selection bias can occur when certain individuals choose to participate in the survey, particularly in the case of online surveys (Bethlehem, 2010), which can lead to a biased sample, not truly representative of the entire whole population (Johnson, Beaton, Murphy, & Pike, 2000). To mitigate this risk, the current study used a purposive sample method by selecting respondents who are most likely to provide valuable insights on the research topic.

Another potential limitation is social desirability bias, where participants may respond in ways that are deemed more socially acceptable, rather than reflecting their actual feelings or experiences (Latkin, Edwards, Davey-Rothwell, & Tobin, 2018). In order to address this limitation, the survey included both favorably and negatively phrased statements to assess users' perspectives and experiences with TikTok (Dunsch, Evans, Macis, & Wang, 2018). The survey was answered anonymously by participants in order to encourage truthful answers. In addition, the survey featured a relatively small number of questions to prevent a low response rate among the participants (Sharma, 2022).

Participants

For this study, a purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who met specific criteria, ensuring they had relevant experience with TikTok use and could provide insightful responses. The common variable among all participants was the fact that they were active users of TikTok. This ensured that participants' responses

were directly related to the research questions, enhancing the validity and reliability of the results. Moreover, it eliminated the inclusion of individuals who could answer hypothetically rather than based on their own personal experiences. What was crucial, however, was the fact that the survey was constructed with care, creating a safe and supportive environment that encouraged participants to candidly share their views on this sensitive topic (Wu, Zhao, & Fils- Aime, 2022).

To recruit participants for the research study, the following methods were used:

1. Leveraging the researcher's personal network, by sharing the survey on the researcher's Facebook, Instagram and TikTok personal accounts.
2. Reaching out via online communities, such as Facebook Pages and Groups related to mental health.
3. Finding research participants through social media. For the purposes of the research study, the questionnaire was distributed on TikTok, as on this platform the chances were higher of finding the appropriate participants. This included apart from the researcher's personal account, the sharing of the survey in the comments section of relevant, mental health – related TikTok videos.
4. Using snowball sampling, where already involved individuals helped reach out to other potential participants.

Data Collection & Analysis

An online questionnaire was used as the methodological instrument of the survey. An online research description directed recipients to a Qualtrics link, which contained the study information, consent form, and the survey. Data for the study was gathered through the use of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to gather information from participant TikTok users about their experience from being exposed to mental health - related content on the platform. The questions were designed to obtain meaningful information that corresponds to the study's goals and hypotheses.

The questionnaire also drew from scales used on relevant bibliography found in the literature review. Such scales were the ATSPPH-SF scale developed by Fischer & Farina (1995) to assess attitudes regarding mental health seeking, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) originally developed by Cohen et al. (1983) to measure stress, the ULS-8 Loneliness Scale (Xu, Qiu, Hahne, Zhao, & Hu, 2018) measuring perceived loneliness, as well as the MICA Scale (Gabbidon, et al., 2013) assessing stigmatization. All the scales used in the questionnaire are described in detail in the Results section (in the Reliability tests part).

The questionnaire was organized logically, with a clearly defined flow of questions. It started with a preliminary question about TikTok usage, while the subsequent sections addressed the research hypotheses, ensuring that each question added to the overall research objectives. The questions on the survey were closed -

ended and the responses were evaluated using multiple - choice or Likert scales so as to capture the participants' opinions, perceptions, and experiences.

The questionnaire was designed in a focused way to ensure validity and reliability. Careful attention was given to the wording of questions to avoid bias. The questionnaire was designed to find a balance between collecting comprehensive data and respecting the time of participants. The questionnaire went through pilot testing to improve its accuracy in obtaining the needed by the researcher information.

To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, the questionnaire followed all the ethical standards and study procedures as approved by the Institutional Review Board at the ACG-Deree. At the beginning, an informed consent statement was provided, outlining the goal of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and the precautions that were taken to protect participants' anonymity and their data. Throughout the study, confidentiality was maintained, and participants' anonymity was protected in all reporting and analysis. At the end of the study, a debriefing form was presented to the participants with additional information about the research, including its purpose, significance, and potential implications.

The collected data from the questionnaires were analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques. This analysis helped uncover patterns, trends, and relationships between the data and helped the researcher reach some meaningful interpretations and conclusions that align with the research objectives and tested the stated hypotheses.

Reliability tests

Regarding the internal reliability, Cronbach's alpha reliability tests were conducted on SPSS for all the multi-item scales used in the online questionnaire.

As seen below, the reliability level was good (0,86) for the multi – item scale measuring the attitude towards professional help. To measure this, an 11-item, 5-point Likert scale, originally developed by Fischer & Farina, (1995) was used, anchored at 0= “strongly disagree” and 4 = “strongly agree”.

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,867	11

A 5-item, 5-point Likert scale, adapted by Shah and Birur (2014), anchored at 1= “not aware at all” and 5= “extremely aware”, was used to measure the perceived levels of awareness regarding mental health issues. The reliability level was good (0,88) for this scale, as can also be seen below.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,885	5

A 9-item, 5-point Likert scale, originally developed by Cohen et al. (1983), anchored at 0 = “never” and 4= “very often”, was used to measure the perceived levels of anxiety. The internal reliability level was also good (0,86).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,868	9

A 7-item, 4-point Likert scale, adapted from Xu et al. (2018), anchored at 1= “never” and 4= “always”, was used to measure the perceived levels of loneliness. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability test showed that this scale’s internal reliability was good (0,8).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,803	7

A 5-item, 4-point Likert scale, adapted from Zigmond & Snaith, anchored at 0= “not at all” and 3= “most of the time”, was used for the measurement of the perceived levels of depression. This scale’s internal reliability was found to be at an acceptable level (0,72).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,727	5

Trustworthiness was measured with two questions in the online questionnaire. The first question focused more on the users’ general perception of TikTok’s

trustworthiness and reliability, while the second one focused more on how much the knowledge and the opinions provided by people/ profiles on TikTok can be trusted. For the first question, a 1-7 semantic differential scale, adapted from Ohanian (1990), was used, including the adjectives “dependable – undependable”, “reliable-unreliable” and “trustworthy – untrustworthy”. The scale’s internal reliability was excellent (0,9).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,909	3

For the second question measuring trustworthiness, a 2-item, 5-point Likert scale, adapted from Wiedmann and Von Mettenheim (2020), was used, anchored at 1= “strongly disagree” and 5= “strongly agree”. The internal reliability for this scale was found to be at a good level (0,85).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,858	2

Two questions were also used in order for the perceived stigmatization level, regarding mental health issues, to be measured. The first question included items concerning the stigmatization that one would feel if he/she was suffering from a mental health problem, while the second question included questions focusing only on the stigmatization that exists in society against people facing mental health problems. For the first question, a 5-item, 5-point Likert scale was used, adapted from Gabbidon et al. (2013), anchored at 1= “strongly disagree” and 5= “strongly agree”. The internal reliability level for this scale was acceptable (0,71).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,719	5

For the second question measuring perceived stigmatization, another 5-item, 5-point Likert scale was used, adapted from Yeap & Low (2009), anchored at 1= “strongly disagree” and 5= “strongly agree”. The reliability for this scale was the only one at a minimally acceptable level (0,69).

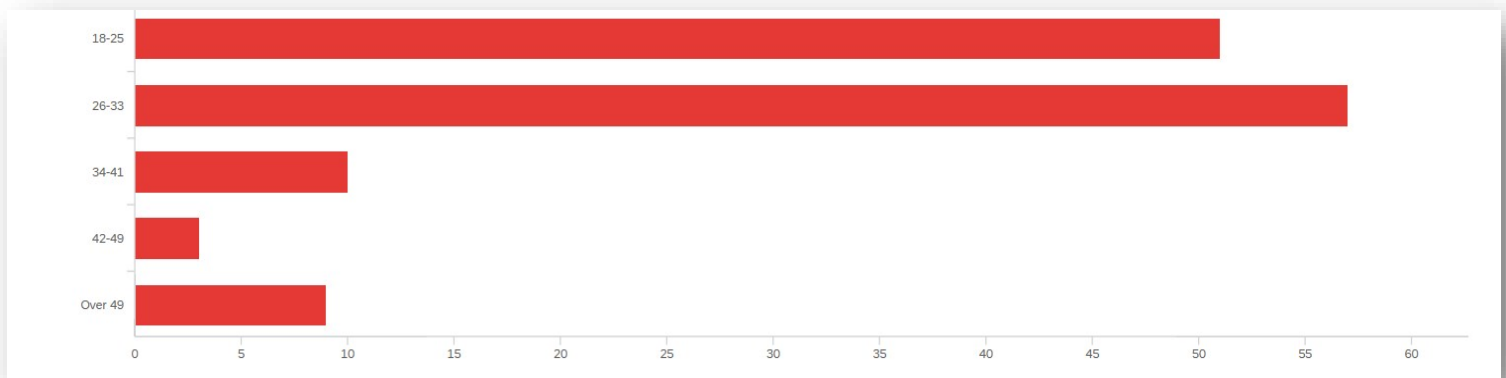
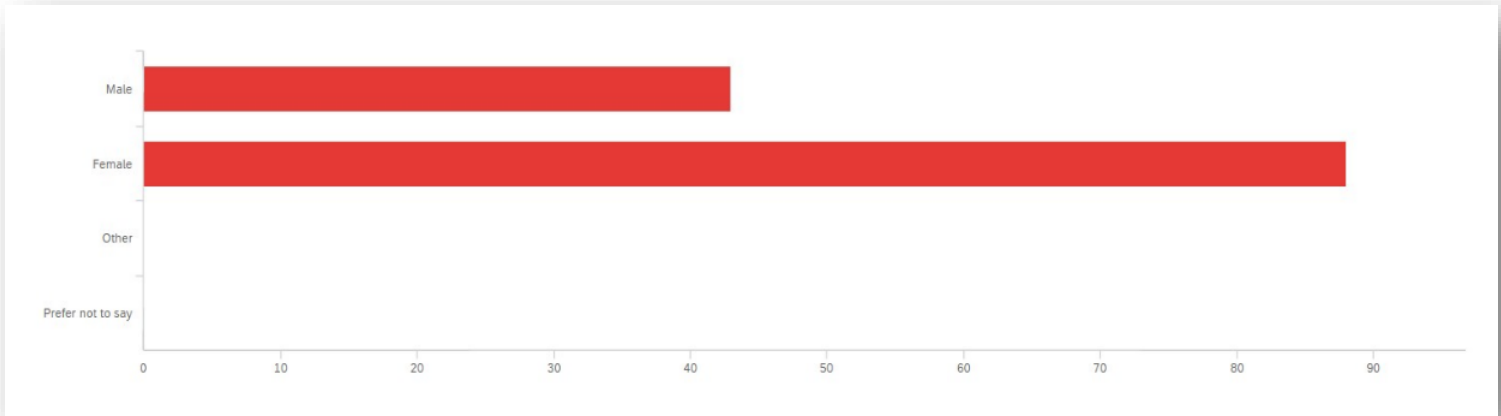
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,699	5

Demographic distributions of the sample

Of the responses gathered on Qualtrics, 131 were deemed valid. Participants who answered that they do not use TikTok, were immediately redirected to the end of the survey and thus did not count as valid answers. Additionally, only fully completed questionnaires were considered as valid, as all questionnaires that were in progress were excluded. In total, 48 answers from non-TikTok users and incomplete questionnaires were excluded.

Out of the 131 participants, 88 were female and 43 were men, while no “other” and “prefer not to say” answers were collected. The majority of the participants (57 participants, 43,51%) were in the age group of 26-33, while 39,69% were between 18 and 25 years old. The “34-41” age group came third with a 7,63%, while “over 49” and “42-49” followed with 6,87% and 2,29% respectively.



