The Consumption Trap - Tackling TikTok's Unsustainable Consumer Culture

London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

PB403 Psychology of Economic Life
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1. Background

1.1. Origins

TikTok, the video-sharing platform launched by ByteDance in 2016, has quickly become one of the most influential social media apps worldwide, currently ranking as the 5th most-used social network globally (D'Souza, 2025). The app was originally introduced in China as *Douyin*, the app gained immense popularity amongst young users, as its short-form video format distinguished itself from traditional social media platforms that heavily relied on text and static images (Hardy, 2024). Seeing an opportunity for a global expansion, ByteDance acquired the US-based lip-syncing app *Musical.ly* in 2017 and merged it with Douyin, rebranding the combined platform to the TikTok as we know it today. Unlike its Chinese counterpart, which operates under strict government regulations, imposes screen time limits and promotes educational content, TikTok operates in a more unregulated environment, leading some to refer to it as the "opium" version of Douyin (Nash, 2024); a platform designed for endless scrolling, user and influencer-driven marketing, and instant gratification.

1.2. Current Statistics

Today, TikTok has been downloaded over 4.7 billion times across 154 countries (D'Souza, 2025), and is the most popular in the United States, Indonesia and Brazil (Dunn, 2025). With users spending an average of 95 minutes per day on the app (Vardhman, 2024), nearly twice the amount of time spent on other popular social media platforms like Instagram (51 minutes), TikTok has revolutionised the Social Network landscape, and has embedded itself into user's everyday digital habits. As the 18-24 age group makes up the largest share of its daily active users (36.2%) (Shepherd, 2025), it is the focus of this essay.

1.3. TikTok's Key to Success

TikTok's success can be attributed to its highly responsive algorithm, which ensures users are continuously shown personalised content, notably on the For You Page (FYP). Besides that, TikTok makes 'Going viral', a term that refers to videos quickly reproduced multiple times by large audiences, possible for every content creator, regardless of their size. This feature is particularly attractive for businesses as it translates into sales: after becoming a sensation in TikTok, Stanley Cups' revenues went from $73 US million in 2019 to $750 US million in 2023, and CeraVe sales increased more than 60% in 2020 compared to the previous year (Seshagiri et al., 2024). Finally, along with the short-video format and the design of the app, the algorithm

largely contributes to high Social Media Intensity (SMI), defined as the extent to which social media is actively engaged with and integrated into daily routines (Ellison et al., 2007), a critical factor in impulse buying and negative consumption habits (Pellegrino et al., 2022). TikTok shapes its audience behaviours in a distinctive way, as will be demonstrated below.

1.4. TikTok's Business Model

Naturally, ByteDance has leveraged this high SMI to maximise its revenue streams, which are extensive: TikTok's primary source of revenue comes from advertising, with brands paying for various ad formats such as in-feed ads or branded filters. This has earning TikTok $16.1 billion in global ad revenue in 2024 (Spocket, n.d.). Another major revenue stream is in-app purchases, where users buy "TikTok Coins", tokens that are acquired in exchange for money to send virtual gifts to creators during live streams, from which TikTok earns a 50% commission (Perez, 2023). This model alone contributed to $15 billion in consumer spending in 2024 (Briskman, 2024). TikTok Shop, introduced in selected countries in 2021, also serves as a significant income source, as it allows businesses to sell products directly within the app using an included affiliate programme for creators, providing TikTok with commissions from each sale (Naradauskas, 2024).

1.5. TikTok and Consumerist Behaviour

Overall, TikTok embodies the "attention economy", where user attention, seen as a scarce and valuable commodity, is captured and maintained for the purpose of monetisation and influence (Terranova, 2012). This approach has clearly been successful, not only reflected in TikTok's consumption-based revenue streams, but also in users' consumer behaviour: Over 66% of users have purchased products after seeing them on TikTok, with approximately 58% buying directly through TikTokShop (AMZScout, 2025). Additionally, 62% of users state that TikTok inspires their shopping choices (Saini, 2025), meaning the app does not only encourage in-app spending, but also drives consumerism beyond the platform itself. While TikTok is not the first social media platform to influence consumer behaviour (Oruç & Aydin, 2022), it has accelerated the process of digital consumption in ways that were previously unseen, reshaping how trends emerge, spread, and drive purchasing decisions. Yet, the same features that make TikTok so influential have also introduced pressing concerns about sustainability, overconsumption, and psychological consequences, issues that will be examined in the following sections.

1.6. Existing Efforts

Some attempts have been made to counteract TikTok's consumerist culture, but none have achieved lasting impact. One example is the "De-influencing" trend in 2023, where creators attempted to raise awareness about overconsumption. However, since it was itself a trend, it quickly faded, and many influencers simply replaced promoted products with alternative recommendations. Ironically, this created a "de-influencing-influencing loop" (Ihalainen, 2024) which contradicted its original sustainability message. A similar "No Buy" movement emerged in early 2025, which encouraged users to cut back on non-essential purchases, but given its trendy nature, it may face the same short-lived fate. Beyond user-led efforts, TikTok recently revised its transparency guidelines to clarify sponsored content and ads (TikTok for Business, 2023, June 28). While it was intended to increase user awareness, it instead strengthened the trust in influencers and brands, making promotional content even more persuasive (Williams, 2024). Even if TikTok were banned by governments, which would theoretically eliminate its influence on user's consumerist behaviour, history shows (e.g. U.S. ban, see Lutkevich, 2025) that users would most likely migrate to similar platforms rather than change their behaviours.

2. Introduction

"Just one more video," you tell yourself, as minutes quietly turn into hours. Your screen lights up with another video, this time an influencer excitedly waving a product at you: "Trust me, you need this - get it before it sells out!" Before you know it, you are caught in a cycle of impulse-driven purchasing, an experience shared by 1.5 billion TikTok users (Woodward, 2025), spurred by TikTok's endless stream of hyper-personalised content and fleeting micro-trends.

TikTok, an app originally designed as a creative outlet for entertainment (Hardy, 2024), has evolved into a relentless engine of consumerism, where users are drawn into cycles of short-lived gratification and ongoing consumption (David & Roberts, 2024). While this model has proven successful commercially, with brands and content creators profiting from it, it also comes at a considerable cost: severe environmental impacts and negative psychological consequences that make TikTok's current business model fundamentally unsustainable.

Our project aims to challenge this toxic cycle by promoting awareness of sustainable practices and encouraging a mindset shift towards mindful consumption. Our solutions are embedded within university communities, leveraging their shared spaces, experiences and values. Our approach aims to help students recognise the unsustainable nature of TikTok and empower them to break free from the lure of temporary fulfilment using LSE as an exemplary installation.

2.1. TikTok's Effects on Sustainability

As mentioned above, TikTok usage not only exacerbates sustainability concerns in the traditional environmental sense, but also in terms of psychological and social repercussions.

2.1.1. Environmental Consequences

The primary environmental concern linked to TikTok stems from the increased consumption behaviour it encourages in its user's, which affects the environment in three major ways: pollution, emissions, and material waste (Marsh, 2024). One key driver of this is the widespread advertising and consumption of inexpensive, mass-produced goods on TikTok (Schmidt, 2023), many of which rely on resource-intensive production methods and contribute to air pollution and CO2 emissions (RedCloud Technology, 2024). For example, the highest-selling product category on TikTok is beauty and personal care (22.5% market share; Aftership, 2025), which is often packaged in single-use plastics (S. Smith, 2024). The second and third most popular categories are womenswear (12.6%) and menswear (8.06%), which are both primarily fast fashion (Aftership, 2025). Characterised by the rapid production of low-quality clothing at low

prices, fast fashion is environmentally damaging at every stage of its life cycle (Bick et al., 2018). The transportation of products sold on TikTok further contributes to the rising CO2 emissions (Schmidt, 2023). TikTok has only intensified this issue, as the constantly emerging trends pressure users to frequently update their wardrobes, reinforcing the outlined harmful consumption patterns.

Lastly, TikTok itself has a massive environmental footprint as the platform is estimated to generate 50 million tonnes of CO2 annually (O'Brien, 2024). In comparison, Meta produces 14.07 million metric tonnes of CO2 (Meta, 2024).

2.1.2. Social Consequences

Apart from its environmental repercussions, concerns about TikTok's impact on its users have also grown. Studies indicate that higher TikTok usage is associated with a decreased attention span (Alghamdi & Aljabr, 2024), as well as mental health issues like anxiety and depression (Zahra et al., 2022). Excessive use has also been linked to poor academic performance and stress (Maguire & Pellosmaa, 2022). Further, TikTok's high SMI increases materialistic behaviour, as users who spend time on social media exhibit higher levels of materialism compared to non-social media users (Bush and Gilbert, 2002), which correlates directly to the negative effects outlined above.

