# Unveiling the Influence of TikTok Dependency on University Students' Post-COVID-19 Health Protective Behavior

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## Abstract

In the post-COVID-19 era, Chinese university students have become more reliant on TikTok for health information, which has shaped their health-related behavior. In order to investigate how university students' reliance on health information on TikTok influenced their health protective behaviors in response to COVID-19, a survey questionnaire was designed to measure the following four constructs: TikTok dependency, health information seeking, TikTok trust, and health Protective behavior. A total of 426 respondents in China participated in the survey and the data was analyzed through structural equation modeling (SEM). The findings indicate that respondents who have higher TikTok dependency tend to have higher post-COVID-19 health protective behavior. Study results also found that health information seeking and TikTok trust partially mediate the relationship between TikTok dependency and post-COVID-19 health protective behavior separately. To conclude, the results highlight the important role of TikTok as a social media platform for university students' post-COVID-19 health protective behavior in Wuhan of China.

## 1. Introduction

TikTok, as an emerging social media, is a short-form mobile video platform which allows its users to create videos and share them with the wider TikTok community. It has rapidly become popular with young people since its launch in 2017 (Li et al., 2021). The majority of viewed content is randomly selected from other people who have posted their video on TikTok rather than drawn from their friends, so TikTok generates a wider and more diverse audience than other social media platforms on the basis of this model. Videos are sorted into hashtags, with search results directly sorted by likes received per post (Falgoust et al., 2022).

In recent years, young people spend more and more time on their mobile phones in order to seek out new entertainment activities and means to stay connected, which drives frequent use of TikTok (Yang et al., 2023). The rapid expansion of the use of TikTok has provided individuals with a unique opportunity for seeking health-related information. Young adults have also been noted to be more inclined to seek information about both physical and psychological health on the Internet instead of utilizing other channels. Therefore, TikTok is regarded as a popular platform that people can turn to as a source of health information before visiting a doctor (Siegal et al., 2022). Due to the widespread usage of TikTok in China, scholars are starting to take notice of this app. With a large amount of time spent on TikTok, there is a great need to study young people's use behavior.

In order to protect themselves from COVID-19 in their daily lives, many people use TikTok to seek health-related information (Basch, Hillyer & Jaime, 2022). However, some research has shown that a lot of false information has spread on this platform, which may not help people adopt health-protective behaviors (Tam, Porter & Lee, 2022). The aim of this study is to better understand this issue by examining the connections between university students' TikTok reliance and their protective behavior. Furthermore, university students in Wuhan, China, where the disease has affected people the most severely, have not yet been included in the current research stream on the connection between TikTok use behavior and post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior. It is essential to conduct research to examine the relationship between TikTok dependency, health information-seeking behavior, TikTok trust, and post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior among TikTok's young adult users, given the platform's dominance in the Chinese social media market and its current rapid growth.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 TikTok Dependency and Post-COVID-19 Protective Behavior on TikTok

There are many terms used to describe dependency on media, such as media dependency and media addiction (LaRose, Lin & Eastin, 2003). On the other hand, according to some studies, media dependency is a relationship that shows how the objectives of social media users are dependent on the resources provided by the media (Sun, Rubin & Haridakis, 2008). Based on the definitions of media dependency, this study mainly focuses on TikTok dependency to understand how TikTok users' goals are fulfilled through the resources that TikTok affords. Specifically, TikTok provides information and guidance regarding infection prevention procedures and allows its users to stay up to date on the latest news about infectious disease outbreaks (Lui, 2023). As a result, TikTok has served as a crucial channel for providing individuals with up-to-date medical news so they can practice prevention at their convenience (Wijaya, Zakaria & Ida, 2022).

It is reported by Lui (2021) that, as one of the countries that have successfully contained COVID-19, China has offered reliable and valuable information on social media for public health lessons to fight against the pandemic. For example, a great number of Chinese social media users were exposed to COVID-19-related information from all kinds of digital media platforms, which also attached great importance to preventive behaviors and encouragement provided by using these social media tools through triggering their situation awareness as well as their fear (Feng & Tong, 2022). Therefore, in this study, TikTok dependency is expected to positively influence post-COVID-19 health protective behavior. The hypothesis is as follows:

H1. TikTok dependency is positively related to post-COVID-19 health protective behavior.

