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Perceived Emotional and Social Effects of TikTok Among Youth: A Visual Communication Perspective in Côte d'Ivoire *

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has emerged as one of the most influential visual communication platforms among young people, shaping how they express their identities, participate in trends, and interact socially through visually rich and continuously flowing content environments. This study explores how young people in Côte d'Ivoire perceive the emotional and social effects of TikTok, framing these perceptions within a visual communication perspective. A quantitative descriptive survey was conducted with 205 young TikTok users to analyze their usage patterns and self-reported experiences related to anxiety, cyberbullying, compulsive use, and social isolation. The findings reveal that TikTok is widely and intensively used, particularly among younger users, with many reporting prolonged daily engagement. While most participants did not perceive significant negative effects, a noteworthy minority reported experiences linked to compulsive usage, emotional distress, cyberbullying, and feelings of isolation. These results suggest that TikTok's engaging and continuous content environment may contribute to prolonged use, potentially reducing users' awareness of negative experiences. Rather than directly analyzing algorithmic systems, this study focuses on users' self-reported perceptions and interprets these experiences within a visually and algorithmically curated environment. From a visual communication perspective, the platform can be understood as a content environment where interface design, aesthetic presentation, and content flow contribute to user engagement. The study emphasizes the importance of digital and visual literacy, highlighting the need for critical awareness of platform design and responsible interaction with visually intensive media environments.

Keywords : Tiktok, Visual Communication, Graphic Design, User Perception, Social Media Effects, Youth

* *This study draws on survey data collected as part of a master's thesis completed in the MA in Communication Sciences program at the European University of Lefke.*

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TikTok'un Gençler Tarafından Algılanan Duygusal ve Sosyal Etkileri: Fildişi Sahili Bağlamında Bir Görsel İletişim Perspektifi

ÖZ

Görsel açıdan zengin ve sürekli akış halinde olan içerik ortamları aracılığıyla TikTok, gençlerin kimliklerini ifade etmesinde, trendlere katılımında ve sosyal etkileşim kurma biçimlerini şekillendirmede en etkili görsel iletişim platformlarından biri haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, Fildişi Sahili'ndeki gençlerin TikTok'un duygusal ve sosyal etkilerine ilişkin algılarını incelemekte ve bu algıları görsel iletişim perspektifi çerçevesinde ele almaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, 205 genç TikTok kullanıcısıyla nicel betimleyici bir anket uygulanmış; kullanım örüntüleri ile anksiyete, siber zorbalık, zorlayıcı kullanım ve sosyal izolasyon gibi konulara ilişkin öz-bildirimlere dayalı deneyimler analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, TikTok'un özellikle genç kullanıcılar arasında yaygın ve yoğun biçimde kullanıldığını, katılımcıların önemli bir kısmının günlük olarak uzun süreler platformda zaman geçirdiğini göstermektedir. Katılımcıların büyük çoğunluğu belirgin olumsuz etkiler bildirmemekle birlikte, dikkate değer bir azınlık zorlayıcı kullanım, duygusal rahatsızlık, siber zorbalık ve yalnızlık hissi gibi deneyimler ifade etmiştir. Bu sonuçlar, TikTok'un akıcı ve dikkat çekici içerik yapısının uzun süreli kullanımı teşvik edebileceğini ve kullanıcıların olası olumsuz deneyimlerin farkına varmalarını sınırlayabileceğini düşündürmektedir. Bu çalışma, algoritmik sistemleri doğrudan analiz etmek yerine, kullanıcıların öz-bildirimlerine dayalı algılarına odaklanmakta ve bu deneyimleri görsel ve algoritmik olarak kurgulanmış bir ortam içerisinde yorumlamaktadır. Görsel iletişim perspektifinden bakıldığında, platform; arayüz tasarımı, estetik sunum ve içerik akışının kullanıcı etkileşimine katkıda bulunduğu bir içerik ortamı olarak değerlendirilebilir. Çalışma, dijital ve görsel okuryazarlığın önemini vurgulamakta; platform tasarımına yönelik eleştirel farkındalığın geliştirilmesi ve görsel yoğun medya ortamlarıyla daha bilinçli etkileşim kurulması gerekliliğine dikkat çekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Tiktok, Görsel İletişim, Grafik Tasarım, Kullanıcı Algısı, Sosyal Medya Etkileri, Gençler

