

## WOMEN, STRESS AND COPING WITH TIKTOK

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**Abstract:** This research paper delves into women's consumption of TikTok to cope with everyday stress by examining the significant meanings of TikTok to women as a coping tool, exploring women's motivations for engaging with TikTok for stress and emotion management, and finally, investigating the relationship between women's social and economic conditions and their consumption of TikTok for coping. Using the Media Dependency Theory, we conducted semi-structured interviews with six women from lower-income (B40) backgrounds. Our findings identified two themes: Characteristics of Stress and Coping via Consumption. These findings suggest that TikTok has several positive outcomes in women's coping processes and emotional well-being; as such, we found that TikTok positively affects women's moods and emotions through its various media content. TikTok is also used as a tool for women to comprehend the nature of their stressors, including gaining mutual emotional support through online discussions. Additionally, TikTok encourages women to seek self-betterment and practice healthy, effective coping strategies. The implications of this paper can help us understand the nature of stress women face in this current era, and how social media is capable of becoming an effective tool for coping.

**Keywords:** Media consumption, social media, stress and coping, TikTok, women.

## INTRODUCTION

Amid this century's greater level of political, social, and economic uncertainties, many women in Malaysia have pursued participating in the nation's labour force (*The Star*, 2023; Mohd Rizal et al., 2021). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), the female participation rate in the labour force has increased steadily over the past few years – from 55.3% in 2020 to 55.5% in 2021, 55.8% in 2022, and 56.2% in 2023 (Yeap, 2023). National leaders like Malaysia's Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri, are encouraging more women to join the workforce, aiming to increase the participation rate to 60% within the next decade (*The Star*, 2023; Yeap, 2023). However, it would also steer women into experiencing more stress than their previous generations as they now have to juggle between the societal expectations of being progressive, career-driven individuals while still being bound by their traditional gender roles as mothers, wives, and daughters (Kaur, 2020; Eagly et al., 2000; Islahi, 2017).

Whether we like it or not, stress is an intrinsic part of our everyday lives. Pearlin (1989) alluded that stress arises from our experiences – a perspective which sparked frequent debates among communication scholars who pondered the effects of media on our stress experiences. Despite the contingency of social media being perceived to *cause* stress, we argued that it could easily be a tool for *coping* since social media has already changed our normative ways of interacting, engaging, socialising, information and entertainment-seeking (Najmul-Islam et al., 2022; Nabi et al., 2017). Most meaningfully, social media has the ability to gratify our intrinsic needs and coping desires (Wolfers & Schneider, 2021; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009); for instance, TikTok provides innumerable media channels where we can gain information or solutions related to our stressors, gain mutual support through online discussions, and watch entertaining or relaxing media content to evoke positive moods and emotions.

Although there is a plethora of research about stress and media effects on people's everyday lives, there seems to be a gap within emerging researches regarding our stress experiences and coping via media, specifically from women's perspectives of how they make sense of social media for coping with their everyday stress. In our search for literature about media content/consumption for coping, we found many emerging researches associating the effects of media consumption with the underlying phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic. Granting that these researches contributed to different aspects of the topic, predominantly on the pandemic's profound effects towards our consumption patterns and increased dependency on social media for informative and intrinsic needs, we remain unsatisfied. We believe there needs to be more perspectives relating individuals' coping tendencies via media consumption without any underlying influences of a particular phenomenon since stress can also be evoked from everyday environments and occurrences. Therefore, we believe that it is essential for us to examine individuals' motivations for coping via social media in everyday environments.

Moreover, there were empirical researches that inferred social media as a "stressor"—a tool that influences our cognitive structures of stress (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), even attributing it to cause media addiction and social media fatigue. We found that these researches implicated measurements as a means for examining aspects of well-being rather than exploring it through individuals' subjective interpretations of media consumption. This is concerning as their implications may create a generalisation or even uniform definitions of social media consumption. Sharing similar opinions with Seligman (2012), an experience should be understood from the users' subjective point of view: Does social media carry any significance to their everyday lives? Why do they engage with social media for stress and emotion management? What impact does social media have on their well-being?

With our great interest in understanding how social media, particularly TikTok, can help women cope with their everyday stress, we aim to provide relating and integrating perspectives on this topic. Most significantly, our perspectives contribute to; (1) presenting outcome factors,

such as TikTok's role in fulfilling women's intrinsic and coping needs, (2) demonstrating TikTok's role in satisfying women's interpersonal emotional gratifications (e.g., self-expression, social support, and information or entertainment channel) where the act of coping can occur, (3) describing the presence of TikTok in women's work and home environment, and (4) reviewing why women, especially in lower-income (B40) backgrounds, are motivated to consume TikTok as a coping space.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Stress and Coping**

*Stress* is a natural reaction intended to protect ourselves against real or perceived danger. It is also a condition or the emotions we feel when facing excessive demands beyond our internal or external capabilities (Pearlin, 1989; Selye, 1982). While stress can be beneficial in some cases (Maddi, 2006), like encouraging adaptation and personal development, excessive stress can severely impact our physical and psychological health, resulting in health problems like high blood pressure, heart attack, and nervous disturbances, including psychological effects like anxiety, depression, and insomnia (Carver, 2007; Cohen et al., 2007; Matud, 2004).