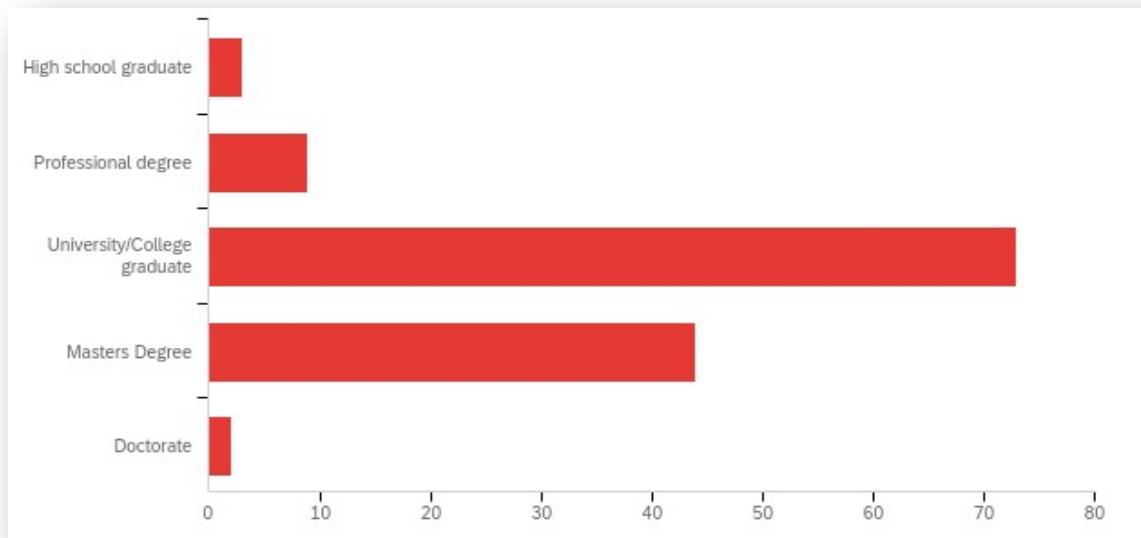
Regarding the participants' education level, the vast majority of 55,73% were university or college graduates, while 33,59% had a Master's degree. Participants with a professional degree followed with 6.87%, while 3 participants (2,29%) were high school graduates and 2

(1,53%)

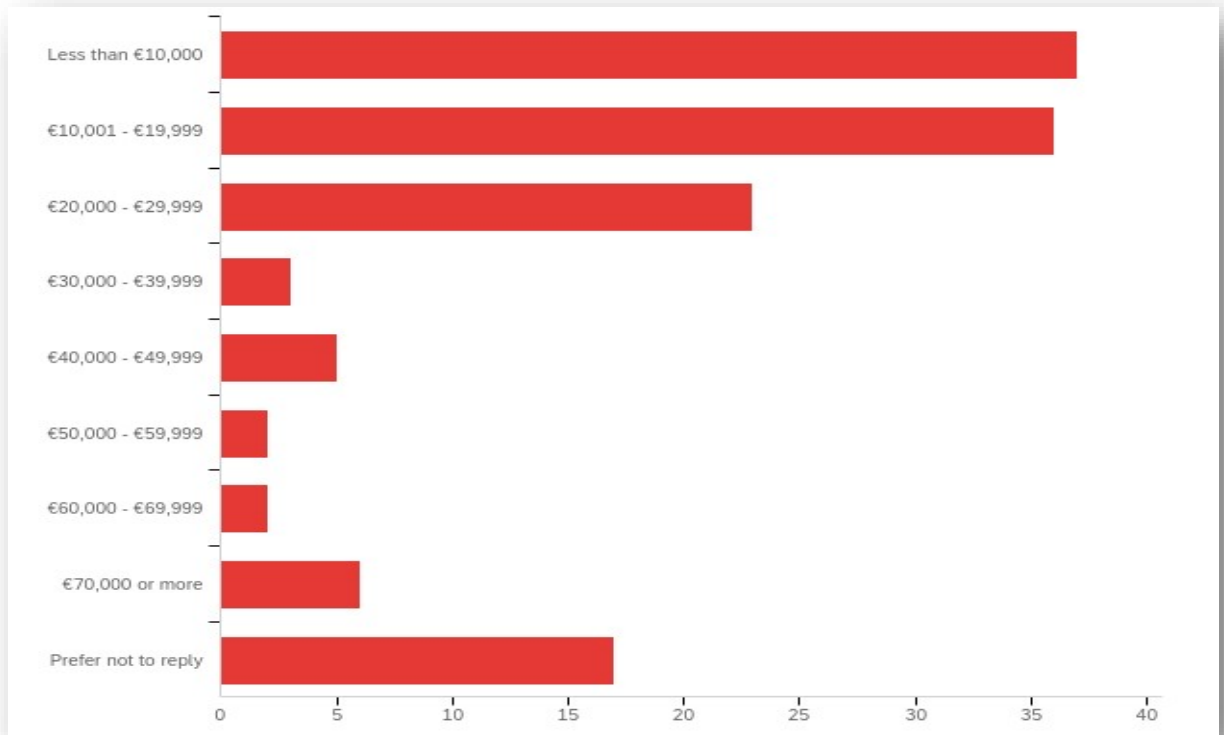
had

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Doctorate.



As far as the participants' annual income level is concerned, many different answers were collected. A number of 37 (28,24%) participants reported they have a total annual income of less than 10,000 euros, while 36 (27,48%) participants answered that they earn between 10,000 and 19,999 euros per year. A significant part of the participants, amounting to 17,56%, earn 20,000 – 29,999 euros annually. The rest of the income categories collected less than 5% each, while 17 participants (12,98%) preferred not to answer this question.

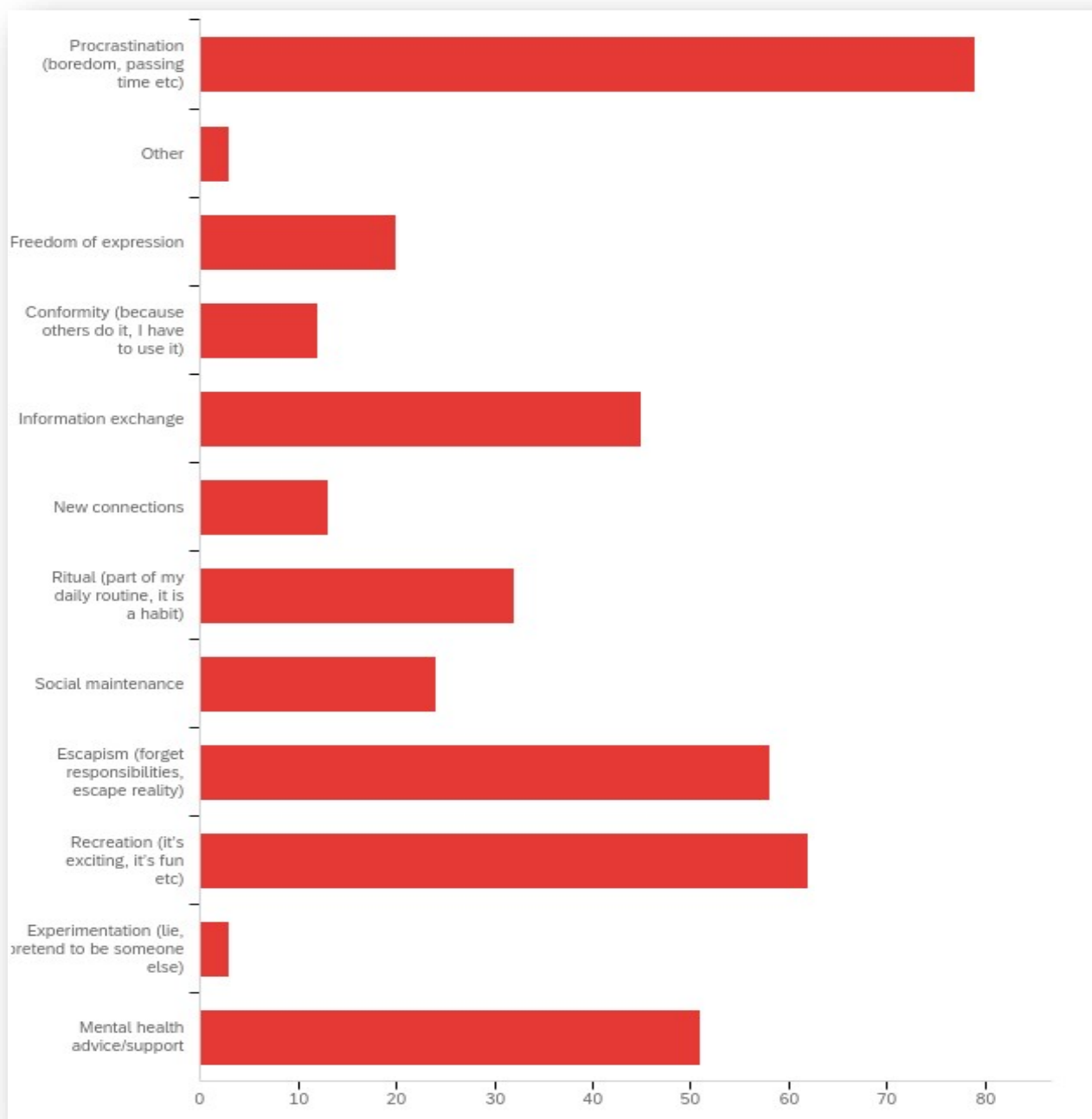


Results

Motivations

One of the main questions of the online questionnaire was the one asking participants about motivations for using TikTok. Participants were asked to select all answers that applied. As it can be seen in the graph below, “procrastination” was found to be the most common reason why people use TikTok (79 participants selected it), while “recreation” was the second most usual motivation, with 62 participants selecting it. “Escapism” was the third most selected answer, which means that people use TikTok to escape reality and forget about their responsibilities. What is also interesting, is the fact that that mental health advice and support was the fourth most important need that TikTok users try to satisfy by using the platform (51 participants), a fact which highlights the importance of the current study examining the effects of TikTok on people’s mental health. “Information exchange” was recorded in 45 answers and was also found to be among the main reasons of TikTok’s popularity, while “ritual” followed with 32 participants choosing it among their main reasons for using the platform. “Social maintenance” was selected by 24 participants, “freedom of expression” by 20, “new connections” by 13 and “conformity”

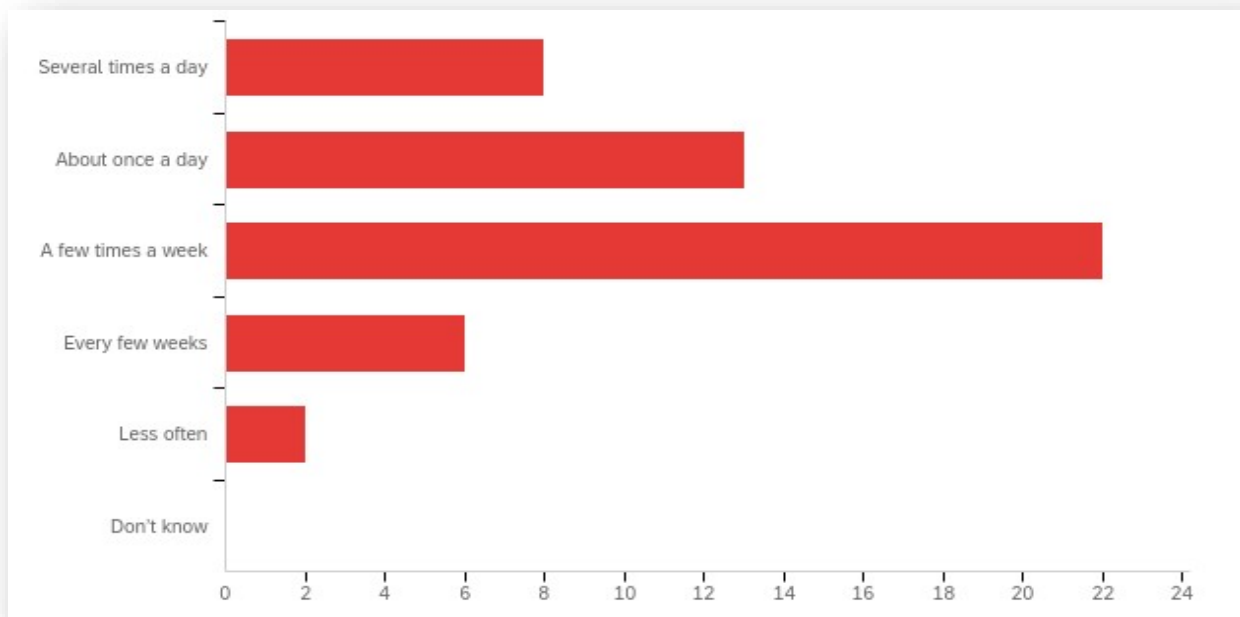
by 12. “Experimentation” and “other reasons” were also recorded by 3 participants each. Regarding the “other reasons”, the participants’ answers were: “art ideas”, “work” and “product reviews and DIYs”.



