



TikTok as a Micro-Learning Tool for Academic Adaptation among First-Year Students

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Article Information:

Received June 10, 2026

Revised July 18, 2026

Accepted August 10, 2026

Keywords: *TikTok*, Micro-Learning, *academic adaptation*, *digital literacy*

Abstract

This study aims to explore first-year students' experiences of using TikTok to support academic adaptation and to understand the digital literacy challenges that arise from its use. This study employed a qualitative research design with an interpretive phenomenological approach to understand students' experiences and meanings associated with using TikTok for academic activities. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five first-year students and analyzed interpretively to identify emerging patterns of experience and meaning. The findings show that TikTok is utilized as a Micro-Learning resource that helps students obtain brief explanations of academic technical skills, review course materials, and access alternative explanations beyond the classroom. TikTok is also perceived as a *cognitive bridge* in Arabic language learning, particularly for students with limited prior knowledge. However, students' experiences indicate that TikTok use is ambivalent. The platform provides rapid and practical access to academic information but also exposes students to the risks of unverified information and algorithmic distractions that may divert them from their academic purposes and contribute to assignment delays. To address these challenges, students verify information by comparing TikTok content with journals, books, and official sources, while also practicing self-regulation to control their use of the platform. These findings indicate that the use of TikTok for academic adaptation depends not only on content accessibility but also on students' ability to evaluate information and regulate their use of digital media. Thus, TikTok is more appropriately positioned as a supplementary Micro-Learning medium that should be used critically and purposefully within the digital learning ecosystem of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has changed the ways in which students access, select, and use information in their academic lives. This change is particularly evident among first-year students who are undergoing a transition from secondary education to higher education (Intania & Nurcholis, 2024). At this stage, students are required not only to adapt to a new academic environment but also to develop the ability to independently seek and evaluate learning resources. One digital platform that has

How to cite:

Wangiman, W., Alina, A. A. (2026). TikTok as a Micro-Learning Tool for Academic Adaptation among First-Year Students. *Ahlussunnah: Journal of Islamic Education*, 5(1), 691-700.

E-ISSN:

2827-9573

Published by:

The Institute for Research and Community Service

increasingly become part of this process is TikTok (Madhani et al., 2021; Tana et al., 2024). As a short-form video platform, TikTok enables users to access information quickly through content that is visual, concise, and easy to understand. These characteristics have contributed to the use of TikTok not only as an entertainment platform but also as a source of information and a means of supporting learning activities. However, the use of TikTok in academic contexts presents a complex situation because easy access to information is accompanied by concerns regarding source credibility, distraction, and the regulation of digital media use (Larasati et al., 2025; Rosyidah & Ahnaf, 2025).

TikTok can be understood as an audio-visual medium that enables users to express themselves and engage in communication through various forms of content (Suhardiman & Kamaluddin, 2022). In the context of digital learning, these characteristics allow information to be presented in a concise and visual form. However, the accessibility of information does not automatically guarantee the quality of the information received by students. Jannah & Atmojo (2022); Musa et al (2021); Umanah (2024) explain that digital literacy is not limited to the ability to use digital devices but also encompasses the ability to manage, evaluate, and analyze digital resources to construct knowledge. Therefore, the use of TikTok for academic purposes requires students to balance the convenience of accessing information with the ability to assess the credibility and relevance of the content they encounter.

In the context of first-year students, the use of TikTok is particularly relevant because academic adaptation often involves the need for practical and readily accessible information. The initial experiences identified in this study indicate that students use TikTok to search for technical tutorials, such as how to use software for preparing academic papers, as well as to obtain additional explanations of course materials (Mulida & Silma, 2025; Putri et al., 2022). The short-form nature of the videos allows students to access specific explanations according to their needs without having to review the entire material from the beginning. In addition, TikTok is used to obtain further explanations of materials perceived as complex, including Arabic language learning for students who have no prior experience in the subject (Mesa et al., 2025; Ritonga et al., 2025).

