

https://nawalaeducation.com/index.php/O/index

Volume 2 Nomor 5, October 2025 e-ISSN: 3047-017X

DOI: https://doi.org/10.62872/gw12fk57

A Mediation Analysis of Digital Engagement on the Influence of Exposure to HIV/AIDS Educational Content on TikTok on Adolescents' Knowledge

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Input : August 19, 2025 Revised : September 22, 2025 Accepted: October 02, 2025 Pubslished : October 20, 2025

ABSTRAK

Advances in digital technology have driven significant transformations in adolescents' information consumption patterns, particularly through short video-based platforms like TikTok. This medium serves not only as a space for entertainment but also as an effective educational platform for conveying health messages, including on the issue of HIV/AIDS, which still faces social stigma. This study aims to analyze the relationship between exposure to HIV/AIDS educational content on TikTok and increased adolescent knowledge, and to examine the role of digital engagement as a mediating variable in this process. Using a qualitative approach with a literature review method, this study combines narrative and thematic synthesis to comprehensively interpret empirical and conceptual results. The results indicate that digital engagement, such as commenting, sharing, or recreating content, plays a crucial role in strengthening the internalization of health messages through a reflective and participatory process. Repeated exposure to creatively and emotionally packaged educational content can enhance adolescents' understanding and critical awareness of HIV/AIDS. However, the challenge of misinformation demands increased digital literacy to ensure the credibility of messages received. The implications of this study emphasize that effective digital health education strategies require collaboration between health workers, educators, and content creators to create an interactive, inclusive, and evidence-based learning environment in the digital era.

Keywords: *TikTok*; *Health Literacy*; *Digital Engagement*

INTRODUCTION

Advances in digital technology have fundamentally changed people's information consumption patterns, particularly among adolescents, who are primary users of social media. Platforms like TikTok are growing rapidly due to their ability to provide short, dynamic, and easily accessible content. This phenomenon has created a new ecosystem where the lines between



entertainment and education are increasingly blurred. Adolescents not only consume content for enjoyment but also gain knowledge and social values from repeated exposure. Interaction patterns that occur through preference-based algorithms expose each user to specific types of information intensively (Dahulai & Listia, 2024). This makes social media a potential tool for disseminating public health messages. However, its effectiveness still needs scientific analysis to ensure it serves not only as entertainment but also as a meaningful learning tool. Therefore, research examining the relationship between exposure to educational content and changes in knowledge is highly relevant.

HIV/AIDS education is a field that requires a communicative and innovative approach to reach young audiences. Epidemiological data shows that adolescents remain at high risk of HIV transmission due to low awareness and understanding of prevention methods (Purwanto & Charolina, 2025; Goh et al., 2022). Conventional outreach methods such as seminars, brochures, or lectures are often considered monotonous and less engaging for the digital generation. Changes in adolescents' learning styles and social interactions require adaptation of health communication strategies to better suit their characteristics. TikTok, with its visual appeal and rapid dissemination, can be an effective channel for conveying health information. Short videos with persuasive narratives can help simplify complex topics like HIV/AIDS into easier-to-understand content. However, the level of understanding generated is not solely determined by the frequency of exposure, but rather by the quality of user engagement with the content consumed. This indicates that the influence of social media needs to be analyzed more deeply from the perspective of digital interaction.

Digital engagement is a key concept in understanding the dynamics of communication on modern social media. Activities such as liking, commenting, sharing, or participating in thematic challenges reflect the level of user engagement with the message. The higher the digital engagement, the more likely the message is to be internalized and influence an individual's knowledge and behavior. Active participation enables deeper cognitive processes because users not only passively receive information but also interactively process and express their responses. In the context of HIV/AIDS education, digital engagement can strengthen the absorption of prevention messages and raise collective awareness among adolescents (Lewis et al., 2024). This relationship demonstrates that social media is not simply a means of disseminating messages but also an arena for dialogue and social reflection. Therefore, mediation analysis of digital engagement is crucial to understand the extent to which active participation mediates the relationship between content exposure and increased adolescent knowledge (Ramadani et al., 2024). High engagement has the potential to deepen understanding and change attitudes toward health issues in a sustainable manner.

