The Role of TikTok in Hoax Dissemination and Its Impact on Adolescent Mental Health

Tessalonika Theresia Cinthya Kasih Hutajulu[1], Najmi Levina[2]

[1,2]Sains Informasi, Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

Email: *tessalonikahutajulu10@gmail.com, najmilevina@gmail.com*

Abstract

The rapid development of social media, especially the TikTok application, has significantly influenced how teenagers consume information. This study aims to examine TikTok's role in the spread of hoaxes and its impact on adolescent mental health. A non-participatory observation method was used to analyze TikTok content related to mental health and potentially misleading information. Findings show that many contents lack scientific basis and often promote self-diagnosis narratives without professional validation. Teenagers tend to accept information at face value without verification, potentially worsening their psychological condition. Continuous exposure to hoaxes and social comparison amplified by TikTok's algorithm increases the risk of stress, anxiety, and depression. Low digital literacy is a key factor that makes teenagers vulnerable to misinformation on this platform. This study highlights the importance of improving digital literacy and controlling information exposure to minimize negative mental health impacts on adolescents.

Keywords: TikTok, Hoaxes, Mental Health, Teenagers, Digital Literacy

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information technology in recent decades has significantly influenced nearly every aspect of our lives, including how we communicate, work, and seek entertainment. One notable result of this technological advancement is the emergence of various social media platforms that have become an integral part of daily life, particularly among younger generations. One of the most popular platforms among teenagers today is TikTok, as evidenced by its approximately 500 million downloads on the Google Play Store.

This short-form video-based application allows users to create, share, and watch a wide variety of creative videos that can be enhanced with music, challenges, and appealing visual filters. TikTok has transformed the way adolescents interact in the digital world and, in many cases, has also influenced their behavior in everyday life. With its highly interactive features, TikTok facilitates the rapid spread of information, ranging from educational content to potentially misleading or false information.

On the positive side, the platform can serve as a medium for mental health education. Numerous accounts focusing on psychological behavior regularly share tips and information on how to manage stress, anxiety, and various mental health issues. This contributes to raising awareness among adolescents about the importance of maintaining mental well-being. However, excessive use of TikTok can also produce negative consequences. One example is the phenomenon of *social comparison*, the habitual tendency to compare oneself to others, which often arises while scrolling through content. This can lead to feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and even depression, especially among users who spend more than three hours per day on the platform. In addition, TikTok has also become a medium for the spread of hoaxes, which may adversely affect adolescents' psychological well-being. Research indicates that exposure to hoaxes and hate speech on social media can lead to anxiety, frustration, and even trauma among teenagers (Thulhidjah, 2024).

TikTok is not immune to the proliferation of hoaxes or misleading information. In the context of mental health, such hoaxes, often disguised as helpful tips or advice, can exacerbate adolescents' psychological conditions. For instance, false claims about self-diagnosis without scientific basis or invalid treatment suggestions may mislead teenagers in understanding their own mental health and delay the pursuit of appropriate professional help.

In some cases, hoaxes or hate speech disseminated via TikTok can trigger stress and emotional pressure. Continuous exposure to negative information, fake news, or provocative content may lead to mental fatigue, frustration, or trauma, particularly in the absence of adequate digital literacy skills and social support. A lack of digital literacy is a key factor explaining why hoaxes are often believed and shared among students. This is supported by interview findings indicating that many students tend to accept information at face value without verifying its accuracy (Thulhidjah, 2024).

The primary aim of this study is to comprehensively understand how the TikTok application contributes to the dissemination of hoaxes and its impact on adolescent mental health. In a fast-paced digital era, the flow of information through social media platforms such as TikTok significantly influences users' thought patterns and psychological conditions. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the extent to which TikTok serves as a medium for misleading information, as well as how such content is consumed, responded to, and affects adolescent mental well-being. Additionally, the research aims to assess adolescents' level of digital literacy, particularly their ability to filter and verify information received via social media.

This study is expected to contribute to the academic discourse on the impact of social media on mental health, particularly in the context of hoax dissemination on TikTok. Theoretically, the research may enrich existing literature concerning the relationship between digital information flow and adolescent psychological conditions in the technological age. Practically, the study's findings are anticipated to raise awareness among teenagers and the general public about the importance of critically evaluating information and understanding the psychological implications of consuming unhealthy social media content.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TikTok and the Dissemination of Information TikTok is a short-form video-based social media platform that has gained immense popularity among teenagers. Introduced in 2016 by the Chinese company ByteDance, the application has experienced rapid growth in user numbers. With more than one billion active users worldwide, TikTok has become one of the most influential digital platforms in the daily lives of the younger generation (Hendra et al., 2024). Originally recognized as an entertainment medium, TikTok now also functions as a channel for information dissemination. The platform's algorithm, which tailors content based on user preferences, allows information to spread quickly and broadly in a short amount of time. Through this application, users are increasingly encouraged to imitate and engage with content they find humorous or appealing (Ginting et al., 2021). Consequently, users are no longer passive viewers, but active participants in the production and distribution of information.