Despite these benefits, the use of TikTok for academic activities also reveals experiences that are not entirely positive. Students need to verify information obtained from digital content, particularly when dealing with historical materials, theoretical concepts, or other academic information that may contain bias or inaccuracies. At the same time, TikTok's algorithmic characteristics can extend users' activities from searching for academic information to consuming entertainment content. In the experiences reported by the informants in this study, this situation was associated with difficulties in controlling the duration of use and a tendency to postpone the completion of academic assignments. This situation indicates that the use of TikTok in the academic adaptation process cannot be understood solely in terms of its benefits as a learning medium but should also be examined through students' experiences of navigating the tension between information accessibility, source evaluation, and self-regulation.

Several studies have examined TikTok in educational contexts, including its potential as a micro-learning medium, an audio-visual learning medium, and a tool for supporting learning. Rosyidah & Ahnaf (2025), for example, describes TikTok as a micro-learning medium that enables information to be delivered in short and easily accessible learning units. (Ahmad & Abd Halim, 2024) also demonstrate that audio-visual media can support independent learning beyond the classroom. Meanwhile, research on digital literacy emphasizes the importance of users' ability to evaluate digital information sources (Suhardiman & Kamaluddin, 2022). Nevertheless, research specifically exploring how first-year students experience and make sense of

TikTok use during the process of academic adaptation, including how they utilize TikTok as a micro-learning resource, address issues of information credibility, and manage algorithmic distractions, remains limited. Therefore, there is a need to understand TikTok use not merely as a media-use phenomenon but as an academic experience that students interpret while responding to the demands of higher education.

Based on this gap, this study employs an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore first-year students' experiences of using TikTok during the process of academic adaptation. The study specifically focuses on how students make sense of TikTok as a source of micro-learning, how they use the platform to address academic difficulties, and how they deal with challenges involving unverified information and algorithmic distractions. By examining these experiences, this study seeks to provide a more contextual understanding of the position of social media within the digital learning ecosystem of higher education, particularly during the early stage of students' transition into academic life.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore first-year students' experiences of using TikTok during the process of academic adaptation (Eddles-hirsch, 2015; Renjith et al., 2021a). This approach was selected because the study focuses on students' subjective experiences, including how they experience, make sense of, and respond to the use of TikTok to meet their academic needs. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with five first-year students from the 2025/2026 cohort. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) they were first-year students from the 2025/2026 cohort; (2) they actively used TikTok; and (3) they used TikTok to obtain information or support their academic activities. These criteria were used to identify participants who had direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews in April 2026 on the university campus. The interviews employed open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their experiences in depth regarding the use of TikTok for academic activities. The interview questions addressed participants' experiences of using TikTok to search for academic information, their reasons for selecting particular content, their experiences of understanding or reviewing course materials, their encounters with questionable information, their strategies for verifying information, and their experiences of regulating TikTok use when facing distractions. The questions were designed to obtain an understanding of participants' experiences and interpretations rather than merely identify the frequency or duration of application use.

The data were analyzed interpretively by identifying patterns of experience, meanings, and themes emerging from the participants' narratives. The analysis involved repeated readings of the interview transcripts, identification of statements related to participants' experiences of using TikTok, grouping of similar meanings, and development of themes representing shared experiences among the participants. The analysis generated several main themes: TikTok as micro-learning in academic adaptation, TikTok as a bridge in Arabic language learning, digital literacy challenges in evaluating information, and the algorithmic dilemma between academic needs and distraction (Eberle, 2014; Engkizar et al., 2026; Renjith et al., 2021b). The interpretation process considered the context of each participant's experience to develop a deeper understanding of the meaning of TikTok use in the academic lives of first-year students.