### 2.2 Health Information Seeking Behavior

Health information seeking has been defined as a sequence of interactions that not only reduce confusion about one's health condition but also help one develop a social and personal sense of health (Mills & Todorova, 2016). It is an important strategy for a great number of people to understand their health status and cope with their illness. TikTok is seen as a popular platform for people to turn to as a source of health information (Siegal et al., 2022). Hence, there are an increasing number of people who rely on TikTok to seek health information in their daily lives. It has been mentioned that social media plays an important role in shaping individuals' attitudes towards their COVID-19 protective behaviors. Further, when people use TikTok for health information seeking, it may lead them to protect themselves to avoid catching COVID-19 (Yang & Cao, 2022).

Health information-seeking behavior has been found to play a mediator role in previous research. For example, when people have COVID-19 symptoms, they are more inclined to seek online health information which in turn also increases their health anxiety (Li et al., 2023). Similar research has also mentioned that frequent social media use may lead to health information-seeking behavior while it also results in individuals' higher self-care behavior (Soroya, Rehman & Faiola, 2023). In this study, TikTok dependency is expected to positively influence university students' health information seeking behavior while seeking health information on TikTok may also influence their post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior. Therefore, the hypotheses are as follows:

H2. TikTok dependency is positively related to health information-seeking behavior on TikTok.

H3. Health information-seeking behavior on TikTok is positively related to post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior.

H4. Health information-seeking behavior mediates the relationship between TikTok dependency and post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior.

### 2.3 TikTok Trust

It has been demonstrated that individuals' use behavior and intentions on social media are greatly influenced by their level of trust in these platforms. When it comes to using social media, trust provides proof of who consumers may accept information from without further investigation and who they can trust to share information with (Tang & Liu, 2015). In this research, TikTok trust refers to individuals' confidence as well as reliance on the accuracy and credibility of the information shared on the platform (Maqableh et al., 2021).When users increase their dependency on TikTok, it is likely to reflect their trust in this social media platform (Marengo et al., 2021; Tang & Mahoney, 2019; Alivi, Ghazali & Ezhar, 2018). Meanwhile, trust has been deemed a crucial factor of individuals' COVID-19 protective behavior. It is believed to play an important role in users' sense of security and belongingness (Li et al., 2022). Hence, due to people's trust in TikTok, they tend to believe that the information shared on this platform can protect them from the disease.

Previous research has broadly investigated social media use and people's trust (Alivi, 2023), such as WeChat trust and Facebook trust (Li et al., 2019; Maqableh et al., 2021). However, adolescent and adult groups are identified as more active and heavier users of TikTok, especially in the post COVID-19 era. Given the current rapid growth of TikTok use

and its dominant role in the Chinese social media market, it is imperative to conduct research to investigate the relationship TikTok trust played between users' TikTok dependency and post-COVID-19 health protective behavior in China among TikTok young adult users. Higher levels of TikTok dependency are associated with increased trust in the platform, which in turn leads to a greater likelihood of engaging in post-COVID-19 health protective behavior. Therefore, the hypotheses are as follows:

H5. TikTok dependency is positively related to TikTok trust.

H6. TikTok trust is positively related to post-COVID-19 health protective behavior

H7. TikTok trust mediates the relationship between TikTok dependency and post-COVID-19 health protective behavior.