Hoaxes and Teen Information Literacy In the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian Dictionary), a hoax is defined as false information. Chen et al. (2014, as cited in Khairunnisa & Yuniati, 2023) describe a hoax as misleading and dangerous information that distorts human perception by presenting falsehoods as truth. Information literacy, on the other hand, encompasses the ability to recognize the need for information, to search for it, evaluate it, use it, and communicate it ethically (Himawan, 2014). Research by Sya'diyah and Anggraini (2020) found that low media literacy levels contribute to the spread of hoaxes. A lack of literacy makes it difficult to distinguish credible content amid the flood of online information (Simarmata et al., 2019). Therefore, insufficient information literacy may lead teenagers to receive and disseminate hoaxes without proper verification.

Adolescent Mental Health. According to Darajat (1983) (as cited in Rosmalina & Khaerunnisa, 2021), mental health refers to a body of knowledge and practice aimed at maximizing and utilizing one's potential, talents, and inherent traits to achieve happiness for oneself and others, while avoiding mental illness. Mental health issues are defined as an individual's inability to adapt to environmental demands and conditions, which can lead to specific impairments (Sarmini et al., 2023).

Mental health is especially crucial during adolescence, a transitional stage from childhood to adulthood marked by intense social, academic, and emotional pressures. It is a turbulent period, during which mood swings can occur rapidly (Rahmawaty et al., 2022). Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to mental health disorders such as stress, anxiety, and depression, largely due to identity exploration, hormonal changes, and increased pressure from their surroundings. If not properly addressed, these conditions may affect their quality of life, academic performance, and social relationships. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), at least one in seven adolescents globally experiences a mental health disorder. Unfortunately, many cases go undetected early due to a lack of awareness and insufficient support systems surrounding adolescent mental health.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a non-participant observation method, in which the researcher directly observes the activities of adolescent users on the TikTok platform without engaging or influencing the observed subjects. The observation focused on TikTok content appearing on the For You Page that relates to mental health issues and other types of information with potential hoax elements. The researcher recorded the types of content, dissemination patterns, user responses (such as comments and interaction counts), as well as the narratives constructed within the content.

In addition, observation was also conducted on adolescents' digital behavior through monitoring general TikTok usage patterns, including access duration, frequently viewed content types, and how adolescents respond to the information they encounter on the platform. Data were collected over a defined period and analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach to identify common patterns regarding the spread of hoaxes and their potential impact on adolescents' perceptions and psychological conditions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of non-participant observation on the TikTok platform, a significant number of mental health-related contents were found to lack clear scientific grounding. These contents are often framed through personal narrative styles, particularly focusing on mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and ADHD. Such narratives are typically delivered in an emotional and relatable storytelling format, capturing the attention of adolescents and prompting self-identification. Teen users who watch this type of content tend to immediately assume they are experiencing the same conditions without undergoing any professional diagnosis. Many express similar feelings in the comment sections, indicating a strong emotional response. The high volume of interactions, likes, comments, and shares, demonstrates that mental health topics are highly engaging among adolescents, even though the validity of the information is questionable.

TikTok's highly personalized algorithm presents users with content tailored to their interaction history. This leads to the continuous appearance of similar themes on users' For You Pages, forming what is known as an "echo chamber." In the context of hoax dissemination, this becomes a critical issue because users are repeatedly exposed to similar types of content, with limited exposure to alternative viewpoints or more credible sources. As a result, false information tends to become increasingly accepted as truth simply due to its repetition and familiarity.

Adolescents' digital behavior shows that they spend a considerable amount of time on TikTok each day. Observed users typically spend more than three hours per day browsing the platform. This prolonged exposure increases the likelihood of encountering hoaxes and content that may harm mental well-being. Many adolescents are emotionally affected by the content they consume, especially content that implicitly promotes social comparison, such as displays of luxury lifestyles, personal achievements, or idealized physical appearances. This often leads to feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction with oneself, and prolonged anxiety. The phenomenon of social comparison emerges as one of the most apparent psychological impacts resulting from adolescents' intensive engagement with TikTok content.