The five participants demonstrated diverse patterns of TikTok use and academic needs. The first participant was a student in the Islamic Religious Education Study Program who used TikTok for approximately 3–4 hours per day, primarily to search for technical tutorials, such as using Microsoft Word to prepare and edit academic papers. The second participant, who was also enrolled in the Islamic Religious Education Study Program, used TikTok for approximately 4–5 hours per day and utilized the platform to obtain religious learning materials, including *Nahwu* and *Shorof* in Arabic language learning. The third participant used TikTok for approximately 2–3 hours per day, primarily to search for information about history and current social issues. The fourth and fifth participants mainly used TikTok to obtain college-related tips and software tutorials relevant to completing academic assignments. These variations in experience enabled the study to provide a diverse understanding of how first-year students utilize and make sense of TikTok to meet their academic needs during the transition to higher education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

TikTok as a Micro-Learning Instrument for Academic Adaptation

Based on the interview findings, Informants 1 and 2 reported that first-year students often experienced difficulties understanding standard academic writing formats during the early stages of their university studies. These difficulties involved the use of academic language, the structure of academic papers, and the technical procedures involved in completing assignments. In this context, TikTok was utilized as an alternative learning resource through short, visual, and practice-oriented tutorial content. Informant 1 stated:

Sometimes I get confused by the language used in the handbook, but on TikTok there are one-minute videos that directly show me where to click to create an automatic table of contents.

This statement indicates that the concise and demonstrative characteristics of TikTok content help students obtain technical information that may be difficult to understand through written sources. This finding is consistent with (Rosyidah & Ahnaf, 2025), who explains that TikTok can be utilized as a micro-learning medium because information is presented in short and easily accessible learning units. For first-year students, such characteristics can support the process of adapting to university learning patterns, which involve academic demands that differ from those at previous educational levels. This is further supported by Hamid et al (2026); Kasheem et al (2025); Mustafa et al (2026), who emphasize that audio-visual media can facilitate the process of independently internalizing learning materials beyond classroom hours.

In addition to helping students understand technical aspects of academic learning, TikTok was also used when students experienced difficulties understanding lecturers' explanations in class. Informant 2, a first-year student in the Tarbiyah Study Program, explained:

Sometimes the lecturer explains the theory very quickly in class, especially when it comes to language rules or the format of academic papers. I want to ask questions, but honestly, I feel embarrassed or hesitant because I am afraid that my question will be considered too basic. So, at night, I open TikTok to look for another explanation. The visuals there are much more engaging, and there are direct practical examples, so I feel like I have my own private tutor.

This statement indicates that TikTok functions not only as an additional information source but also as a means of reinforcement when students require independent repetition of learning materials. Students can revisit explanations they have not fully understood without relying entirely on direct interaction in the classroom. This finding is consistent with Aminullah et al (2022), who demonstrate that TikTok has emerged as a learning medium that can help students overcome

difficulties in understanding learning materials through simpler and more accessible forms of presentation. Thus, in the process of academic adaptation, TikTok functions as a supplementary medium that helps students review and reinforce their understanding according to their individual learning needs.

TikTok as a Transitional Bridge in Arabic Language Learning

Another finding of this study indicates that TikTok is utilized as a transitional learning medium for first-year students from general educational backgrounds, particularly senior high schools, when entering the Tarbiyah Study Program. Differences in previous learning experiences require some students to adjust to courses that they had not previously studied in depth, including Arabic.

Based on interviews and field observations, subjects such as *Nahwu* and *Shorof* were perceived as relatively complex by students who lacked prior foundations in Arabic language learning. Under these circumstances, students utilized TikTok to obtain repeated explanations through short videos. Content presenting examples of sentence structures, vocabulary, and language rules in visual formats provided students with an alternative means of understanding the material gradually (Engkizar et al., 2024).

This use of TikTok indicates that the platform can serve as a form of reinforcement in Arabic language learning. Students did not use the platform solely to acquire new material but also to review material previously presented in class through simpler forms of explanation. Such an audio-visual approach is consistent with research published in Ritonga et al (2025); Salsabila et al (2025), which indicates that the use of audio-visual media in Arabic language learning can support students' retention of new vocabulary and language rules.