3. Case Analysis

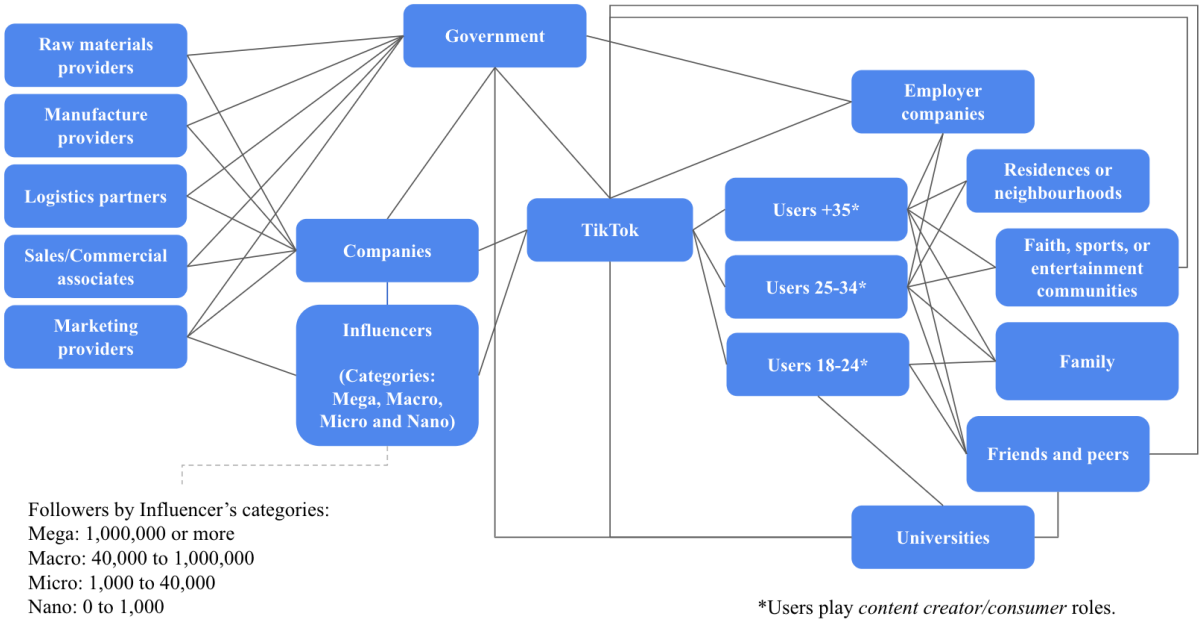
To design effective interventions, a comprehensive analysis of TikTok and its usage from multiple perspectives is essential to identify the underlying factors contributing to unsustainable behaviour. We approach this through a stakeholder analysis, Activity Theory (Leontev & Hall, 1978; Engeström, 2014) and Installation Theory (Lahlou, 2017) which allow us to systematically deconstruct TikTok as a platform and its broader usage context, providing a holistic understanding of the mechanisms that support these behaviours.

3.1. Stakeholder and Motive Analysis

As the first step of our analysis, we identified the stakeholders involved in the issue at hand (Figure 1). The stakeholders listed below were identified as the most relevant, as they exert considerable influence over other actors within the network. We examine their specific motives for engaging with TikTok and assess the extent and nature of their influence.

Figure 1

Stakeholder Network Map of TikTok's Ecosystem



3.1.1. TikTok

TikTok offers businesses, brands and content creators a massive and versatile platform for building a reputation and selling products to its captive audience. By controlling what content gets promoted through the algorithm, TikTok shapes the user experience by popularising trends, businesses, and individuals that align with their interests. Features like TikTok Shop, personalised recommendations and ad tools serve TikTok's core motivation: maximising profit.

3.1.2. Companies

By leveraging creative TikTok strategies to enhance user engagement, companies seek to increase sales, visibility, and overall influence, ultimately driving revenue growth. One effective approach is advertising, which tends to feel less disruptive when it aligns with users' interests- something TikTok's personalised algorithm facilitates more effectively than other platforms (Ozcelik & Varnali, 2019). Additionally, content creators do more than simply promote products; they serve as brand representatives, helping to expand a brand's reach and strengthen its presence in the market. The best-selling goods and services companies are fashion and beauty products followed by home-decor and electronics and gadgets (Mag, 2024).

3.1.3. Content-creators

Beyond money, content creators are also motivated by validation, value- and self-expression, growing their influence, and better career prospects (Omar & Dequan, 2020). They earn income on TikTok through brand deals, affiliate marketing, selling products directly on the platform, receiving gifts from viewers during live streams (Optimizon, 2024; Chan, 2024) and TikTok's reward programme, which pays them based on views (Howarth, 2025). As Figure 1 illustrates, creators are categorised into nano, micro, macro and mega-influencers (Borges-Tiago et al., 2022). Since TikTok's algorithm amplifies engagement, the platform especially appealing for content creators, as even micro-influencers can reach a large audience (Zhang & Liu, 2021). These smaller influencers often enjoy higher engagement rates compared to influencers with larger followings (Yew et al., 2018; Van Der Harst & Angelopoulos, 2024), as they are perceived as more authentic and relatable (Chen et al., 2024). Their niche audiences are particularly valuable to companies seeking to target specific interests, as research also indicates they may have greater impact on their audience compared to macro-influencers, making them highly effective in influencing consumer behaviour (Kay et al., 2020)

3.1.4. Governments

Governments hold significant power over TikTok and its stakeholders as they dictate how the platform operates through legislation and regulation. So far, most interventions have focused on national security, misinformation control, platform accountability and child protection, as seen in the UK's Online Safety Act (Online Safety Act: Explainer, 2025) and the EU's Digital Services Act. However, ongoing investigations are now addressing TikTok's systemic risks, particularly its algorithm-driven behavioural addictions and threats to user well-being (European Commission, 2024), which are central to our essay's discussion. If found non-compliant, TikTok will likely face substantial financial penalties and stronger enforcement of existing rules. However, if violations reveal major regulatory gaps, this could set a precedent for tighter enforcement and influence future regulatory shifts, as governments' involvement in TikTok is largely driven by their goals of user protection, national security, and maintaining social and economic stability.

3.1.5. Existing Social Structures

Despite the increasing adoption of social networks like TikTok, users continue to live within broader societal structures, ranging from family and peers to national institutions. These function as social regulators of user behaviour (Lahlou, 2017). Young people (aged 18 to 24)

are mostly influenced by their friends and peers, and communities such as universities, while older users (over 24) are also regulated by employers and communities related to e.g. faith, sports, and leisure. Although these direct and embodied relationships exist offline, users can reconnect with familiar stakeholders inside TikTok, reinforcing or establishing a sense of community and belonging.

3.1.6. Users

As the largest stakeholder group, TikTok users drive engagement and influence the platform's ecosystem, either as consumers, generating data that fuels the algorithm, or as content creators, contributing to its economy. However, most users are passive consumers rather than active creators (C. Smith, 2024). User motives can be explained through the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973), which explains social media engagement to satisfy specific needs. We identified four key motives: cognitive needs, where users turn to TikTok for information and advice (Carbonaro, 2023; Regasa & Ettisa, 2023), hedonic gratification, with entertainment being one of the fundamental drivers of TikTok usage (Abbasi et al., 2023; Herna, 2022), tension-release needs, as many users rely on TikTok for escapism, relaxation, and filling their free time (Abbasi et al., 2023; Fabio & Iaconis, 2024) and social integrative needs, where users engage for interaction and a sense of belonging (Fabio & Iaconis, 2024). The need for social connection and belonging extends beyond the platform itself, making peer influence and communities (3.1.5.) a major reason why users join and stay on TikTok (Isman & Yahya, 2024).