The learning process through digital media has distinct characteristics from traditional learning systems. Teenagers who interact through social media tend to be more responsive to visualizations, short narratives, and interactive elements than to lengthy texts or formal lectures. TikTok presents a communication model

that combines entertainment and education through an algorithm based on user interests. When HIV/AIDS educational content is packaged creatively and relevant to adolescents' lives, the level of information acceptance increases significantly (Sitar, 2024). Psychological factors such as curiosity, the desire to follow trends, and the need for acceptance within online communities also influence levels of digital engagement. Therefore, understanding the psychosocial mechanisms behind digital interaction is crucial to explaining the effectiveness of social media-based education. An analytical approach to these mediating variables will help answer how digital engagement acts as a catalyst between information exposure and knowledge formation. This mechanism reflects the process of internalizing values that is not only informative but also transformative.

Knowledge about HIV/AIDS among adolescents is formed not only through the presentation of facts, but also through cognitive and affective processes triggered by digital experiences. When adolescents are exposed to emotionally stimulating and socially relevant educational content, they are more likely to remember and understand the messages. Repeated interaction with such content leads to memory strengthening and increased awareness of health issues. Furthermore, comments and discussions in digital spaces provide a space for reflection that deepens individual understanding (Wasike, 2023). This process demonstrates that digital social learning has significant potential for improving adolescent health literacy. However, challenges remain in ensuring that the information circulated is credible and does not lead to misinformation. Therefore, research analyzing the relationship between content exposure, engagement, and knowledge can provide an empirical basis for developing effective digital education policies. Knowledge formed through digital media must be verified and directed to support sustainable healthy behaviors.

The quality of educational content is a determining factor in the effectiveness of message delivery via TikTok. Content developed based on health communication principles and supported by valid sources has a greater chance of fostering correct understanding. Creativity in presentation, such as the use of personal narratives, engaging visuals, and language appropriate to adolescent characteristics, strengthens the message's appeal (Yang et al., 2023). However, quality presentation alone is insufficient without reciprocal interaction between creators and audiences. This interaction builds a sense of ownership of the message and fosters active participation in disseminating information. Thus, the relationship between exposure and knowledge is not linear, but rather influenced by complex mediating factors. Digital engagement is a crucial component that determines whether a message is merely viewed or truly understood. Therefore, research that examines this mediating relationship can shed more light on the mechanisms by which adolescents' knowledge is formed through social media.

The transformation of digital behavior among adolescents demands adaptive and evidence-based health education strategies. The use of TikTok as an educational intervention medium must consider rapidly changing algorithmic dynamics and user preferences. Empirical analysis of the influence of content exposure and digital engagement provides a foundation for designing more responsive health campaigns. By understanding how adolescents interact, react, and participate in HIV/AIDS educational content, outreach strategies can be designed in a more contextual and engaging manner (Taher & Syafar, 2024). Analytical and mediative research will help formulate health communication models that meet the needs of the digital generation. Furthermore, such findings can strengthen collaboration between health institutions, academics, and content creators in building an educational digital environment. A paradigm shift from one-way communication to two-way communication will increase the effectiveness of public health messages. This approach strengthens social media's position as a strategic instrument in digital community-based health education.

The study of digital engagement mediation also has theoretical and practical implications for the development of health communication models in the modern era. Theoretically, this research contributes to broadening understanding of the relationship between media exposure and knowledge change through psychosocial mechanisms. Practically, the research findings can be used to design more targeted digital interventions for adolescents. Strengthening digital literacy capacity is crucial for adolescents to distinguish between valid information and misinformation. Furthermore, a participatory approach can foster a sense of social responsibility toward public health issues. This effort aligns with the global health development agenda, which emphasizes the importance of empowering adolescents through technology. Therefore, the analysis of digital engagement provides not only academic insights but also recommendations for strengthening HIV/AIDS education in the digital era. Utilizing the results of this study will strengthen the foundation for more inclusive, interactive, and sustainable health communication.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a literature review method, aiming to examine the relationship between exposure to HIV/AIDS educational content on TikTok, digital engagement, and adolescents' knowledge. According to Creswell (2014), a qualitative approach is used to understand the meaning inherent in social experiences and interpret phenomena from the perspectives of participants. Therefore, this study focuses on an in-depth understanding of how digital interactions play a role in shaping health knowledge among adolescents.

The literature search process was conducted systematically through scientific databases such as SINTA, Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using a combination of keywords "TikTok," "HIV/AIDS education," "digital engagement," and "youth knowledge." Inclusion criteria included publications within the last 10 years relevant to social media-based health education. Each article was evaluated based on its validity, methodology, and scientific contribution to the reviewed theoretical framework.