For first-year students without a pesantren background, the availability of short and visually presented content also provides an alternative means of addressing gaps in prior knowledge. Accordingly, TikTok can be understood as a form of cognitive bridge that helps students connect their prior knowledge with the demands of Arabic language learning in higher education. However, this function remains complementary, as comprehensive academic understanding still requires more systematic learning resources.

Digital Literacy Challenges: Between Educational Content and Disinformation

Although TikTok facilitates access to academic information, the findings indicate that students are aware of the limitations of using the platform as their primary academic reference. This awareness was particularly evident when students encountered content related to theoretical subjects, such as History and Civic Education, where information may be biased or inconsistent with established academic sources. Informant 3 described the following experience:

I once saw a history video with controversial content, so I did not immediately believe it and chose to look for the information again in journals or books.

This response indicates students' awareness of the importance of evaluating digital information. Students did not automatically regard information appearing on their For You Page (FYP) as academic fact but instead verified it through other sources. This was reflected in the following statement from Informant 3:

If I come across history content or academic regulations that seem questionable, I just use them as a starting point. After that, I cross-check the information through Google Scholar or the university's official website. So, TikTok is the entry point, but journals are still my main reference for valid data.

This finding is consistent with the concept of digital literacy proposed by Alfian et al (2025), who position the ability to evaluate and assess the credibility of digital sources as an important component of digital literacy. In the context of learning, this ability becomes increasingly important because TikTok contains various

types of content that are not necessarily produced according to academic standards. Although the platform has the potential to serve as a creative medium for Civic Education (Rizal et al., 2024), students still need to distinguish between content that functions as a learning stimulus and sources that can legitimately be used as academic references.

Thus, the findings demonstrate that using TikTok for academic purposes involves not only the ability to access information but also the ability to evaluate it. Students' strategy of treating TikTok as an "entry point" while relying on journals or official sources as primary references demonstrates a process of information selection. In this context, digital literacy functions as a mechanism that enables students to obtain educational benefits from TikTok while reducing the risk of accepting unverified information.

The Algorithmic Dilemma: Between Academic References and Procrastination

Despite its benefits as a learning medium, TikTok use also presents the problem of distraction. The interview findings indicate that students' initial intention to use TikTok to search for academic materials does not always result in learning activities. The characteristics of the For You Page (FYP) algorithm, which continuously presents content based on users' interests, can divert students' attention from their original purpose for using the application.

Based on the interviews, students spent approximately four hours per day accessing TikTok. This duration indicates that their use of TikTok was not limited to academic activities. Informant 5 explained:

Sometimes my initial intention is just to watch a Microsoft Word or Excel tutorial that is only one minute long, but because the videos that come afterward are very interesting and match my hobbies, I end up scrolling continuously for an hour. My main assignment is still unfinished.

This statement demonstrates a shift in the purpose of use from academic activities toward entertainment. Students initially used TikTok to obtain the information they needed but were subsequently encouraged to continue consuming other content recommended by the algorithm. This condition may increase the likelihood of delays in completing academic assignments.

This finding can be related to the study by Ahmad & Abd Halim (2024), which identifies a relationship between the intensity of TikTok use and academic procrastination. The greater the intensity of use without adequate time control, the greater the likelihood that students will allocate their time to non-academic activities rather than completing academic assignments. This finding is also consistent with (Efriyani et al., 2026), who emphasizes the importance of self-regulation in controlling social media use so that it does not interfere with academic activities.

Thus, TikTok occupies an ambivalent position in the learning process of first-year students. On the one hand, its micro-learning characteristics facilitate rapid access to information; on the other hand, the platform's algorithmic characteristics can transform learning activities into unstructured content consumption. Therefore, the educational value of TikTok depends considerably on students' ability to manage their time, establish clear purposes for its use, and regulate potential distractions.