*2.4 Theoretical Framework*

Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach put out the media dependency theory in the 1970s. According to this theory, people rely on the media to meet their requirements for social contact, entertainment, and information (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). To provide an explanation for the research model, this study used the media dependency theory. Media plays an increasingly significant role in influencing people's attitudes and behaviors and more people rely on it as their main information source. In other words, university students have been using TikTok more frequently in recent years to get health-related information, and it is more likely that this knowledge will affect their post-COVID-19 protective behavior (Jung, 2017). In addition, higher levels of media dependency typically indicate that individuals trust the media to provide accurate and credible information for their health protective behavior (Vozab, Mihalec & Uremović, 2023). People are more likely to rely on TikTok for information related to their health when they believe it to be trustworthy and reliable. They believe that in TikTok short videos, there are expertise and resources to gather and disseminate information effectively, which will lead to their more health-related behavior. According to the proposed hypothesis, this study's research model was integrated (see Figure 1).
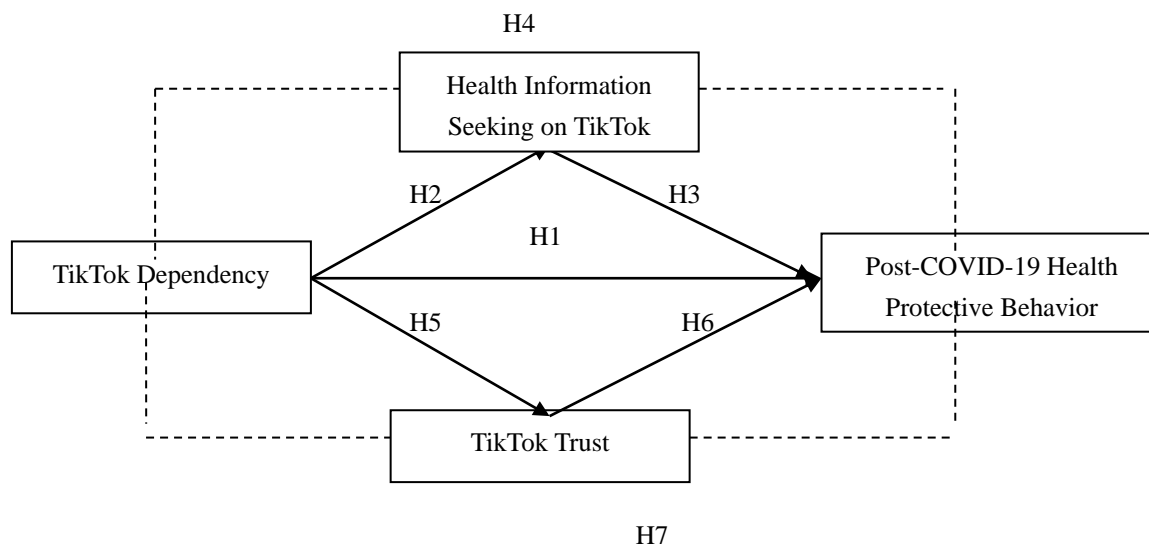


Figure1. Research Model

**3. Methodology**

Quantitative method was utilized in this research in order to examine the independent variables and dependent variable as well as its mediators. The target population of the current study is TikTok users among university students in Wuhan of China. The COVID-19 outbreak's original epicenter was Wuhan, the largest city in China's Hubei province. A number of pneumonia cases in Wuhan were confirmed by the Chinese Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in December 2019 (Cipolletta, Andreghetti & Mioni, 2022). Because they were directly impacted by the disease, researching Wuhan university students can shed light on how they sought out health information both during and after the outbreak. They can provide insight on how people looked for health information after the pandemic by sharing their experiences and activities. Hence, the survey was distributed to TikTok users among university students in Wuhan of China.

Further, cluster sampling was employed in this research. There are 13 administrative districts, namely Jiang an, Jianghan, Qiaokou, Hanyang, Wuchang, Qingshan, Hongshan, Caidian, Jiangxia, Huangpi, Xinzhou, Dongxihu, and Hannan, and 85 universities in Wuhan, including 54 public universities and 31 private universities. Due to the large population and many universities in Wuhan, in order to cover all the students in Wuhan, the researcher chooses one

university in each district, but there is no university in Jianghan district. Hence, a total of 12 universities are randomly selected. Besides, the researcher randomly select one faculty member from each selected university, and then one class member was randomly selected from each faculty member in each university, which is done by using random number generators. Therefore, a total of 426 students from the universities were randomly selected.

Besides, this study employed a self-completed five-point Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree) questionnaire. The contents centered on four constructs including: (1) TikTok dependency (Cronbach's alpha= 0.810) which was adapted from social media dependency and was measured with four items (Men & Tsai, 2013); (2) TikTok health information seeking scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.740) which was adapted from Reinfeld-Kirkman et al. (2010) and was measured with five items (3) TikTok trust scale (Cronbach's alpha= 0.763) which was adapted from social media trust scale   and was measured with seven items (Maqableh et al., 2021); (4) post-COVID-19 health protective behavior scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.830) which was adapted from Schneider et al. (2021) and was measured with seven items.