Frequency of exposure to mental health content

The participants who selected “mental health advice and support” as one of the main reasons they use TikTok, were additionally asked how regularly they watch mental health content on the platform. Almost half of the participants (48,14%) are exposed to mental health content on TikTok a few times a week, while an impressive 41,18% watches TikTok mental health content once a day or several times per day (25,49

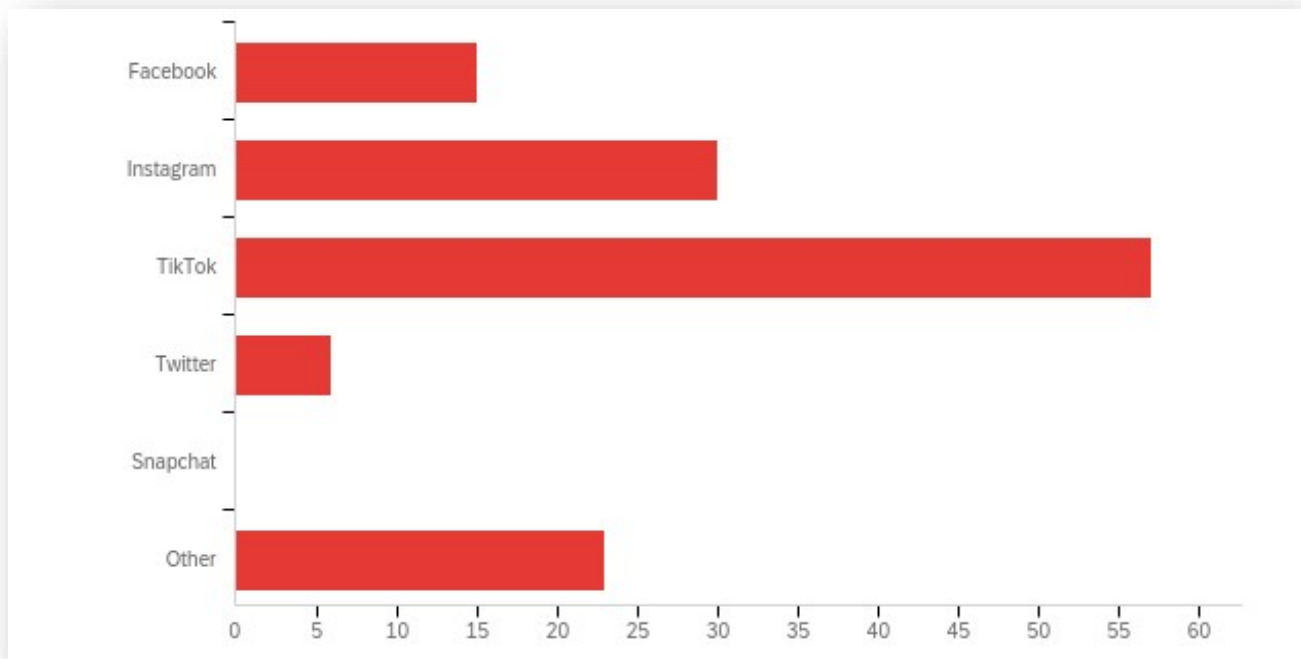
and 15,69% respectively). 11,76% uses TikTok for mental health advice and support every few weeks, while 3.92% is exposed to this kind of content on TikTok less often.



Preferred social media platform for mental health content

In response to the question inquiring about participants' preferred platforms for seeking mental health content, advice, or support, TikTok emerged as the most favored platform with 57 participants identifying it as their primary choice. This was followed by Instagram, chosen by 30 participants.

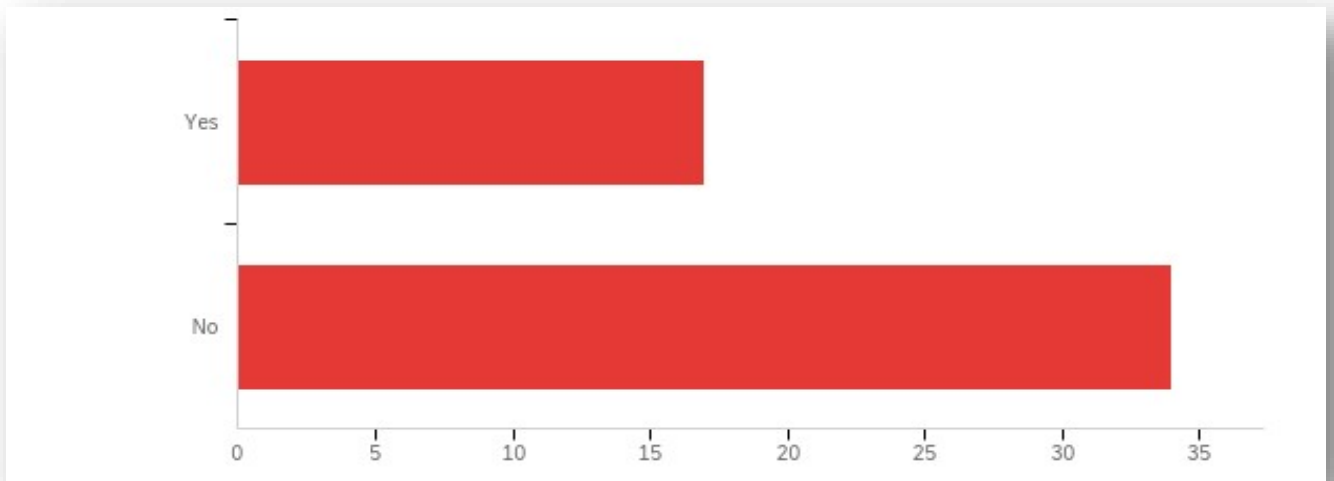
The third most favorite social media platform for mental health content was Facebook, which was selected by 15 participants, while Twitter was selected by 6 participants. Another 23 participants selected the option “other” indicating that neither “Facebook”, “Instagram”, “TikTok”, “Twitter” nor “Snapchat” were their favorite platform. Among these 23 answers, 9 participants preferred “YouTube”, 1 favored “TikTok and YouTube”, 1 opted for “Tumblr”, and 4 indicated “No social media platform/ None”. Another one was “a mental health professional/ Google/ articles/ YouTube” and 1 was “a friend”. Six participants chose not to specify which the “other” preferred social media platform was for them when looking for mental health content.



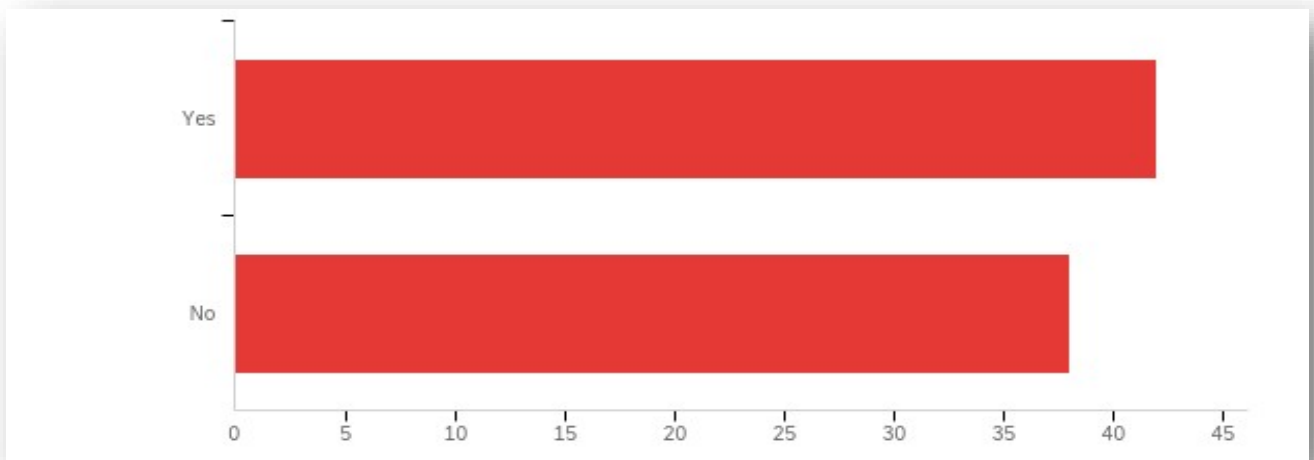
Attitude towards professional help

Participants were moreover asked about their willingness to ask for professional help when facing mental health problems. For participants who had previously selected “mental health advice/support” among their main reasons for using TikTok, the question was phrased as follows: “*Before starting using TikTok for mental health content, had you ever discussed psychological problems with a mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker?)*”, while for those who had not selected “mental health advice/support” among their main reasons for using TikTok, the question was slightly changed, as follows: “*Have you ever discussed psychological problems with a mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker?)*”. The differentiation of the question between the two groups was made in order to see if TikTok could possibly have an effect in increasing people’s willingness to visit a mental health professional when needed, or if people using TikTok had already a positive attitude towards mental health, even before starting using TikTok for mental health advice and support.

The results show that most of the participants who are currently regularly exposed to mental health content on TikTok, stating that mental health content is one of the main reasons they use the platform, had not previously discussed psychological problems with a mental health professional, as only 33,33% had already visited a mental health professional before starting using TikTok.



On the other hand, the answers were divided among the participants who do not use – at least on a regular basis – TikTok for mental health content. In particular, 52,50% have discussed mental health problems with a professional, while 47,50% have not.



Results regarding hypotheses

H1: In order to test the current study’s first hypothesis, which suggested that the regular¹ exposure to mental health - related content on TikTok is associated with lower levels of users' perceived symptoms of anxiety, loneliness, and depression, three independent t-tests were conducted.

¹ In order for participants to be considered as “regularly” exposed to mental health-related content they had to include “mental health advice/support” among their main reasons for using TikTok.

The first independent t-test was conducted to determine if the regular exposure to mental health – related content (TikTok users regularly exposed to mental health content [M=1,79, SD= .73] vs TikTok users who are not regularly exposed to mental health content [M=2,15, SD= .67]) is associated with lower levels of perceived symptoms of anxiety. The Levene’s test for equality of variances was not significant (F = .78, p >.05), so equality of variances could be assumed. The difference of the anxiety levels between the two groups (regularly exposed – not regularly exposed) was found to be statistically significant, t = 2,91, p = .004, as the anxiety mean value of the users who are not regularly exposed to mental health – related content, was significantly higher than the mean value of the users who are regularly exposed to mental health – related content.

T-Test

Group Statistics

Which are the main reasons you use TikTok for? Please select all that apply. - Selected Choice

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total_anxiety	Other reasons	80	2,1583	,67985	,07601
	Mental health advice/support	51	1,7930	,73098	,10236

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Total_anxiety	Equal variances assumed	,784	,377	2,912	129	,004	,36531	,12545	,11710	,61351
	Equal variances not assumed			2,865	100,924	,005	,36531	,12749	,11239	,61822

The second independent t-test was conducted to determine if the regular exposure to mental health – related content (TikTok users regularly exposed to mental health content [M=1,83, SD= .56] vs TikTok users who are not regularly exposed to mental health content [M=2,06, SD= .58]) is associated with lower levels of perceived symptoms of loneliness. The Levene’s test for equality of variances was not significant (F = .45, p >.05), indicating that the assumption of equality of variances was met. The difference of the loneliness levels between the two groups (regularly exposed – not regularly exposed) was found to be statistically significant, t = 2,22, p = .02, as the loneliness mean value of the users who are not regularly

Participants who did not select “mental health advice/support” among the main reasons for using TikTok were considered as “not regularly exposed to mental health- related content”.

exposed to mental health – related content, was significantly higher than the mean value of the users who are regularly exposed to mental health – related content.

