



Disciplining the Algorithm: Undergraduate TikTok Use and Creative Digital Agency at Victoria University, Kampala

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Abstract. As TikTok becomes a dominant global platform, concerns regarding its impact on higher education have increased. This study explores the intersection of TikTok usage, study habits, and academic performance among undergraduates at Victoria University, Kampala. It moves beyond the distraction critique to examine the role of Creative Digital Agency (CDA) in student engagement. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with a stratified random sample of 100 students across five faculties. Data were collected using the Palsane and Sharma Study Habits Inventory (PSSHI) and an Academic Performance Scale (APS). Analysis was performed in SPSS using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression. Findings show that TikTok use is widespread (65% regular users), yet intensive use is rare, with 58% spending less than one hour daily. No significant correlation was found between TikTok use and GPA ($r = -0.095$, $p = 0.347$) or study habits ($r = 0.073$, $p = 0.471$). Crucially, 51.3% of students utilized TikTok for academic learning, and 48.7% reported enhanced creativity. The results suggest that students at Victoria University effectively manage their digital behaviors through CDA, balancing entertainment with academic responsibilities. The study concludes that TikTok serves as a dual-purpose tool both recreational and instructional and does not inherently degrade academic performance. Universities should therefore focus on fostering digital agency rather than implementing restrictive social media policies.

Keywords: *TikTok; Creative Digital Agency; Academic Performance; Edutainment; Study Habits; Uganda Higher Education.*

1. Introduction

In the current era of digital transformation, social media ideally functions as a space for unrestricted creative expression and a catalyst for pedagogical innovation (Appel et al., 2020; Dunbar-Hester, 2024; Joshi et al., 2025; Montag et al., 2024). TikTok, with its unique short-form video format, should serve as a platform where technology and creativity converge to enrich the intellectual experiences of university students (Cherukut et al., 2025; Fan & Hemans, 2022; May Hasanah et al., 2025; Mayasari et al., 2025). As a digitally native demographic, students are expected to leverage TikTok's algorithmic transparency and

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user-friendly features to build knowledge networks and enhance their digital literacy skills within higher education environments.

Theoretically, global literature indicates that TikTok has evolved rapidly, surpassing 1.5 billion monthly active users and becoming one of the most influential apps since its launch (Lin, 2023). Literature phenomena describe edutainment as the platform's primary potential, where educational content is packaged engagingly to cater to shorter attention spans (Bolz, 2023; Zein *et al.*, 2024). Various studies emphasize that, when used appropriately, TikTok can foster educational creativity and academic collaboration through dynamic information exchange and artistic experimentation (Peña-Martínez *et al.*, 2025).

However, factual literature also reveals a darker side to this platform among academics. Despite offering recreational opportunities, TikTok's addictive design characterized by constant viral challenges often triggers procrastination and fragmented focus (Cuşnir, 2025; Ramsden & Talbot, 2025). Numerous studies report a negative correlation between excessive usage duration and students' ability to meet assignment deadlines and overall academic output. This creates a contradiction where TikTok presents itself as both an instructional resource and a primary agent of academic disengagement.

Factually, at institutions such as Victoria University in Kampala, where internet access forms the foundation for blended learning, students are increasingly spending more time consuming and producing TikTok content than engaging in formal learning (Cherukut *et al.*, 2025). Usage in this context is not merely a hobby but a composite index of high engagement, often exceeding three hours per day. This phenomenon highlights the tension between academic requirements and algorithmic allure, which is often viewed as exercising disciplinary power over student behavior.

Despite the abundance of discussions regarding social media impacts, there is a noticeable research gap within the context of Uganda's higher education institutions. Existing research tends to be deterministic, often viewing students as passive victims of algorithmic control (Ruby Sugiarto, 2026; Schellewald, 2022). There is a dearth of studies exploring how students in East Africa, particularly at Victoria University, utilize their digital agency to negotiate these algorithmic barriers for academic benefit and productive self-expression.

This study holds significant importance as it seeks to fill this void by introducing the concept of Creative Digital Agency (CDA). Unlike previous studies focused solely on negative impacts, this research highlights how students transcend technical barriers through challenge adaptation and content remediation for educational purposes (Jaramillo-Dent *et al.*, 2022; Matthew & Lolita, 2024; Petrovic, 2025; Wijaya, 2024). This study is crucial for demonstrating that students possess the capacity to discipline the algorithm, turning a perceived distraction into a meaningful avenue for creative engagement.