## 4. Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software 25.0, and the structural equation model (SEM) was used in the research to test the hypothesized model of the relationships between independent and dependent variables using Mplus8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2015). Table 1 presents demographic specifics of those who participated in the survey.

Table 1. Demographic information of the respondents (n = 426)

| Variable | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 190 | 44.6 |
| Female | 236 | 55.4 |
| Age | | |
| 18-20 | 176 | 41.31 |
| 21-23 | 122 | 28.64 |
| 24-26 | 72 | 16.9 |
| 26 and above | 56 | 13.15 |
| Marital status | | |
| Single | 385 | 90.38 |
| Married | 41 | 9.62 |
| Educational Background | | |
| Diploma | 112 | 26.29 |
| Bachelor | 235 | 55.16 |
| Postgraduate | 79 | 18.55 |
| Time Spent on TikTok (Hour) | | |
| Less than 1 | 25 | 5.86 |
| 1-3 | 98 | 23 |
| 4-6 | 221 | 51.89 |
| More than 6 | 82 | 19.25 |
| Weeks of using TikTok | | |
| Less than 10 weeks | 6 | 1.41 |
| 10-29 weeks | 15 | 3.52 |
| 30-50 weeks | 60 | 14.08 |
| More than 50 weeks | 345 | 80.99 |

### 4.1 Measurement Model

The connections between the underlying construct and the observable variables are described by the measurement model. The criteria of discriminant validity, convergent validity, and reliability are used to assess how adequate the measurement model is.

Table 2. Result of the measurement mode

| Construct | Items | Loading | CR | AVE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| TTD | TTD2 | 0.835 | 0.820 | 0.603 |
| | TTD3 | 0.752 | | |
| | TTD4 | 0.740 | | |
| HISB | HISB2 | 0.762 | 0.842 | 0.571 |
| | HISB3 | 0.758 | | |
| | HISB4 | 0.749 | | |
| | HISB5 | 0.754 | | |
| TTR | TTR2 | 0.753 | 0.873 | 0.534 |
| | TTR3 | 0.755 | | |
| | TTR4 | 0.735 | | |
| | TTR5 | 0.722 | | |
| | TTR6 | 0.677 | | |
| | TTR7 | 0.738 | | |
| PHPB | PHPB1 | 0.738 | 0.876 | 0.502 |
| | PHPB2 | 0.705 | | |
| | PHPB3 | 0.696 | | |
| | PHPB4 | 0.741 | | |
| | PHPB5 | 0.675 | | |
| | PHPB6 | 0.699 | | |
| | PHPB7 | 0.702 | | |

TTD1 = 0.086, TTR1 = 0.250 and HISB1 =0.282; **TTD:** TikTok Dependency; **HISB:** Health Information-seeking Behavior; **TTR:** TikTok Trust; **PHPB:** Post-COVID-19 Health-protective Behavior

Generally speaking, standardized factor loading should be higher than 0.60 (Bhattacherjee, 2001) but the value of items including TTD1 with a standardized factor loading of 0.086, TTR1 with a standardized factor loading of 0.250 and HISB1 with a standardized factor loading of 0.282, which is not acceptable. Therefore, item TTD1, item TTR1, and item HISB1 should be deleted due to the low loading in this study. Hence, as presented in Table2, in order to improve the composite reliability and AVE of the results, three indicators were removed from the model.

In terms of the reliability, composite reliability (CR) values were employed based on the principle set by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Referring to Table 2, all CR values exceeded the threshold of 0.70, with values ranging from 0.820 to 0.876 which is considered satisfactory. For convergent validity, all the reported average variance extracted (AVE) values are above the cut-off value 0.50 which is considered acceptable (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 3. Results of validity and reliability

| DIM | Discriminant Validity | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| TTD | *0.777* | | | |
| HISB | 0.328 | *0.756* | | |
| TTR | 0.342 | 0.112 | *0.731* | |
| PHPB | 0.581 | 0.459 | 0.455 | *0.709* |

**TTD:** TikTok Dependency; **HISB:** Health Information-seeking Behavior; **TTR:** TikTok Trust; **PHPB:** Post-COVID-19 Health-protective Behavior