INTRODUCTION

TikTok has become one of the most influential platforms for visual communication over the past decade, significantly shaping new forms of digital aesthetics, self-presentation, and creative expression among young users worldwide (Cusnir, 2025). Centered on short-form videos, visual filters, sound-driven editing, and algorithmic curation, TikTok creates an immersive aesthetic environment where individuals primarily communicate through visual and performative content. For many young people, this platform serves as a unique space for visual communication, where trends, gestures, styles, and identities are constantly produced, shared, and remixed (Loupessis & Intahchomphoo, 2025).

TikTok has quickly become culturally significant in various African contexts, particularly among young people who use the platform to express their identity, creativity,

humor, and sense of social belonging (Agency, 2025). Côte d'Ivoire, with its youthful population and growing digital infrastructure, serves as a prime example of this shift toward visually mediated communication practices (Kemp, 2025).

While TikTok provides a platform for creativity and self-expression, its visually stimulating, algorithmically crafted design may influence how young users view themselves, engage with others, and navigate digital environments emotionally (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Although TikTok is often discussed in terms of its social or psychological effects, it is important to understand how users perceive the emotional and social impact of engaging with this highly visual platform. While the platform's aesthetic features—filters, visual templates, algorithmic content flows—are widely recognized components of its design, their influence is most meaningfully observed through how young people experience and interpret their time on the platform.

This study focuses on young users' self-reported perceptions of TikTok's emotional and social effects. By examining usage habits and subjective experiences, the research aims to understand how youth in Côte d'Ivoire interpret their prolonged exposure to a visually structured and algorithmically driven platform. It seeks to interpret these perceptions within the context of TikTok's visually focused communication style.

The study is guided by the following questions:

- What motivates young people in Côte d'Ivoire to engage with TikTok's visual content and aesthetic environment?
- What are the self-reported emotional and social effects associated with TikTok's visually driven platform?
- How can these perceptions be interpreted in relation to TikTok's role as a visually oriented communication platform?

These questions focus on perceptions rather than clinical results, keeping the study centered on youth experiences and media interpretations.

Although numerous studies have been conducted on TikTok, research exploring the platform's effects on young people in relation to its algorithmic visual structure is still relatively limited (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Paasonen, 2021; Montag et al., 2021). Most existing studies primarily address the psychological and social impacts of social media, without delving into the relationship between these effects and the algorithmically circulated visuals, interface aesthetics, and visual communication elements. This article investigates how young people in Côte d'Ivoire are affected by TikTok, specifically analyzing the visual factors underlying these effects. It interprets and synthesizes the emotional and social impacts perceived by young users in connection with visual communication elements. The primary

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focus of the study is to explore young people's experiences on TikTok and how these experiences are shaped within a visually oriented and content-driven platform environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Visual Communication, Digital Aesthetics, and Platform Design

The rise of digital platforms has fundamentally changed how visual content is produced, shared, and interpreted. Mirzoeff (2015) argues that contemporary society is defined by visuality—a condition where images increasingly shape social experiences, identity formation, and cultural meanings. Expanding on this idea, Manovich (2013) emphasizes that digital interfaces and software tools create new aesthetic conventions, enabling users to construct and manipulate images through filters, presets, effects, and algorithm-driven editing.

TikTok is a prime example of this trend towards visually dominant communication. Focused on short-form videos, rhythm, motion, color, and audio-visual synchronization, the platform serves as a dynamic space for aesthetic production rather than just a medium for sharing information. Users express their identities, participate in trends, and engage with symbolic gestures through visual performance, making TikTok a central hub for contemporary visual communication (Ionescu & Licu, 2023).