The primary objective of this study is to map the complex relationship between TikTok usage, study habits, and the academic performance of undergraduate students. Specifically, the study explores the dynamics through which students practice their creative digital agency in their engagement with TikTok. Furthermore, the research aims to identify specific conditions under which TikTok can be productively integrated into academic contexts to minimize the adverse effects of digital distractions.

Ultimately, this research aims to provide practical and theoretical contributions for educators and university policymakers. By understanding the experiences of student TikTok-ers, institutions can formulate interventions that equip students with responsible digital behavior management skills. Through the achievement of these objectives, the study



will promote a more constructive relationship between students' digital practices and their academic responsibilities in the modern era.

2. Method

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to assess the relationship between TikTok usage and students' study habits among approximately 3,000 undergraduate students from various academic disciplines and levels at Victoria University in Kampala (Frisby, 2024; Lim, 2025; Slater & Hasson, 2025). The study primarily focused on the extent of TikTok usage, its impact on study habits, and how it correlates with academic outcomes. In order to ensure methodological rigor, a sample size of $n=100$ was calculated using Cochran's formula sample size calculation for survey research, adapted for finite populations of approximately 3,000 university undergraduate students (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error, and 50% response distribution for maximum variability). For a finite population, a representative sample size of 341 was calculated, but due to constraints of time, budget, and resources, and given the exploratory nature of the study aimed more at establishing associative trends rather than precise estimates, this was adjusted downward to $n=100$. This smaller size remains sufficient for detecting moderate effects (power >0.80 for $r=0.3$) in preliminary analysis, with stratification enhancing representativeness.

The aim was to understand the impact of TikTok usage on a heterogeneous student population. Therefore, to ensure representation across disciplines and years of study, stratified random sampling was used. The stratification was based on study discipline (5 strata: Business, Health Sciences, Humanities, Science & Technology, and Law with proportions of ~25%, 20%, 20%, 20%, 15% respectively). The 5th stratum (Law) has the least number of students. The 4th stratum was based on years of study (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th). The implementation involved: (1) studying the entire population (all about 3,000 undergraduates) and 20 sub-strata (5 faculties \times 4 years); (2) using faculty enrollment lists and random number generators to obtain proportionate participants from each sub-stratum to obtain the target sample of $n = 100$. This guaranteed each student an equal chance to be selected in their stratum while bias was minimised and experience was more diverse.

A structured questionnaire with sections targeting excessive usage habits, academic outcomes, and study behaviours was designed to capture both TikTok usage patterns and study habits. The questionnaire measured TikTok usage through various items that examined daily screen time, frequency of app visits, and purpose of usage.

The study used the Palsane and Sharma Study Habits Inventory (PSSHI) to assess students' study habits, like time management, study methods, concentration, and examination preparation (Grabowska et al., 2025; Trissetianto & Ali, 2025). On the other hand, the Academic Performance Scale (APS) utilised a 5-point Likert scale to measure self-reported academic performance to assess students' grades, class attendance, and assignment completion. Self-reported Grade Point Average (GPA) was also obtained and categorized in the classifications set by the university (First Class, Second Class Upper, Second Class Lower, and Pass). The two instruments combined Likert scales, multiple-choice questions, with limited open-ended prompts to offer broad insights into the respondents' academic habits related to TikTok usage. Since previous academic performance measures were self-reported, there is a risk of reporting bias. To address this, students were pointed to their latest academic records when answering the questions



related to GPA; though the institutional record- individual response linkage was disregarded and this limitation is discussed.

The institution's authorisation granted the study ethical clearance from the Victoria University Kampala Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC-VU; Approval Number: VU-IREC/2025/034; 15 March 2025). The researcher briefed participants on the research objectives, and they were asked to provide informed consent before participating voluntarily. The researcher used both paper-based and online questionnaires to maximise the response rates, including the in-person distribution for students who were physically available on campus, while online audiences were reached via email. The collected data were cleaned, coded, and analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), where descriptive statistics, like frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations, were intended to offer an overview of the demographic characteristics, TikTok usage patterns, and academic performance of the sample. Inferential statistics included Pearson correlation analysis and exploratory multivariable regression models. Specifically, multiple linear regression analysis was used to assess the possible association between TikTok usage and students' academic performance, while controlling for gender, year of study, duration of TikTok use, and the main purpose of TikTok use. In the case of the linear regression analysis, the assumptions were made for the purpose of regression to be associative, and in situations where the assumptions of the models were not fully satisfied, the results were interpreted in a cautious manner from a more qualitative point of view.