To confirm discriminant validity, diagonal elements in a correlation matrix should possess higher values than the off-diagonal elements. As presented in Table3, the outcomes from the analysis in the research affirm good discriminant validity.
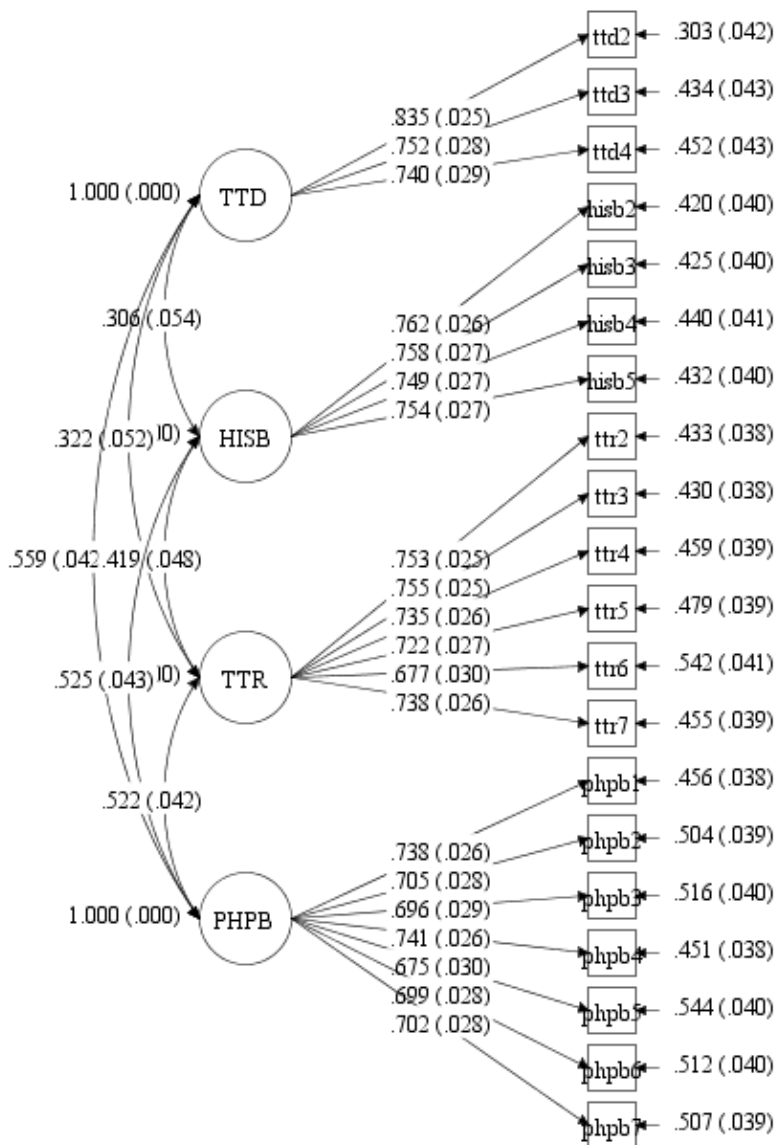
Figure 2. Measurement model

*4.2 Structural Model*

A structural model is a theoretical representation that illustrates the relationships between different constructs. In this research, the results indicated that the measurement model produced a good fit: ($\chi^2$ = 176.506, df = 165, p < 0.001; RMSEA = 0.013; CFI = 0.997; TLI = 0.996; SRMR = 0.064).

Table 4. Path Analysis of Research Model

| DV | IV | Path coefficients | S.E. | Est./S.E. | P-Value | $R^2$ | Test Results |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PHPB | TTD | 0.383 | 0.048 | 8.054 | *** | 0.493 | H1 Supported |
| | HISB | 0.291 | 0.049 | 5.923 | *** | | H3 Supported |
| | TTR | 0.301 | 0.050 | 6.065 | *** | | H6 Supported |
| HISB | TTD | 0.328 | 0.053 | 6.172 | *** | 0.108 | H2 Supported |
| TTR | TTD | 0.342 | 0.052 | 6.620 | *** | 0.117 | H5 Supported |

Note: ***p<0.001, **p<0.05. **TTD:** TikTok Dependency; **HISB:** Health Information-seeking Behavior; **TTR:** TikTok Trust; **PHPB:** Post-COVID-19 Health-protective Behavior

As shown in Table 4, the hypothesis H1 was supported that TikTok dependency is positively related to post-COVID-19 health protective behavior ($\beta$ = 0.383, *p < 0.001*). The hypothesis H3 that health information-seeking behavior on TikTok is positively related to post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior was supported ($\beta$ = 0.291, *p < 0.001*).