From a graphic design perspective, TikTok serves as a carefully designed visual interface. Its libraries of filters, beauty enhancements, animation tools, transitions, and layout templates provide users with standardized yet flexible resources for self-presentation (Almoqbel, et al., 2025). The organization of content is influenced by algorithmic curation, infinite scrolling, looping videos, and the circulation of aesthetic templates that encourage the repetition of popular visual styles. Norman (2013) argues that aesthetic appeal is not superficial; it may influence the way users perceive the quality and value of a product. Similarly, interface aesthetics are not neutral; they significantly affect attention, engagement, and emotional responses. TikTok's design emphasizes instant interaction and visual impact, making it a suitable platform for examining how graphic systems influence user perception.

2.2. Emotional Responses and Perceived Effects of Visual Platforms

Aesthetic systems are complex frameworks ranging from user interfaces to fine art that are designed to evoke specific psychological responses. These systems generate reactions by combining sensory inputs with cognitive assessments, often bypassing rational limits to influence behavior and decision-making. They are actively involved in human-environment interactions beyond mere visual appeal. High-quality aesthetics encourage approach behaviors, like using an app or purchasing products, whereas poor aesthetics may contribute to avoidance behaviors, causing frustration or task abandonment. Additionally, aesthetic

appreciation can shift cognitive states from anxiety to curiosity, promoting a desire for new knowledge instead of risk avoidance (McCrae, 2024).

Aesthetic systems of the TikTok platform play a crucial role in human experience. They are based on both cognitive evaluation and physiological mechanisms, evoking users' emotional and behavioral responses. Visual stimuli, such as bright colors, rapid motion, idealized bodies, and highly stylized lifestyles, influence how viewers perceive themselves and others. Scholars suggest that prolonged exposure to these environments may lead to emotional comparison, sensory overload, compulsive viewing, and feelings of social isolation (Matta, 2025) (Yusoff, et al., 2025) (Kushnir, 2024).

Young users are especially attuned to visual norms and self-presentation strategies. Based on Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, individuals actively curate their appearances to shape the social impressions others have of them. On TikTok, this process is intensified by easily accessible tools that allow users to modify their facial features, enhance their bodies, stylize their environments, and align themselves with global visual trends. Engaging in dances, challenges, gestures, and meme formats fosters a sense of aesthetic belonging, while simultaneously encouraging comparisons with peers and influencers. These practices represent an ongoing negotiation between authenticity and visual conformity, particularly among young people navigating both global and local identities.

Frequent encounters with idealized representations can heighten social comparison and feelings of inadequacy (Derbaix, et al., 2025). Additionally, the fast pace of digital platforms—characterized by constant visual novelty, notifications, and intense stimulation—can overwhelm cognitive processing, resulting in fatigue and difficulty maintaining attention (Devi & Singh, 2023). Algorithmically optimized content streams can encourage compulsive viewing behaviors, often referred to as "doomscrolling," making it increasingly difficult to disengage from screens (Yusoff, et al., 2025). Despite appearing socially connected, excessive engagement with visual platforms can displace offline interactions and contribute to feelings of loneliness (Smith & Alheneidi, 2023).

2.3. Algorithmic Curation and Visual Experience

Algorithmic curation has become a defining feature of contemporary digital platforms, shaping how visual content is selected, organized, and encountered by users. In this context, the concept of algorithmic visuality can serve as a lens for understanding how visually curated environments may influence user perception and engagement (Kafer & Quick, 2023). Rather than referring to a directly measurable system within this study, algorithmic visuality is considered as a theoretical framework that helps explain users' experiences of continuous and personalized visual content flows (Alpaslan & Delibalta, 2025).

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Recommendation systems operate by organizing content based on user interactions, creating tailored streams of images and videos that can influence attention, aesthetic preferences, and patterns of engagement. Instead of encountering content randomly, users navigate environments structured by ongoing feedback loops, in which past behaviors inform future content exposure. Scholars such as Crawford and Paglen (2021), Gillespie (2014) and Bucher (2018) emphasize that algorithms function as visibility regulators, shaping what becomes more prominent within digital environments.

From a visual communication perspective, these processes can be understood as contributing to a dynamic visual experience in which certain aesthetic styles, formats, and visual conventions become more visible and repeatable. Rather than determining user behavior directly, algorithmic systems may influence how visual content is encountered, interpreted, and engaged with over time.