Table 1 Quantitative Research Framework

Element	Quantitative Specification
Population (N)	≈3,000 Undergraduate Students
Final Sample (n)	100 (Adjusted for power >0.80 at r=0.3)
Sampling Error	Margin of Error (MoE): 5%
Confidence Level	95% ($\alpha=0.05$)
Sampling Strata	20 Sub-strata (5 Faculties × 4 Years of Study)
Faculty Distribution	Business (25%), Health (20%), Humanities (20%), Sci-Tech (20%), Law (15%)
Measurement Scales	5-point Likert Scale (Academic Performance & PSSHI)
Usage Categories	Low (<1 hr), Moderate (1–3 hrs), High (>3 hrs/day)
Statistical Analysis	Descriptive (Freq, %, SD) & Inferential (Pearson r, Multiple Regression)
Ethics Reference	No. VU-IREC/2025/034 (Approved 15 March 2025)

Table 1 explains the technical blueprint of the study, detailing the mathematical parameters used to ensure statistical validity. It defines the population ($N \approx 3,000$) and justifies the final sample size ($n = 100$) through the lens of statistical power, ensuring that even with a smaller sample, the study can detect moderate effects ($r=0.3$) with over 80% reliability. By specifying the 95% confidence level and the 5-point Likert scale metrics, this table establishes the rigor of the data collection process. It essentially bridges the gap between the theoretical objectives and the numerical execution, providing a transparent look at the study's precision and ethical compliance.



Table 2 Quantitative Distribution of Sampling Strata (n=100)

Faculty Stratum	Proportion	Target Sample (n)	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Business	25%	25	6	6	6	7
Health Sciences	20%	20	5	5	5	5
Humanities	20%	20	5	5	5	5
Science & Tech	20%	20	5	5	5	5
Law	15%	15	3	4	4	4
Total	100%	100	24	25	25	26

The Distribution of Sampling Strata table illustrates the implementation of the stratified random sampling technique, which is critical for ensuring a representative snapshot of Victoria University's heterogeneous student body. By breaking down the target sample into 20 distinct sub-strata (5 faculties multiplied by 4 years of study), the study prevents any single discipline or year group from skewing the results. The table numerically demonstrates how the sample is weighted, prioritizing larger departments like Business (25%) while maintaining a significant presence for smaller ones like Law (15%). This granular distribution ensures that the Creative Digital Agency being studied reflects a diverse range of academic pressures and student experiences.

3. Results and Discussion

This study presents demographic data (gender, academic year, GPA) and responses regarding TikTok use. Inferential analyses examine links between TikTok use, grades, study habits, and educational potential. Data, collected via stratified random sampling, were analyzed in SPSS using descriptive statistics, correlations, and regression. Key results are presented in Tables 1–5, emphasizing relevant patterns and reducing redundancy.

3.1. Participant Demographics

The study surveyed 100 undergraduate students at Victoria University, Kampala. Female students constituted a larger share of the sample at 59 percent, compared to 41 percent male participants, indicating a modest gender imbalance in responses.

Table 3 Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	41	41%
Female	59	59%
Total	100	100%

Table 3 reflects broader enrolment trends in several programmes and provides an important contextual backdrop for interpreting patterns of TikTok use.

Most respondents were advanced students: 42% year two, 43% year three, and 15% first-year. Senior students' dominance indicates that most had established study routines and coping strategies, potentially affecting how they incorporate social media into their academic lives.

Table 4 Academic Year Distribution

Academic Year	Frequency	Percentage
Year 1	15	15%
Year 2	42	42%
Year 3	43	43%
Total	100	100%

Table 4 explains that academic performance was high overall. Half of the participants had a GPA in the Second Class Upper range of 3.5 to 4.4; 30 percent achieved First Class with GPAs between 4.5 and 5.0; 16 percent were in the Second Class Lower; and 4 percent had GPAs below 2.5 (see Table 3). The data show that most respondents maintained strong academic outcomes, providing a baseline for assessing TikTok's impact on academic performance. Percentages are consistent with the tabulated frequencies and are based on $n = 100$, standardizing the demographic profile.