3.2. Activity Theory

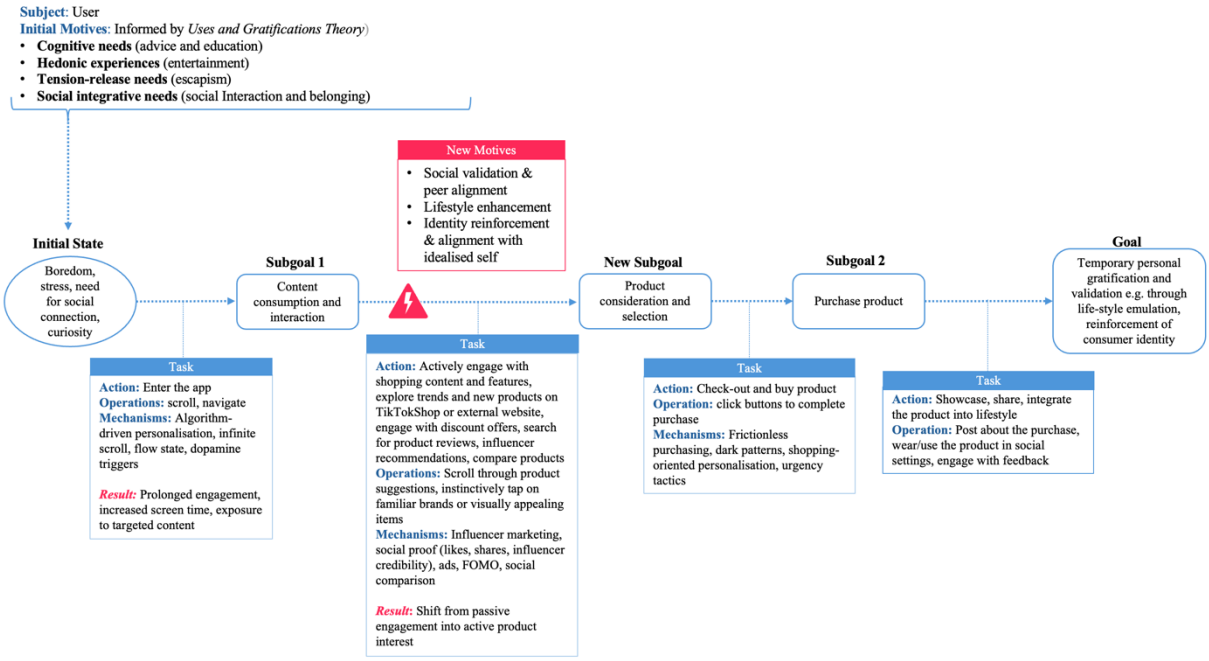
However, the user's original motives alone are not sufficient to explain the problematic behaviours that arise from TikTok use, such as prolonged screen time and impulse-purchasing. To explore how these unfold, we turn to Activity Theory (Leontev & Hall, 1978) which allows us to trace the user journey on TikTok and identify the key moments where stakeholders intervene and shape the user's behaviour.

Activity Theory describes human behaviour as a goal-directed process in which the subject (the user) engages with their surroundings (TikTok) through activities influenced by social contexts (influencer culture, trends, peer interaction), external tools (such as the algorithm and TikTok Shop), and internal motives (such as entertainment, social validation, and escapism). While users enter TikTok's app with specific motives, the deliberate design made by TikTok redefines their internal motives using several cognitive and social mechanisms, notably reinforcing social comparison and aspirational identity formation (Richins & Rudmin, 1994) (Figure 2). Increased

time spent by the user on TikTok translates into increased algorithm knowledge about the user, which subsequently refines users' personalised content, including ads and recommendations, ultimately persuading and facilitating the user to complete a purchase. However, this process does not end with a single purchase; it results in a self-perpetuating consumption cycle, where TikTok continuously adapts to user interests and promotes both habitual engagement and digital dependency.

Figure 2

User Engagement and Consumption Cycle on TikTok Through the Lens of Activity Theory

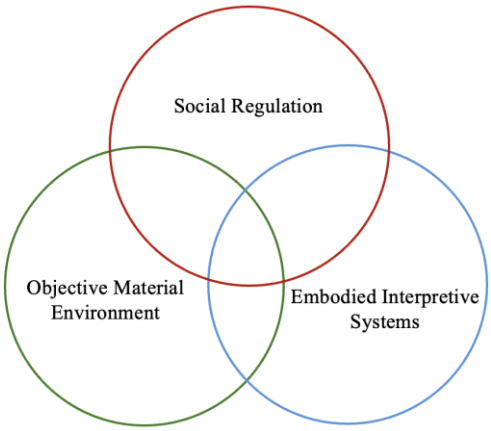


3.3. TikTok through the Lens of Installation Theory

To better examine the determinants that sustain users' engagement and consumption on TikTok, we employed Installation Theory (Lahlou, 2017), which provides a holistic framework situating TikTok into three identifiable layers (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Illustration of the Installation Theory Framework



3.3.1. *Physical layer*

TikTok's design reflects its economic motives, deliberately structured to maximise content consumption. As a digital platform, the objective material environment layer is embedded in the User Interface (UI), the point of interaction between humans and computers (Stevens, 2024). Upon opening the app, users are immediately immersed in the FYP, where the algorithm displays personalised short videos. The distribution of the elements on the screen favours focusing on the video, while minimal space and subtle colours are allocated to menus and other features. This follows Visual Design principles like Scale (larger elements attract more attention) and Visual Hierarchy (guiding the eye to the priority elements) (Gordon, 2020) (Figure 3). Additionally, the information architecture, the process by which content is structured and labelled (Hannah, 2023; Larson, 2025), favours attention captivity: 11 out of 14 of the main sections are dedicated to video consumption (Figure 4). In the absence of a *mute* function across all sections, it becomes difficult for users to disengage from auto-playing videos. This design reinforces Lahlou's (2017) statement that the deliberate placement of objects is meant to elicit or prevent a specific behaviour.

Interaction design also eases navigation and engagement: double tapping to like a post and swiping up to shift between videos, elicit a natural thumb movement following ergonomic design principles, with the auto-scroll feature removing the need for manual action entirely. Further, visible affordances such as 'Like', 'Comment', 'Share' and 'Profile' buttons, help TikTok track user interests to further personalise content. UI also incentivises purchasing across the app and blends organic content with ads and commission-based content on the FYP.

Bright visuals and countdown timers are used to capture user's attention and create urgency to purchase in TikTok's two-click checkout (Figure 3). Collected Interests are reflected in TikTokShop, prominently located in the main bottom menu. Finally, the TikTok Livestream section offers a gamified experience for purchasing TikTok coins to gift to influencers.

Overall, TikTok's architecture, content and interaction design are geared towards maximising user's time spent on the app, ultimately guiding users towards completing purchases.