T-Test

Group Statistics

Which are the main reasons you use TikTok for? Please select all that apply. - Selected Choice
Mental health advice/support

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total_loneliness	Other reasons	80	2,0661	,58082	,06494
	Mental health advice/support	51	1,8375	,56135	,07861

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Total_loneliness	Equal variances assumed	,456	,501	2,224	129	,028	,22854	,10274	,02527	,43180
	Equal variances not assumed			2,241	109,312	,027	,22854	,10196	,02646	,43061

The third independent t-test was conducted to determine if the regular exposure to mental health – related content (TikTok users regularly exposed to mental health content [M=.76, SD= .56] vs TikTok users who are not regularly exposed to mental health content [M=1,09, SD= .57]) is associated with lower levels of perceived symptoms of depression. The Levene’s test for equality of variances was not significant (F = .065, p > .05), so equality of variances could not be assumed. The difference of the depression levels between the two groups (regularly exposed – not regularly exposed) was found to be statistically significant, t = 3,20, p = .002, as the depression mean value of the users who are not regularly exposed to mental health – related content, was significantly higher than the mean value of the users who are regularly exposed to mental health – related content.

T-Test

Group Statistics

Which are the main reasons you use TikTok for? Please select all that apply. - Selected Choice
Mental health advice/support

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total_depression	Other reasons	80	1,0900	,57005	,06373
	Mental health advice/support	51	,7647	,56243	,07876

Independent Samples Test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances

t-test for Equality of Means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Total_depression	Equal variances assumed	,065	,800	3,201	129	,002	,32529	,10162	,12424	,52635
	Equal variances not assumed			3,211	107,699	,002	,32529	,10131	,12447	,52612

H2: In order to test the second hypothesis, which suggested that there is a positive correlation between regular exposure to mental health content on TikTok and users' perceived levels of awareness of mental health issues, an independent t-test was conducted. The independent t-test aimed to determine if the regular exposure to mental health –related content (TikTok users regularly exposed to mental health content [M=3,99, SD= .65] vs TikTok users who are not regularly exposed to mental health content [M=3,76, SD= .96]) is associated with users' perceived levels of awareness of mental health issues . The Levene’s test for equality of variances was significant (F = 9,40, p < .05), so equality of variances could not be assumed. The difference of the perceived levels of awareness between the two groups (regularly exposed – not regularly exposed) was not found to be statistically significant, t = 1,64, p = .10, as the awareness mean value of the users who are not regularly exposed to mental health – related content, was not significantly lower than the mean value of the users who are regularly exposed to mental health – related content.

T-Test

Group Statistics

Which are the main reasons you use TikTok for? Please select all that apply. - Selected Choice

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total_awareness				
Other reasons	80	3,7600	,96070	,10741
Mental health advice/support	51	3,9922	,65722	,09203

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Total_awareness	Equal variances assumed	9,406	,003	-1,514	129	,133	-,23216	,15337	-,53561	,07129
	Equal variances not assumed			-1,641	128,309	,103	-,23216	,14144	-,51202	,04771

H3: As far as the third hypothesis is concerned, which suggested that TikTok users who utilize the platform as a source of mental health support are more likely to recognize the need for professional help with mental health issues, when necessary, an independent t-test was conducted. The independent t-test aimed to determine if the use of TikTok as a source of mental health support (TikTok users utilizing TikTok for mental health content² [M=2,85, SD= .69] vs TikTok users who do not utilize TikTok for mental health content [M=2,52, SD= .76]) is associated with users' attitude towards professional mental help. The Levene's test for equality of variances was not significant (F = 1,85, p > .05), so equality of variances could be assumed. The difference between the two groups (regularly exposed – not regularly exposed), in recognizing the need for professional help when needed, was found to be statistically significant, t = -2,53, p = .01, as the mean value of the users who are not regularly exposed to mental health – related content, was significantly lower than the mean value of the users who are regularly exposed to mental health – related content.

² Participants who selected “mental health advice/support” among the main reasons why they use TikTok.

T-Test

Group Statistics

Which are the main reasons you use TikTok for? Please select all that apply. - Selected Choice
Mental health advice/support

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total_willingness_help	80	2,5250	,76321	,08533
Mental health advice/support	51	2,8592	,69098	,09676

Independent Samples Test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances

t-test for Equality of Means

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Total_willingness_help	Equal variances assumed	1,866	,174	-2,534	129	,012	-,33418	,13189	-,59513	-,07323
	Equal variances not assumed			-2,590	114,270	,011	-,33418	,12901	-,58974	-,07862

A second independent t-test was conducted in order to examine if the current attitude of TikTok users regularly exposed to mental health - related content towards professional mental help, is associated with their attitude before starting using TikTok. In particular, the independent t-test aimed to determine if the previous attitude of TikTok users who are regularly exposed to mental health –related content on TikTok (TikTok users who had already visited a mental health professional before using TikTok [M=2,97, SD=.80] vs TikTok users who had not visited a mental health professional before using TikTok [M=2,79, SD=.63]) is associated with users' current attitude towards professional mental help. The Levene’s test for equality of variances was not significant ($F = 1,89, p > .05$), so equality of variances could be assumed. The difference between the two groups (regularly exposed – not regularly exposed) was not found to be statistically significant, $t = -.87, p = .38$, as the mean value of the users who had not visited a mental health professional before using TikTok, was not significantly different than the mean value of the users who had visited a mental health professional before using TikTok.

T-Test

Group Statistics

Before starting using TikTok for mental health content, had you ever discussed psychological problems with a mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker?)

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total_willingness_help	No	34	2,7995	,63094	,10821
	Yes	17	2,9786	,80515	,19528

Independent Samples Test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances

t-test for Equality of Means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Total_willingness_help	Equal variances assumed	1,894	,175	-,871	49	,388	-,17914	,20575	-,59262	,23433
	Equal variances not assumed			-,802	26,139	,430	-,17914	,22325	-,63793	,27964

A third independent t-test was conducted in order to examine if the current attitude of TikTok users not regularly exposed to mental health - related content towards professional mental help, is associated with whether they have visited a mental health professional. In particular, the independent t-test aimed to determine if the experience of TikTok users who are not regularly exposed to mental health –related content on TikTok (TikTok users who have already visited a mental health professional [M=2,73, SD= .71] vs TikTok users who have not visited a mental health professional [M=2,29, SD= .75]) is associated with users' attitude towards professional mental help. The Levene’s test for equality of variances was not significant ($F = .28, p > .05$), so equality of variances could be assumed. The difference between the two groups (those who have visited and those who have not visited a mental health professional) was found to be statistically significant, $t = -2.7, p = .008$, as the mean value of the users who have not visited a mental health professional, was significantly lower than the mean value of the users who have visited a mental health professional.

T-Test

Group Statistics

Have you ever discussed psychological problems with a mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker?)		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total_willingness_help	No	38	2,2919	,75888	,12311
	Yes	42	2,7359	,71181	,10983

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Total_willingness_help	Equal variances assumed	,288	,593	-2,700	78	,008	-,44406	,16445	-,77146	-,11667
	Equal variances not assumed			-2,692	75,931	,009	-,44406	,16498	-,77266	-,11547

H4: An independent t-test was also conducted in order to test the 4th hypothesis, which suggested that TikTok users who utilize the platform for mental health advice and support report a significant decrease in perceived stigmatization of mental health issues. The independent t-test aimed to determine if the use of TikTok as a source of mental health support (TikTok users utilizing TikTok for mental health content [M=1,75, SD= .64] vs TikTok users who do not utilize TikTok for mental health content [M=2,17, SD= .58]) is associated with users' perceived stigmatization of mental health issues. The Levene's test for equality of variances was not significant (F = .90, p > .05), so equality of variances could be assumed. The difference between the two groups (regularly exposed – not regularly exposed) regarding the perceived stigmatization of mental health issues was found to be statistically significant, t = 3,85, p = <.001, as the stigma mean value of the users who are not regularly exposed to mental health – related content, was significantly higher than the mean value of the users who are regularly exposed to mental health – related content.

T-Test

Group Statistics

Which are the main reasons you use TikTok for? Please select all that apply. - Selected Choice
Mental health advice/support

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total_stigma	Other reasons	80	2,1775	,58004	,06485
	Mental health advice/support	51	1,7588	,64658	,09054

Independent Samples Test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances

t-test for Equality of Means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Total_stigma	Equal variances assumed	,905	,343	3,851	129	<,001	,41868	,10871	,20359	,63377
	Equal variances not assumed			3,759	98,119	<,001	,41868	,11137	,19767	,63968

H5: The results regarding the fifth hypothesis, which suggested that TikTok is regarded as the most favored social media platform for acquiring mental health advice and support, was already answered in the findings presented above regarding the question that asked participants which social media platform they prefer when searching for mental health – related content.

H6: The sixth hypothesis suggested that TikTok is generally perceived as an unreliable source of advice on mental health issues and that perceived reliability is increased in the sample that utilizes the platform for mental health - related content.

To answer the first part of the hypothesis (TikTok is generally perceived as an unreliable source of advice on mental health issues), two different Means of the participants’ answers were calculated. The first one generally concerned the reliability of the mental health advice offered on TikTok, while the second one focused specifically on the users’ perceived reliability regarding the knowledge of the people/profiles on TikTok. As seen below, the Mean of perceived reliability generally for the advice offered on TikTok was M=3,51.

➔ Descriptives

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total_trustworthiness_A	131	1,00	7,00	3,5191	1,48679
Valid N (listwise)	131				

The Mean of perceived reliability specifically concerning the knowledge of the people/profiles offering mental health advice on TikTok was $M=2,62$.

➔ **Descriptives**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total_trustworthiness_B	131	1,00	4,50	2,6298	1,02016
Valid N (listwise)	131				

Two independent t-tests were conducted to answer the second part of the hypothesis. Specifically, the first independent t-test was conducted in order to determine if the use of TikTok as a source of mental health support (TikTok users utilizing TikTok for mental health content [$M=4,03$, $SD= 1,17$] vs TikTok users who do not utilize TikTok for mental health content [$M=3,18$, $SD= 1,57$]) is associated with users' perceived reliability of mental health advice provided on TikTok. The Levene's test for equality of variances was significant ($F = 8,68$, $p < .05$), so equality of variances could not be assumed. The difference between the two groups (regularly exposed – not regularly exposed) regarding the perceived reliability of mental health advice provided on TikTok was found to be statistically significant, $t = -3,53$, $p = <.001$, as the reliability mean value of the users who are not regularly exposed to mental health – related content, was significantly lower than the mean value of the users who are regularly exposed to mental health – related content.

		Group Statistics			
Which are the main reasons you use TikTok for? Please select all that apply. - Selected Choice Mental health advice/support		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total_trustworthiness_A	Other reasons	80	3,1875	1,57230	,17579
	Mental health advice/support	51	4,0392	1,17879	,16506

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Total_trustworthiness_A	Equal variances assumed	8,687	,004	-3,318	129	,001	-,85172	,25671	-1,35963	-,34380
	Equal variances not assumed			-3,532	125,533	<,001	-,85172	,24114	-1,32894	-,37449

The second independent t-test was conducted to determine if the use of TikTok as a source of mental health support (TikTok users utilizing TikTok for mental health content [$M=3,11$, $SD= .75$] vs TikTok users

who do not utilize TikTok for mental health content [M=2,31, SD= 1,04]) is associated with users' perceived reliability of the knowledge of the people/profiles offering mental health advice on TikTok. The Levene's test for equality of variances was significant (F = 9,38, p < .05), so equality of variances could not be assumed. The difference between the two groups (regularly exposed – not regularly exposed) regarding the perceived reliability of people offering mental health advice on TikTok was found to be statistically significant, t = -5,05, p = <.001, as the reliability mean value of the users who are not regularly exposed to mental health – related content, was significantly lower than the mean value of the users who are regularly exposed to mental health – related content.

Group Statistics					
Which are the main reasons you use TikTok for? Please select all that apply. - Selected Choice					
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total_trustworthiness_B	Other reasons	80	2,3188	1,04713	,11707
	Mental health advice/support	51	3,1176	,75887	,10626

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Total_trustworthiness_B	Equal variances assumed	9,387	,003	-4,714	129	<,001	-,79890	,16949	-1,13424	-,46356
	Equal variances not assumed			-5,053	126,804	<,001	-,79890	,15811	-1,11177	-,48603

Moreover, a Pearson correlation test was conducted to determine if the two different measurements of reliability presented above were correlated. The correlation was found to be statistically significant (p= <.001) and it was proven to be a positive one (627).