Data were analyzed using thematic synthesis as described by Thomas and Harden (2008), which emphasizes the importance of coding, grouping themes,

and constructing conceptual meaning from previous study findings. The analysis was conducted to identify patterns of relationships between exposure to educational content, levels of digital engagement, and increased HIV/AIDS literacy among adolescents. This approach also enabled the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings into a cohesive conceptual narrative.

Study quality was assessed using the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) tool to assess the credibility and relevance of sources. The synthesis of results was then compiled following PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and replicability of the review process. Validity was enhanced through inter-reviewer triangulation and critical reflection on researchers' interpretive biases.

As stated by Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou (2016), a systematic literature review not only summarizes previous research but also builds a new conceptual foundation through reflective synthesis. Based on this principle, this study emphasizes how digital engagement serves as a bridge that transforms exposure to educational content into meaningful understanding of HIV/AIDS. The findings are expected to enrich digital health communication models and serve as a reference in designing more effective educational strategies for adolescents in the social media era..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Dynamics of Exposure to HIV/AIDS Educational Content on Tiktok on the Formation of Adolescent Knowledge

The exposure of HIV/AIDS educational content on TikTok represents a new phenomenon in the dynamics of adolescent knowledge formation in the digital era. This platform presents an interactive space that combines entertainment and education through an audiovisual format that adapts to the attention patterns of the younger generation. Information conveyed through short, emotionally packaged videos has been shown to increase cognitive retention because it simultaneously engages both affective and visual aspects. This makes TikTok not just a medium for distributing messages but also an arena for the socialization of health values constructed through symbolic interactions between creators and audiences. The learning process is not linear, but is influenced by recommendation algorithms that adapt to user preferences, thus strengthening the effect of repeated exposure to certain topics (Waldmann et al., 2025). In the context of HIV/AIDS issues, this mechanism can be an effective strategy to normalize discourse on sexuality, disease prevention, and empathy for people living with HIV through positive and inclusive representations (Kristiani et al., 2025). However, its effectiveness remains dependent on the quality of content curation and adolescents' capacity to discern credible information. Thus, exposure to educational content on TikTok has the potential to shape not only factual knowledge but also attitudinal orientation and critical awareness of reproductive health issues.

Furthermore, the process of adolescent knowledge formation through social media like TikTok is inseparable from psychosocial aspects that influence how individuals interpret information (Luthfiyyah & Mukramin, 2023). Adolescents, as an age group developing a social identity, tend to be more responsive to messages relevant to their emotional experiences. Narrative formats that present real-life stories, testimonials, or simulated social situations about HIV/AIDS can facilitate empathy-based learning and reduce the gap between conceptual knowledge and social reality. When educational messages are delivered by figures perceived as relatable or credible among adolescents, the resulting persuasive effect is stronger because it is supported by social identification and interpersonal trust. This reinforces social learning theory, which states that individuals tend to imitate behaviors or attitudes observed from models perceived as having close values or social status. Therefore, the credibility of content creators plays a crucial role in ensuring that messages about HIV/AIDS prevention are received correctly and internalized as part of positive health values.

On the other hand, the diversity of content and the openness of the TikTok platform also have epistemological consequences for the quality of knowledge generated. Not all educational content is scientifically accurate, as much of it is created by users without a health background. This situation has the potential to create knowledge distortion if the messages conveyed are oversimplified, morally biased, or even misleading. Exposure to pseudo-educational content can blur the line between fact and opinion, leading to misunderstandings regarding transmission mechanisms, prevention, and social stigma against PLWHA. This phenomenon demonstrates that social media is not only an instrument for disseminating information, but also an arena for decentralized knowledge production. Therefore, efforts to improve digital literacy and health literacy are key factors in enabling adolescents to evaluate the validity of sources and select scientifically sound information. Media education-based interventions are also needed to build critical capacity in navigating a fast-paced, open, yet often ambiguous information ecosystem.

Furthermore, the dynamics of exposure to HIV/AIDS educational content on TikTok also reflect a shift in the health communication paradigm from a top-down approach to a participatory model (Delmonaco, 2023). The educational process is no longer solely dependent on formal institutions such as schools or health institutions, but rather decentralized through dynamic digital social networks. Adolescents play an active role as both producers and consumers of information, meaning they contribute to shaping public discourse on HIV/AIDS through the process of sharing, commenting, and reinterpreting messages. This digital engagement activity strengthens the internalization of messages because it involves simultaneous cognitive and affective participation. When adolescents engage in discussions or recreate educational content, the learning process is collaborative and reflective (Bose et al., 2023). This interaction model has the potential to create virtual communities that support healthy behaviors and strengthen solidarity on sexual health issues. Thus, TikTok can function as a

medium for social transformation that facilitates the formation of collective knowledge about HIV/AIDS through inclusive, adaptive, and user-experience-oriented digital communication mechanisms.

