TikTok Addiction and Academic Stress Among University Students: Examining the Mediating Role of Social Support

Imam Riefly Aditomo[1*]
Faculty of Economics and Business
Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta,
Sukoharjo, Indonesia
E-mail: ira197@ums.ac.id

Amalia Fasha Nur Swastika[2]
Faculty of Economics and Business
Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta,
Sukoharjo, Indonesia
E-mail: b100220236@student.ums.ac.id

Erlisa Nur Diana Imanda[3]
Faculty of Economics and Business
Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta,
Sukoharjo, Indonesia
E-mail: b100220283@student.ums.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the interrelationship between TikTok addiction, perceived social support, and academic stress among university students in Surakarta. Grounded in the stress-buffering framework, the research explores the direct and indirect effects of compulsive TikTok use on academic stress, with social support examined as a mediating variable. A cross-sectional design was employed, using purposive sampling to collect data from 452 TikTok users enrolled in higher education. TikTok addiction, social support, and academic stress were measured using adapted and validated scales. Structural equation modelling with SmartPLS revealed that TikTok addiction significantly increases academic stress, while social support reduces it. Interestingly, TikTok use was positively associated with perceived social support, though its mediating role in buffering academic stress was limited. The findings underscore the complex psychosocial dynamics of digital behaviour and suggest that enhancing social support systems may help mitigate the academic strain associated with social media overuse.

Keywords: TikTok Addiction; Academic Stress; Social Support; Digital Behavior; University Students

INTRODUCTION

The surge in TikTok usage among university students in recent years reflects a significant transformation in the ways young people interact with social media. As a dominant platform for short-form video sharing, TikTok's rapid growth particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns was fueled by users' desire for connection and entertainment while confined to their homes (Mendes *et al.*, 2023). Studies have shown that students now spend more than 100 minutes per day on the platform on average, indicating a concerning pattern of excessive engagement (Yang *et al.*, 2023). This behavioral trend raises pressing questions about the psychological consequences of TikTok addiction, especially its potential role in increasing academic stress. This highlights an urgent need to explore the academic and psychological consequences of TikTok overuse among university students.

Growing evidence suggests that TikTok's addictive features contribute to a range of negative psychological outcomes. Martinez *et al.* (2023) emphasize that addiction to platforms like TikTok can harm students' academic achievement and diminish their self-esteem. Similarly, research by Ramsden & Talbot (2024) highlights how students experiencing academic pressure often turn to TikTok as a coping mechanism. While this behavior may temporarily alleviate anxiety, it can worsen stress levels over time. This aligns with earlier findings that point to a self-reinforcing cycle between academic stress and escapist social media use, in which reliance on platforms like TikTok reduces academic focus and increases stress, ultimately impairing educational performance (Hou *et al.*, 2019). Existing evidence reveals a cyclical relationship between academic stress and TikTok use, but the mechanisms behind this cycle remain underexplored.

Beyond academic consequences, TikTok addiction has also been linked to broader mental health concerns. Excessive use of the platform has been associated with serious psychological conditions such as anxiety and depression, largely due to its compulsive use patterns and content design (Rogowska & Cincio, 2024). Zhao and Kou (2024) further note a significant correlation between excessive TikTok engagement and loneliness among college students. In these cases, the pursuit of social interaction through the app may paradoxically lead to greater social disconnection, intensifying feelings of stress and emotional isolation. This suggests that while TikTok offers virtual connectivity, it may simultaneously foster psychological vulnerabilities, an area needing further empirical clarification.

Given these dynamics, examining the role of social support as a mediating factor becomes essential. Although some argue that social media can foster a sense of connection, excessive reliance on TikTok may instead erode meaningful interpersonal interactions and fail to meet students' emotional needs (Qin *et al.*, 2022). C. Zhao *et al.* (2021) found that students with lower levels of perceived social support are more likely to seek comfort and validation online. However, such engagement often yields only superficial support, failing to address deeper emotional needs and potentially contributing to increased academic stress.