Figure 3

Illustration of the Distribution of Elements on TikTok's Interface

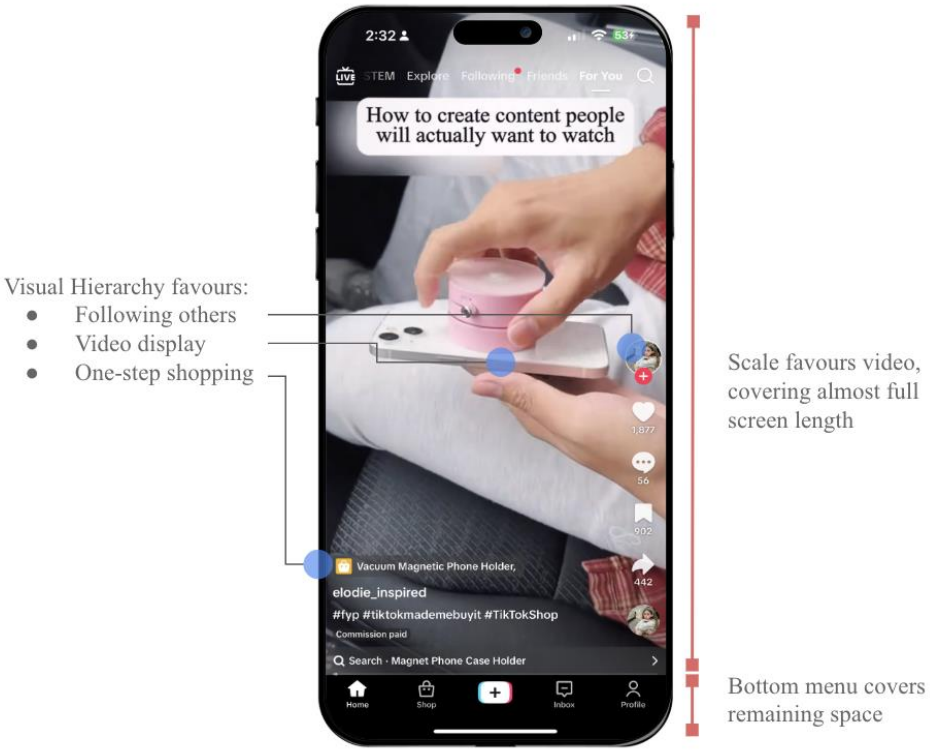
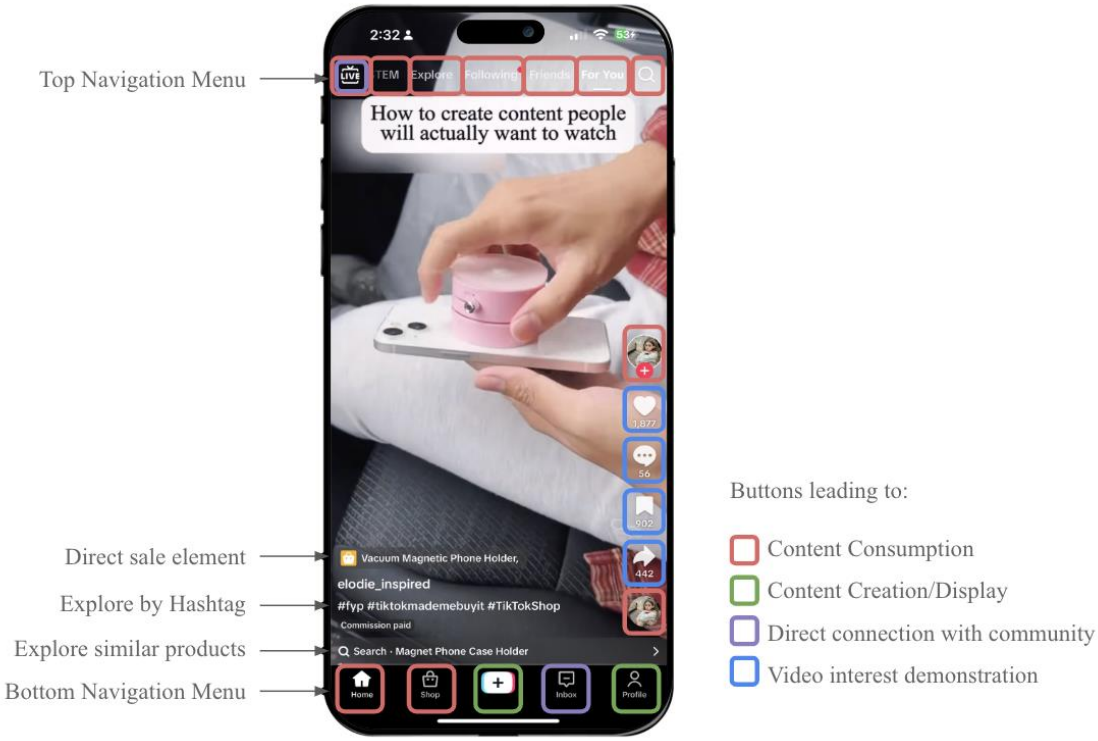


Figure 4

Identified Elements and Categories in TikTok's Architecture



3.3.2. Embodied Layer

This layer encompasses the user's internal mechanisms such as knowledge and skills, past experiences, reflexes, habits and mental representations (Lahlou, 2017). An estimated 94.2% of internet users use social media (DataReportal, 2025), thus, the necessary skills to operate TikTok are familiar, as mechanisms such as swiping, liking and in-app-purchasing exist in other apps. Nevertheless, there are different cognitive mechanisms embedded in the design driving addiction and consumerism. First, in an installation, a repeated stimulus or affordance triggers a "preferred activation path" (Lahlou, 2017, p.103) in the brain; consuming TikTok content is likely to strengthen the path reinforcing reward-seeking behaviour, ultimately creating an addictive, flow-like state (Petrillo, 2021). Flow experience, the state in which an individual engages in an activity with complete focus and involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), is induced at the highest rate by TikTok, compared to other social media platforms (Roberts and David, 2023). Flow is associated with time distortion, which causes excessive engagement and increased exposure to materialism, as well as a feeling of telepresence - the immersion into the world of the app - which is positively correlated to brand trust and, most importantly, impulse buying (Parahiyanti & Dimara, 2024).

Second, the platform's social connectivity (see 3.3.3.), activates the brain's dopaminergic reward system, which is a crucial factor in the development of addictive behaviours and contributes to problematic TikTok use (Pedrouzo & Krynski, 2023).
Despite the design being the same for all users, individual differences influence engagement with the app. Personalities, experiences and cultural backgrounds allow for different usage patterns; excessive social media usage may be positively correlated with traits such as extraversion or impulsivity and negatively correlated with conscientiousness (Sindermann et al., 2020), and users looking for escapism and social interaction are most vulnerable to addictive TikTok behaviour (Fabio & Iaconis, 2024). All mechanisms described ultimately contribute to making consumerism an embodied habit.

3.3.3. Social Regulation Layer

Factors which are crucial in shaping our behaviour both internally and externally are associated with the user's social integrative needs, like the desire for social connection and validation. The social context plays a key role in the adoption and continued use of the app, as many users join TikTok because it is a social norm among peers. Subsequently, out of "fear of missing out" (FOMO), i.e. social exclusion, users start using TikTok regularly to stay connected (Wang & Shang, 2024). However, users might also turn to TikTok because of the lack of a social circle and actively search for social connection on the platform (Bond, 2021). This motivation is strategically leveraged by TikTok to drive user engagement and consumption. Liking, commenting, and sharing posts for example, are all exchanges that allow users to maintain or build relationships, giving users a feeling of approval and inclusion, which encourages them to stay active (Ballara, 2023). Over time, those repeated interactions create expectations for continued engagement, both for content creators and users, who may feel the need to post regularly to fulfil social expectations.
Furthermore, during this extended use, TikTok's algorithm continuously exposes the users to influencers, ads and trends tailored to their preferences to advertise promote products and lifestyles. This repeated exposure creates a sense of familiarity and liking, also known as the mere-exposure effect (Klinger & Greenwald, 1994). This has two consequences: Firstly, the formation of parasocial relationships (Wang & Shang, 2024), which are non-reciprocal emotional attachments users develop with online personalities. As users seek out validation and a sense of belonging through these relationships, they become more likely to use TikTok compulsively (Wang & Shang, 2024) and follow influencers' recommendations and purchasing habits (Baek et al., 2013). Secondly, it ties into a broader pattern, in which TikTok normalises

consumerism as a social behaviour. The repeated exposure of lifestyles or products can feel like a social norm which often implicitly sparks a desire in users to join, either due to FOMO, social validation or the desire to align with an "idealized self" (Richins & Rudmin, 1994). Therefore, TikTok acts as a catalyst of dynamic norms, where each new trend encourages users to make purchases to feel they belong. As Sheth and Solomon (2014) argue, the digital world adapts to the self just as much as the self-adapts to it, meaning TikTok and its algorithm simultaneously reflect who the user is and shape who they become.

4. Our Approach: A Community-based Intervention at LSE

Based on the analysis above, we identified two main behavioural issues: the excessive time users spend on TikTok and the resulting impulse-driven purchasing. Our solution targets both: incentivising students to reduce the time spent on the app consciously, and exposing the consumerism problem caused by TikTok and the consumption alternatives to lead to long-lasting behavioural changes. The stakeholder analysis revealed that TikTok and its commercial partners significantly benefit from keeping the app's consumerist nature intact. This creates a clear conflict of interest with our goal of reducing screen time and impulse purchasing, as it would require TikTok to change its underlying profit-driven system. Consequently, involving TikTok or these stakeholders in our solution is not viable.

Instead, it is more feasible to change the way users engage with the app by targeting their attitudes and intentions around its use, as these have been shown to be highly effective intervention points for meaningful behavioural transformation (Dorninger et al., 2020). To achieve this, we focus on localised communities with existing social structures and communication channels. For this project, we chose universities as our intervention setting, using LSE as an exemplary case. We chose this for three key reasons: First, universities offer access to a large and highly relevant audience, as 18-24-year-olds, who represent the largest segment of TikTok users (36.2%) (Shepherd, 2025), make up a large part of the student population. With 2.94 million students enrolled in UK universities in 2022-23 (Bolton, 2025), universities present an ideal opportunity to target this demographic within an already regulated context. Secondly, this approach aligns with Roger's (2003) concept of *diffusion of innovation*, which describes how innovation is distributed within a social system over time via specific communication channels. LSE is a strong example of such a system, as it consists of students and staff with shared goals and predefined communication channels, like Moodle, making it a fruitful environment to distribute skills and promote awareness. Lastly, university communities allow us to leverage user's social integrative needs, which, as analysed above, play a key role

in TikTok use on multiple levels. Dzimińska et al. (2020, p.1) describe universities as "incubators of knowledge, research leaders and the partners to the social and business world that surrounds them". They propose a model where universities act as agents for cultural change towards sustainability through education, community engagement and research, all of which we address in our solution at LSE.