→ Correlations

[DataSet1] C:\SPSS - DERE\FIRST_Thesis_September 3, 2023_08.08.sav

Correlations

		Total_trustworthiness_A	Total_trustworthiness_B
Total_trustworthiness_A	Pearson Correlation	1	,627**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001
	N	131	131
Total_trustworthiness_B	Pearson Correlation	,627**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	
	N	131	131

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion

In this research study, TikTok mental health – related content was examined with regards to its effect on the users' mental health. As found through the online survey, mental health is one of the main reasons why many people use TikTok nowadays, as searching for mental health advice and support was the fourth most common reason why someone could use TikTok for. This highlights the importance of the current study, by underlining the role that TikTok plays as an online type of *peer-to-peer support*.

Before analyzing each of the hypotheses examined in the current study, it is important to first identify the main needs that TikTok covers to its users, applying the Uses & Gratifications Theory. The majority of the participants stated that their most important motivation for using this platform is procrastination, which can be explained as the delay in starting or finishing a task that must be done by a certain deadline (Wolters & Corkin). TikTok's special features, such as its personalized algorithm (Xu, Yan, & Zhang, 2019), its endless stream of videos (Gallagher, 2022), the short duration of those videos (Williams, 2020), as well as the fun and entertaining element included in most of the content uploaded (Anderson, 2020), have helped skyrocketing the platform's popularity during the last years, making the platform an ideal place for "hiding" when responsibilities start piling up. However, the fact that procrastination is the top reason why most users utilize TikTok, can raise concerns for potential detrimental effects that this can have. To begin with, one of the main concerning effects, can be a potential significant decline in people's productivity (Petrillo, 2021). People may use TikTok to delay or postpone necessary work they have to complete, a fact which can impede in the long-term their goals

and ambitions. Additionally, even if users do not intentionally postpone the completion of necessary tasks while preferring to spend time on TikTok, the platform's addictive algorithm, which makes users lose track of time easily (Fan, Luo, & Wang, 2023), can result in time mismanagement (Zhao Z. , 2021). The aforementioned potential reduction in productivity and the time mismanagement can be even more concerning for young adults, among whom the platform is impressively popular (McLachlan, 2023), as they might neglect their school or university and as a result gradually record a downward academic performance which can even lead to future career setbacks. Of course, the effects depend on the time spend on the platform, as not all users are prone to becoming addictive to the platform's use. In addition, the fact that TikTok often functions as an excuse for people to procrastinate, can have negative effects on their mental health, as procrastination has been correlated with increasing symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress (Johansson, et al., 2023; Sirois, 2023). Further research could shed more light on why procrastination is the most common reason why TikTok users utilize the platform and how this affects them.

Procrastination was followed by recreation and escapism, which were found to be the second and third most common reasons for utilizing TikTok. Although the two words might overlap each other or sometimes be used interchangeably, it should be noted that they reveal two different needs that are being covered by TikTok. Utilizing the platform for recreation means utilizing it for fun, rest, or leisure (Aydın & Arslan, 2015). This finding was expected, as entertainment has been repeatedly confirmed among the top needs covered by TikTok in previous studies (Falgoust, et al., 2022; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021; Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Lawrence, 2020). Escapism, on the other hand, although including most of the time entertaining content, covers a deeper need of the users to run away from unpleasant feelings, real-life problems or everyday stress (Gabbiadini, Baldissarri, Valtorta, Durante, & Mari, 2021). Despite the fact that most social media platforms can function as a form of escapism for their users, since they create their "own online world" (Kırcaburun & Griffiths, 2018), TikTok and Instagram seem to be the two most preferred platforms for covering this need, thanks to their flow state (Roberts & David, 2023). A flow state is achieved when users are so immersed into the platform that they would continue their activity even if it had negative consequences for them (Roberts & David, 2023). TikTok in particular is the platform with the higher levels of perceived time distortion, which does not let the users realize the time they spent on the platform (Craine, 2023). Although escapism can effectively help TikTok users to feel relieved from their everyday duties and stress, it can also hide risks for potential psychological implications when used for this reason, as it has been associated with decreased wellbeing (Lee & Chen, 2022). Apart from that, it can also result in people being socially isolated and socially anxious, as they know that, on the platform, they can avoid whatever makes them feel

uncomfortable in the real world and find a “shelter” to hide (Hussain, Jabarkhail, Cunningham, & Madsen, 2021). Moreover, escapism can in fact exacerbate all the real – life problems that someone might be facing, as postponing the problems’ resolution does not mean that the problems actually disappear.

As mentioned above, the fourth most common reason for using TikTok, was searching for mental health advice and support. Although TikTok mental health – related content has been associated with positive effects on the users’ wellbeing (Gallagher, 2022; Droe, 2012) and lower levels of perceived stigmatization (Tavassoli, 2022), the risks that may lurk behind profiles providing mental health support should not be ignored. It is true, that people who have suffered from mental health issues in the past, and managed to overcome them, can positively affect the mental health state of users who currently struggle with similar mental health problems, since watching these people sharing their experiences can make them feel hopeful (Amato, 2022; Burke, Pyle, Machin, Varese, & Morrison, 2019). However, users should always keep in mind that social media cannot, and should not, replace support provided by qualified professionals and should not be considered as a substitute of therapy, counseling or treatment, as not all cases can be handled in the same way (Hunter, 2022). Solely relying on social media mental health advice can prevent users from receiving the necessary treatment to effectively address their mental health issues. Even the users who only share their experience with other users and do not provide mental health advice, can, however, be harmful, due to the fact that there is no way to crosscheck whether the experience they describe is true or honest (Tavassoli, 2022). This can lead to unrealistic expectations or exaggeration of situations which can have adverse effects. Moreover, TikTok’s personalized algorithm, which constantly matches each user’s mood, thoughts and interests (Yaqi, Lee, & Liu, 2020; Xu, Yan, & Zhang, 2019; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022), can raise serious concerns in the case of people suffering from mental health disorders. If these people feel lonely, anxious or depressed, the possibilities are that they will most likely engage with similar content, which will in turn deteriorate their symptoms (Carville, 2023).

Additionally, relying on TikTok in order to get advice on mental health issues can also have detrimental effects, due to the dissemination of false or misleading information, which is a common phenomenon on the platform and cannot be easily detected (Martin, 2023; Yeung, Ng, & Abi - Jaoude, 2022). The fact that anyone can provide mental health advice on TikTok, without having to prove that he/she is qualified to do so, results in people’s perception that they can be self – diagnosed based on the advice they receive, replacing once again professional mental care (Paul, 2022). Mental health professionals stress that in order to be able to make a correct diagnosis, one must have the ability to recognize a range of criteria rather than just a few symptoms, as well as monitor how the mental health

conditions are developing through time (Bahorsky, 2022). Furthermore, as far as mental health problems are concerned, they can be differently expressed depending on the patient's age or other subject diseases he/she might suffer from (Caron, 2022). It is thus profound that basing one's mental health diagnosis on false, inaccurate information only with regards to symptoms, can lead to worsening of their wellbeing and can sometimes be even life – threatening, since mental health is a very sensitive issue to be misinformed about. This is also a highly concerning finding because the fifth most common reason for users to utilize TikTok was information exchange. This means that TikTok users consider TikTok not only as a source of mental health advice, but as a source of information in general, a fact which can have negative effects on people's perceptions about important topics affecting their lives, such as politics, health and education (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022). In order to address this problem, users should be more properly educated on which information they should trust, while TikTok should also invest in fact – checking teams, which will detect harmful or false information.

Another motivation for using TikTok, as reported by the survey's participants, was “ritual”. Based on the ritual view of communication, proposed by James W. Carey (1989), “ritual” in the context of TikTok suggests that people do not join the platform just for consuming content and information but rather for engagement, sharing experiences with other users, and socializing (Yang, 2020). TikTok users often follow certain norms, similar to their real – life routines, aiming to receive attention and interaction with the community (Yang, 2020). Connected with the ritual, in terms of engagement, is also another motivation reported by users for utilizing TikTok, social maintenance. Apart from the fact that TikTok motivates its users to interact with each other through likes, comments and personal messages, like any other social media platform, it also seems to assist in maintaining friendly or romantic relationships due to its interest – based algorithm. In other words, since most people select their close friends and partners based on their common interests, having a platform filled up with endless, interesting, personalized content, gives them many reasons to contact their loved ones every day just to share things that they would both enjoy watching or commenting together (Nemes, 2022). TikTok could thus be described as an endless list of things available to discuss with your company, based on your common interests, helping this way in maintaining social relationships. At the same time, of course, TikTok also contributes to fostering new relationships among people with the same interests, as the users have the chance to follow accounts with content they found interesting and engage with them through comments or messages (Sharabati, et al., 2022). Additionally, special TikTok features, such as live streaming or daily vlogs, based on everyday rituals as mentioned above, can also help bringing people together, even without knowing each other in real – life, as watching someone's everyday life can foster a feeling of diving into their life (Yang, 2020).

Furthermore, among the reasons why people use TikTok, freedom of expression was also reported. This finding is quite interesting, as it highlights a paradox that exists around the different ways the platform can function. It is undeniably true that TikTok is dominated by user – generated content, a fact which can in itself make users feel free to express themselves (Wagner, 2022). Not only that, but it also provides them with a variety of tools and features, which can help them be even more creative when expressing themselves (Lee & Abidin, 2023). In addition to these, TikTok is a platform giving space to niche communities, enabling this way users to get in touch with people, with whom they share common hobbies, interests, passions or beliefs, creating also a public arena for youth politics and activism to grow (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). However, some risks that are lurking should be highlighted, since TikTok can also promote conformist behaviors or trends among its users, depending on the way the platform is being utilized. As the majority of social media platforms (Forest & Wood, 2012; Reinecke & Trepte, 2014), TikTok establishes some norms, the most important of which, is the presentation of one’s self in a favorable way (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). This leads to a social positivity bias, where positive portrayals of oneself are considered preferable and able to get more interaction from others than negative self-expressions. Of course, this can, in turn, raise concerns regarding the deterioration of the mental health state of people suffering from mental health issues and increase their stigmatization, as they will constantly feel that they should hide their real feelings (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). What is more, TikTok, which could be characterized as the ideal platform for virality due to its “For You Page”, promotes a wide range of trends among its users, which foster a conformist culture (Pellathy, 2021). This means that if someone does not follow the trend, then he/she is instantly characterized as “other”, a phenomenon that also occurs in real – life, especially among young people. This conformist culture is getting even stronger thanks to TikTok’s special algorithm, which makes sure that user’s feed is filled with content they had previously enjoyed, creating this way a “filter bubble” by not exposing them to different types of content compared to their interests or beliefs (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Pellathy, 2021).

After having analyzed the main motivations reported for utilizing TikTok, the research hypotheses can be examined. The study’s first hypothesis (**H1**) suggesting that the regular exposure to mental health - related content on TikTok correlates with lower perceived symptoms of anxiety, loneliness, and depression, can be confirmed. According to the survey’s findings, there is a difference of 0.36 points in a 5-point Likert scale measuring anxiety, between the users who are regularly exposed to mental health - related content and the users who are not regularly exposed to mental health – related content. Moreover, between the two groups, there is a 0.23 points difference in a 4-point Likert scale measuring loneliness and a 0.33 points difference in a 4-point Likert scale measuring depression. It

should be noted, that as “regularly exposed” were considered all the users that included mental health advice and support as one of the main reasons they use TikTok. People who watch mental health – related content on a regular basis were found to be less anxious, less lonely and showing less depression symptoms than people who do not watch mental health content on TikTok regularly, confirming the part of the literature which highlights the relieving effects that TikTok mental health-related content can have on its users (Gallagher, 2022; Droe, 2012). Being able to engage with such content, can offer a form of digital catharsis to users suffering from mental health issues, as they can often see their own experiences being reflected in the content shared by other users who have overcome similar problems in the past, or are currently facing them (Amato, 2022; Burke & Kraut, 2016). This way, they can also feel less ashamed of their mental health issues or disorders and less stigmatized, which in turn can help them feel more comfortable to discuss their own problems and seek professional help (Koehler & Parrell, 2020; MacKinnon, Kia, & Lacombe- Duncan, 2021; Calear, Batterham, & Christensen, 2014). Moreover, watching other people sharing their own struggles, can make users feel understood as it validates and normalizes their feelings and experiences as well (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance). The feeling of digital catharsis can become even more intense if they find the courage, inspired by other users, to share their own experience so that they can continue the cycle of support among TikTok users (Gallagher, 2022).