From a design perspective, the interaction between content curation and visual aesthetics creates an environment that supports continuous engagement. Features such as looping videos, infinite scrolling, and visually appealing formats contribute to sustained attention by minimizing interruption points. In this sense, the platform can be understood as a visually structured content environment where design elements and content flow work together to shape user experience (Manovich, 2013).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative, descriptive survey design to examine how young people in Côte d'Ivoire perceive the emotional and social impacts of TikTok within a visually oriented and content-driven platform environment. A cross-sectional approach was adopted to explore patterns of use and self-reported perceptions at a specific point in time, rather than to establish causal relationships. The survey design enables the identification of subjective emotional responses and social experiences emerging within a visually structured, engagement-oriented digital platform.

The research was conducted between August 2024 and December 2024 and involved 205 young TikTok users residing in Côte d'Ivoire. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Eligibility criteria required respondents to be active TikTok users aged 18 to 27 with regular engagement on the platform. This age group was selected due to its high exposure to visually dominant social media environments and the developmental relevance of identity formation, peer comparison, and digital self-presentation during this life stage.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed in accordance with existing literature on social media engagement, visual culture, and user experience. The questionnaire items were developed based on existing literature on social media engagement,

visual culture, and user experience. While some items were adapted from previous studies, others were specifically developed in line with the objectives of this research. The questionnaire consisted of four main sections: demographic characteristics; TikTok usage patterns (including duration of use and daily time spent); motivations for engaging with content; and perceived emotional and social effects associated with platform use. The section addressing perceived negative outcomes included statements related to increased feelings of anxiety or depression, experiences of cyberbullying, compulsive usage tendencies, and feelings of isolation or loneliness. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. The instrument was designed to capture subjective perceptions rather than clinically diagnosable psychological conditions. The internal consistency of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, which indicated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.78$).

Content validity was ensured by aligning the questionnaire with established theoretical frameworks, including social comparison theory, visual communication studies, and user experience research. The study remains descriptive and perception-based, aiming to identify patterns in how users interpret and emotionally experience the platform environment.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, primarily frequency distributions and percentage analyses, to identify dominant patterns of platform use and users' self-reported perceptions. Rather than testing causal hypotheses, the analysis focuses on observable trends within the sample.

It should be noted that this study does not directly measure or analyze algorithmic systems. Instead, algorithmic structures are considered as part of the broader platform environment within which user perceptions are formed. Therefore, algorithmic influence is approached indirectly through users' experiences and interpretations rather than through computational or infrastructural analysis.

Following the statistical analysis, the findings were interpreted through theoretical perspectives related to visual communication, aesthetic response, and digital youth identity formation. This interpretive approach enables connecting empirical observations with broader discussions of how platform environments may influence engagement, attention, and emotional experience.

The research adhered to institutional ethical standards and received ethical approval from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (BAYEK) of European University of Lefke on 26 August 2024 (Approval No: BAYEK048.03) prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by not collecting any identifying information. The study focuses solely on self-reported emotional and social experiences and

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does not aim to provide clinical diagnoses. All data were used exclusively for academic purposes and stored securely.

4.FINDINGS

4.1. Demographics & Usage

Table 1 outlines the participants' demographic characteristics, highlighting TikTok's status as a platform primarily used by young people. The data show a higher proportion of female users, which aligns with previous research indicating greater engagement among women with visually aesthetic platforms that focus on self-representation, beauty filters, and lifestyle imagery. The age distribution further confirms that TikTok is predominantly utilized by late adolescents and young adults, a demographic particularly interested in visual experimentation and identity expression.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 205)

Age	Male		Female		Total	
	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
15-19	26	12.7	30	14.6	56	27.3
20-22	23	11.2	47	22.9	70	34.1
23-25	12	5.9	31	15.1	43	21.0
26 and above	10	4.9	26	12.7	36	17.6
Total	71	34.6	134	65.4	205	100