4.1. Bottom-up Strategy

Our proposal is based on direct communication and execution by LSE students who will act as the model's engine. Several reasons lead us to deploy our model mainly through Student Union (SU) societies. First, they are existing organisations with a leadership committee and members who voluntarily enrol (target for behaviour change). Second, the variety of societies support the effectiveness of behaviour change through polycentric systems (Ostrom, 2010), which include multiple governing authorities at differing scales rather than a single central unit. Third, students' dynamics enable *microgenetic interaction* (the exchange of alternative knowledge), leading to self-reflection and ultimately to social change (Kadaniaki & Gillespie, 2012).
Thus, considering these advantages, and recognising that high-level institutional change is often slow and difficult (Roland, 2004), we propose a *bottom-up* solution that starts with relevant student societies. Subsequently, this model can progressively be scaled up to other parts of LSE and ultimately be replicated in other UK universities (see Figure 5).

4.2. Key Stakeholders for Implementation

Initially, the model will target stakeholders with preexisting strong motivations to support its implementation: Societies' leaders and members who are directly concerned with sustainability-related issues and, therefore, naturally complement our mission of mitigating the socio-environmental consequences associated with TikTok (first-level-stakeholders). These will be supported by student influencers. Subsequently, first-level stakeholders will persuade the remaining societies to support the model (second-level-stakeholders) and leverage the collective momentum to include third-level-stakeholders, i.e. administrative and academic departments, in the implementation of the model at an institutional level. Each level's stakeholders, along with their roles and motivations, are outlined in Table 1.

Figure 5

Illustration of the Progressive Execution of the Model Among Stakeholders.

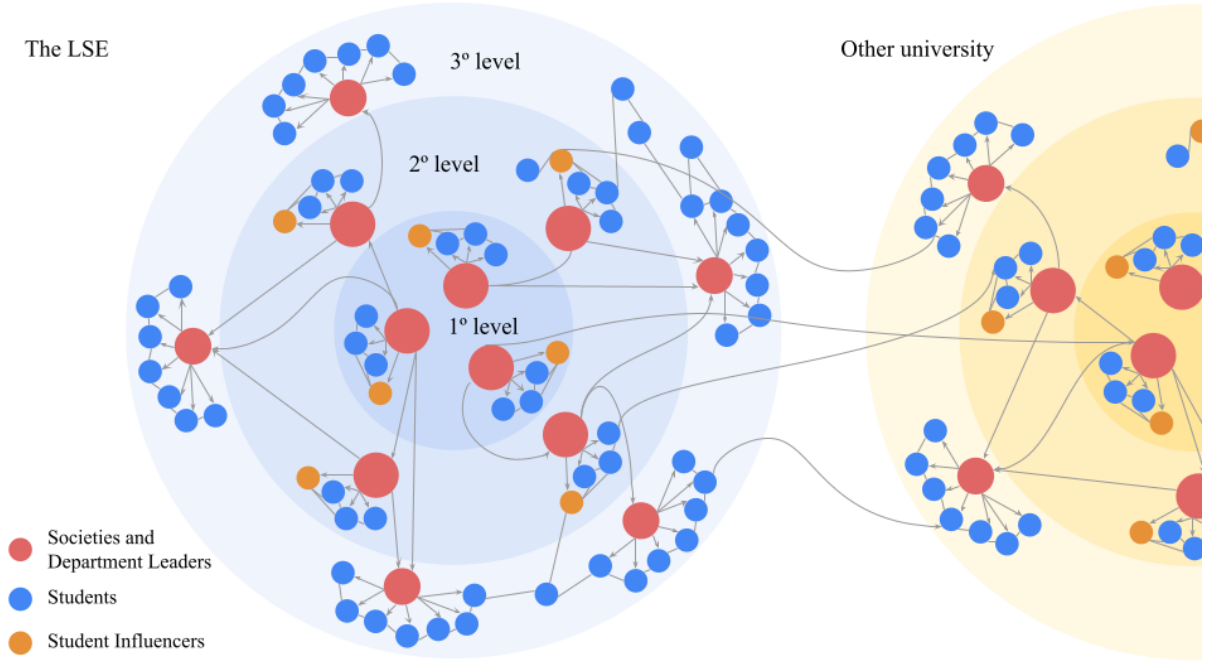


Table 1.

LSE-Stakeholder Overview

1º Level Stakeholders			
Stakeholders	**Existing actions**	**Actions related to the model**	**Motivations**
Sustainability related societies' leaders in LSE (See list in Appendix B)	Lead and coordinate their societies driven by interest in Sustainability.	Execute awareness campaign, organise society's members to perform the activities promoted by the model, be and/or identify influencers, look for alliances to extend the model.	Reach goals in an easier way. Reputation. CV Skills & Experience
Existing Sustainability related Societies' Members (students) in LSE (See list in Appendix B)	Hold interest in Sustainability, join associated Societies.	Set up free-phone spaces; join the challenges and activities; follow, spread the message, practice Sustainable Consumption.	Social cognitive needs met. Reputation. Enhanced self-image. Better Academic performance and well-being.

Students' Influencers (ambassadors)	Influence people through Social Networks.	Spread messages related to the model continuously.	Reputation Enhanced self-image.

2º Level Stakeholders			
Stakeholders	**Existing actions**	**Actions related to the model**	**Motivations**
Students' Union Officers	Fund and facilitate student activities on campus, including societies, and sports clubs	Provide support to display communication campaign and identify societies interested	Achieve their motto: to help LSE students make the most of all the life-changing experiences open to them during their time at university. (LSE Students' Union, 2025)
Existing societies' leaders in LSE (not directly concerned with sustainability)	Individuals already performing as leaders and coordinators	2nd level: Communicate the awareness campaign within the members of their societies. and/or identify influencers	Reputation. CV Skills & Experience
Existing societies' members (students) in LSE (not directly concerned with sustainability)	Individuals united by common interest.	Come into the free-phone spaces join the challenges and activities; follow, spread the message, practice Sustainable Consumption.	Social cognitive needs met. Reputation. Enhanced self-image. Better Academic performance and well-being.

3º Level Stakeholders			
Stakeholders	**Existing actions**	**Actions related to the model**	**Motivations**
Student's Well-Being Departments (Inside LSE: Mental Health Services, LSE Life)	Master methods for time management and treating TikTok addiction.	Provide more information and active help to combat TikTok addiction. Show campaign messages in their spaces and presentations.	Help students achieve mental health. Reputation.
Sustainability related Departments (Inside LSE: Environment & Geopolitics, PEL)	Educate towards sustainable principles and practices.	Show campaign messages in their spaces and presentations. Promote dynamic change.	Reputation. Reinforce education given in lectures and seminars.

Marketing & Communication Departments	Create and manage campaigns aligned with LSE goals.	Participate in creating and deploying videos, repost and post messages to distribute to all LSE students across multiple channels.	Reputation. Comply with role goals.
LSE Changemakers	Organise team-based, student-led research projects regarding student life	Conduct a project measuring the effectiveness of the intervention	Preexisting intrinsic motivation to participate in student research. CV Boost.

4.3. Our Model

Following Dzimińska et al.'s (2020) approach, the model includes elements of education through an awareness campaign, community engagement through phone-free spaces and challenges, as well as a research project complementing the intervention.

4.3.1. #MindtheScroll Awareness Campaign

The campaign will be initiated by the first-level-stakeholders and aims to tackle both identified problems: reducing time spent on TikTok and educating students on how and why to avoid impulse purchasing to gradually become sustainable consumers, using existing communication channels. The campaign's slogan, "Mind the Scroll" references the iconic "Mind the gap" tube announcement and serves as a memorable warning for users to be cautious of their TikTok use. To address the first problem, the campaign will inform students about TikTok's exploitative business model, e.g. how the platform economically profits from their attention, and highlight how students can benefit from reducing their app use, e.g. improving their academic performance. Students will also be encouraged to use the *phone-free spaces* (see *3.3.3.*) and participate in the challenge (see *3.3.4.*).

