Exploring the Educational Potential of Tiktok:
A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

TikTok, a rapidly expanding platform known for its short-form videos, has garnered increasing interest for its potential in education. This review explores TikTok's use in both formal and informal learning environments by analyzing 30 studies published since 2020. It examines how the platform can engage students, improve knowledge retention, and promote digital literacy. While TikTok successfully captures student interest, concerns persist regarding its capacity to support deep learning and critical thinking. Additionally, balancing its entertainment focus with academic rigor remains a challenge. The review provides practical recommendations for integrating TikTok into educational practices, emphasizing the importance of aligning its use with specific learning objectives. The findings suggest that, with the right strategies, TikTok can serve as a valuable educational tool, though further research is needed to address its limitations.

Keywords: TikTok, Educational Use, Educational Potential, Student Engagement, Informal Learning

INTRODUCTION

Social media has reshaped the ways students interact with educational material, and platforms like TikTok are quickly becoming prominent in both formal and informal learning contexts. TikTok, a platform designed for short-form video content, has gained significant traction among various user groups, particularly younger audiences. The platform's design, allowing users to create, share, and engage with videos ranging from 15 to 60 seconds, has prompted educators and scholars to investigate its potential to enhance student engagement, improve knowledge retention, and foster digital literacy (Rajan & Ismail, 2022). As digital tools take on a more integral role in modern education, it becomes increasingly important to examine how platforms like TikTok can be leveraged for educational purposes. A key advantage of TikTok is its ability to capture student interest through dynamic, multimedia content.

Research indicates that the platform supports active learning and creativity, encouraging students to interact with educational materials in unique and engaging ways (Wang et al., 2024). Features such as hashtags, challenges, and content remixing provide educators with novel methods to stimulate student interest and foster engagement in a variety of subjects (Hayes et al., 2020). Furthermore, TikTok's short and visually engaging format aligns well with the attention spans of today's digital-native students (Kolber, 2024). Despite TikTok's potential to engage students, questions have arisen regarding its effectiveness in fostering deeper learning and critical thinking. Critics suggest that the platform's focus on brevity and entertainment may encourage only surface-level engagement with

more complex topics, potentially hindering educational depth (Nguyen & Diederich, 2023). The condensed nature of TikTok videos often requires simplifying information, which could limit the development of the critical thinking skills traditionally emphasized in more structured educational settings (Vermeire et al., 2024). Additionally, the fact that TikTok content is user-generated and lacks editorial oversight raises concerns about the risks of misinformation and inconsistent educational quality (Shafirova & Araújo e Sá, 2024). Thus, while TikTok can serve as an engaging introduction to learning, it is essential to use it alongside structured educational frameworks to ensure depth and critical analysis. Beyond engagement and learning, TikTok also contributes to the development of digital literacy and media education. Its algorithm-driven content distribution system provides students with opportunities to engage critically with digital mechanisms, contributing to the development of "algorithmic literacy" (Low et al., 2023). Additionally, TikTok encourages multimodal literacy by promoting content creation that integrates visual, auditory, and textual elements, skills that are becoming more crucial in today's media-rich communication environment (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021).

However, TikTok also presents the challenge of combating misinformation, highlighting the importance of integrating media literacy education into its use to help students critically evaluate digital content (Yu & Ding, 2022). Given TikTok's potential and the growing reliance on digital platforms in education, it is crucial to develop practical strategies for integrating the platform into teaching. Effective use of TikTok in educational settings requires alignment with curricular goals and desired learning outcomes. Educators can harness the platform by designing tasks that encourage students to create explanatory videos and collaborate with peers, fostering creativity while promoting critical thinking (Witte et al., 2024). Additionally, embedding media literacy into these activities is vital to ensure that students learn to engage with digital platforms responsibly, navigate misinformation, and critically evaluate content (Xu & He, 2023). This systematic review aims to investigate TikTok's role in enhancing learning across diverse educational settings. By synthesizing recent research, the review will evaluate the platform's strengths and limitations as an educational tool and provide guidance on best practices for its integration into both formal and informal educational environments. In doing so, the paper seeks to offer educators a clearer understanding of how TikTok can be used effectively to meet various learning objectives, while also addressing its potential challenges.