Academic stress itself is shaped by a variety of factors, including demanding coursework, exam pressures, and competition within academic settings all of which influence how students interact with social media (Putri *et al.*, 2024). Evidence suggests that those overwhelmed by academic demands may be more vulnerable to maladaptive behaviors, including compulsive TikTok use (Sriwahyuningsih & Barseli, 2023). This complex interplay underscores the need to investigate how different types of social support, whether from family, friends, or institutions may help buffer or intensify the relationship between TikTok addiction and academic stress. This points to a gap in understanding how social support, both online and offline interacts with TikTok addiction

to influence academic stress. Despite the recognition of academic stressors, research rarely integrates social support into models explaining the link between TikTok addiction and academic stress.

Although research on social media use and its psychological effects is expanding, few studies have specifically addressed the combined influence of TikTok addiction, academic stress, and the mediating role of social support. Much of the current literature focuses on general social media platforms, without considering TikTok's unique algorithmic features and user dynamics (Galanis *et al.*, 2024; Hou *et al.*, 2019). This gap highlights the importance of targeted research that examines these variables in tandem, particularly among college students, where such behavioral patterns are becoming increasingly common. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring the mediating function of social support in the relationship between TikTok addiction and academic stress, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how digital behaviors affect students' well-being and academic experiences. This study addresses a critical research gap by examining TikTok addiction, academic stress, and social support together, focusing on the mediating mechanism that has been largely overlooked in prior studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TikTok Addiction

TikTok addiction refers to a compulsive engagement with the application that disrupts users' daily functioning, interferes with interpersonal relationships, and negatively affects psychological health (Jain *et al.*, 2025). The platform's design characterized by features such as infinite scrolling and personalized algorithmic content fosters prolonged use, making it difficult for users to regulate their screen time and balance their responsibilities offline (Rogowska & Cincio, 2024).

Academic Stress

Academic stress refers to the psychological pressure that students experience as a result of the various demands associated with their educational responsibilities. It is characterized as an overwhelming state of distress caused by academic challenges that exceed an individual's adaptive capacity, thus negatively impacting their mental well-being (Hằng *et al.*, 2015; Tania & Hastuti, 2024). Factors contributing to academic stress include heavy workloads, competitive academic environments, and high expectations set by oneself or external sources like parents and (Chyu & Chen, 2022; Suhaimi *et al.*, 2023).

Social Support

Social support refers to the resources and assistance individuals receive from their social networks, such as family, friends, and community. It plays a crucial role in promoting emotional, psychological, and physical well-being (Li *et al.*, 2022; Vangelisti, 2009). Social support can be categorized into different forms, including emotional support, informational support, and tangible assistance, all of which serve to enhance individuals' coping mechanisms during stressful situations (Davidson & Zhou, 2020).

TikTok Addiction and Its Effects on Social Support

A growing body of research has documented the adverse psychological consequences associated with excessive TikTok use. Notably, this form of addiction is correlated with increased levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and social withdrawal (Jain *et al.*,

2025; Pop *et al.*, 2022). For example, Auf *et al.* (2023) highlight how continuous exposure to idealized content on TikTok can exacerbate negative social comparisons, particularly in terms of body image and self-esteem, especially among adolescents. Users may begin to seek approval and self-worth through digital validation, reducing the value they place on authentic offline relationships and potentially weakening their social support systems. Given that social support plays a protective role against various mental health risks, understanding how TikTok addiction influences perceived social support is essential for evaluating its broader psychosocial impacts (Maghraoui & Khrouf, 2024).

While some researchers argue that TikTok can serve as a medium for social expansion and connection, particularly among youth (Bossen & Kottász, 2020), the excessive use of the platform often interferes with the maintenance of meaningful offline interactions. Bossen and Kottász (2020) observed that adolescents utilize TikTok as a tool to extend their social circles, demonstrating the app's potential for virtual connectivity. However, this engagement frequently comes at the expense of in-person relationships, resulting in feelings of isolation and dependence on superficial digital bonds. Furthermore, the psychological phenomenon known as the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has been shown to intensify compulsive usage patterns, as individuals continuously seek online interaction to avoid exclusion, often neglecting face-to-face social support systems (Apriyanti & Wijayani, 2024; Rachman et al., 2024).