For the second problem, we aim to make students reflect on their consumption behaviours by informing them about the environmental and psychological consequences of accelerated consumerism (Amrilah, 2024), demonstrating alternative ways to consume, and easing their path to gradually becoming a sustainable consumer (e.g. by providing guides to aid reflection). The content of these guides will address purchasing fewer resources and provide options that could lead to more sustainable consumption and a lower ecological impact (Dantas et al., 2018). Visual material will be distributed to convey these messages across key physical spaces on campus and digital platforms including social networks; and a designated SU webpage (see

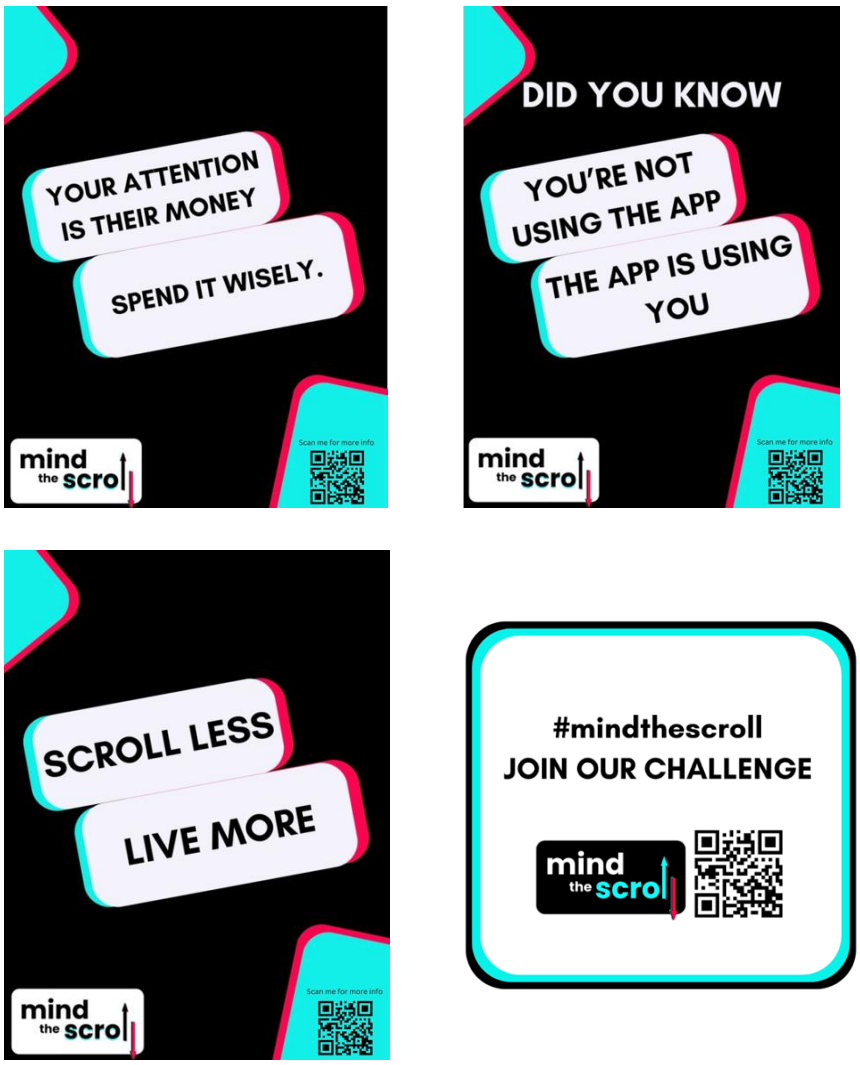
Appendix C), accessible through QR codes (see Figure 6), will be created by the first-level stakeholders, providing relevant information of the campaign and its purpose.

Visual material will be distributed to convey these messages across key physical spaces in LSE's campus and in digital platforms, including social networks, and a designated SU webpage (see Appendix D), accessible through QR codes (see Figure 6), will be created by the first-level stakeholders, providing relevant information of the campaign and its purpose. To accelerate the campaign's reach, the webpage link will be circulated in the existing WhatsApp group of society presidents allowing them to distribute it to society members.

The campaign's visual concept mimics TikTok's colour palette, so the users immediately recognise it. However, this design aims to invoke a negative association with TikTok. The campaign's content will also make use of metaphors to maximise their impact, for example, "Your attention is their money. Spend it wisely", frames a more abstract concept (attention) onto a more concrete one (money) (Lakoff & Johnsen, 2003), to imply that attention, like money, can be spent and exploited, and thus encourages students to treat their attention with the same care as their finances. We aim the campaign works as a boost (Hertwig & Grüne-Yanoff, 2017) strengthening agency and self-regulation skills among students. We hope to stimulate critical thinking, which is associated with lower levels of social network addiction on TikTok (Fabio & Iaconis, 2024).

Figure 6

Exemplary Campaign Posters and Sticker



4.3.2. Influencers

Identified by first-level stakeholders, student-influencers will create personal content on campaign awareness and the social media challenge, which can be highly effective in impacting their audience (Joshi et al., 2023). Narrative videos such as personal stories about TikTok addiction or disappointing online purchases could be a valuable addition to enhance interest and engagement in non-expert audiences (Dahlstrom, 2014) to participate in #MindtheScroll. Since many LSE students already act as hobby-influencers by posting TikToks or Instagram reels about their student life, this makes it a realistic and relevant part of our model.

4.3.3. Phone-Free Spaces

To address the overuse of TikTok and smartphones on campus, designated phone-free areas (Appendix D) will be created, where students can focus on social connection, collaboration, and studying. By introducing these zones, we purposefully create an affordance within the physical layer (Lahlou, 2018) of the LSE-installation to provoke behaviours that do not require a phone. The goal is to create physical spaces functioning as mini-installations with a new social norm of abstaining from phones. These will be organised by the first-level stakeholders within the SU building, which is designed to provide communal space for students. At later stages of the intervention, third-level stakeholders (different departments, Mental Health Services) could work together to implement phone-free spaces across campus.

4.3.4. The #MindtheScroll Challenge

This digital well-being challenge encourages students to reduce their TikTok screen time over a set period (see Appendix E). Students will set daily screen-time goals and log their actual use on a Moodle page. They will be awarded points based on how closely their screen time aligns with their goal, and at the end of the challenge, receive rewards based on their ranking. This gamified approach provides extrinsic motivation (Subhash & Cudney, 2018) and creates a sense of competition, which are crucial aspects for boosting engagement in university settings (Cagiltay et al., 2015). It also aims to promote a sense of belonging and support for students outside of TikTok.

We propose LSE Life, SU and Wellbeing Services to coordinate the challenge, as they already support students' academic and personal development and reach the entire student-body.

4.3.5. Complementary Study

The final step of our intervention is a longitudinal study to evaluate its impact. It will assess new undergraduate students before and after participating in the "MindtheScroll" project, focusing on well-being, TikTok use, and sustainable consumption. The study could be conducted under the "LSE Change Makers" programme (LSE, 2025b), as it aligns with its focus on student life and education. Although the study may face certain limitations, such as inconsistent participation or uncontrollable variables, it can offer valuable insights that may inspire similar initiatives at other universities or guide future policies. Further methodological details are provided in Appendix E.

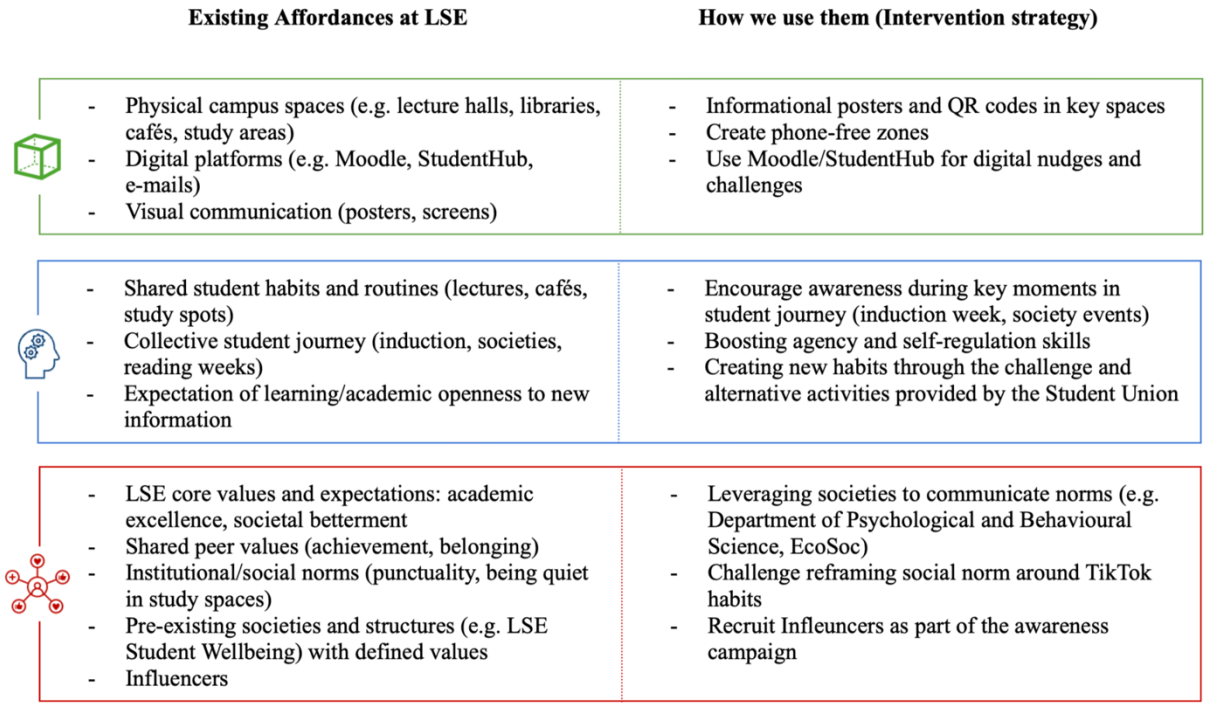
The overall costs of this model are minimal, limited to posters and stickers, as all other resources are already available to us. A detailed cost analysis is provided in Appendix F.