Problem Statement

In recent years, short video platforms like TikTok have significantly reshaped how younger generations engage with educational content. Although primarily known for its entertainment appeal, TikTok's potential as an educational tool has increasingly drawn attention. Its visually stimulating, engaging, and easily consumable format presents educators with a novel avenue to reach students, particularly in informal learning environments (Rajan & Ismail, 2022; Low et al., 2023). However, despite growing interest in its educational applications, there are still unresolved questions about its capacity to foster meaningful and long-lasting learning outcomes. A primary challenge lies in integrating TikTok into formal educational contexts without sacrificing academic rigor. While the platform's interactive features and micro-learning approach are often praised for capturing student attention, concerns remain regarding the superficiality of its content. Given the short duration of TikTok videos, there is a risk that the platform may not provide the depth required for developing critical thinking and promoting knowledge retention (Nguyen & Diederich, 2023). Additionally, TikTok's algorithm-driven content selection, which prioritizes entertainment and user engagement, often misaligns with educational objectives, raising doubts about its reliability as an instructional tool (Wang et al., 2024). Moreover, there is limited empirical research on TikTok's effectiveness in structured educational environments, such as classrooms, particularly for teaching complex subjects. Some studies suggest that TikTok can enhance student engagement in areas like geography and digital literacy (Xu & He, 2023; Yu & Ding, 2022), yet others emphasize the difficulty of maintaining an educational focus within a platform predominantly oriented towards entertainment (Lampe, 2023). This highlights the need for educators to better understand how to balance TikTok's entertainment-driven features with the demands of formal education, especially when aiming to develop cognitive skills beyond basic, surface-level learning. Thus, the key issue is how to effectively incorporate TikTok into educational practices while ensuring that it supports critical thinking, long-term knowledge retention, and academic depth. This systematic review seeks to address these challenges by analyzing existing literature on TikTok's educational

applications, examining its strengths and limitations, and offering guidance to educators on how best to leverage its potential while mitigating its drawbacks.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the educational potential of TikTok as a tool for enhancing learning outcomes in various educational contexts. Specifically, the research seeks to:

a. Analyze TikTok's capacity to engage learners and improve knowledge retention through its unique short-form video format.
b. Investigate the strengths and limitations of TikTok's use in formal educational settings, with particular attention to its impact on critical thinking and academic rigor.
c. Examine how TikTok can contribute to the development of digital literacy and media education, focusing on its role in promoting responsible and effective use of digital platforms.
d. Provide practical recommendations for educators on how to integrate TikTok into their teaching practices in ways that align with curricular goals and foster meaningful learning experiences.

Significance of the Study

This systematic review provides important insights for educators and researchers by exploring the role of TikTok as an educational tool in today's digital landscape. As students increasingly engage with short-form content, understanding how to integrate TikTok into learning environments becomes essential. The platform's potential to enhance student engagement, facilitate knowledge retention, and promote digital literacy aligns with evolving educational needs. This study also delves into how TikTok can combine entertainment with education, offering strategies for educators to make use of the platform's interactive features without compromising academic depth, particularly in areas that require critical thinking and deeper analysis. Moreover, the study highlights TikTok's role in developing essential digital skills, including critical media literacy and multimodal communication. As digital literacy grows in importance, the research offers practical recommendations for integrating TikTok into formal educational settings, spanning from primary education to university level. By addressing both the opportunities and challenges presented by TikTok, this review provides valuable direction for shaping future teaching practices and encouraging responsible, effective use of digital platforms in education.

METHODOLOGY

This study follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 guidelines to ensure a transparent and replicable systematic review process. The goal is to synthesize existing research on TikTok's educational potential using a rigorous and structured approach. The process involves several key steps, including study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion.

Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted in two major academic databases, Scopus and CNKI, between January 2020 and August 2024. The search strings were designed to capture studies focused on TikTok's role in education, emphasizing terms like "student engagement," "digital literacy," and "informal learning." Filters were applied to ensure that only peer-reviewed journal articles in English and Chinese were included, See table 1 for details.

