

From Entertainment to Education: A Phenomenological Study of Students' Self-Directed Learning Experiences with TikTok

Dari Hiburan Menuju Edukasi: Studi Fenomenologi Pengalaman Belajar Mandiri Siswa Menggunakan TikTok

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Abstract: *This study examines a common problem: adding digital technology to education does not always lead to real learning, a gap often called the “rich-technology, poor-pedagogy” phenomenon. Although students increasingly use social media platforms, most studies remain quantitative or focus on media development, and few capture how students themselves experience and make sense of these tools. This study aims to explore and describe in depth how senior high school students experience using TikTok as a self-directed learning resource. Using a qualitative phenomenological design based on Adrian van Kaam’s procedure, data were collected from eight purposively selected students at MAN 1 Yogyakarta through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation, with validity ensured through triangulation and member checking. The results show that students turn TikTok from an entertainment app into an effective tool for solving academic problems through short-video visualization. Learning is felt as enjoyable because of low academic pressure, relatable language, and easy access, in line with micro-learning. The study’s main contribution is a learner typology, comprising critical, pragmatic, and passive types, that links lived experience to the Technology Acceptance Model, showing that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use shape self-directed learning. The findings offer practical guidance for teachers to act as curators of valid digital content rather than as the sole source of knowledge.*

Keywords: self-directed learning; phenomenology; social media; micro-learning; TikTok

Abstrak: *Penelitian ini mengkaji permasalahan yang semakin muncul dalam pemanfaatan teknologi digital dalam pendidikan, yaitu bahwa penambahan teknologi tidak selalu menghasilkan proses pembelajaran yang bermakna. Kondisi ini sering disebut sebagai fenomena rich-technology, poor-pedagogy, ketika perkembangan teknologi tidak diikuti oleh pendekatan pedagogis yang tepat. Di tengah meningkatnya penggunaan media sosial oleh siswa, sebagian besar penelitian masih berfokus pada pendekatan kuantitatif atau pengembangan media, sementara kajian yang menggali secara mendalam pengalaman siswa dalam menggunakan media tersebut sebagai bagian dari proses belajar masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dan mendeskripsikan secara mendalam pengalaman siswa sekolah menengah atas dalam menggunakan TikTok sebagai sumber belajar mandiri. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi berdasarkan prosedur Adrian van Kaam. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur secara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi terhadap delapan siswa MAN 1 Yogyakarta yang dipilih secara purposif. Keabsahan data diperiksa melalui triangulasi dan member checking. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa*

siswa memanfaatkan TikTok tidak hanya sebagai media hiburan, tetapi juga sebagai sarana untuk membantu menyelesaikan permasalahan akademik melalui penyajian materi dalam bentuk video singkat yang mudah dipahami. Proses belajar melalui TikTok dirasakan lebih menyenangkan karena minim tekanan akademik, menggunakan bahasa yang dekat dengan keseharian siswa, dan mudah diakses, yang sejalan dengan konsep micro-learning. Kontribusi utama penelitian ini adalah ditemukannya tipologi siswa yang terdiri atas tipe kritis, pragmatis, dan pasif. Tipologi tersebut menghubungkan pengalaman belajar siswa dengan Technology Acceptance Model, yang menunjukkan bahwa persepsi terhadap kegunaan dan kemudahan penggunaan TikTok turut membentuk pengalaman belajar mandiri siswa. Temuan ini memberikan implikasi praktis bagi guru untuk berperan sebagai kurator yang membantu memilih dan memvalidasi konten digital yang kredibel, bukan hanya sebagai satu-satunya sumber pengetahuan bagi siswa.

Kata kunci: *pembelajaran mandiri; fenomenologi; media sosial; pembelajaran mikro; TikTok*

Introduction

The rapid growth of information and communication technology (ICT) in the twenty-first century has greatly changed the way people learn. Teachers are no longer the only source of knowledge; students are now encouraged to look for other learning resources, and education has shifted toward a student-centered model in which learners are free to find their own material (Rahayu et al., 2022; Aswan, 2023). In this change, social media platforms that were once used only for fun have started to become informal places for learning (Pratama Yendra et al., 2024). TikTok is a clear example. With more than one billion monthly active users, many of them of school age, it has become a big part of the daily life of Generation Z (Kemp, 2023; Elkatmış, 2024; Buzzetto-Hollywood & Quinn, 2024; Hu et al., 2022). An early observation at MAN 1 Yogyakarta revealed an interesting pattern. Even though the school provides good technology facilities, students often open TikTok to understand topics they find difficult, because its short videos are simple, visual, and easy to access anywhere. This shows that, for these students, TikTok is no longer just entertainment but has become an important informal learning resource. It also reflects a move toward self-directed learning, in which students deliberately choose the sources that best fit the way they like to learn (Knowles, 2005).