Taken together, these findings present a complex dynamic in which TikTok addiction may simultaneously foster and diminish perceptions of social support. While digital interactions can offer temporary feelings of connection, the decline in meaningful offline relationships may undermine overall emotional well-being. To investigate this duality, it is important to examine whether frequent TikTok use is related to users' perception of being socially supported.

H1: TikTok addiction is positively associated with social support among university students.

Social Support and Its Effects on Academic Stress

In the realm of higher education, social support has consistently been identified as a critical protective factor against the detrimental effects of academic stress. Numerous studies have affirmed that students with access to strong support networks whether from family, peers, or mentors are better equipped to handle the psychological pressures associated with academic life (Kamila & Ramadhani, 2024; Muhtar & Wijaya, 2024). Perceived social support not only contributes to emotional stability but also enhances students' capacity to manage academic demands effectively.

Empirical evidence underscores the significance of this relationship. Glozah (2013) and Zhang *et al.* (2022) both found that individuals who perceive themselves as having robust social support exhibit greater resilience and report lower levels of stress. This support acts as a psychological buffer, empowering students to approach academic challenges with improved coping mechanisms and a more adaptive mindset.

Kamila and Ramadhani (2024), for example, demonstrated that students who received consistent emotional and instrumental support experienced a marked increase in overall well-being and a corresponding decrease in academic stress. Their findings reinforce the stress-buffering hypothesis, which suggests that social support serves to moderate the impact of stressful experiences by providing emotional reassurance, problem-solving assistance, and a sense of belonging (Glozah, 2013). These benefits are particularly relevant in high-stakes academic environments, where the absence of supportive relationships can intensify feelings of pressure, anxiety, and burnout.

Given this evidence, it is reasonable to posit that greater perceived social support is associated with reduced academic stress. This relationship warrants further exploration, especially in populations where social support may vary in form, quality, and accessibility.

H2: Social support is negatively associated with academic stress.

TikTok Addiction Effect on Academic Stress and Role of Social Support as A Mediator

Academic stress is commonly understood as a form of psychological strain that arises when students perceive a discrepancy between academic expectations and their capacity to meet them. Woolman *et al.* (2015) define it as anxiety resulting from perceived academic inadequacy, whether those expectations originate internally or externally. In a more recent elaboration, Tania and Hastuti (2024) describe academic stress as a psychological burden experienced by students when academic demands exceed their adaptive capabilities, often producing feelings of helplessness, insecurity, and emotional exhaustion.

A growing body of research points to a significant relationship between TikTok addiction and academic stress. Hu *et al.* (2023) observed that compulsive use of TikTok may negatively impact academic focus and time management, ultimately exacerbating stress. Students who engage in excessive screen time on the platform often struggle to fulfil academic obligations, which can trigger heightened anxiety and a sense of academic underachievement. Supporting this, research reported that social media addiction may erode students' academic self-efficacy, setting in motion a cycle of digital dependency and increased stress (Gao *et al.*, 2022). The emotional dissonance stemming from prolonged disengagement with academic tasks often manifests in elevated levels of academic strain among those heavily reliant on the app.

However, the negative consequences of TikTok addiction may be mitigated by the presence of social support. Numerous studies highlight the importance of perceived social support in alleviating academic stress by offering emotional comfort, practical guidance, and a sense of community (Muhtar & Wijaya, 2024). For instance, research argue that students with robust social support systems are more resilient in managing the conflicting demands of social media engagement and academic performance (Hu *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, recent findings by Chu *et al.* (2025) suggest that social support may serve as a mediating variable buffering the impact of TikTok addiction on academic stress. This mediating role underscores how external support systems can help students maintain emotional balance and academic focus despite the distractions of digital media.

H3: TikTok addiction is positively associated with academic stress among university students.