Moreover, the hypothesis H6 that TikTok trust is positively related to post-COVID-19 health protective behavior was also supported ($\beta = 0.301$, *p < 0.001*). In addition, the hypothesis H2 that TikTok dependency is positively related to health information seeking behavior on TikTok was supported ($\beta = 0.328$, p < 0.001) while the hypothesis H5 that TikTok dependency is positively related to TikTok trust was also supported ($\beta = 0.342$, p < 0.001)

The model's degree of variation was explained by $R^2$. In this research, referring to Table3, TikTok dependency, health information-seeking behavior on TikTok, and TikTok trust accounted for 49.3% of the variance in the post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior. TikTok dependency accounted for 10.8% of the variance in health information-seeking behavior on TikTok, while TikTok dependency accounted for 11.7% of the variance in TikTok trust.
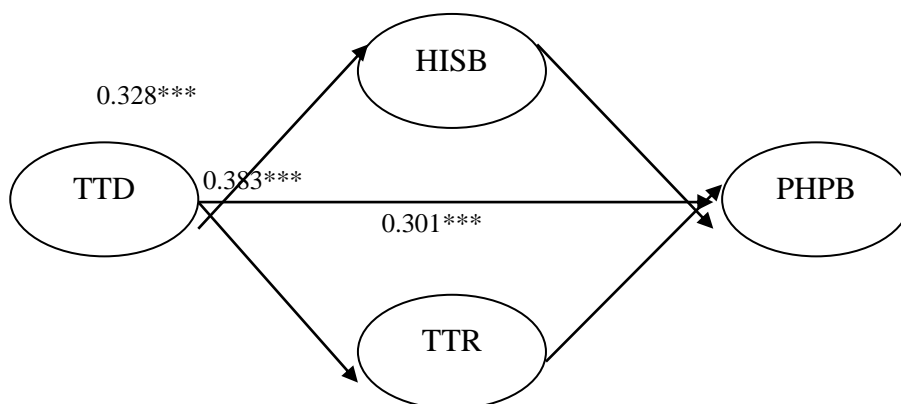


Figure 3. Path Diagram of the Final Model

Note: ***p<0.001, **p<0.05. **TTD:** TikTok Dependency; **HISB:** Health Information-seeking Behavior; **TTR:** TikTok Trust; **PHPB:** Post-COVID-19 Health-protective Behavior

Table 5. Standardized estimates and 95% confidence interval

| Path | Mediation effect | 95% Confidence Interval | | Test Results |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Lower | Upper | |
| TTD→HISB →PHPB | 0.093*** | 0.053 | 0.151 | H4Supported |
| TTD→TTR →PHPB | 0.094*** | 0.048 | 0.156 | H7Supported |

N = 426; ***p<0.001; **TTD:** TikTok Dependency; **HISB:** Health Information-seeking Behavior; **TTR:** TikTok Trust; **PHPB:** Post-COVID-19 Health-protective Behavior

Furthermore, the process by which one independent variable influences the change of a dependent variable is addressed by mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986). By using Mplus8, Table5 presented the results of the bootstrapping test. The 95% confidence interval of the mediation effect of health information-seeking behavior on TikTok with mediation effect 0.094, *p < 0.001*, between TikTok dependency and post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior is [0.053, 0.151]. Hence, the hypothesis H4 was supported. Moreover, the 95% confidence interval of the mediation effect of TikTok trust with mediation effect 0.094, *p < 0.001*, between TikTok dependency and post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior is [0.048, 0.156]. Therefore, the hypothesis H7 was supported. In addition, the direct relationship between health information-seeking behavior on TikTok and post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior is 0.362, *p < 0.001* with the 95% confidence interval [0.247, 0.479].