Several features make TikTok different from other platforms. First, its content follows the idea of micro-learning, presenting information in short and focused pieces that match Generation Z's habit of taking in information quickly (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024; Khlaif & Salha, 2021; Ding et al., 2023; Conde-Caballero et al., 2024). Second, its personalization algorithm, working through the For You Page, keeps showing more relevant material and supports a kind of unplanned, incidental learning (Nguyen & Diederich, 2023). Third, the habit of watching many short videos has slowly changed the way students take in information, shifting them from passive text-based learning toward more active visual and interactive learning.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is a helpful way to understand why students adopt TikTok. TAM explains that two main factors perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use decide whether people accept a technology (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Recent studies confirm that this model still works well for social media, showing that usefulness, ease of use, and attitudes strongly affect how Generation Z decides to use TikTok (Khoiriah et al., 2023; Thi Nguyet Trang et al., 2025). Evidence from Indonesia also shows that TikTok's simple design makes it easy for teachers and students to use it as a learning tool (Kemal et al., 2024).

Even with this growing body of research, two gaps remain. First, most earlier studies have used quantitative methods or focused on developing media, so they explain whether TikTok works but not what the learning experience actually means to students. Second, although the

Technology Acceptance Model is widely used, it is rarely combined with a phenomenological reading of students' own voices, leaving its two core constructs perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use described in numbers rather than in lived experience. Addressing these gaps, the present study makes a twofold contribution: it provides phenomenological evidence of how usefulness and ease of use are actually felt during learning, and it proposes a learner typology that turns rich qualitative data into a usable framework for educators. Accordingly, this study is guided by three research questions: (1) How do students experience using TikTok for learning? (2) How aware are students of the way they use TikTok for learning? (3) Why do students choose TikTok as a self-directed learning resource?

Research Method

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to capture how students personally experience using TikTok as an informal learning tool. Phenomenology was chosen because it focuses on understanding lived experience from the students' own point of view, rather than measuring or broadly explaining a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Sinfield et al., 2023). This choice also fits the shift in educational technology from teaching toward facilitating learning, in which the meaning that students give to their learning is the main focus.

The participants were eight students at MAN 1 Yogyakarta, chosen purposively based on one criterion: they actively used TikTok for self-directed learning. To protect their privacy, each participant was given a code from R1 to R8. They came from different grades and majors, and their daily smartphone use ranged from two to eleven hours. Their details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Code	Grade	Major	Sex	Media Exposure
R1	XI	Social Science	Female	High
R2	XI	Social Science	Male	High
R3	XII	Language	Female	High
R4	XII	Language	Female	High
R5	XII	Language	Male	Moderate
R6	XII	Language	Male	Moderate
R7	X	General	Male	Low
R8	X	General	Female	High

The researcher was the main instrument, helped by an interview guide and recording devices. Data were collected over three months (January–April 2026) through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation, after obtaining informed consent. An informal, conversational style was used so that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences naturally.

The data were analyzed using Adrian van Kaam's phenomenological method, which he described as a controlled explanation of behaviour (Van Kaam, 1959). The analysis followed several steps: collecting and describing the data; listing all relevant statements and treating them as equally important (horizontalization); removing statements that were irrelevant or repeated (reduction and elimination); grouping the remaining statements into themes (clustering); explaining their meaning (explication); writing textural and structural descriptions; and validating the results. Validity was further strengthened through triangulation of interview and observation data, member checking, and reflexive journaling to reduce researcher bias (Enworo, 2023).

Results and Discussion

The analysis produced three main themes about students' experiences using TikTok to solve learning problems, finding learning enjoyable, and seeing learning as easy together with a typology of learners. These are presented below and explained using constructivist theory and TAM.

TikTok for Solving Learning Difficulties

All eight participants saw TikTok as an "academic rescuer" when they got stuck, turning to it when textbooks or teacher explanations were hard to understand quickly. R1 looked for narrative explanations of history that she found too dense in textbooks, saying that explanations on TikTok felt like storytelling and were easier to take in. R2 searched for faster and more logical ways to solve problems than the rigid steps in textbooks, while R3 used videos showing body organs to make abstract ideas easier to picture. R4 used creative and fun memory tricks to learn foreign vocabulary, and R5 followed a structured series of videos to learn about stock investment. These accounts show that TikTok's short and visual format works as a strong aid for learning on one's own. Viewed through the Technology Acceptance Model, these experiences illustrate perceived usefulness in its most direct form: students judged TikTok valuable because it visibly helped them resolve concrete academic problems that textbooks and classroom explanations had left unresolved (Davis, 1989).