Table 1. TikTok Users Based on Age Group and Level of Parental Supervision

TIKTOK USER CATEGORY	AGE RANGE	PARENTAL SUPERVISION
Children	5-13 years	Highly required
Teenagers	13-20 years	Required
Adults	>21 years	Need to understand their own limits

In terms of age-appropriate usage, TikTok officially sets a minimum age requirement of 13 years old to access the platform. However, in practice, many children below this age threshold are still able to create accounts by manipulating their age information. Even among teenagers who meet the minimum age, there are insufficient restrictions on accessing content that may not be appropriate for their maturity level and emotional capacity. While TikTok provides parental control features such as *Family Pairing* and certain content filters, these tools are often neglected or underutilized by parents and guardians. As a result, the risk of exposure to harmful content, including mental health-related hoaxes, increases significantly, particularly among adolescents who lack adequate digital literacy skills.

Furthermore, it was found that teenagers rarely verify the information they receive. Most of them accept information at face value and often do not even check the provided sources, if available. Their limited digital literacy impairs their ability to distinguish between credible information and hoaxes. False claims about mental health, such as unsubstantiated methods to cope with depression or anxiety are widely circulated without any form of filtering. This poses a serious risk, as it can mislead users and prompt them to take inappropriate or even harmful steps in addressing their own psychological issues.

The psychological impact of hoax dissemination on TikTok is evident in the emotional responses displayed by users. Many adolescents report feeling mentally exhausted, experiencing overthinking, and even losing motivation after continuous exposure to unverified and negative content. In some cases, content containing hate speech or derogatory claims toward specific groups also triggers feelings of frustration and anger. Without adequate social support or digital skills to filter such information, adolescents become increasingly vulnerable to the psychological pressures imposed by social media.

These findings reinforce previous literature suggesting that social media, including TikTok, plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' perceptions of themselves and the world around them. The rapid flow of information on TikTok is not matched by users' capacity to critically evaluate what they consume. Consistent with the findings of Simarmata et al. (2019) and Sya'diyah & Anggraini (2020), low levels of information literacy contribute to the widespread dissemination of hoaxes. In this context, adolescents are the most vulnerable group, as they are in a developmental phase of identity formation and are highly susceptible to environmental influences, including those from digital spaces.

Table 2. Additional Observational Findings

ASPECT	ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONAL FINDINGS
Motivation for Accessing TikTok	Not solely for entertainment, but also to seek emotional and validation support from virtual communities.
Perception of Hoaxes	Many teenagers are unaware that the content they watch may contain hoaxes because it is emotionally framed and relatable.
Information Consumption Patterns	Teenagers tend to rely more on information from influencers or TikTok celebrities than from experts or official health institutions.
Dissemination Factors	TikTok's "duet" and "stitch" features accelerate the spread of misleading claims, as users can add personal narratives to existing content.
Peer Influence	Peers often serve as a source of account recommendations, reinforcing trust in unverified information shared within their social circles.

Overall, the results of the observation indicate that TikTok is not merely an entertainment platform, but also a medium of information that has a significant impact on adolescent mental health. When the flow of information is not properly regulated, the potential for psychological harm increases substantially. This presents a collective challenge for the platform itself, the government, educational institutions, and families to ensure that adolescents have access to healthy, accurate, and beneficial information, while also possessing the critical skills needed to filter information amidst the overwhelming stream of digital content.

CONCLUSION

Social media, including TikTok, has become an integral part of modern adolescent life. This platform functions not only as a source of entertainment but also as a medium for rapid and massive information dissemination. In this context, TikTok's role as an information agent is twofold: on one hand, it offers educational value and raises awareness of important issues such as mental health; on the other, it can serve as a source of misinformation or hoaxes that negatively affect users' psychological well-being.

The findings of this study reveal that hoaxes on TikTok are often wrapped in personal and emotional narratives that easily capture the empathy and attention of adolescents. Unfortunately, much of this content lacks scientific foundation and can be misleading. The phenomena of self-diagnosing and overreliance on unverified information pose serious challenges to safeguarding adolescent mental health. This issue is further exacerbated by TikTok's algorithm, which reinforces echo chambers and social comparison, increasing adolescents' vulnerability to psychological pressures such as anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, and depression.