Table 1 *Keyword Search*

Database	Search String	Filters

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (tiktok OR "short-form videos") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("educational technology" OR "educational use" OR "student engagement" OR "digital literacy" OR "informal learning" OR "teaching practices" OR "creative learning")	PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2025, DOCTYPE = "ar", LANGUAGE = "English"
CNKI	Douyin (TikTok) AND Education AND Learning	Chinese Core Journals, CSSCI, AMI, Published 2020–2024

The Scopus search string was designed to capture studies focused on TikTok or short-form videos used in education. Keywords such as "educational technology," "student engagement," and "digital literacy" were included to ensure the articles were relevant to the research objectives. The CNKI search used similar terms to focus on high-quality Chinese journals, emphasizing TikTok's role in education.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and rigor of the review, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied. Articles published in peer-reviewed journals, reporting empirical findings, were included, while non-research articles, theoretical materials, and government policy documents were excluded. The time frame for the search was limited to articles published between 2020 and 2024, See table 2 for details.

Table 2 *The Selection Criterion Is Searching*

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Date	2020–2024	Pre-2020
Language	English or Chinese	Non-English, Non-Chinese
Document Type	Empirical studies with quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods	Theoretical articles, editorials, government documents
Source	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference papers, policy documents

By applying these criteria, the study aims to focus on research that directly investigates TikTok's educational applications, particularly those that provide empirical evidence on student engagement, digital literacy, or learning outcomes. Articles published before 2020 were excluded to ensure the review captures the most recent developments in TikTok's use for educational purposes.

Data Collection

The PRISMA flow diagram (see Figure 1) outlines the detailed process of study selection, following the key steps of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion.From the initial database searches, 38 records were identified in CNKI and 31 in Scopus, resulting in a total of 69 records. After removing 2 duplicate records and 1 ineligible record, 66 records proceeded to the screening phase. During screening, 2 non-English/Chinese articles were excluded, leaving 64 articles for eligibility assessment. Of these, 62 were assessed for eligibility, and 32 were excluded for reasons such as 6 articles not being specific to TikTok, 1 being a review study, and 25 not directly relevant to the study's objectives. Ultimately, 30 studies were included in the final systematic review, providing empirical evidence on the educational use of TikTok or short-form videos.
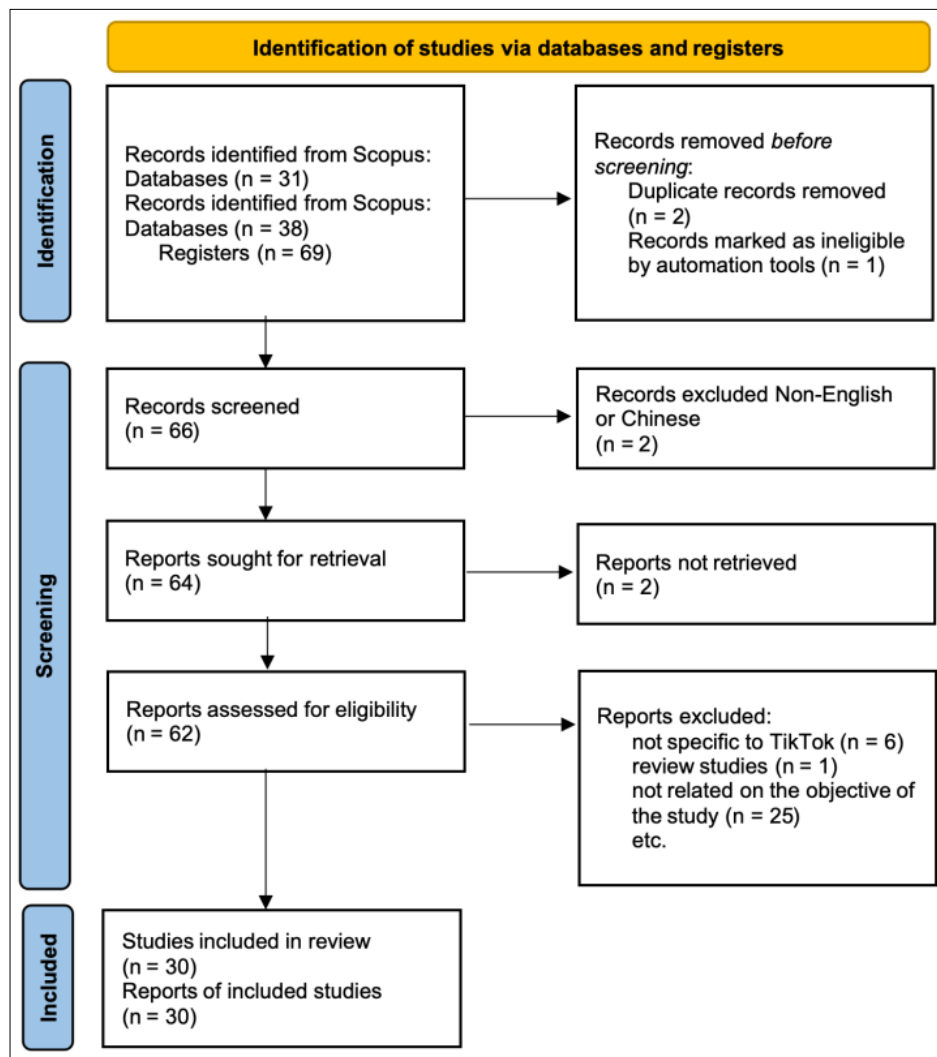
Figure 1. Flow Diagram of The Proposed Searching Study