H4: Social support mediates the relationship between TikTok addiction and academic stress.
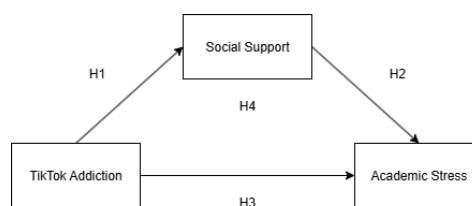

Figure 1. Research Framework
Source: Own Compilation (2025)

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional research design. The sample was obtained using a purposive sampling technique, with the following criteria: university students and users of the TikTok application in Surakarta. According to Hair *et al.* (2022), the recommended minimum sample size should be at least ten times the number of indicators for the most complex latent variable in a PLS path model. Data collection was conducted through an online survey distributed via Google Forms. A total of 452 valid responses were obtained, meeting the minimum sample size requirement.

To evaluate TikTok addiction, this research utilized a modified version of the Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale (BFAS) (Andreassen *et al.*, 2012) and later adjusted into the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) (Andreassen *et al.*, 2017). Terminological adjustments were made to tailor the instrument specifically to TikTok usage. The construct was assessed through six indicators rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Perceived social support was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), which includes twelve items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (Zimet *et al.*, 1988). Academic stress was evaluated using the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA), comprising sixteen items scored on a 5-point Likert scale (Sun *et al.*, 2011).

The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through SmartPLS 4 software. The analytic procedure consisted of two core phases: assessment of the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model) (Hair *et al.*, 2022). The evaluation of the measurement model involved testing for reliability and validity, including convergent and discriminant validity. Discriminant validity was examined using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. Upon confirming the adequacy of the measurement model, the structural model was analyzed to explore the proposed relationships among the latent variables (Richter *et al.*, 2016).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Demographics of The Respondents

A total of 452 individuals participated in the study, as shown in Table 1. The gender distribution showed a higher proportion of female respondents, accounting for 61.1% (n = 276), while male respondents comprised 38.9% (n = 176). In terms of educational level, the majority of participants were enrolled in a Master's program, representing 90.5% (n = 409) of the sample. Only 9.5% (n = 43) were pursuing a Bachelor's degree, indicating that the sample primarily consisted of postgraduate students. Regarding daily TikTok usage, the most common usage duration was 3–4 hours per day, reported by 40.5% (n = 183) of respondents. This was followed by 1–2 hours of daily usage (34.1%, n = 154), and ≤ 1 hour (17.9%, n = 81). A smaller portion of the sample (7.5%, n = 34) reported using TikTok for more than 4 hours daily.

Table 1. Demographics of the respondents

Category	Amount	Percentage
Gender		
Male	176	38,9%
Female	276	61,1%
Grand Total	452	100,00%
Study Program		
Bachelor	43	9,5%

Master		409	90,5%
Grand Total		452	100,00%
Duration using TikTok (daily)			
≤ 1 hour		81	17,9%
1-2 hours		154	34,1%
3-4 hours		183	40,5%
≥ 4 hours		34	7,5%
Grand Total		452	100,00%

Source: Own Compilation (2025)

Measurement Model Analysis

As shown in Table 2, the measurement model demonstrated strong internal consistency, convergent validity, and reliability across all constructs. For the TikTok Addiction variable, all item loading factors ranged between 0.801 and 0.881, exceeding the recommended minimum of 0.70 (Ahmadi *et al.*, 2024). The construct yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.927, indicating excellent internal consistency. Both composite reliability (CR = 0.930) and average variance extracted (AVE = 0.943) surpassed the standard thresholds of 0.70 and 0.50, respectively, confirming strong reliability and convergent validity.

The Social Support construct showed item loadings between 0.744 and 0.864, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.957. The CR value was 0.964, and the AVE was 0.962, again reflecting high reliability and strong convergence. For Academic Stress, item loadings ranged from 0.841 to 0.913, well above the accepted minimum. The Cronbach's alpha was exceptionally high at 0.981, with a CR of 0.982 and an AVE of 0.982, confirming very high internal consistency and convergent validity.