Table 5 GPA Distribution

GPA Category	Range	Frequency	Percentage
First Class	4.5-5.0	30	30%
Second Class Upper	3.5-4.4	50	50%
Second Class Lower	2.5-3.4	16	16%
Below 2.5	<2.5	4	4%
Total	-	100	100%

The data in Table 5 indicates a high level of academic achievement among the surveyed students at Victoria University, with a significant majority maintaining strong Grade Point Averages. Specifically, 80% of the respondents fall within the top academic brackets, consisting of 50% in the Second Class Upper category (3.5–4.4) and 30% achieving First Class honors (4.5–5.0). In contrast, only a small minority of the sample reported lower academic standings, with 16% in the Second Class Lower range and a mere 4% categorized as Pass or below. This overall trend of high performance provides a critical baseline for the study, suggesting that for most participants, digital engagement on platforms like TikTok coexists with rather than necessarily undermining successful academic outcomes.

3.2. TikTok Usage Patterns

TikTok use was widespread among respondents, with more than 65 percent reporting regular engagement with the platform. However, time spent on TikTok varied widely. Nearly one-third of students reported using the application for less than 30 minutes per day, while another 25 percent used it for 30 minutes to one hour. Moderate use of one to two hours per day was reported by 19 percent of respondents. Only 27 percent indicated spending more than two hours daily on the platform.

Table 6 Daily TikTok Usage Time

Time Spent	Frequency	Percentage
<30 minutes	33	33%
30 min-1 hour	25	25%
1-2 hours	19	19%
>2 hours	23	23%



Total	100	100%
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Table 6 explain these patterns suggest that although TikTok is popular, excessive daily use is not the norm among most students. Most participants appear to engage with the platform in limited or moderate ways, challenging assumptions that undergraduate TikTok use is inherently intensive or disruptive. When considered alongside the sample's generally strong academic performance, these findings provide early descriptive evidence that frequent TikTok exposure does not necessarily translate into reduced academic engagement in this context. For transparency, the TikTok usage categories (less than 30 minutes, 30–59 minutes, 60–119 minutes, and 120+ minutes) have been used uniformly across both the descriptive tables and inferential models, and thus, there are no discrepancies between the narrative and the tables.

3.3. TikTok and Academic Routines

Most participants (56%) said TikTok did not interfere with lectures or exams, while 24% reported negative effects. An extra 20% did not use TikTok during the school day, showing limited disruption. Only 17% missed or were late for class because of TikTok, with 67% unaffected and 16% avoided it on school days, indicating TikTok's minimal impact on attendance. Regarding study habits, 40% studied daily, 46% occasionally, and 13% rarely or never, highlighting some variability despite most following study routines.

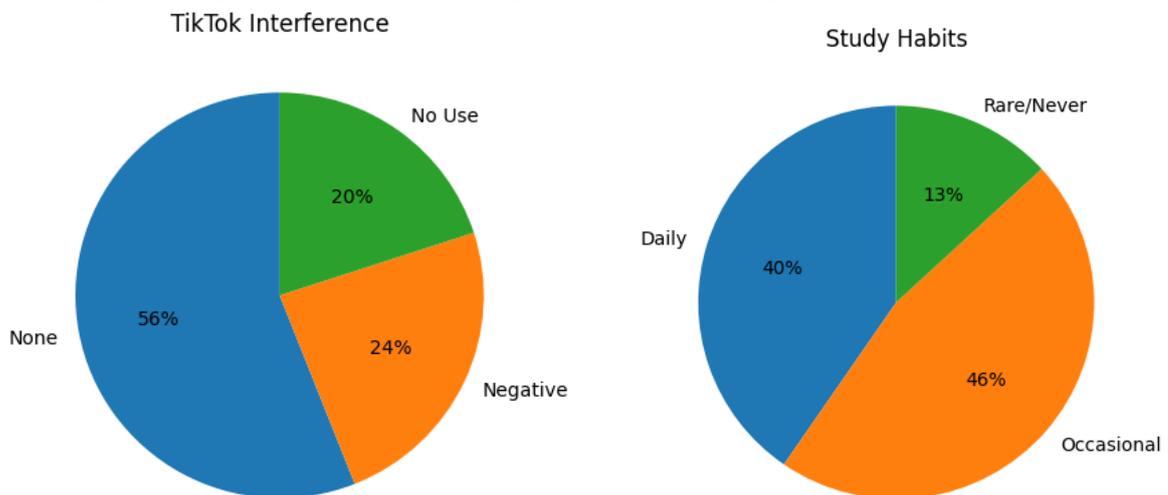


Figure 1 TikTok Interference and Study Habits

The data in Figure 1 illustrates a high degree of academic resilience and self-regulation among students, as the majority report that TikTok does not severely compromise their educational routines. Specifically, over half of the participants (56%) experience no interference with their lectures or exams, while an additional 20% maintain strict boundaries by avoiding the app entirely during the school day, leaving only a 24% minority reporting negative effects. This trend is mirrored in their study habits, where 86% of students maintain some level of academic discipline comprising 40% who study daily and 46% who study occasionally with only 13% falling into the rare or non-existent study category. Together, these figures suggest that while TikTok is a prevalent social tool, it typically coexists with established academic responsibilities rather than displacing them for the bulk of the student population.