Data Analysis

The selected articles were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring themes, strategies, and outcomes in the educational use of TikTok. The analysis focused on four key areas: (1) Student Engagement, examining how TikTok fosters student motivation and participation in learning activities; (2) Knowledge Retention, assessing the platform's impact on long-term retention and academic performance; (3) Digital Literacy, exploring TikTok's role in promoting critical media skills and digital literacy; and (4) Challenges in Formal Education, identifying barriers to using TikTok in structured educational settings, such as the perceived lack of academic depth.

RESULTS

Table 3 presents the findings from 30 studies, categorized into four key areas: student engagement, knowledge retention, digital literacy, and challenges in formal education. Each study examines TikTok's role in education, capturing both its potential benefits and limitations. Regarding Student Engagement (n=10), the studies illustrate how TikTok can motivate and engage students across a variety of subjects, such as chemistry, ESL, sociology, and management, showcasing its effectiveness in creating more interactive learning environments. In terms of Knowledge Retention (n=8), the studies explore TikTok's capacity to reinforce key concepts in areas like literature, history, management, and democratic

education, highlighting its ability to support long-term retention through brief yet memorable content. For Digital Literacy (n=7), the research shows how TikTok aids in building critical media skills and digital awareness, particularly through informal learning and user-generated content. However, the Challenges in Formal Education (n=12) are significant, as these studies reveal the difficulties of maintaining academic rigor and balancing entertainment with educational objectives, especially in subjects like public health, sociology, and political education. During the review process, several studies were found to overlap across categories, which initially led to a higher total count. For example, Rajan & Ismail (2022) appeared under both student engagement and knowledge retention, while Wang et al. (2024) was included in three areas: student engagement, knowledge retention, and digital literacy. Similarly, Lampe (2023) and Xu & He (2023) appeared in multiple categories. After accounting for these overlaps, the final number of distinct studies stands at 30.

Table 3 *Key Focus Areas from Studies on TikTok's Educational Potential*

Category	Authors and Year	Key Focus
Student Engagement	Hayes et al. (2020)	Engagement in chemistry education through TikTok's interactive features.
	Assad (2024)	Virtual classroom engagement, particularly among male students in Egypt.
	Nguyen and Diederich (2023)	Informal learning in science education, promoting participation and knowledge sharing.
	Rajan and Ismail (2022)	Increased student participation in ESL literature classes via TikTok integration.
	Wang et al. (2024)	Enhanced engagement in management education through interactive video content.
	Vermeire et al. (2024)	Increased student control and participation in digital learning compared to traditional settings.
	Lampe (2023)	Use of TikTok to increase engagement in sociology courses on sensitive topics.
	De-la-Peña and Chaves-Yuste (2024)	Social networks and TikTok fostering EFL student engagement.
	Wang et al. (2023)	Effects of TikTok's intelligent recommendations and playfulness on student engagement.
	Xu & He (2023)	Engagement through 'Four Histories' education on TikTok.
Knowledge Retention	Kolber (2024)	Improved retention through TikTok-Socratic Circles integration.
	Jerasa and Boffone (2021)	Enhanced literary knowledge retention via BookTok communities.
	Rajan and Ismail (2022)	Knowledge acquisition improvement in ESL literature classrooms.
	Wang et al. (2024)	Interactive TikTok features aiding in long-term retention in management education.
	Lampe (2023)	Improved understanding of complex sociological theories through TikTok.
	Xue (2022)	Retention of historical knowledge through patriotic-themed short videos.
	Guan (2020)	Mobile short videos enhancing student engagement in academic libraries.
	Sun et al. (2023)	Use of micro-videos in history courses to improve knowledge retention.
Digital Literacy	Low et al. (2023)	Algorithmic literacy and critical digital skills in the BookTok community.
	Shafirova and Araújo	Multilingual learning and digital literacy through