4.3.6. LSE as an Installation

Overall, the intervention targets LSE's physical and digital spaces, the student's agency and embodied skills, as well as communal norms. The goal is to gradually address all three layers of the LSE-installation to establish long-lasting behaviour change. Figure 7 summarises our proposed solutions across the three layers of LSE as an installation.

Figure 7

Applying Installation Theory at LSE



5. Discussion and Limitations

As our model's execution relies on the willingness and effort of various stakeholders, there is no guarantee that its full potential will be reached. Nevertheless, we strongly believe that their underlying motives and the strength of our cause are enough to mobilise their support. Furthermore, as a bottom-up solution, the progress of our model may be slow-paced and the timeline of its success difficult to anticipate. It may also encounter bureaucratic hurdles (e.g. approvals), which can delay its progress.

Most of our solutions target TikTok habits, however, students might turn to other social media applications instead; however, as the campaign aims to boost critical thinking, it might cause a positive spillover effect on habits broader social media behaviour.

We also recognise that TikTok is not the sole driver of consumerism. Users are constantly exposed to advertisement efforts on various social media platforms and outside digital environments, making consumerism a problem that needs systemic interventions along with the solutions proposed.

Finally, the model's transferability to other universities will depend on the context of its destination and may be hindered if their conditions do not meet a sense of community. The reach of general public is out of the scope of this essay as it would require governmental actions such as tighter regulations and bans, counteracting the current neoliberal ideal of deregulated free markets (Adams et al., 2019). Instead, our solution serves as a realistic starting point for a more holistic approach and inspiration for future s-frame solutions.

6. Conclusion

This essay aims to break the vicious cycle of overconsumption fostered by TikTok's addictive app design. We offer a multidimensional, community-based approach, which is embedded within the installation of LSE, with the goal of transferring the model to other institutions. The bottom-up-model is expected to spread from an individual to an institutional level, finalized by a study to empirically ground its impact. We acknowledge that our solution will neither eradicate the omnipresence of consumerism, nor TikTok's harmful impact entirely, but we hope to create a small-scale solution that can act as a springboard for diffusion of innovation over time and space. As Gómez (2014, p.1) phrased it, "Although less dramatic than abrupt and wholesale transformations, these slow and piecemeal changes can be equally consequential for patterning human behaviour".

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Appendices

Appendix A

AI use in Title Page Image

The mage on title page was partly generated with tools using AI on the Canva platform.

Prompt used: Please make a picture which shows how TikTok boosts the attention economy - so steals us time and makes us consume more and more. Emphasize on the clocks so the time spent and the consumption so maybe piles of stuff we buy and a clock and also the phone with the TikTok logo.

Reference: Canva. (2025.). *DreamLab, text to image generator* (March 22 free web version) https://www.canva.com/dream-lab

Appendix B

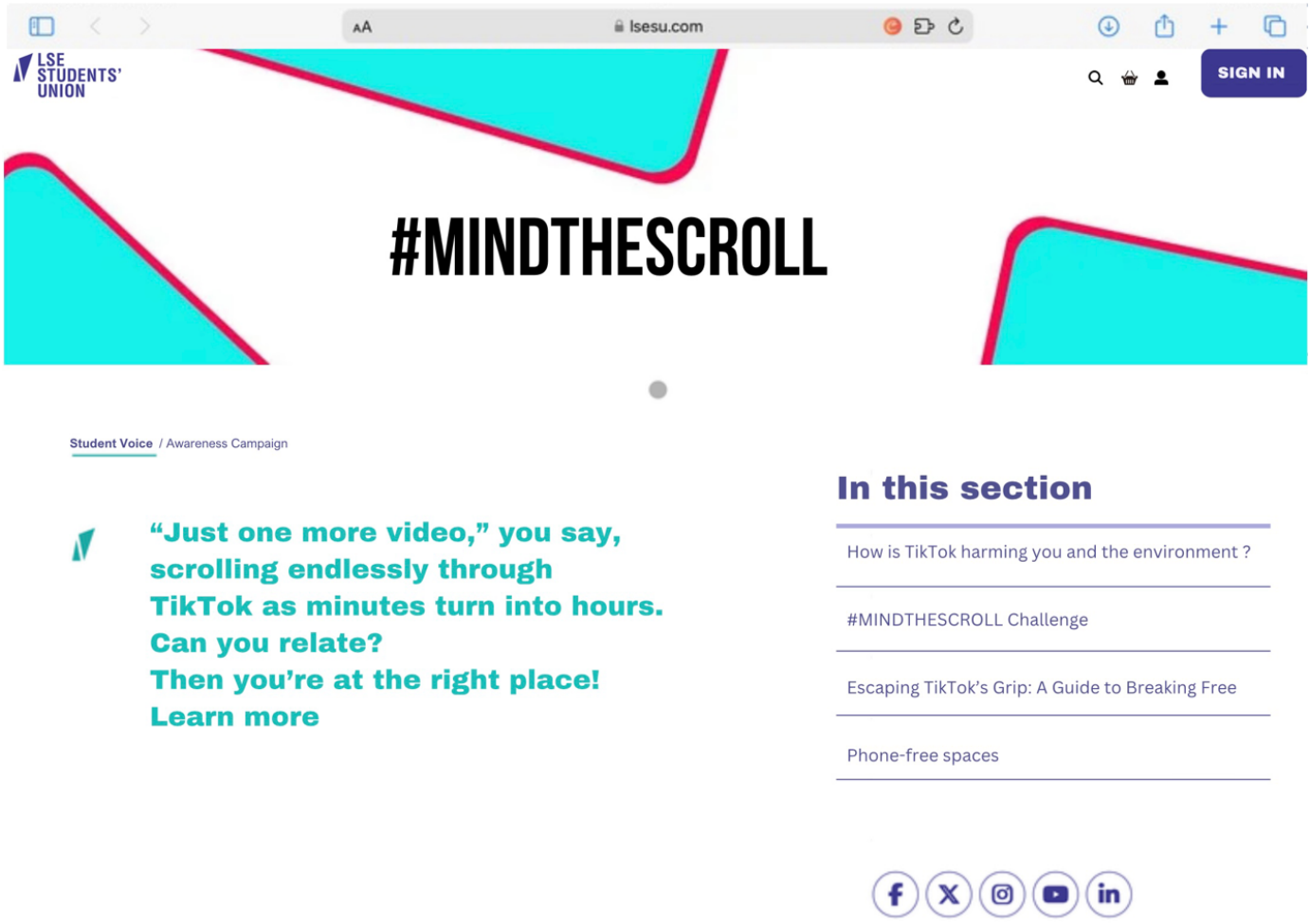
List of First Level Societies

- **EcoSoc.** “EcoSoc's aim is to incentivise individuals and organisations to become more sustainable in their everyday life and care for their environment, through a series of interactive, fun, and educational activities”. (LSE SU, 2025)
- **Sustainable Futures Society.** “The Sustainable Futures Society works to increase the sustainable practices of the LSE by working jointly with staff and students on environmental initiatives. We administer the 20,000-pound Sustainable Projects Fund that gives out funding for projects to increase the Sustainability on Campus”. (LSE SU, 2025)
- **Geography and Environment.** “To function as a place for LSE students to share their ideas and interest about Geography and Environment. We also collaborate with different societies to further our aims”. (LSE SU, 2025)
- **Social Impact Advisory.** “We perform pro-bono consulting work to help leading UK charities maximize their impact. Our members gain hands-on consulting experience while making the world a better place”. (LSE SU, 2025)
- Circular Economy**.** Vision: "To emerge as London's preeminent student society, dedicated to inspiring heightened awareness and action in propelling the circular economy forward”. (LSE SU, 2025)
- **Biodiversity.** “As proactive students, we're committed to minimizing our ecological footprint through engaging events, from immersive educational workshops to impactful conservation initiatives”. (LSE SU, 2025)
- **LSU Greens.** “Provides our students with the opportunity to engage in fairer, greener politics. If you are passionate about socialism, climate action, and the empowerment of marginalised communities, this is the right place for you!”. (LSE SU, 2025)
- **Green Finance.** “Our mission is to provide our members with the resources to gain knowledge and skills in the field and the opportunity to contribute towards efforts to drive sustainability in various industries”. (LSE SU, 2025)