Table 2. Convergent validity and reliability result

Variable	Indicator	Mean	Standard deviation	Loading factors	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
TikTok Addiction	TTA.1	3,681	1,125	0,871	0,927	0,930	0,943
	TTA.2	3,619	1,160	0,881			
	TTA.3	3,644	1,146	0,851			
	TTA.4	3,396	1,052	0,801			
	TTA.5	3,095	1,155	0,869			
	TTA.6	3,210	1,183	0,864			
Social Support	SS.1	5,261	1,707	0,813	0,957	0,964	0,962
	SS.2	5,281	1,644	0,854			
	SS.3	5,810	1,495	0,797			
	SS.4	5,646	1,479	0,820			
	SS.5	5,358	1,639	0,840			
	SS.6	5,299	1,410	0,813			
	SS.7	5,011	1,463	0,796			
	SS.8	5,312	1,590	0,812			
	SS.9	5,403	1,561	0,849			
	SS.10	5,310	1,623	0,864			
	SS.11	5,584	1,528	0,863			
	SS.12	5,100	1,608	0,744			
Academic Stress	AS.1	2,655	1,227	0,848	0,981	0,982	0,982
	AS.2	2,392	1,255	0,868			
	AS.3	2,768	1,232	0,869			

AS.4	2,434	1,298	0,920
AS.5	2,573	1,245	0,910
AS.6	2,659	1,267	0,841
AS.7	2,469	1,295	0,878
AS.8	2,768	1,264	0,848
AS.9	2,476	1,311	0,913
AS.10	2,608	1,265	0,908
AS.11	2,659	1,237	0,847
AS.12	2,394	1,307	0,884
AS.13	2,763	1,272	0,855
AS.14	2,487	1,306	0,902
AS.15	2,558	1,256	0,902
AS.16	2,562	1,281	0,893

Source: Own Compilation (2025)

As presented in Table 3, discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), a robust criterion for evaluating the distinctiveness of latent constructs. All HTMT values in the model were well below the recommended threshold of 0.85, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity. Specifically, the HTMT value between Academic Stress and Social Support was 0.207, between Academic Stress and TikTok Addiction was 0.479, and between Social Support and TikTok Addiction was 0.104. These values suggest that each construct is empirically distinct and does not excessively overlap with the others. Thus, the results confirm that the constructs Academic Stress, Social Support, and TikTok Addiction measure separate theoretical concepts, thereby supporting the model's discriminant validity.

Table 3. Discriminant validity (HTMT)

Variable	Academic Stress	Social Support	TikTok Addiction
Academic Stress	-	-	-
Social Support	0,207	-	-
TikTok Addiction	0,479	0,104	-

Source: Own Compilation (2025)

Structural Model Analysis

The structural model illustrated in Figure 2 provides insight into the relationships among TikTok addiction, social support, and academic stress. All hypothesized paths (H1–H4) were supported, as each demonstrated statistical significance with p-values below 0.05, indicating that the proposed relationships within the model are empirically valid. The first path (H1) shows a positive relationship between TikTok addiction and social support, with a path coefficient of 0.096 and a p-value of 0.042, suggesting that greater use of TikTok is associated with a slight increase in perceived social support. However, the explanatory power of this relationship is limited, with a relatively small R^2 value of 0.009, indicating that TikTok addiction explains less than 1% of the variance in social support.

The second path (H2) demonstrates a negative relationship between social support and academic stress, with a coefficient of –0.253 and a p-value of 0.000. This suggests that higher levels of social support are significantly associated with lower academic stress. Although the effect size is modest ($R^2 = 0.088$), the direction and strength of the relationship emphasize the protective role of social support in mitigating stress among students. The third path (H3) reveals a strong positive relationship between TikTok addiction and academic stress, with a coefficient of 0.485 and a highly significant p-value of 0.000. This finding implies that excessive engagement with TikTok can considerably

elevate students' academic stress levels, possibly due to time mismanagement, distraction, or reduced academic involvement. The corresponding effect size ($R^2 = 0.322$) indicates that TikTok addiction accounts for a substantial proportion of the variance in academic stress.