The findings of this study demonstrate that TikTok use in the academic adaptation of first-year students is characterized by an ambivalent nature. On the one hand, TikTok functions as a micro-learning resource that helps students obtain brief explanations, review previously misunderstood materials, and address specific academic difficulties, particularly in academic writing and Arabic language learning. On the other hand, the platform's algorithmic characteristics may direct students toward non-academic content that potentially reduces their learning focus. Therefore, the primary implication of this study does not concern whether TikTok should be

used or avoided in education, but rather how the platform can be appropriately positioned within students' digital learning ecosystems.

At the level of teaching practice, the findings indicate that TikTok is more appropriately positioned as a supplementary learning medium rather than as a replacement for formal academic sources. Its short and visual content can be utilized to provide just-in-time learning, particularly when students require additional explanations of specific concepts or skills outside the classroom. In this context, lecturers can integrate short-form videos as pre-learning, reinforcement, or enrichment materials, followed by discussion, practice, and engagement with more comprehensive academic sources. Such an approach allows the characteristics of micro-learning to be utilized without compromising the depth and validity of academic learning (Annida et al., 2024; Engkizar et al., 2025; Rambe et al., 2025).

The findings regarding students' practice of cross-checking TikTok information also indicate that the effectiveness of social media for academic purposes is closely related to digital literacy. Students need not only the ability to locate and access information but also the ability to evaluate credibility, compare sources, and determine whether particular information is appropriate for use as an academic reference. Accordingly, digital literacy in higher education needs to move beyond technological competence toward evaluative and epistemic abilities. In this context, TikTok can provide an authentic environment for developing such abilities because students encounter information with varying levels of credibility and different communicative purposes.

At the institutional level, the findings indicate a need to establish greater continuity between formal classroom learning and the digital environments in which students independently obtain information. Lecturers do not necessarily need to become social media content producers; rather, their role can expand toward that of content curators who assist students in identifying, selecting, and using digital content relevant to learning objectives. Higher education institutions can also strengthen digital literacy programs for first-year students by incorporating source verification, information credibility assessment, digital time management, and social media self-regulation. Such an approach is more constructive than simply restricting social media use because the findings demonstrate that students already utilize the platform as a source of academic support.

Theoretically, the findings provide an understanding that micro-learning through social media should not be conceptualized solely in terms of short content duration. For first-year students, the value of micro-learning lies in its ability to provide rapid access to information that corresponds to specific learning needs. However, these benefits are not automatic, as they are influenced by students' ability to evaluate information and regulate their use of the platform. Thus, the findings suggest an understanding of micro-learning as a learning practice situated at the intersection of information accessibility, digital literacy, and self-regulation. This perspective helps explain why the same platform can function as a source of academic support for one activity while simultaneously becoming a source of distraction for another.

The findings also have implications for future research. Because this study employed a qualitative approach and focused on the experiences of first-year students, future studies could further examine the relationship between academic-oriented TikTok use, digital literacy, self-regulation, and academic adaptation through quantitative or mixed-methods approaches. Comparative studies could also examine differences between TikTok and other short-form video platforms and investigate how algorithmic characteristics influence the sustainability of students' learning activities. In this way, research on social media in education can move beyond the simple question of whether a platform is effective and toward the more substantive

question of under what conditions social media can support learning and under what conditions it may instead become a source of academic distraction.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that first-year students' experiences of using TikTok during academic adaptation are ambivalent. TikTok is utilized as a micro-learning resource that helps students obtain brief explanations, review course materials, and address specific academic needs beyond the classroom. In students' experiences, the platform also functions as a cognitive bridge for understanding previously unfamiliar materials, including Arabic language learning. However, this accessibility is accompanied by challenges involving unverified information and distractions arising from algorithmic recommendations. Students respond to these challenges by cross-checking information against academic sources and making efforts to regulate their use of the platform. Thus, the findings indicate that the educational value of TikTok is determined not only by the characteristics of its content but also by students' ability to evaluate information and regulate their use of digital media. TikTok is therefore more appropriately understood as a supplementary micro-learning medium that supports academic adaptation rather than as a substitute for more comprehensive academic learning resources.

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Ahlussunnah: Journal of Islamic Education

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