	e Sá (2024)	TikTok.
	Wang et al. (2024)	Promoting digital literacy through TikTok's intelligent recommendation system and playful features.
	Jerasa and Boffone (2021)	Critical media skills fostered through out-of-school literacy practices on TikTok.
	Tang and Zhou (2021)	TikTok culture influencing university students' media literacy.
	Yu and Ding (2022)	Geography-themed TikTok videos foster digital literacy.
	Li and Dong (2020)	Cloud Scholar phenomenon promoting self-directed digital literacy.
Challenges in Formal Education	Lampe (2023)	Maintaining academic depth in sociology courses using TikTok.
	Witte et al. (2024)	Balancing entertainment and educational content in public health education on TikTok.
	Vermeire et al. (2024)	Challenges of using TikTok in structured settings due to its entertainment-first nature.
	Assad (2024)	Demographic factors influencing engagement in virtual classrooms using TikTok.
	Xu et al. (2023)	Struggles with balancing cultural education and academic depth on TikTok's "Chinese Bridge".
	Wu and Song (2021)	Challenges in integrating short video platforms into formal education settings.
	Li and Wang (2021)	Concerns about superficial content undermining educational objectives.
	Wang et al. (2022)	Library "short video+" services underutilization and challenges.
	Li and Li (2021)	TikTok's integration in geography teaching and its curricular challenges.
	Hong (2020)	Challenges faced by kindergarten teachers using digital media during remote learning.
	Gou et al. (2022)	Challenges in balancing educational goals with media trends in the era of intelligent media.
	Li et al. (2020)	Challenges in integrating TikTok into ideological and political education.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONSD

TikTok has emerged as a valuable tool for educators aiming to engage students, improve knowledge retention, promote critical thinking, and foster digital literacy. However, its effective use in educational contexts requires carefully considered strategies that maximize its benefits while addressing its limitations.

TikTok's Capacity to Engage Learners and Improve Knowledge Retention

TikTok's format, with its short and visually appealing content, is particularly effective at capturing students' attention and supporting knowledge retention. Research indicates that this platform excels at promoting active participation and emotional engagement (Kolber, 2024; Rajan & Ismail, 2022). By encouraging users to engage creatively with the material, TikTok helps learners develop a deeper understanding of complex topics through the processes of creating, sharing, and interacting with content. This active involvement strengthens cognitive processing, which in turn improves information retention. The concise nature of TikTok videos also plays a key role in simplifying key concepts into digestible,

repeatable segments that suit the shorter attention spans of today's digital-native learners. As Wang et al. (2024) and Sun et al. (2023) note, presenting information in focused, bite-sized videos helps reduce cognitive overload, making it easier for students to retain and recall essential information. Emotional connections further enhance retention, as content that resonates personally with learners tends to be more memorable (Xue, 2022). This combination of visual appeal, emotional engagement, and active involvement makes TikTok a valuable tool for educational engagement, especially when integrated thoughtfully into both formal and informal learning settings.

Strengths and Limitations of TikTok in Fostering Critical Thinking and Academic Rigor

While TikTok is effective at engaging students, its short-form content can limit opportunities for deep critical thinking. Rajan and Ismail (2022) and Wang et al. (2024) note that TikTok promotes active learning, particularly by capturing students' interest. However, the brevity of its videos often leads to an oversimplification of complex topics, which can make it challenging to encourage the deeper analysis needed for developing critical thinking skills. Nguyen and Diederich (2023) warn that the platform's focus on quick content consumption may result in surface-level engagement, potentially compromising intellectual rigor. Furthermore, the user-generated nature of TikTok content presents risks to academic quality and consistency. While the platform encourages creativity, the lack of editorial oversight can expose students to misinformation or overly simplified interpretations of complex subjects (Vermeire et al., 2024). As a result, although TikTok can boost engagement and foster creativity, it needs to be used alongside structured pedagogical approaches that promote critical analysis and deeper cognitive engagement. Research by De-la-Peña and Chaves-Yuste (2024) also shows that TikTok, when used thoughtfully, can improve communication skills, particularly in language learning. However, careful oversight is necessary to ensure that the platform's entertaining elements do not detract from academic focus. In formal educational settings, TikTok's strength lies in complementing more rigorous, traditional methods rather than serving as a complete replacement for them.