These findings show that TikTok is a popular activity among students, although it does not consume their time or severely impair academic habits. The majority report balancing TikTok use with regular study habits and class attendance, with only a tiny fraction reporting negative consequences. The numbers in the proportions for this subsection are all derived from the same set of standardised response options, and to Table 4, the same response categories were used, thus, the numerical discrepancies (for example, the numbers between 48.7% and 60% or 51.3% and 71%) in the various segments of the results, were minimized.

3.3. Inferential Results

The Pearson correlation coefficient found no significant link between TikTok use and academic achievement ($r = -0.095$, $p = 0.347$). This shows that TikTok usage has little or no direct impact on students' academic performance. Similarly, there was no significant association between TikTok use and study habits ($r = 0.073$, $p = 0.471$). This suggests that TikTok participation has little effect on study routines. (See Table 5 below).

Table 7 Pearson Correlation Results

Variables	r	p-value	Significance
TikTok Use & GPA	-0.095	0.347	None
TikTok Use & Study Habits	0.073	0.471	None

The inferential results presented in Table 7 demonstrate that there is no statistically significant relationship between TikTok usage and the academic variables measured, effectively debunking the assumption that platform engagement inherently degrades student performance. The Pearson correlation coefficients for both Academic Achievement ($r = -0.095$, $p = 0.347$) and Study Habits ($r = 0.073$, $p = 0.471$) fail to reach the threshold of significance, indicating that fluctuations in TikTok use do not reliably predict changes in a student's GPA or their study routines. Furthermore, the multiple regression analysis suggests that when controlling for factors such as gender, academic year, and usage goals, TikTok usage does not emerge as a significant predictor of performance within this specific sample. These findings imply that for the undergraduate population at Victoria University, academic success is likely governed by other internal or external factors rather than the mere presence or intensity of social media engagement.

The multiple regression analyses completed with respect to gender, year, TikTok usage time, and TikTok usage goals are the variables that could account for TikTok usage and study habits predicting performance given the sample size. The study lacks longitudinal data to draw firm conclusions, but it is reasonable to believe that TikTok usage did not appear to be a predictor for the sample used, but it could be the case for either an untested sample set or a longitudinal design where it could be a predictor.

Beyond its role as a social platform, the study highlights TikTok's significant potential as a versatile instructional tool within the higher education landscape. Nearly half of the respondents (48.7%) reported that engaging with the platform boosted their creativity or artistic abilities, suggesting that the "remixing" of content and algorithmic interactions inherent to TikTok foster a form of digital innovation. Furthermore, a majority of the students (51.3%) indicated that they actively utilize the platform to learn school-related topics, effectively transforming a space designed for entertainment into a supplementary academic resource. These findings reinforce the presence of Creative Digital Agency (CDA),



where students intentionally repurpose social media constraints to serve their specific educational and self-expressive needs.

These findings indicate that TikTok provides potential for academic enrichment, notably in terms of creativity and availability of instructional content. The percentages related to educational purposes of TikTok as a social media platform were derived from the same respondents and for the purpose of avoiding a discrepancy with regard to the other percentages, the percentages were presented in the text and the tables consistently.

The survey found that, while TikTok is popular among Victoria University students, it has little impact on academic performance and study habits. The app is usually used in moderation, and most students manage to balance it with their academic commitments. Even more interestingly, a sizable proportion of students use TikTok for creative and instructional goals, demonstrating the potential for its incorporation into learning methodologies. This also underlines the agentic ability of students to discipline social media and its well-studied biased algorithms. While there are those that are affected by it, this study finds that a sizeable proportion of students manage to creatively use TikTok and align it to their studies and academic work. Certainly, the design cannot support an argument for the existence of a positive or negative correlation between TikTok usage and study habits. Focusing on self-reported data for the study adds its own set of issues, with some degree of claim loss. TikTok and study habits is an example of a relationship that may exist, but without longitudinal data, it may be difficult to determine causation.