This is a very interesting finding, since social media in general (Beeres, Andersson, Vossen, & Galanti, 2021; Song, et al., 2014; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Ceballos, Howard, Dailey, Sharma, & Grimes, 2018; Griffiths, Murray, Krug, & McLean, 2018; Yurdagül, Kircaburun, Emirtekin, Wang, & Griffiths, 2019) and TikTok in particular (Fan, 2023; Paul, 2022) have often been heavily criticized about their harmful effects on stress levels, anti-social behavior, self-esteem and happiness. One of TikTok’s most important benefits, is the fact that with the anonymity offered to the users, in combination with the endless stream of videos including strangers and not friends and family, it can guarantee to users that they can post any mental health – related video and not be seen by their loved ones (Gallagher, 2022). This can significantly help to reduce symptoms of anxiety, as most users seem to feel less judged by TikTok’s environment, while it can also help to reduce loneliness symptoms, as users also feel that they are not alone when coping with mental health – related problems (Amato, 2022). The lower levels of perceived depression symptoms, moreover confirms the academic work which suggests that all types of *peer-to-peer support*, including the online world, can lead to positive results that can even be compared to those offered by professional mental health care providers (Burke, Pyle, Machin, Varese, & Morrison, 2019; Davidson, et al., 2004; Sells, Davidson, Jewell, Falzer, & Rowe, 2006). What could be the subject of a future research study regarding this finding, is to examine

which uses of TikTok are causing negative effects on users' mental health, since mental health – related content was found to be beneficial. Furthermore, a qualitative research study could be conducted to investigate which are the main benefits of TikTok compared to other social media platforms and why do users feel less stressed, less lonely and less depressed when they watch mental health content on this platform.

As far as **H2** is concerned, which suggested that there is a positive correlation between regular exposure to mental health content on TikTok and users' perceived levels of awareness of mental health issues, the hypothesis was rejected. In particular, it was found that there was no statistically significant difference regarding perceived levels of mental health awareness between people who regularly watch mental health content on TikTok and people who do not. This finding is contradictory to a big part of the existing literature, which suggests that among TikTok's advantages as a platform, is the fact that it helps “humanizing” knowledge and familiarizing users with terminology related to mental health issues, contributing this way to the increase of mental health awareness (Basch, Donelle, Fera, & Jaime, 2022; Onebright Mental Health, 2022; Tavassoli, 2022). Different cultural and demographic variables could possibly explain these contradictory results. First of all, as far as age is concerned, different age groups may differ in how much they weigh the importance of mental health, a fact which can determine the impact that TikTok can have on them in terms of mental health awareness, even if they watch the same content (Co, Doy, & Healy, 2023). Apart from this, a person's educational background may also be important, since higher educated people may possess superior critical thinking skills and thus be able to better and more easily process the information they gain, while they might also have prior knowledge on mental health issues. Moreover, culture can also play an important role in perceived mental health awareness, since in some cultures stigmatization is still a common phenomenon when it comes to publicly discussing mental health issues, preventing people from actually learning more about mental health. Greek citizens in particular, who participated in the current study, have been found to carry a “medium – high level of authoritarian views” (the belief that mental patients are inferior), and a “moderate level of social restrictiveness” (the belief that mental patients should be isolated), a fact which might have affected their impact by TikTok regarding mental health awareness (Porfyri, et al., 2022). What is more, the effectiveness of TikTok in “humanizing” mental health – related knowledge might also depend on the quality and reliability of the content published, as not all types of content by all users can be equally effective, while it should also be underlined that “humanizing” mental health issues does not necessarily mean that users retain these information.

However, at the same time, the aforementioned finding concerning H2, confirms the literature which underlines the risk that hides behind this “humanization” of knowledge. As Moseley (Moseley,

2023) highlights, TikTok often disseminates information regarding mental health which can be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted, leading instead to the decrease of proper mental health awareness. Moreover, previous studies examining the mental health – related information provided on TikTok, have discovered that misinformation and medically inaccurate information is a common phenomenon on the platform (Martin, 2023; Yeung, Ng, & Abi - Jaoude, 2022), while, most of the times, the people disseminating these pieces of information or advice are not qualified to do so (PlushCare, 2022). This shows that, although TikTok is actually a commonly used platform for easy access to mental health – related information and advice, and although this can result in people getting to know more about mental health issues, it does not necessarily lead to the increase of mental health awareness. In other words, more people might get easier access to information regarding mental health problems, symptoms and coping methods, however this does not always mean that their knowledge actually increases, as a big part of the information they receive on the platform is false. The phenomenon of misinformation being disseminated on TikTok raises serious concerns. As mentioned above, false information and advice by unqualified people can result in people proceeding to making self - diagnosis, which will, profoundly, not be based on proper professional examination of the patient’s situation, but rather on some implications based on their symptoms (Caron, 2022). It is of vital importance for this problem to be addressed, since it can lead many people to avoiding effective professional care, while worsening their mental health. In addition, false information provided on TikTok might support stereotypes or stigmatizing beliefs about mental health issues, increasing the dissemination that people with mental health disorders face in their everyday lives, which deteriorates their mental health even more (An, 2022). Misinformation about mental health can moreover result in the dissemination of myths and misconceptions regarding mental health issues or disorders, further limiting people’s empathy or understanding towards those who suffer from mental health problems (Raphael, 2022).

As regards **H3**, which suggested that TikTok users who utilize the platform as a source of mental health support are more likely to recognize the need for professional help with mental health issues when necessary, the hypothesis can be accepted. According to the survey’s findings, there is a difference of 0.33 points in a 5-point Likert scale measuring the attitude towards professional mental help, between the users who utilize TikTok for mental health - related content and the users who do not. In particular, users utilizing TikTok as mental health source are more favorable towards asking for professional help when needed, compared to users who do not use TikTok for mental health – related content. This finding confirms the part of the existing literature which highlights that mental health content on TikTok can effectively contribute to people’s attitude becoming more favorable towards

professional help with mental health issues when needed (Confectioner, et al., 2021). This could be explained due to the fact that TikTok can serve as a public arena for the debate of health issues (Basch, Meleo-Erwin, Fera, Jaime, & Basch, 2021; Zenone, Ow, & Barbic, 2020), and although, as previously stressed, there are varied degrees of information reliability (Basch, Meleo-Erwin, Fera, Jaime, & Basch, 2021; Song, Zhao, Yao, & Ba, 2022; Kong, Song, Zhao, Zhu, & Sha, 2021), this can help people feel more comfortable with mental health related issues and more willing to ask for help when needed. Moreover, it has been found in the past that TikTok users who suffer from mental health – related problems create a strong feeling of community based on their common experiences, a fact which contributes to their motivation to cope with challenging tasks, such as mental health issues (Droe, 2012). The more positive attitude of TikTok users who watch mental health related content on the platform towards professional mental help, is also associated with the contribution of TikTok in the destigmatization of mental health issues, which will be further discussed below.

What is also worth mentioning regarding this hypothesis, is the fact that the attitude that TikTok users had towards professional mental help before starting using TikTok, does not seem to have a significant effect in their current attitude. In particular, there was no significant difference found between users who had visited a mental health professional before starting using TikTok and the users who had not visited a mental health professional before starting using TikTok, regarding their willingness to ask for professional mental help when needed. This shows that their current positive attitude towards asking for professional help when necessary, is not affected by their previous experiences with professional care providers, but rather by their experience and engagement with mental health – related content on TikTok. Of course, this should be further examined with qualitative research before leading to generalized conclusions.

On the other hand, TikTok users who are not regularly exposed to mental health – related content on TikTok, seem to be more affected by their experience with mental health professionals. In particular, there was a 0.44 points difference in a 5-point Likert scale measuring the attitude towards professional mental help, between the users who had visited a mental health professional in the past and the users who had not. The users who had visited a mental health professional had a more positive attitude towards asking for professional help when needed, compared to the users that had not lived such an experience in the past. This finding comes in contrast to the previous one, regarding users who watch mental health – related content on TikTok, as they were found to be more positive towards asking for professional help regardless their previous experiences with mental health professionals. Based on these findings, a new hypothesis could arise suggesting that if users were regularly exposed to mental health content on TikTok, their attitude towards professional mental help could become more positive,

regardless their previous experience with mental health professionals. This could be further tested with an experiment or a qualitative research, in which participants would explain any possible changes in their attitude towards mental health professionals after watching mental health – related content on TikTok.

As far as **H4** is concerned, which suggested that TikTok users who utilize the platform for mental health advice and support report a significant decrease in perceived stigmatization of mental health issues, the hypothesis can be accepted. According to the survey's findings, there is a difference of 0.42 points in a 5-point Likert scale measuring stigmatization, between the users who utilize TikTok for mental health advice and support and users who do not. In particular, users who do not utilize TikTok as a source of mental health – related content, reported significantly higher levels of perceived stigmatization of mental health issues compared to the users that are regularly exposed to TikTok's mental health content. This finding confirms previous studies' findings which suggested that all types of peer support seem to substantially help people, and especially the younger ones, to better handle the stigmatization associated with mental illnesses (Ojeda, Munson, Jones, Berliant, & Gilmer, 2021; Vojtila, Ashfaq, Ampofo, Dawson, & Selby, 2021). Furthermore, it also confirms previous studies which examined the effects of social media in general, underlining that they can significantly help in decreasing mental health stigma due to the fact that they offer a place for personal stories to be shared and “unheard voices to be heard”, without limitations in terms of time or space (Betton, et al., 2018). In addition to this, TikTok, as already highlighted above, gives users the chance to post any mental health – related video and not be seen by their personal network, while they can also participate in mental health communities outside of their immediate networks (Gallagher, 2022). These are two important advantages of TikTok that help in reducing mental health stigma, as people feel more comfortable in sharing their own experiences without having the fear that their friends or family will treat them differently. The sharing of personal experiences, the easy access, the anonymity, the feeling of acceptance and the sense of control have also been found to be crucial factors that make TikTok, an ideal platform for reducing mental health stigma (MacKinnon, Kia, & Lacombe- Duncan, 2021).

As already previously mentioned, this decrease in stigmatization of mental health issues among users who regularly watch mental health – related content on TikTok can also possibly explain their more positive attitude towards professional mental help. According to previous studies, the decreased levels of stigmatization have been repeatedly connected with a more positive attitude towards help seeking behaviors (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen , 2010; CEAR, Batterham, & Christensen, 2014; Rowe, et al., 2014), as it has been found that stigma can be a key barrier to seeking mental health treatment or help (Clement, et al., 2014; Corrigan, Powell, & Rüsck, 2012). Moreover, previous studies

have found that destigmatization is positively associated with confidence in dealing with mental health symptoms as well as with more positive attitude towards seeking professional help (Confectioner, et al., 2021). The current study also confirmed that the correlation between the perceived levels of stigmatization of mental health issues with the attitude towards asking for professional mental help when needed is statistically significant. Specifically, a negative correlation was found, meaning that the more decreased the perceived levels of stigmatization of mental health issues are, the more increased is the willingness of a person to ask for professional help when needed.

TikTok's contribution to decreasing perceived stigmatization surrounding mental illness, while also promoting positive attitudes towards professional mental care when needed, can have some implications of vital importance for people suffering from mental illnesses and disorders. In particular, TikTok's beneficial impact could be increased by joint efforts including public health groups and organizations. Taking precautions to address the lurking risk of misinformation, such as TikTok informing users about which videos are uploaded by qualified professionals and which are not, the platform could be included as part of the treatment process of mental health patients. Specifically, what TikTok could effectively do, through the sharing of other users' experiences, is boosting the patients' hope that they will overcome their problems, while normalizing their struggle with mental health issues. Mental health professionals could also create accounts on TikTok in order to increase mental health awareness among the platform's users, with the dissemination of correct information, explained in simple words for everyone to be able to understand basic terminology more easily. Of course, it should be stressed that TikTok cannot replace proper mental health treatment by professionals, since mental health is a very sensitive issue and every patient should be treated and approached in a different way. The best exploitation of the platform would be to be used as a supplementary service to mental health care treatment, and as a tool to motivate people, and especially the younger ones, to seek for professional help when needed.