Table 2 details the duration of TikTok usage among participants, providing insights into how long they have been active on the platform. The results demonstrate that TikTok adoption in Côte d'Ivoire is relatively recent but has grown rapidly. More than half of the participants (51.2%) reported using TikTok for approximately 3 years, while 25.9% had been active for 2 years and 14.6% for 4 years. In contrast, a tiny proportion of respondents (1.5%) reported using TikTok for over 5 years. This distribution suggests that TikTok's popularity among young people in Côte d'Ivoire has grown mainly over the last three to four years. The predominance of medium-term users indicates that most participants have gained sufficient experience with the platform's visual interface, content-delivery algorithms, and aesthetic conventions to form informed opinions about its emotional and social impacts. From a visual communication standpoint, this sustained exposure helps users become familiar with TikTok's graphic rhythms, trend cycles, and interface logic, which are essential for understanding their reported engagement patterns and perceptions.

Table 2: Duration of TikTok Use (N = 205)

Year	Male		Female		Total	
	Frequency (n)	**Percentage (%)**	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
1 year	7	3.4	7	3.4	14	6.8
2 years	23	11.2	30	14.6	53	25.9
3 years	31	15.1	74	36.1	105	51.2
4 years	8	3.9	22	10.7	30	14.6
More than 5 years	2	1.0	1	0.5	3	1.5

Table 3 illustrates the time participants spend on TikTok each day. Daily usage patterns reveal intensive engagement, with the majority of participants spending more than three hours per day on the platform. Such extended usage may be associated with features of the platform environment, including continuous content flow and interface design characteristics. Together, these elements create a continuous visual flow that encourages prolonged viewing. Additionally, female users are more prevalent in the higher usage categories, suggesting a stronger engagement with visually driven trends and self-presentation practices.

Table 3: Daily Time Spent on TikTok (N = 205)

Time	Male		Female		Total	
	Frequency (n)	**Percentage (%)**	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
1-2 hours	10	4.9	10	4.9	20	9.8
3-5 hours	33	16.1	35	17.1	68	33.2
6-11 hours	23	11.2	65	31.7	88	42.9
12 hours and above	5	2.4	24	11.7	29	14.1

4.2 Motivations for TikTok Use

Table 4 outlines the motivations for TikTok usage among young people in Côte d'Ivoire. The findings indicate that TikTok primarily serves as an aesthetic and recreational visual platform rather than an informational or utilitarian medium. The most significant reason for engagement was following trends related to personal interests, with 73.2% of participants answering "Yes," and 7.3% responding "Absolutely Yes." This result underscores TikTok as a space for collective aesthetic participation, where visual gestures, styles, movements, and editing conventions circulate rapidly, fostering a shared sense of belonging.

Table 4: Reasons for TikTok Usage Among Young People in Côte d'Ivoire (N = 205)

Reasons	Absolutely No		No		No idea		Yes		Absolutely Yes	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Watching my friends live	9	4.4	68	33.2	3	1.5	116	56.6	9	4.4
Watching the lives of celebrities	17	8.3	70	34.1	9	4.4	102	49.8	7	3.4
To follow the political situation in the country	14	6.8	109	53.2	9	4.4	59	28.8	14	6.8
Promoting and running a business	11	5.4	106	51.7	8	3.9	72	35.1	8	3.9
To follow the trends about my interests	7	3.4	26	12.7	7	3.4	150	73.2	15	7.3
Just for fun	3	1.5	54	26.3	10	4.9	126	61.5	12	5.9

Entertainment also emerged as a key motivation. A substantial portion of participants (61.5% answered "Yes," and 5.9% replied "Absolutely Yes") indicated they use TikTok "just for fun." From the perspective of visual communication, this notion of fun goes beyond mere leisure; it reflects the visual pleasure and sensory stimulation generated by rhythm, motion, performance, transitions, and richly visual imagery. These findings suggest that entertainment on TikTok is closely intertwined with aesthetic experiences, as users are continuously exposed to visually engaging content designed to capture attention and elicit emotional responses.

Social motivations on TikTok are primarily visually oriented. More than half of participants (56.6%) reported using TikTok to watch live content from friends, while 49.8% reported engaging with live content from celebrities. This trend highlights the significance of aspirational aesthetics, peer-driven visual storytelling, and curated lifestyle imagery. On TikTok, social interaction primarily occurs through images and performances rather than text-based communication, reinforcing the platform's identity as a distinctly visual environment that emphasizes self-presentation and visual comparison.