The Enjoyable Nature of Learning

Enjoyment turned out to be a key reason students were willing to spend a lot of time learning on TikTok. The fun, entertaining nature of the content lowered their mental load: R1 felt comfortable because creators used everyday language, and R2 said that background music and good looking visuals kept his mood positive, so even long study sessions did not feel tiring. The lack of pressure was especially important; R5 explained that there was no fear of being wrong or feeling embarrassed, unlike being asked questions directly in front of the class. Enjoyment, then, was not just an extra feature but an inner motivation that pushed students to keep learning by choice. This pattern corresponds to perceived ease of use in Davis's (1989) model: when a learning activity feels effortless and free of social risk, students engage with it voluntarily and repeatedly, turning enjoyment into a self-directed learning habit rather than an occasional distraction.

Perceived Ease of Learning

Students often described TikTok as offering great practical convenience in terms of saving time, organizing information, and easy access. R1 liked being able to learn in small bits during breaks or on the way home, while R3 valued the control of being able to replay a video until she understood a concept, without having to ask a teacher to repeat it. R6 used the save and favourite features to collect important material for later exam preparation, and R7 liked how the algorithm delivered relevant content automatically through the For You Page. These accounts show how the platform breaks heavy material into short, easy-to-digest videos that support faster and more effective study. Read together, these convenience features operationalize both core TAM constructs at once: the platform is easy to use because it fits naturally into students' daily routines, and it is useful because it turns fragmented moments of free time into productive, self-regulated study opportunities (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

Learner Typology

Using Weber's idea of ideal types and Mossberger's concept of digital citizenship, the analysis found three patterns of behaviour. The critical type (R1, R3, R5, R8) showed high digital

literacy, checking information against trusted sources such as Google Scholar and e-journals and treating TikTok only as a starting point that still needed to be verified. The pragmatic type (R2, R4, R6) focused on efficiency and instant usefulness, using AI to summarize videos and saving practice questions for exam preparation. The passive type (R7) had weaker control over the flow of information, often losing focus in the algorithmic feed and going back to physical books as a way to protect himself from distraction. These three patterns can be read as differing configurations of perceived usefulness and ease of use: critical learners treat ease of use as a starting point that still requires verification, pragmatic learners maximize usefulness through efficiency, and the passive learner's difficulty regulating ease of use undermines the technology's intended benefit. Table 2 summarizes these ideal type descriptions, which were drawn out through van Kaam's steps of reducing and removing each participant's statements to find their essential features.

Bringing these themes and types together, the essence of the phenomenon can be stated as follows: for these students, TikTok is experienced as self-directed and adaptive digital learning. They take control of their own learning by deliberately choosing visual content for quick understanding, checking it against AI or search engines for accuracy, and managing their time to avoid distraction so that the platform becomes part of a smart and independent study strategy rather than mere entertainment.

Table 2. Typology of Students Using TikTok as a Learning Resource

	Ideal Type	Learning Characteristics with TikTok
R1	The Self-Regulated Explorer	Hybrid integration (book + AI); independent exploration with strong self-awareness.
R2	The Efficiency Strategist	Pragmatism and efficiency; uses AI to summarize and selectively removes distracting platforms.
R3	The Proactive Producer	Uses social media for identity representation, educational content production, and data verification (fact-checking).
R4	The Aspirational Creative	Treats the digital ecosystem as a "living portfolio" for art-career preparation; learns through hobby and visualization.
R5	The Human-Centered Learner	Prioritizes teacher/expert authority; critical of shallow content; uses technology in a hybrid way for economic benefit.
R6	The Interactive-Pragmatic	Mood-based learning and two-way interaction (TikTok Live); uses social media for school-organization productivity.
R7	The Balanced Traditionalist	Limits screen time (2–3 hours); returns to physical books to maintain focus and avoid algorithmic distraction.
R8	The Scholar-Activist	Uses authoritative sources (e-journals/Google Scholar); explores social and mental-health issues; a digitally aware organizational leader.