Regarding **H5**, which suggested that TikTok is regarded as the most favored social media platform for acquiring mental health advice and support, the hypothesis can be accepted. According to the participants' answers, TikTok was found to be the most preferred platform of all, with 57 out of 131 (43,51%) participants selecting it as their favorite social media platform when searching for mental health – related content, followed by Instagram with 30 answers (22,90%). This shows that, although mental health – related content is not the main reason why TikTok users utilize the platform, when searching for mental health advice, information and support TikTok is their first option. This finding once again confirms the platform's impressive popularity over the last few years (Feldkamp, 2021; McLachlan, Hootsuite, 2023), while highlighting the need for more measures to be taken by the

platform in order for the information provided to be as accurate as possible and hateful comments to be deleted, since many people nowadays trust TikTok for getting access to mental health advice, information or support. TikTok's special algorithm, which constantly gives the user the content he/she is searching for and would probably enjoy is one of the main benefits that TikTok has as a platform (Xu, Yan, & Zhang, 2019; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022) and one of the main reasons that could possibly explain its popularity among people searching for mental health – related content. In other words, a user who is into mental health – related issues, knows that when using TikTok the content that will appear on his/hers “for you page” will most probably be of his/hers interest without even having to search for it. Of course, further qualitative research regarding the reasons why users prefer TikTok when searching for mental health – related content could significantly help understand this finding.

What is also worth noticing, is that Instagram's popularity for mental health – related content seems to remain high, despite its controversial effects on its users' mental health (Schmuck, Karsay, Matthes, & Stevic, 2019; Moreno, Ton, Selkie, & Evans, 2016; Choukas-Bradley, Roberts, & Maheux, 2021; Ceballos, Howard, Dailey, Sharma, & Grimes, 2018; Griffiths, Murray, Krug, & McLean, 2018; Yurdagül, Kircaburun, Emirtekin, Wang, & Griffiths, 2019; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). One of the reasons why this happens could be the support that a user can gain through likes, tags and comments (Mackson, Brochu, & Schneider, 2019), which have been found to be associated with increase in users' self-confidence and sense of social support (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). Another reason why TikTok and Instagram are the most preferred social media platforms for mental health content is because they are video - based platforms (and image-based in the case of Instagram), a fact which makes them more attractive to the majority of users, while also making the information provided on the platform more “digestible” and easily understood (O'Reilly, et al., 2019). Facebook was the third most used platform for mental health – related content with 15 participants reporting it as their favorite platform for mental health – related content, while another video – based platform, YouTube, was fourth with 11 participants selecting it. It should be noted that YouTube was not included among the choices given to the participants, as it is not always considered as a social media platform. However, many users added it when selecting the “other” option. This means that there is a possibility that some users might not selected YouTube, because it was not included among the choices given and might have thought that it is not considered as a social media platform. Thus, YouTube's percentage might have been a little increased if it was included among the possible answers. Twitter's popularity for mental health – related content was low with only 6 participants out of 131 selecting it, while no participant selected Snapchat, probably due to its low popularity in Greece compared to other countries.

Finally, with regard to **H6**, which suggested that 1) TikTok is generally perceived as an unreliable source of advice on mental health issues and that 2) the perceived reliability is increased in the sample that utilizes the platform for mental health content, the hypothesis can be accepted. Before analyzing the findings, it should be noted that two different means regarding TikTok's perceived reliability were measured. The first one measured TikTok's general perceived reliability, while the second one was focused on measuring the perceived reliability of people providing mental health advice and support on TikTok. The first Mean regarding TikTok's general perceived reliability was found to be 3,5 out of 7, which means that the respondents did not consider TikTok neither as completely unreliable source of mental health – related content nor as completely reliable. The second Mean regarding the perceived reliability of people providing mental health advice and support on TikTok was 2,6 out of 5, which again shows that the users neither completely trust the knowledge of people / profiles providing advice and support nor solely reject it as unreliable. The two measurements of reliability were found to be positively correlated, meaning that when there is a decrease in the perceived reliability of the people providing mental health advice and support on TikTok, there is also a decrease in TikTok's general perceived reliability, as well as the other way round.

However, a significant difference in TikTok's perceived reliability, both generally and in the perceived reliability of the people offering mental health advice and support, was found between people who watch mental health content on TikTok on a regular basis and the people who do not. Specifically, there was a 0,85 points difference in a 7-point semantic differential scale between the two groups regarding TikTok's perceived reliability, while there was also a 0,80 points difference in a 5-point Likert scale regarding the perceived reliability of the people providing mental health advice and support on TikTok. This difference in perceived reliability was expected, as if users did not trust the information provided on the platform regarding mental health, then they would not use it regularly for this reason. A possible explanation of why the perceived reliability of TikTok is higher among the people who utilize the platform as a source of mental health – related content is because many users search for people with similar experiences and thus trust their opinion and advice on mental health issues, as they themselves have been through similar situations (Betton, et al., 2018; MacKinnon, Kia, & Lacombe- Duncan, 2021; Amato, 2022; Gallagher, 2022). It would be useful for a further qualitative research to be conducted among users who utilize TikTok as a source of mental health – related content in order to examine which are the reasons why they trust this platform for this kind of content, and whether they mostly trust the advice and support they can get rather than the mental health - related knowledge. Trusting the advice given by users who have been through similar situations in the past could be proven beneficial for a users' boosted motivation to cope with mental health issues, while,

instead, trusting users' knowledge on mental health issues, which can even lead to self-diagnosis can be harmful (Martin, 2023).

Limitations and future research

Although the current research has added to the existing knowledge regarding the effects of TikTok mental health – related content on the platform's users, it is crucial to address the limitations that might restrict the generalization of the study's conclusions. First of all, the 131 participants are considered as a relatively small sample size, in order for the findings to be generalized. Moreover, no conclusions can be drawn about the total population, due to the fact that a purposive sampling method was used, instead of a probabilistic one, which would allow each member of the survey's population to have an equal probability of being selected in the sample (Setia, 2016; Johnson, Beaton, Murphy, & Pike, 2000; Wiśniowski, Sakshaug, Perez Ruiz, & Blom, 2020). What is more, as far as the representativeness of the sample is concerned, more than 85% of the participants were university / college graduates or had a Master's degree, while all the other education levels were underrepresented. The truthfulness in participants' answers is also possibly affected by what is considered to be a socially acceptable answer (Latkin, Edwards, Davey-Rothwell, & Tobin, 2018), as mental health is a very sensitive and personal topic for each of the participants, especially if they are facing mental health problems. Thus, although the online questionnaire was anonymous, some participants might have felt uncomfortable while filling in the answers and might not have been totally honest about their current mental health situation and their struggles. The conduct of a qualitative research study, to be examined in combination with the current study, could help to address this limitation, as the participants' answers would be cross - checked in multiple ways, as even their expressions when answering could add to the survey's findings. In addition to the aforementioned, another limitation that is evident in the majority of social media research, is the fact that they only offer an ephemeral view of the users' behavioral patterns. This happens due to the fact that both social media platforms and the users' behavior have a tendency to change, sometimes even drastically, over time, reflecting the needs of each audience (Yurieff, 2019). Finally, as far as the internal reliability of the scales used is concerned, the reliability of the one out of two scales measuring the perceived stigmatization of the users, adapted from Yeap & Low (2009), was found to be at a minimally acceptable level (0,69) and thus, in a future study another scale could be used for the perceived stigmatization to be more accurately measured.

In order to draw conclusions about the total population that are more broadly applicable, future research could use more representative samples, including more diverse groups of people. Additionally, a mix of research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, would help in providing deeper explanations about the correlations found in the current study between psychological variables,

such as anxiety, depression and loneliness, with TikTok. A qualitative research on the reasons why people prefer TikTok, among all the other social media platforms, when searching for mental health-related content could also be useful in better understanding the current findings. Moreover, focused research on the types of TikTok content that are more effective in destigmatizing mental health issues, could be proven beneficial in order for better practical implications to be provided for the platform's policies. Finally, further research should be conducted examining why does TikTok not help in increasing its users' perceived mental health awareness, despite the fact that it assists in decreasing perceived stigmatization.

Conclusion and practical implications

The current study explored, through the online survey method, potential associations between the use of TikTok and various aspects of mental health, such as awareness, symptoms, help - seeking behavior, destigmatization, and psychological well - being. Adhering to the quantitative paradigm, the present study partly confirmed and partly contradicted previous relevant studies. First of all, in contrast to a big part of the existing literature, which criticizes social media in general (Beeres, Andersson, Vossen, & Galanti, 2021; Song, et al., 2014; Orben & Przybylski , 2019; Ceballos, Howard, Dailey, Sharma, & Grimes, 2018; Griffiths, Murray, Krug, & McLean, 2018; Yurdagül, Kircaburun, Emirtekin, Wang, & Griffiths, 2019) and TikTok (Fan, 2023; Paul, 2022) in particular, for their harmful effects on their users' mental health, the findings of the current study showed that using this platform for mental health - related content can be significantly beneficial for people suffering from anxiety, loneliness or even depression, as it can substantially decrease these symptoms. Moreover, the findings showed that nowadays TikTok seems to have replaced previously preferred platforms for mental health content, such as for example YouTube (Oliphant, 2013; Zhao & Zhang, 2017; Giustini, Ali, Fraser, & Kamel Boulos, 2018), creating a need for past studies to be re - examined after TikTok's dominance in the online word, especially among people of the Gen Z. What was also found to be contradictory to past studies, was the fact that TikTok does not seem to significantly increase its users' perceived mental health awareness. This comes as a surprise, since studies in the past have suggested that, through "humanizing" knowledge regarding mental health issues and bringing light to mental health problems previously unaware to many people, can increase TikTok users' mental health awareness (Basch, Donelle, Fera, & Jaime, 2022; Onebright Mental Health, 2022; Tavassoli, 2022). One possible explanation for this could be TikTok's misleading and false information, which are found to be often disseminated through the platform (Yeung, Ng, & Abi - Jaoude, 2022; Martin, 2023), as well as differentiations in demographics and cultural variables. Further research on this topic could be useful

to examine whether TikTok's unreliability in disseminating mental health information can have negative effects in increasing the users' mental health awareness.

However, the present study also confirmed parts of the existing literature. As expected (Tavassoli, 2022; Onebright Mental Health, 2022), TikTok was found to be significantly beneficial in reducing the users' perceived stigma regarding mental health issues. Furthermore, the current study also confirmed previous research suggesting that TikTok mental health - related content is a valuable source for increasing its users' help - seeking behavior when dealing with mental health issues (Confectioner, et al., 2021). What should also be highlighted, is the fact that the reduction in perceived stigmatization was also found to be associated with the increase in help – seeking behaviors, confirming previous studies that had found similar associations (Calear, Batterham, & Christensen, 2014). As far as TikTok's perceived reliability as a mental health source is concerned, it was found that the majority of the platform's users do not consider it as a completely reliable source, while they also believe that people providing mental health advice are also not trustworthy and qualified to do so. This finding confirms that, despite using the platform for mental health – related content, TikTok users are able to realize that it is not a completely trustworthy tool for gaining mental health advice and information and they probably prefer utilizing it as a source of mental health support by people who have been through similar situations, a fact which has also been found in other studies in the past (McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Herrman, 2019; Amato, 2022; MacKinnon, Kia, & Lacombe- Duncan, 2021). Finally, it was also confirmed that many users utilize TikTok for mental health – related reasons (Drillinger, 2022; Kyparissiadis & Diamantaki, 2022; Basch, Meleo-Erwin, Fera, Jaime, & Basch, 2021; Zenone, Ow, & Barbic , 2020; Rosenblatt, 2021; McCashin & Murphy, 2022), as it was found that this is the fourth most common need that users cover when using this platform.