In contrast, interest in political or business-related content is relatively low. Over half of the respondents indicated that they do not use TikTok to follow political developments or to promote and manage a business. This finding supports the idea that TikTok's primary

appeal to young users lies in visual expression, aesthetic engagement, and recreational participation rather than in informational or commercial use.

Overall, the motivations identified in this study position TikTok as a visually driven platform where aesthetic trends, sensory enjoyment, and visual social interactions influence engagement. These motivations are vital for understanding how prolonged exposure to TikTok's visual environment may shape young users' emotional and social experiences.

4.3 Perceived Negative Effects of TikTok Use

Table 5 presents participants' perceptions of the negative emotional and social effects associated with TikTok use. Overall, the findings indicate that most respondents did not link their TikTok engagement to severe emotional or social difficulties. However, a notable minority reported experiences of emotional discomfort, cyberbullying, compulsive use, and social isolation. These responses are seen as subjective emotional reactions to a visually structured and algorithmically driven platform, rather than indicators of psychological disorders.

Table 5: Negative Effects of TikTok on Young People in Côte d'Ivoire (N = 205)

Negative effects	Absolutely No		No		No idea		Yes		Absolutely Yes	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
TikTok's visual content increases my feelings of depression and anxiety	15	7.3	143	69.8	16	7.8	23	11.2	8	3.9
I have experienced cyberbullying in TikTok	18	8.8	141	68.8	12	5.9	29	14.1	5	2.4
I find myself addicted to using TikTok	7	3.4	108	52.7	19	9.3	64	31.2	7	3.4
TikTok contributes to my feelings of isolation and/or loneliness	12	5.9	130	63.4	25	12.2	33	16.1	5	2.4

Regarding emotional well-being, most participants (69.8%) reported that TikTok content did not increase their feelings of depression or anxiety. However, a minority of respondents (15.1%, combining "Yes" and "Absolutely Yes") reported heightened emotional discomfort. From a visual algorithm perspective, this response may be related to exposure to visually rich and highly stylized content environments. Such aesthetic hierarchies can influence self-perception and emotional responses, particularly among young users navigating identity formation in visually competitive environments.

The experiences of cyberbullying among participants followed a similar trend. While the majority (68.8%) reported no experiences of cyberbullying, 16.5% admitted to encountering

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it on TikTok. Given the platform's visual nature, cyberbullying often manifests in forms that involve visual content, such as mocking duets, edited responses, appearance-focused commentary, unwanted stitches, and public visual comparisons. These practices raise ethical concerns in participatory visual communication, where visibility and performance can become tools of exclusion or humiliation.

Perceptions of addiction-like behavior were notably significant among users. Although more than half of the participants (52.7%) reported not feeling addicted to TikTok, a considerable proportion (34.6%) reported feeling compelled to use the platform more than they intended. These patterns of engagement associated with the platform's interface structure and continuous content flow. Features like endless scrolling, looping videos, rapid visual transitions, and personalized content recommendations encourage prolonged engagement by sustaining attention and minimizing natural stopping points.

A smaller but significant segment of the sample reported feelings of social isolation. While 63.4% of participants disagreed that TikTok contributed to loneliness, 18.5% felt that the platform intensified their feelings of isolation. These perceptions may be associated with passive content consumption, visual comparison, and exposure to curated representations of social life. In these situations, involvement in an aesthetic community may paradoxically increase feelings of disconnection instead of fostering a sense of belonging.

Overall, these findings suggest that user experiences within visually mediated communication environments vary across individuals. Rather than indicating uniform effects, the results highlight differences in how users perceive emotional and social outcomes. These perceptions appear to be associated with patterns of platform use, exposure to visual content, and engagement with the platform environment. The findings emphasize that users' emotional and social responses should be understood as subjective interpretations shaped within a visually rich media context.