The findings show that students' use of TikTok is not a random distraction but a complete and complex learning strategy, supporting evidence that TikTok can work as an interactive tool that encourages active engagement (Kemal et al., 2024; Meidina, 2025). Seen through Piaget's (1952) cognitive constructivism, participants such as R1 and R4 felt confused when teacher

explanations were unclear (cognitive disequilibrium) and actively looked for other visual explanations, an act of accommodation through which they rebuilt their own understanding instead of just receiving information. Seen through Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, TikTok creators acted as a more knowledgeable other whose relatable, everyday language served as scaffolding, helping students close the gap between difficult material and their current level of understanding within the zone of proximal development. This dual reading, cognitive and social, suggests that TikTok functions less as a replacement for classroom instruction and more as an accessible entry point that lowers the threshold for engaging with difficult material, after which students still rely on their own reasoning or on peer- and creator-mediated guidance to consolidate understanding.

These results agree with studies reporting that TikTok increases learning motivation through engaging and interactive presentation (Davina Pebrimireni & Diena San Fauziya, 2024) and that motivation, ease of use, and fit with one's lifestyle drive its use as a source of information and learning (Thi Nguyet Trang et al., 2025; Khoiriah et al., 2023). One important point, however, is the difference between engagement driven by entertainment and engagement that reflects real learning. Some participants (R4, R6) admitted that the line between learning and being entertained was very thin, while R1, R3, and R8 showed a more deliberate and purposeful kind of engagement. The quality of learning through TikTok therefore depends on how well students can move from passive watching toward active thinking, a shift that is easier for learners with higher digital literacy and self-control. This distinction matters theoretically because it shows that perceived ease of use does not automatically translate into perceived usefulness for learning: a video can be easy and enjoyable to watch while contributing little to academic understanding unless the viewer actively works to extract and apply its content, a pattern that mirrors Khlaif and Salha's (2021) caution that TikTok functions more reliably as a tool for micro-learning than for deep or nano-level mastery.

From the view of educational technology, the study also highlights parts of learning that the platform cannot replace. Recorded short videos only allow one-way communication and cannot offer the real-time back-and-forth discussion, flexible support, and emotional presence of a teacher (Danish et al., 2021). R5's clear preference for asking teachers directly shows that the relational and emotional sides of learning are still basic psychological needs. In addition, the micro-learning format that makes TikTok useful for quick ideas also limits how deeply students can think, making it more of a trigger for early interest than a replacement for deep, detailed teaching. These limitations point to a complementary rather than competitive relationship between TikTok and formal instruction: the platform is well suited to sparking curiosity and offering quick clarification, but sustained conceptual mastery still depends on the structured, interactive guidance that only a teacher or a well-designed curriculum can provide (Wohlfart & Wagner, 2023).

Taken together, the study makes two contributions. Theoretically, it extends the Technology Acceptance Model by grounding perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use in students' lived experience, showing that these constructs are not only measurable beliefs but also felt qualities that interact with self-regulation and digital literacy (Jin et al., 2023). Practically, the critical, pragmatic, and passive typology gives teachers a simple, evidence-based map for recognizing different learner profiles and tailoring guidance, strengthening critical learners' verification habits, channelling pragmatic learners' efficiency toward depth, and helping passive learners build the self-control they lack. Taken as a whole, these contributions suggest that the value of TikTok for self-directed learning lies not in the platform itself but in how deliberately students and teachers use it, a conclusion consistent with the broader argument that educational

technology succeeds only when paired with intentional pedagogical design (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This study concludes that students at MAN 1 Yogyakarta experience TikTok as a productive and positive space for self-directed learning, not merely as entertainment. Their experience shows high perceived ease of use, since the material comes in short, engaging, and easy-to-understand forms, and it involves an active strategy of finding quick references that are then checked against other platforms rather than passive watching. Students are clearly aware of the platform's risks, such as algorithmic distraction and shallow content, and they manage themselves accordingly, a pattern that gives rise to the critical, pragmatic, and passive typology of users identified in this study. Theoretically, these findings extend the Technology Acceptance Model by showing that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are not fixed traits of the technology itself but felt, negotiated qualities that depend on each learner's digital literacy and self-regulation.

Practically, the main reason students adopt TikTok is its strong perceived usefulness as a learning aid that offers practical tips, motivation, and visual explanations often missing from textbooks or conventional classroom teaching; this suggests that teachers can make the most of the platform by acting as curators who direct students toward credible, high-quality content rather than competing with it as the sole source of knowledge. As a qualitative study of eight students at a single school, however, these findings describe the lived experience of a specific group rather than a generalizable pattern, and future research involving a larger and more varied group of students would help test how far the critical, pragmatic, and passive typology holds across different educational settings. The heart of educational technology is to make learning easier and more enjoyable, and in this sense, TikTok holds real potential as a self-directed learning tool that matches how today's students learn, provided it is used with awareness and intention.

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