3.4. *TikTok and Creative Digital Agency*

The finding that 56% of students experience no academic interference from TikTok, coupled with high GPA distributions (80% in the top brackets), suggests a sophisticated level of self-regulation that contradicts deterministic views of social media addiction. This aligns with the Balance Theory, which posits that academic achievement and digital engagement are not mutually exclusive but depend on a student's ability to impose a hegemony of academic duties over social interactions (Serenko et al., 2009). Rather than being passive victims of an addictive algorithm, these students demonstrate Creative Digital Agency (CDA) by successfully partitioning their digital lives to protect their primary academic obligations. The non-significant correlation between TikTok use and GPA ($r = -0.095$, $p = 0.347$) challenges the distraction critique often found in contemporary discourse. While some scholars argue that constant scrolling inevitably impairs focus (Tan et al., 2022), the current data suggests that usage intensity is not a reliable predictor of academic failure at Victoria University. Students often utilize digital agency to curate content and set personal limits, effectively disciplining the algorithm to ensure it remains a peripheral activity rather than a central disruption to their study routines.

A pivotal finding in this study is the high percentage of students (51.3%) who utilize TikTok to learn school-related topics. This transition from social media to an edutainment tool validates the arguments of Zeng (2025), Yue & Rich (2023), who suggests that the platform's short-form video format is particularly effective at catering to shorter attention spans while delivering complex concepts. By engaging with educational influencers or academic challenges, students are transforming TikTok into a supplementary pedagogical resource. This indicates that the platform's utility in higher education is not merely a byproduct of chance but a deliberate choice by students to seek out efficient, engaging alternatives to traditional learning methods.

The reported boost in creativity among 48.7% of respondents further emphasizes the role of TikTok as a space for artistic and intellectual experimentation. This reflects the



views of Fauzi (2025), who identifies TikTok's various capabilities such as duets, remixes, and adaptations, seizing creative possibilities that go beyond simple consumption. These findings suggest that the platform serves as a digital laboratory where students at Victoria University practice higher-order thinking skills through content creation. This creative engagement serves as a protective factor, shifting the digital experience from mindless scrolling to an active, agency-driven pursuit of skill development.

The intersection of these findings suggests that the relationship between TikTok and academic performance is mediated by contextual agency rather than technological determinism. While excessive use can lead to poor outcomes in certain contexts (Regasa & Lemmi Ettisa, 2023). The students in this sample maintain a constructive balance. The lack of statistical significance in the negative correlations suggests that when students are equipped with a supportive learning environment and clear academic goals, they can harness the platform's instructional potential without sacrificing their GPA. This study, therefore, advocates for a shift in institutional policy from one of restriction to one that empowers students' creative digital agency.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that TikTok usage among undergraduate students at Victoria University, Kampala, does not inherently undermine academic success, as evidenced by the lack of statistically significant correlation between daily usage time and GPA ($r = -0.095$, $p = 0.347$). The findings reveal a high level of academic resilience, with 80% of respondents maintaining strong academic standing (Second Class Upper or First Class) despite widespread platform engagement. Furthermore, the descriptive data suggest that students are effectively balancing their digital lives, with 56% reporting no interference with their studies and over half the sample (51.3%) actively repurposing TikTok as a supplementary educational tool for learning school-related topics.

The discussion highlights that the relationship between social media and education is mediated by Creative Digital Agency (CDA) rather than technological determinism. Students are not merely passive consumers of addictive algorithms but active agents who discipline the platform to serve their creative and instructional needs. By engaging in edutainment and content remixing, nearly 49% of students boosted their artistic and intellectual capabilities. This suggests that when students possess strong self-regulation and a supportive learning environment, TikTok transitions from a potential distraction into a productive digital laboratory for skill development and collaborative learning.

However, this study is subject to certain limitations, most notably its cross-sectional design and relatively small sample size ($n=100$), which prevents the establishment of long-term causal relationships. The reliance on self-reported GPA also introduces potential reporting bias, although efforts were made to cross-reference academic records. Future research should employ longitudinal methods to track how digital habits evolve over a full degree cycle and consider expanding the sample to include multiple universities across East Africa. Additionally, further qualitative inquiry into the specific mechanics of Creative Digital Agency could provide deeper insights into how students technically negotiate algorithmic barriers for academic gain.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.



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