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate how young people in Côte d'Ivoire perceive the emotional and social effects of TikTok within the broader context of its visual communication environment. Although TikTok has been widely discussed in global research as a platform with potential negative implications for youth well-being, this study's findings indicate that most participants do not perceive it as significantly harmful. However, a notable minority reported experiences related to anxiety, cyberbullying, compulsive use, and loneliness. This divergence between user perceptions and concerns, highlighted in the existing literature, provides insight into how TikTok's environment is interpreted and normalized by its users.

TikTok appears to be integrated into many users' everyday routines, with participants reporting consistent engagement over several years. Activities such as watching friends, following trends, and participating in challenges are often perceived as ordinary social practices rather than as externally influenced behaviors. This normalization may be associated with a reduced tendency to critically evaluate the platform's potential impacts, including emotional fatigue or prolonged use.

The findings suggest a possible gap between users' perceived experiences and the broader implications discussed in previous research. While many participants describe their use as entertaining and trend-oriented, some report emotional discomfort and difficulty disengaging. This observation aligns with studies in visual communication and media research, which suggest that visually engaging and immersive environments may contribute to the normalization of prolonged engagement, potentially reducing users' awareness of negative experiences.

In this context, platform characteristics such as continuous content flow, personalized recommendations, and visually appealing formats may contribute to sustained engagement. Rather than being directly controlled by underlying systems, user experiences may be shaped through ongoing interaction with a structured content environment. Previous research (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014) suggests that such systems can influence visibility and attention patterns, thereby indirectly affecting how users interpret their experiences.

Gender-based differences observed in the findings highlight variations in engagement patterns. Female participants were more likely to report extended usage durations, which may be associated with stronger engagement with visually oriented content, self-presentation practices, and aesthetic trends. However, it is also possible that emotional experiences related to these practices are not fully expressed, particularly when visual participation is perceived as socially positive or empowering.

Social desirability and identity management may have influenced participants' responses. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, individuals tend to maintain a favorable public image, which may limit their willingness to report negative experiences such as emotional distress or compulsive use. As a result, self-reported data may reflect both actual perceptions and socially shaped responses.

Overall, the findings suggest that the absence of strong negative perceptions does not necessarily indicate the absence of negative experiences. Instead, the results suggest a possible disconnect between user awareness and lived experience in visually rich platform environments. These perceptions may be associated with patterns of use, exposure to visual content, and engagement with platform features. From a visual communication perspective, this highlights the importance of examining how design elements, aesthetic norms, and content structures shape the user experience. By situating TikTok within this broader

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framework, the study contributes to understanding how visually mediated platforms influence youth engagement and perception.

CONCLUSION

This study explores how young people in Côte d'Ivoire perceive the emotional and social effects of TikTok, examining these perceptions through a visual communication perspective. While global discussions often emphasize the potential negative impacts of TikTok on mental health, addictive behaviors, and social relationships, the findings of this study indicate that most participants do not perceive the platform as significantly harmful. Instead, TikTok is primarily experienced as a space for entertainment, trend participation, and visually mediated social interaction.

Importantly, the absence of strong negative perceptions should not be interpreted as the absence of negative experiences. Rather, the findings suggest that certain characteristics of the platform environment, including continuous content flow, aesthetic presentation, and personalized content exposure, may contribute to prolonged engagement in ways that are not always critically recognized by users. Within such environments, emotional responses may develop gradually and may not always be explicitly acknowledged.

The study highlights the role of cultural and social context in shaping user perceptions. In line with Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, individuals may be less inclined to report negative experiences that conflict with their desired self-image, particularly within visually performative digital environments. This may help explain why high levels of platform use coexist with relatively low levels of perceived harm.

From a visual communication perspective, the findings underscore the importance of understanding how design elements, aesthetic norms, and content structures shape the user experience. The study also emphasizes the need to strengthen digital and visual literacy, encouraging users to develop greater awareness of how platform environments influence engagement and perception.

Finally, this research points to the need for further studies that combine perception-based approaches with alternative methodologies to better understand the relationship among platform design, user experience, and digital well-being. It also highlights the importance of exploring the ethical dimensions of design in visually mediated digital environments.

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Ethics Committee Approval

This study was approved by the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (BAYEK) of European University of Lefke on 26 August 2024 (Approval No: BAYEK048.03).

Etik Kurul Onayı

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