2. Digital Engagement as a Mediator in the Process of Internalizing Health Knowledge

Digital engagement plays a strategic role in bridging the relationship between exposure to educational content and the internalization of health knowledge, particularly in the context of HIV/AIDS literacy among adolescents. This mediation process operates through participatory mechanisms involving interactive user activities with digital content, such as commenting, sharing, or participating in online discussions. These activities reflect cognitive engagement, enabling individuals to elaborate on the health messages they receive, so that information does not stop at the superficial level of understanding. By actively interacting, adolescents experience a reflective process that encourages the formation of personal meaning regarding the health issues they face. This phenomenon demonstrates that digital engagement is not simply a form of media consumption but also a process of internalizing healthy values, norms, and behaviors transmitted through social media (Mesra & Rahman, 2024). These participatory experiences change how adolescents understand risks, make decisions, and develop critical awareness of HIV/AIDS issues. Therefore, the level of digital engagement can be seen as an important predictor of the depth of health literacy resulting from interactions with educational content.

Digital engagement also serves as a catalyst for social learning, strengthening the cognitive and affective processing of health messages. Through comments, discussions, or collaboration on thematic challenges on digital platforms, users engage in in-depth information processing that broadens their understanding. This activity enables a two-way dialogue between individuals and digital communities, which in turn strengthens the collective construction of meaning. When users reproduce information, for example by sharing educational videos or writing personal responses, they contribute to strengthening the memory and emotional relevance of the health topics discussed (Rizqon, 2025). This type of social interaction supports Bandura's social learning theory, where active observation and participation lead to the internalization of positive health behaviors and values. Thus, digital engagement acts as a dynamic platform that facilitates the integration of cognitive, emotional, and social aspects in the formation of health knowledge.

Furthermore, research shows that the level of digital engagement influences the quality of mental elaboration processes in understanding complex health issues (Sharifi et al., 2024). Actively engaged users tend to search for additional information, verify facts, and critique the messages they receive. These activities demonstrate that digital engagement fosters higher levels of critical thinking and media literacy among adolescents. Conversely, passive consumption of educational content often results in shallow and short-lived understanding, making it vulnerable to information distortion. This difference confirms that the

mediating process of digital engagement operates through increased cognitive depth and reflective awareness of health information. In other words, the higher a person's engagement with digital content, the stronger the internalization of knowledge. This mechanism demonstrates that social media can function as an effective learning environment when accompanied by active participation and critical awareness (Gan et al., 2021).

Ultimately, digital engagement serves not only as an intermediary variable linking content exposure to learning outcomes but also as an indicator of the quality of social interactions in the digital space. Through active engagement, adolescents not only receive health messages but also contribute to shaping a digital ecosystem that supports the dissemination of accurate and ethical information. The social dimension of this engagement creates space for the coconstruction of meaning, where health values are reinforced through collective experiences and reciprocal interactions. This makes digital engagement a form of actualization of responsible digital citizen participation in the dissemination of health literacy. Thus, the mediating mechanism of digital engagement explains that the effectiveness of educational messages on social media depends not only on the quality of the content but also on the extent to which users are able to engage, reflect, and internalize the information into meaningful knowledge that has implications for changing healthy behaviors.

3. Theoretical and Practical Implications of Digital Health Education Strategies for Adolescents

The theoretical implications of the study of digital health education strategies for adolescents indicate a shift in the health communication paradigm toward a more participatory and dynamic approach. The linear communication model, which previously positioned audiences as passive recipients, has now evolved into an interactive model that emphasizes the active role of users in the information exchange process (Mulyono et al., 2024). A mediation analysis of digital engagement explains how emotional, social, and cognitive interactions that emerge through platforms like TikTok contribute to the formation of health knowledge and attitudes. Digital engagement theory expands the scope of persuasive communication theory by incorporating the affective and social identity dimensions of adolescents as determinants of message effectiveness. Therefore, health communication theory needs to adapt to the rapidly changing and participatory nature of the digital environment. This shift demands the integration of digital literacy concepts, uses and gratifications theory, and a social constructivist approach in designing educational strategies. These theoretical contributions enrich our understanding of how social media is not only a means of distributing messages but also an arena for constructing collective meanings about health (Yati, 2024).