One of the root causes of this problem is the low level of digital literacy among adolescents. They often lack the skills necessary to critically assess and filter information. This issue demands serious attention from various stakeholders, educational institutions, families, government bodies, and social media platforms, who must collaborate in building a safe and healthy digital ecosystem. Digital literacy education should be a top priority, implemented both through formal schooling and widespread public awareness campaigns. Therefore, efforts to prevent the spread of hoaxes and protect adolescent mental health cannot be carried out in isolation. A multidisciplinary and collaborative approach is required, encompassing education, regulation, and oversight of social media usage. Moving forward, it is hoped that the younger generation will not only become informed consumers of digital content but also intelligent, critical, and responsible digital users. This study offers an initial overview that can serve as a foundation for future research on the psychological effects of social media on adolescents and the importance of educational interventions in an ever-evolving digital era.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Aisyaroh, N., Hudaya, I., & Supradewi, R. (2022). Trend penelitian kesehatan mental remaja di indonesia dan faktor yang mempengaruhi: literature review. *Scientific Proceedings of Islamic and Complementary Medicine*, *1*(1), 41-51.

Adawiyah, D. P. R. (2020). Pengaruh penggunaan aplikasi tiktok terhadap kepercayaan diri remaja di kabupaten sampang. *Jurnal komunikasi*, *14*(2), 135-148.

Thulhidjah, M., Hilmiah, M., & Nurdyansa. (2024). Perilaku Penyebaran Berita Hoax dan Hate Speech di Kalangan Mahasiswa di Media Sosial Instagram. *CORE: Journal of Communication Science*, *2*(2), 8-16.

Firamadhina, F. I. R., & Krisnani, H. (2020). Perilaku generasi Z terhadap penggunaan media sosial TikTok: TikTok sebagai media edukasi dan aktivisme. *Share: Social Work Journal*, *10*(2), 199-208.

Hendra, H., Zailani, M. H. Z., Asharudin, E. N., Ibrahim, N. H., Hafizam, E. N. F. N., Jamri, M. H., & Mustofa, M. U. (2024). Pengaruh Media Sosial Tiktok Dalam Isu Kesehatan Mental Di Malaysia. *Sosioglobal: Jurnal Pemikiran dan Penelitian Sosiologi*, *8*(2), 185-197.

Ginting, Richard & Dirgantari, Ni & Sawitri, Ni. (2020). Perilaku Informasi Pengguna Tiktok Di Era Keterbukaan Informasi.

Khairunnisa, M., & Yuniati, Y. (2023, August). Pengaruh Pemahaman Literasi Media terhadap Informasi Berita Hoaks Undang-Undang Cipta Kerja Omnibus Law di Media Sosial pada Mahasiswa Unisba. In *Bandung Conference Series: Islamic Broadcast Communication* (Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 366-370).

Nisa', I. S., Ni'mah, L., & Nurroiffah, A. A. (2025). Tinjauan Hukum terhadap Dampak Kecanduan TikTok terhadap Kesehatan Mental Remaja: Studi Kasus di Kalangan Pelajar. *Jurnal Riset Multidisiplin dan Inovasi Teknologi*, *3*(01), 73-82.

Prasetyo, A. E. (2021). Edukasi mental health awareness sebagai upaya untuk merawat kesehatan mental remaja dimasa pandemi. *JE (Journal of Empowerment)*, *2*(2), 261-269.

Simarmata, J., Iqbal, M., Hasibuan, M. S., Limbong, T., & Albra, W. (2019). Hoaks dan media sosial: saring sebelum sharing. *Yayasan Kita Menulis*, *1*(1), 1-18.

Sya'diyah, K., & Anggraini, R. (2021). Pengaruh literasi media terhadap perilaku penyebaran hoax di kalangan generasi Z. *KOMUNIDA*, 142-159.

Syahda, Q. F., & Sitorus, M. Pengaruh Cyberbullying Terhadap Kesehatan Mental Remaja: Pendekatan Pancasila Sebagai Solusi.

Himawan, D. (2014). Pengantar literasi informasi.

Rosmalina, A., & Khaerunnisa, T. (2021). Penggunaan media sosial dalam kesehatan mental remaja. *Prophetic: Professional, Empathy, Islamic Counseling Journal*, *4*(1), 49-58.

Rahmawaty, F., Silalahi, R. P., & Mansyah, B. (2022). Faktor-Faktor yang Mempengaruhi Kesehatan Mental pada Remaja: Factors Affecting Mental Health in Adolesents. *Jurnal Surya Medika (JSM)*, *8*(3), 276-281.

Sarmini, A. P., Maria, C., Syahrias, L., & Mustika, I. (2023). Penyuluhan Mental Health Upaya Untuk Meningkatkan Kesehatan Mental Remaja. *Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat*, *6*(1).