## 5. Discussion

The findings of the research indicated several significant relationships that make novel contributions to the understanding of the factors influencing university students' post-COVID-19 health-related information seeking in the context of TikTok use. First, this study found a positive relationship between TikTok dependency and individuals' health information-seeking behavior on TikTok. It suggests that university students who highly rely on TikTok are more like to have health protective behavior in the post COVID-19 era. In agreement with previous studies, social media use may influence individuals' adoption of health preventive behavior because the information on social media platform might trigger individuals' fear and anxiety (Oh, Lee & Han, 2021; Feng & Tong, 2022) and higher media exposure is more likely to enable university students adopt COVID-19 preventive behaviors (Mesch, Silva & Storopoli, 2022). The finding also aligns with media dependency theory, which examines individuals' dependency on social media platforms and their potential effects on behavior. When individuals frequently engage in social media use, faced with all varieties of information regarding the disease, they tend to have various health-related behaviors in the post COVID-19 era (Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

Besides, the mediation analysis revealed that health information-seeking behavior plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between TikTok dependency and post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior. The result suggests that university students who frequently engage in health information-seeking behaviors on TikTok are more likely to rely on the platform for protective behavior in recent years. Young people tend to rely on TikTok to fulfill their needs including their informational needs. They are more willing to search for information about health online in their daily life which is convenient and money-saving. When they obtain more useful information related to their health, they may pay more attention to their health and adopt health preventive behavior. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of health information-seeking behaviors in the relationship between social media use and individuals' health protective behavior (Soroya, Rehman & Faiola, 2023; Li et al., 2023).

In addition, this study also highlights the mediating role of TikTok trust in the relationship between TikTok dependency and post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior. Users who trust the information on TikTok may be more likely to actively participate in discussions, share health-related content, and seek validation from their social connections. This social interaction can further reinforce their use of TikTok for their health-protective behavior. Similar conclusions have been drawn in previous studies investigating the relationship between trust in social media platforms and online health-related behavior (Jin et al., 2021). As mentioned by previous researchers (Sun et al., 2014), trust in social media platforms as well as information from the platform indicates users' satisfaction, which can directly result in the continued intention of users of online social networking and also promote the participation of citizens in social media. When TikTok users are faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in the TikTok platform may enable them to foster a sense of security because they believe that the institutions are trying their best to provide the latest health-related information that can protect them from the pandemic.

## 6. Conclusion

This study revealed that university students who highly rely on TikTok are more likely to engage in health information-seeking behavior and trust TikTok which also leads to their post-COVID-19 health-protective behavior in the post pandemic era. This finding suggests that TikTok use plays an important role in individuals' health-protective behavior. This research makes contributions to the existing literature by investigating the relationships between TikTok dependency, health information-seeking behavior on TikTok, TikTok trust, and post-COVID-19 health protective behavior. By using media dependency theory in this research, this study offers important understandings of the underlying mechanisms influencing the health-protective behaviors of young people in the post-COVID-19 TikTok usage.

This study also provides valuable insights into the practical implications of the relationships among TikTok dependency, health information-seeking behavior on TikTok, TikTok trust, and post-COVID-19 health protective behavior. The identification of TikTok dependency as a significant predictor of health information-seeking behavior and TikTok trust, which also influences users' post-COVID-19 health protective behavior, highlights the need for targeted interventions and strategies. Together with social media companies, influencers, and content producers, policymakers and medical professionals can make sure that TikTok users have access to accurate and trustworthy health information. By leveraging the popularity and influence of TikTok, health campaigns can be designed to promote healthy protective behaviors and address misinformation related to COVID-19 and other health issues.

### Authors contributions

Dr Yang, Prof Hamedi, Dr Mumtaz, & Dr Zaliza were responsible for project administration; Dr Yang, Prof Hamedi, & Dr Zaliza were responsible for resources; Dr Yang, & Dr Mumtaz were responsible for methodology & writing–review & editing, validation, investigation, writing–original draft preparation, software & visualization, and formal analysis. All authors approved the final version of the article.

### Competing interests

Not applicable.

### Informed consent

Obtained.

**Ethics approval**

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

**Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

**Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

**Open access**

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