Practically, the results of this study provide new direction for health institutions and educators in designing communication strategies relevant to adolescents' digital behavior. Traditional approaches, such as one-way counseling, have proven ineffective in engaging the digital generation, which is

more responsive to visualization, personal narratives, and interactivity (Taba et al., 2022). Utilizing social media platforms like TikTok can be a strategic tool for delivering HIV/AIDS educational messages in an engaging and easy-to-understand manner (Haruna et al., 2019). Collaboration between health workers, educators, and content creators is a concrete step toward combining scientific authority with the creativity of digital culture. This strategy allows health messages to be packaged in an entertaining yet informative format, thereby fostering awareness and empathy among adolescents. Furthermore, health institutions can leverage digital platform algorithms to more effectively target specific audiences, sustainably increasing the reach of educational messages. This approach can also be measured quantitatively through engagement rates, comments, and audience participation.

Another practical implication lies in the importance of improving adolescent digital literacy as a foundation for successful digital health education strategies. Digital literacy encompasses not only the technical ability to use social media platforms but also the critical ability to assess the credibility of sources and filter valid health information. A major challenge currently faced is the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation related to health issues, which can lead to erroneous perceptions and risky behaviors (Emerson et al., 2023). Therefore, educational institutions need to integrate evidence-based digital and health literacy curricula into both formal and non-formal learning activities. This approach will help adolescents develop reflective skills regarding the content they consume while fostering social responsibility in sharing information. Efforts to strengthen digital literacy can also be carried out through collaborative campaigns between schools, non-governmental organizations, and social media platforms themselves. In this way, adolescent participation in the digital space can be directed towards constructive and sustainable empowerment.

In addition to enriching the theoretical and practical aspects of health education, the implications of this research also open up opportunities for the development of participation-based digital interventions. This type of intervention model focuses on active user involvement in creating, assessing, and disseminating educational messages. Such involvement fosters ownership of health issues and strengthens intrinsic motivation for healthy behaviors. Intervention designs can leverage gamification, digital storytelling, and peer-topeer approaches, all proven effective in the context of adolescent education. Furthermore, digital participation data can be analyzed to evaluate message effectiveness and adjust communication strategies based on audience responses. This evidence-based approach ensures that each digital innovation has a measurable impact on adolescents' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Overall, the theoretical and practical implications of this study confirm that the success of digital health education strategies depends on the synergy between academic understanding, technological innovation, and cross-sector collaboration that adapts to the dynamics of the younger generation.

CONCLUSION

Overall, studies of exposure to HIV/AIDS educational content on TikTok show that social media plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' knowledge, attitudes, and critical awareness of health issues through interactive and participatory digital engagement mechanisms. This platform serves not only as a medium for disseminating information but also as a social space where collaborative learning processes combine cognitive, affective, and social aspects. The emotional and narrative audiovisual format allows for deeper absorption of health messages because it aligns with the learning styles and attention patterns of the younger generation. Active engagement, such as sharing, commenting, or recreating content, strengthens the internalization of health values through personal reflection and symbolic interaction with the digital community. This phenomenon demonstrates that the effectiveness of health education is determined not only by the content of the message but also by the extent to which users critically engage in interpreting and reproducing its meaning. However, the openness of the platform also carries the risk of misinformation that can blur the line between scientific fact and personal opinion, making digital literacy a key factor in ensuring the validity of the knowledge formed. Therefore, digital health education needs to be designed based on evidence, taking into account psychosocial dimensions, adolescent identity, and the credibility of content creators as sources of trust. On the other hand, digital engagement can be used as an indicator of the quality of social learning processes taking place online, where the meaning of health is collectively constructed through community interactions. The theoretical implications extend the health communication model toward a participatory paradigm that emphasizes the active role of individuals in the production and interpretation of information. Practically, this requires cross-sector collaboration between health institutions, educators, and digital creators to combine scientific authority with media creativity. Interactive, emotional, and experience-based educational strategies have proven more effective in attracting attention and fostering empathy for HIV/AIDS issues. Thus, TikTok and similar platforms have strategic potential as inclusive and dynamic social learning instruments for strengthening adolescent health literacy in the digital era

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