Following the discussion of the current study's results, it is also important to examine the practical implications that the aforementioned findings can have. To begin with, taking into consideration the association of TikTok mental health – related content with the lower levels of perceived symptoms of anxiety, loneliness and depression, the reduction in perceived stigmatization, as well as the more positive attitude towards help-seeking, it would be useful for mental health organizations and professionals to incorporate TikTok as part of the treatment process for people suffering from mental health issues. In particular, they could create TikTok accounts offering useful tips for handling mental health symptoms, hosting people that have overcome mental health disorders in the past to share their experience and offer support, while at the same time promoting places where anyone can seek professional help when needed. Moreover, in order to address the problem of false information or fake news being disseminated through the platform, TikTok should establish more strict policies and

guidelines for all videos related to mental - health issues, giving users the chance to report any kind of content that might be triggering or raise concerns. In addition to that, TikTok should inform users whether a video is uploaded by an accredited mental – health professional or by a user without any qualification to offer mental health advice. This way, the platform might be able to reduce its perceived unreliability among the users, while at the same time more effectively increase users’ mental health awareness. Furthermore, the dissemination of fake news and false information could also be addressed if schools and educational institutions included into their curricula subjects aiming to digital literacy and mental health education, in order for students to be able to evaluate the information they gain from social media, since fake news are not only being disseminated through TikTok but on all other social media platforms as well.

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APPENDIX A



The American College of Greece

Informed Consent Form for Human Research Subjects

You are invited to volunteer for a research study conducted by Angeliki – Eirini Kourkoulou, a student pursuing an MA in Digital Communication and Social Media, under the supervision of Dr. Katerina Diamantaki. The study aims to explore how TikTok users are exposed to content related to mental health issues and how it affects their perceptions and experiences.

As a participant, you will be asked to complete an online questionnaire. The questionnaire will include structured questions about mental health-related content on the platform. A set of structured questions about mental health awareness, perceived symptoms, platform usage, and perceived effects will be included in the questionnaire. Some of the questions will focus on assessing symptoms of anxiety, depression and loneliness. The questions will be designed to obtain meaningful information that corresponds to the study's goals and hypotheses.

Your input is highly valuable. However, if you feel uncomfortable at any point while answering the questionnaire, for any reason, you have the right to stop and decide not to submit it without facing any consequences. Upon withdrawal, all information provided by the participants e.g. demographic data, will be permanently deleted from all records.

While there are no direct benefits for participating in the study, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your experiences and report your thoughts regarding mental health-related content on TikTok.

Additionally, your participation will contribute to scientific research, potentially providing valuable information in the field of Digital Communication. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential, as no personal identifiers will be requested in the questionnaire and anonymity is fully preserved in the current study.

This consent form confirms your participation in this study. It will be securely stored and be accessible only to the investigator without being linked to the information you provide through the questionnaire. The collected data will be destroyed by the end of August 2026. If you are interested in accessing these results, you may contact the principal investigator.

If you have questions about the research you may contact the student investigator, Angeliki – Eirini Kourkoulou (a.kourkoulou@acg.edu) or the faculty advisor Dr.

Katerina Diamantaki (kdiamantaki@acg.edu).

Your participation in this research is voluntary and you are free to refuse or discontinue your involvement without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

We look forward to receiving your completed questionnaire and analyzing the data. If you have any further questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Once again, we sincerely thank you for your involvement and support. We look forward to analyzing the collected data and sharing the results with you in the future.

By clicking "Yes, I want to participate", you represent that you have read and understood the above information, that you are over 18 years of age and agree to participate, that you understand that you can withdraw your consent at any time and stop participating without consequence and that you do not have any legal claims.

If you would like to keep a copy of this study description for your records, please save or print a copy of this page before proceeding with the study.

Click "Yes, I want to participate" if you want to continue.

Estimated Time: six (6) minutes

APPENDIX B

Debriefing

The present study is a part of a thesis project for the Digital Communication and Social Media Master's program of the American College of Greece. As you were informed at the beginning, the purpose of the thesis is to investigate the impact of exposure to mental health content on TikTok on users' perceptions and experiences related to mental health. To examine this topic, it was necessary to gather valid self-report data from TikTok users.

You were asked to contribute to this research by providing answers to a set of eighteen (18) questions that express your subjective perceptions and beliefs regarding your use of the platform for consuming mental health - related content. Your participation in this study has proven invaluable. It has allowed the researcher to accumulate critical insights into how TikTok, as a social media platform, shapes individuals' understanding of mental health issues, their experiences of symptoms related to anxiety, loneliness, and depression, their behaviors when seeking help, and their attitudes towards mental health overall. This will further contribute to the study of culture and socially mediated communication.

No personally identifiable information was collected during your completion of the questionnaire. Data collected was treated statistically and there was no interest in any individual responses. Results will be reported only in the aggregate. Data will be destroyed at the end of three years.

Finally, in case you experience psychological discomfort during or after completing the questionnaire of this study, you can contact the Ψ-Diktyo - <http://psy-diktyo.gr/>.

If you have any questions regarding your participation or wish to receive a summary of the results, please feel free to contact me at the following address:

a.kourkoulou@acg.edu . You can also contact my supervisor at:

kdiamantaki@acg.edu

Thank you again for taking part in this study!

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire

- **Informed consent (If no, then exit the survey)**

- **Q1) Do you use TikTok?**
 - Yes
 - No (If no, then exit the survey)

- **Q2) Which are the main reasons you use TikTok? Choose all that apply. (adapted from Orchard et al. 2014, Individual Differences as Predictors of Social Networking)**
 - Procrastination (boredom, passing time etc)
 - Freedom of expression
 - Conformity (because others do it, I have to use it)
 - Information exchange
 - New connections
 - Ritual (part of my daily routine, it is a habit)
 - Social maintenance
 - Escapism (forget responsibilities, escape reality)
 - Recreation (it's exciting, it's fun etc)
 - Experimentation (lie, pretend to be someone else)
 - Mental health content/advice/support

- **(Follow up if they answer mental health content)**
- **Q3) How often do you visit TikTok to watch mental health content? (Item adapted by Liu (2015))**
 - Several times a day
 - About once a day
 - A few times a week
 - Every few weeks
 - Less often
 - Don't know

- **Q4) Which social media platform do you prefer if you are looking for mental health content/ advice/support?**
 - Facebook
 - Instagram
 - TikTok
 - Twitter
 - Snapchat
 - Other

- **(If they had selected mental health content as main reason for using TikTok)**

Q5) Before starting using TikTok for mental health content, had you ever discussed psychological problems with a mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker?) Adapted by Mackenzie et al. (2004).

- Yes
- No

- **(If they didn't select mental health advice/support as motivation):**

Q5) Have you ever discussed psychological problems with a mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker?)

- Yes
- No

- **Q6) State your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements:** (adapted from **ATSPPH-SF scale by Fischer & Turner (1970)** 0-3 (0= disagree, 1=partly disagree, 2=partly agree, 3= agree)

- If I thought I was experiencing a mental breakdown, my immediate response would be to seek professional help.
- The notion of discussing my problems with a therapist seems to me an ineffective way of resolving emotional issues.
- The idea of discussing my problems with a therapist seems to me as a poor way of resolving of emotional conflicts
- If I were experiencing a serious emotional crisis at this point in my life, I would be confident that I could find relief in counseling.
- There is something admirable in the attitude of a person who is willing to cope with his or her conflicts and fears without resorting to professional help.
- If I found myself distressed or anxious for an extended period, I would consider seeking psychological help.
- There's a possibility I may seek psychological counseling in the future.
- A person with an emotional problem is not likely to solve it alone; he or she is likely to solve it with professional help.
- Considering the time and expenses involved in therapy, I'm uncertain about its value for someone like me.
- One should attempt to resolve their own issues; psychological counseling should be seen as a final option.
- Just like many aspects of life, personal and emotional difficulties often resolve naturally over time.

- **Q7) Click on the dot that best describes your level of awareness regarding the following:**

Not at all aware – Extremely Aware (1-10) Likert Scale (adapted from S.P. Shah, B.N. Praveen, 2014, Awareness of oral cancer in rural Bangalore population: a questionnaire based study) adjusted to 1-5

- How aware are you of mental health as a topic?
- How aware are you of the causes of mental health problems?
- How aware are you of the signs and symptoms of mental health problems?
- How aware are you of the ways to prevent mental health problems?
- How aware are you of where to seek consultation and treatment for mental health problems?

Anxiety

0-4 (never, almost never, sometimes, fairly often, very often) Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) originally developed by Cohen et al. (1983)

- **Q8) Click on the dot that best describes what is true for you.**
 - In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
 - In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
 - In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?
 - In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
 - In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
 - In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
 - In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
 - In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?
 - In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

Loneliness

1-4 (never – always) ULS-8 Loneliness Scale, Xu, Qiu, Hahne, Zhao, Hu, 2018, Psychometric properties of the short-form UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS-8) among Chinese adolescents

- **Q9) Click on the dot that best describes your current situation.**
 - I lack companionship
 - There is no one I can turn to

- I am an outgoing person
- I feel left out
- I feel isolation from others
- I can find companionship when I want it
- People are around me but not with me

Depression

Adapted from The Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale by A. S. Zigmond and R. P. Snaith 1983

- **Q10) State your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements:**

0 – 3 (3 positive)

I feel cheerful:

- Not at all
- Not often
- Sometimes
- Most of the time

0-3 (3 positive)

I feel as if I am slowed down:

- Nearly all the time
- Very often
- Sometimes
- Not at all

0-3 (3 positive)

I have lost interest in my appearance:

- Definitely
- I don't take so much care as I should
- I may not take quite as much care
- I take just as much care as ever

0-3 (3, negative)

I look forward with enjoyment to things:

- As much as ever I did
- Rather less than I used to
- Definitely less than I used to
- Hardly at all

0-3 (3, negative)

I can enjoy a good book or radio or TV programme:

- Often
- Sometimes
- Not often

- Very seldom

Reliability

1-7 semantic differential adjusted by Ohanian (1990) and Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2020)

- **Q11) For each row of adjectives below, click on the dot that best describes how you would characterize mental health advice provided on TikTok.**
 - Dependable-Undependable
 - Reliable-Unreliable
 - Trustworthy-Untrustworthy
- **Q12) Select your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements regarding people/ profiles offering mental health advice on TikTok.**

1-5 (1=strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree)

- I trust their opinion
- I trust their knowledge on mental health topics

Stigmatization

Strongly agree – strongly disagree (1-5) MICA Scale* (as seen in Gabbidon J., Clement S., Nieuwenhuizen AV., Kassam A., Brohan E., Norman I., Thornicroft G. (2013). Mental illness: clinicians' attitudes (MICA) scale. Psychometric properties of a version for students and professionals in any healthcare discipline. Psychiatry Research 206:81-87)

- **Q13) State your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements:**
 - If I had a mental illness, I would never admit this to any of my friends because I would fear being treated differently.
 - People with a severe mental illness are dangerous more often than not.
 - If I had a mental illness, I would never admit this to my colleagues for fear of being treated differently.
 - The public does not need to be protected from people with a severe mental illness.
 - If a colleague told me they had a mental illness, I would still want to work with them.

Strongly disagree – strongly agree (1-5) (Yeap & Low 2009, Mental health knowledge, attitude and help-seeking tendency: a Malaysian context)

- **Q14) State your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements:**

- A person who has visited a psychologist's office does not necessary mean he/she is a person with mental disorder.
- Anyone can suffer from mental health problems.
- Talking to someone with mental health problems is the same as talking to anyone else.
- People need to adopt a more caring and sympathetic attitude towards people with mental health problems.
- People with mental health problems are not dangerous/violent.

- People with mental health problems should have the same rights as anyone else.
- People with mental health problems should not be blamed for their own condition.

Demographics

- **Q15) What is your gender?**
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other
 - Prefer not to say

- **Q16) How old are you?**
 - Under 18
 - 18 – 25 years old
 - 26– 33 years old
 - 34 – 41 years old
 - 42 – 49 years old
 - Over 49 years old

- **Q17) What is your current education level?**
 - High School Graduate
 - Professional Degree
 - University / College Graduate
 - Masters Degree
 - Doctorate

- **Q18) What is your total annual income?**
 - Less than 10,000 euros
 - 10,001– 19,999euros
 - 20,000 – 29,999 euros
 - 30,000 - 39,999 euros
 - 40,000– 49,999 euros

- 50,000 – 59,999 euros
- 60,000 – 69,999 euros
- 70,000 euros or more
- Prefer not to reply