The fourth path (H4) examines the indirect effect of TikTok addiction on academic stress through social support. Although the path coefficient is small (–0.024) and the effect is minimal, it is statistically significant (p = 0.043), suggesting that social support serves as a weak but meaningful mediator in this relationship. Nonetheless, the variance explained by social support remains low ($R^2 = 0.007$), indicating its limited mediating strength in the overall model. Collectively, the model accounts for 27.3% of the variance in academic stress, signifying a moderate explanatory capacity. These results underscore the dual impact of digital behaviors and interpersonal resources on student stress and highlight the importance of balancing social media use with supportive academic and social environments.
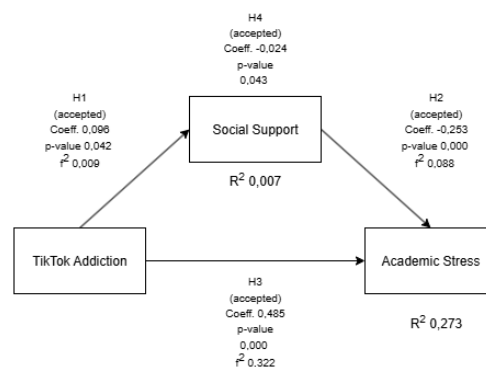

Figure 2. Structural Model Analysis Result
Source: Own Compilation (2025)

DISCUSSION

The present study provides empirical support for the hypothesized relationships among TikTok addiction, perceived social support, and academic stress among university students in Surakarta. All four proposed hypotheses (H1–H4) were confirmed through structural equation modeling, underscoring the multifaceted impact of digital behavior on student well-being and academic performance.

The first finding TikTok addiction being positively associated with perceived social support (H1) may appear counterintuitive, as excessive social media use is often linked to reduced offline interaction. However, this result suggests that TikTok, as a socially engaging platform, may offer users a sense of digital connectedness that they interpret as social support. The relatively weak explanatory power of this relationship ($R^2 = 0.009$), however, implies that the quality or depth of this perceived support may be superficial or insufficient in buffering more intense psychological strains, such as academic stress. These findings resonate with Bossen and Kottász (2020), who noted that while digital platforms can extend social networks, they may not replace the emotional depth of offline support systems.

The second key result confirms that social support is negatively associated with academic stress (H2), aligning with the stress-buffering hypothesis (Glozah, 2013; Kamila & Ramadhani, 2024). The presence of friendships can significantly influence adolescents' ability to fulfill their academic responsibilities (Rosada & Lestari, 2022). Students who perceive stronger emotional and instrumental backing from family, peers,

or institutions are more resilient in managing academic pressures. This relationship emphasizes the pivotal role of interpersonal networks in moderating stress, a theme consistently highlighted in prior literature.

The third and most robust finding TikTok addiction's strong positive association with academic stress (H3) is of critical concern. With a path coefficient of 0.485 and an R^2 value of 0.322, this result suggests that digital over-engagement significantly undermines students' academic performance and psychological balance. This supports earlier findings (Gao *et al.*, 2022; Hu *et al.*, 2023), which have linked compulsive social media usage with academic disengagement, procrastination, and heightened anxiety.

Finally, the study confirms a statistically significant, albeit weak, mediating effect of social support on the relationship between TikTok addiction and academic stress (H4). The modest indirect effect (–0.024) and minimal variance explained ($R^2 = 0.007$) suggest that while social support plays a buffering role, it cannot fully neutralize the academic strain induced by digital addiction. This finding signals a need for a multidimensional intervention strategy: reducing screen addiction alone may be insufficient without simultaneously reinforcing students' social and academic support structures.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the interrelationships among TikTok addiction, perceived social support, and academic stress among university students in Surakarta, using a robust structural equation modelling framework. The findings reveal that TikTok addiction significantly increases academic stress, confirming concerns about the adverse academic consequences of compulsive digital media use. While TikTok may offer users a perception of social connectivity, the emotional and psychological support it provides appears limited in mitigating academic strain.

Social support emerges as a crucial, though not wholly sufficient, mediator that can reduce the intensity of academic stress caused by digital addiction. Thus, interventions aimed at promoting academic well-being should simultaneously address behavioral regulation in social media use and the cultivation of supportive environments within families, peer groups, and educational institutions.

Given the increasing ubiquity of TikTok and similar platforms in students' daily lives, universities and mental health practitioners should consider comprehensive strategies that integrate digital literacy, time management, and psychosocial support to enhance student resilience. Future research should explore longitudinal models and qualitative approaches to better understand the dynamics of digital behavior and social support over time.

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