TikTok's Role in Promoting Digital Literacy and Media Education

TikTok's platform naturally promotes algorithmic literacy, which is essential for understanding how digital systems shape user behavior. Low et al. (2023) point out that users on TikTok develop an "algorithmic imagination," learning how to navigate and adjust their interactions with the platform's algorithms to increase content visibility and engagement. This form of digital literacy is critical in helping learners grasp how digital platforms function, preparing them for more effective participation in an increasingly digital educational and professional landscape. In addition, TikTok supports the growth of multimodal literacy by encouraging students to create and interpret content using various forms of media—visual, auditory, and textual (Wang et al., 2024). This not only stimulates creativity but also enhances students' ability to communicate effectively across different media formats, a crucial skill in today's media-centric environment. Furthermore, subcultures like BookTok provide spaces where users can engage critically with media, thereby fostering critical digital literacy (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021). However, as Shafirova and Araújo e Sá (2024) caution, TikTok also has the potential to spread misinformation, highlighting the importance of media literacy education. It is crucial for educators to ensure that students are equipped to critically assess the accuracy and reliability of the content they come across. Given how easily false information can circulate on digital platforms, integrating media literacy into educational strategies that use TikTok is essential.

Recommendations for Integrating TikTok into Teaching Practices

To effectively incorporate TikTok into educational settings, educators need to design activities that align with curricular goals while encouraging meaningful engagement. One effective approach is to use TikTok's format to simplify and summarize complex topics, allowing students to create short explanatory videos that reinforce essential concepts. As Witte et al. (2024) demonstrate, TikTok's concise nature is well-suited for breaking down important information into easily digestible segments. In addition, promoting critical thinking through content creation is essential. Vermeire et al. (2024) highlight how TikTok allows students to creatively express their understanding, which not only deepens

their comprehension of the material but also builds digital literacy. Encouraging students to produce content related to their coursework fosters a deeper connection with the material and helps them develop communication skills that are vital in today's digital landscape. It is also important to ensure that TikTok activities are closely tied to educational objectives. As Lampe (2023) observes, TikTok can help make abstract academic concepts more accessible by linking them to real-world examples, thereby increasing student engagement. However, maintaining a balance between entertainment and education is crucial. Li and Dong (2020) note that while TikTok's entertaining elements are useful for capturing attention, clear guidelines must be set to ensure the focus remains on learning. Finally, integrating media literacy education into TikTok activities is vital, as Xu et al. (2023) stress. Students need to learn how to critically evaluate both the content they create and the content they consume, which promotes responsible digital citizenship. Collaborative projects on TikTok can further enhance learning by fostering teamwork and creating a sense of community among students (Gou et al., 2022). In sum, TikTok offers educators a dynamic and flexible tool for enhancing student learning. Its ability to promote engagement, creativity, and digital literacy makes it a valuable addition to the classroom when used carefully. However, to fully realize its potential, educators must ensure that TikTok activities are balanced with academic rigor, aligned with curricular objectives, and designed to foster critical thinking, media literacy, and responsible digital engagement.

CONCLUSION

This review of 30 English and Chinese articles underscores TikTok's potential to enhance student engagement, knowledge retention, and digital literacy. Its interactive and short-form video format promotes creativity and active participation, making it a valuable resource in both formal and informal educational settings. However, its limitations, particularly in fostering critical thinking and maintaining academic rigor, highlight the need for careful integration into the curriculum. When used with clear educational goals and a strategic approach, TikTok can complement traditional teaching methods while encouraging collaboration and responsible digital behavior. Future research should explore the factors that affect TikTok's use in education, providing insights into how it can be effectively applied across different learning environments, including higher education, K-12, and informal settings. By examining its impact at various educational levels, researchers can optimize its application to improve learning outcomes. Additionally, addressing the issue of misinformation is essential. Future studies should investigate how media literacy can be combined with TikTok to equip students with the skills to critically evaluate digital content, ensuring informed and responsible use in educational contexts.

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