Appendix C

Figure C

Draft of the SU Webpage Designated to our Campaign



Appendix D

Phone-less Space Promotional Material

For the designated "no phone spaces," additional materials, including posters and stickers, will be used to raise awareness, not only for these specific areas but for the broader initiative as well. These materials should be evenly distributed across campus to inform the community and reinforce our movement.

Figure D

Exemplary Poster and Sickers

Appenidx E

#MindtheScroll Challenge Details

Figure E1

Challenge Outline

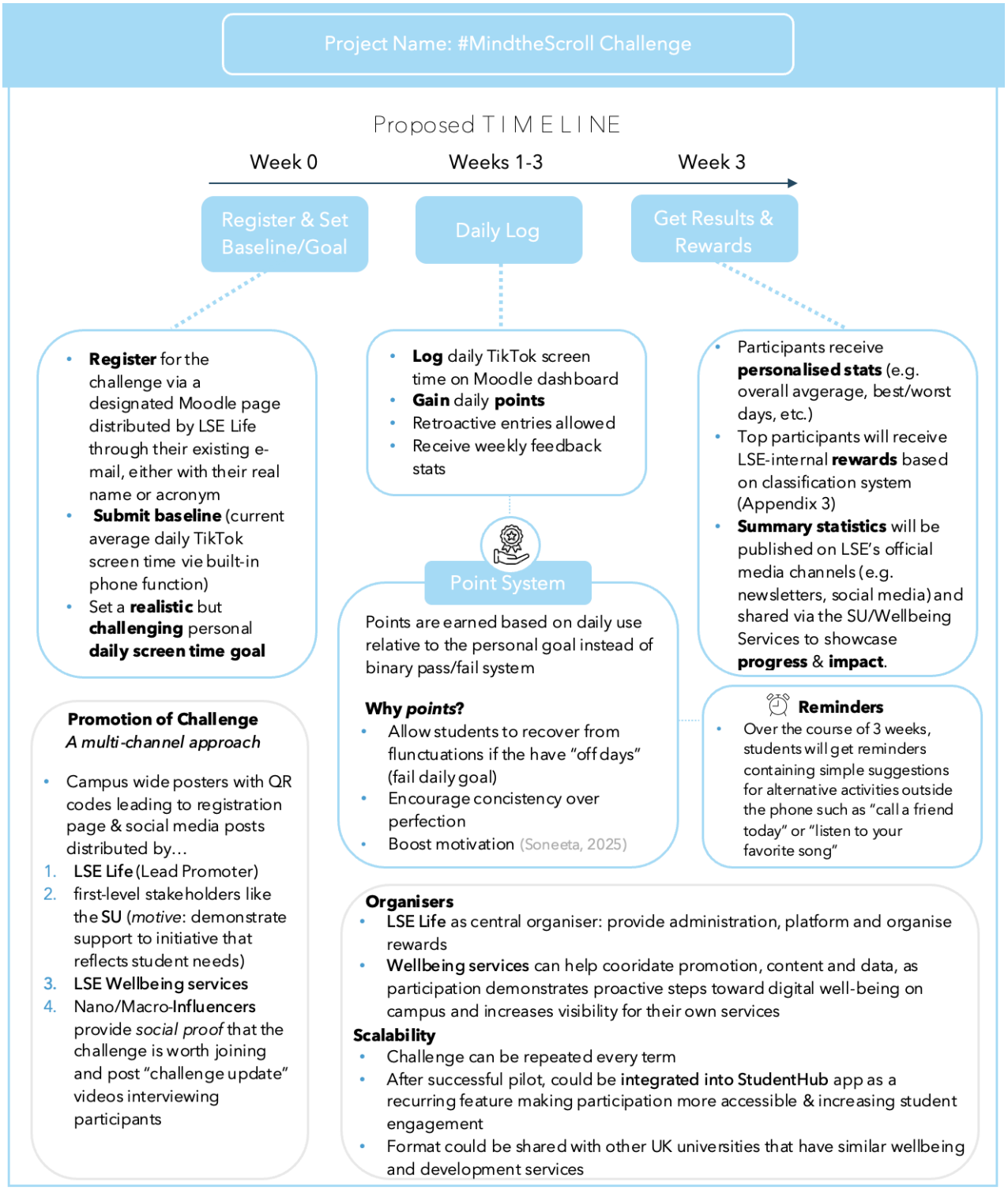


Figure E2

Exemplary Point System

Daily Screen Time vs. Goal Time	Points Earned
20% ≥ below goal	**+ 10 points**
10-19% below goal	**+ 8 points**
1-9 % below goal	**+ 6 points**
At goal (±0%)	**+ 4 points**
1-10% over goal	**+ 2 points**
>10% over goal	**+0 points**

Weekly Bonus Point Option

Bonus Type	Criteria	Bonus Points
Consistency Bonus	Under goal for at least 5 consecutive days	+ 15 points
Improvement Bonus	Weekly avg. screen time lower than previous week	+ 10 points

Figure E3

Exemplary Reward System

Reward Type	Eligibility	Provider	Motivation for Provider
LSE Merchandise bundle (tote bag, pens, notebooks etc) 10 -15£ Vouchers (e.g. Amazon)	Highest 3 point scorers across all participants	LSE Life and LSE Shop, with existing funds	Encourages participation, as they are desirable items with high perceived value
Vouchers for campus facilities (e.g. Bookstore or Café)	Top 4 - 10 performers	Campus Facilities	Encourages campus engagement and traffic; Facilities are also commited to sustainability
LSE-branded item (e.g. notebook, pen)	Next 15% of participants	LSE Life and LSE Shop	Encourages participation
Digital recognition certificate	Completed challenge & submitted all screen time logs	LSE Life	Low-cost, recognition based reward that boosts motivation

Appendix F

Longitudinal Study Design and Measurement Tools

The study will be conducted once the model is fully implemented and has gained traction on campus. New undergraduate students will be assessed both before participating in the "Mind-the-Scroll" project and after it has been running for several months. The study will mainly measure their wellbeing, excessive TikTok use and sustainable consumption habits, using measurements such as the TikTok Addiction Scale (Galanis et al., 2024), the College Student Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (Renshaw, 2016) and the Sustainable Consumption Behaviour Scale (Quoquab et al., 2019).

The study could be conducted as part of the "LSE Change Makers" programme (LSE, 2025b), which provides students with an opportunity to practice their research skills and enhance their CV through team-based, funded research projects. Since the research questions in this programme focus on education or student life, the context of #MindtheScroll aligns well with the research scheme's objective.

Embedding our project into a research project offers multifaceted advantages: it would not only provide a tangible measure of our intervention's effectiveness in the areas outlined above but also allow LSE to demonstrate its commitment to their 2030 agenda. This agenda is aimed at promoting education with a global impact, empowering students to be agents of change and shaping the future of research in the Social Sciences (LSE, 2025a). However, the study might be difficult to implement: Longitudinal changes could be caused by different variables independent from our intervention, participants might have engaged in the "Mind-the-Scroll" movement to different degrees, and the study might go beyond the scope of the usual Change Makers project. Despite these limitations, the study sill provides an empirical framework to place our intervention into a larger context. As a long-term goal, scientific research supporting the importance of TikTok awareness might inspire future policy changes or at least motivate other universities to adopt our model.

Appendix G

Figure G

Exemplary Costs for the Awareness Campaign

Quantity	Price
40 Posters (A3) 5 pieces/poster	**£40**
10x10cm stickers 50pieces	**£52**
Total	**£92**

Note. Costs will be taken out of first-level stakeholder's preexisting budget.