Stress can evoke from our experiences with social context and social conditions, particularly when experiencing unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and self-esteem within societal institutions (Pearlin, 1989; Selye, 1982). Hence, gender is regarded as a significant element of our stress experiences because when social roles and statuses are persistently practised in society, it could host interpersonal conditions which would further reinforce mainstream norms and societal expectations (Graves et al., 2021; Mayor, 2015; Pearlin, 1989). To date, traditional socialisation, like gender roles, is still prevalent and widely practised in our society (Nortajuddin, A., 2020; Mayor, 2015). Women are still expected to be emotional, nurturing, and active in traditional female household chores (e.g., childcare or grocery shopping), unlike men, who are expected to hold more domineering positions in their household (e.g., head of the

family). Initially, stress was believed to be garnered through our conflicts and resistance against existing social conditions and institutions, but it was later recognised that environmental adaptability could also source stress.

Environmental variation produces varying stress experiences for men and women, which explains why they behave differently when adapting to or mediating stress. Studies have shown that environmental variations influence our internal and external health-related factors, such as behaviourism, social environment, and genetic factors (Mayor, 2015; Eagly et al., 2000), which also puts women's health at a disadvantage. Women are more likely to experience chronic stress and perceive stress as life-threatening compared to men (Revathy et al., 2018; Matud, 2004). Continuous exposure to stress would also cause the body to release stress hormones (e.g., cortisol and catecholamines), triggering dysfunctions within the immune system and resulting in innumerable health complications (Carver, 2007; Cohen et al., 2007).

Ambiguity in gender roles can also evoke stress, primarily when women partake in non-traditional gender roles in their social environments. At work, women have been historically associated with clerical positions, while men have tended to hold leadership roles (Eagly et al., 2000). As women began to progressively partake in non-traditional gender roles (e.g., leadership or high-ranking positions), their exposure to experiencing *role strains* and *ambient strains* increased. Role strains come from the persistent societal expectations placed on men and women; when exacerbated by environmental variation, they create ambient strains. Pearlin (1989) alluded that these strains further reinforce the connections between our everyday lives, relationships or associations, experiences, and well-being. However, this does not mean that both genders do not experience the same stressors in similar social environments; instead, it is to emphasise the presence of gender roles in our lives. Nonetheless, the lingering effects of stress would remain a challenge for men and women if they are unable to cope effectively.

*Coping* is a natural response intended to reduce or prevent the impact of our stress; our acts of coping are also distinctive and may vary between the nature or context of our stressors. Interpersonal and intrapersonal social attachments are

influential to our coping tendencies as studies found that these interactions help us in problem-solving, emotional regulation, bolster self-esteem, and promote positive attributes (Pearlin, 1989). Today, coping is becoming more accessible with the advent of social media, especially when its diverse functionalities can fulfil our intrinsic and coping needs through connections, attachments, sharing, and consumption.

There are four distinct forms of coping: (1) approach coping; (2) avoidance coping; (3) problem-solving coping; and (4) emotion-focused coping. According to research, approach coping involves seeking strategies that reduce, eliminate, or manage our stressors. Oppositely, avoidance coping is described as ignoring, avoiding, and physically or emotionally withdrawing from our stressors. Problem-focused coping refers to seeking strategies to change or eliminate our stressors, whereas emotion-focused coping involves strategies that reduce or manage the emotional consequences of our stressors (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009).

Generally, we would combine these approaches to manage any stressful events. And when social media is involved, it becomes clear how the platform can be an effective tool for coping (Wolfers & Schneider, 2021; Nabi et al., 2017). For example, social media can be used to search for information or solutions related to our stressors (problem-solving coping, approach coping) or to search for entertainment or distraction to suppress the impact of our stressors (emotion-focused coping, avoidance coping). In some cases, problem-focused coping may also involve avoidance coping, while emotion-focused coping may involve approach coping. For instance, we might avoid media content related to our stressors to manage their impact on our lives (problem-solving coping, avoidance coping) or use social media to gain emotional support from others (emotion-focused coping, approach coping).

## **Emotion Management**

Managing our emotions is essential for physical and psychological well-being since it helps us respond to opportunities and challenges with pure enthusiasm or self-destructiveness (Selye, 1982). Emotion management can be done intrinsically through self-control or extrinsically through others'

intervention in our emotional tendencies, thus making it a ubiquitous concept (Gross, 2015). This review will focus on two commonly used emotion management strategies: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.

*Cognitive reappraisal* is a cognitive alteration process of our emotional experiences, which can help us to produce re-interpretations of our emotional events (Gross, 2015). Typically, this strategy occurs in the early stages of our emotional experiences. Moods and emotions can be contagious to ourselves and others (Nezlek & Kuppen, 2008), but they can also be managed during emotional events or stimuli. Scholars found that frequent reliance on cognitive reappraisal can help lower stress levels and enhance mental health outcomes, including improving memories of emotional stimuli (Sun & Nolan, 2021).

*Expressive suppression* is the act of suppressing any emotional activities (e.g., facial expressions) that would or are happening when regulating our emotional experiences (Gross, 2015). Unlike the prior, this strategy would occur in the later stages of our emotional experiences. Some researchers have considered this strategy a hindrance to the communication process, stating that the lack of expressive behaviour and responsiveness within social context would falter relational closeness and connectedness (Butlers & Egloff, 2003). But other researchers have pointed otherwise; for instance, expressive suppression has been found to help manage intense emotions during emotional events, prevent memory errors, and preserve social relationships and harmony (Sun & Nolan, 2021; Mata-Greve & Torres, 2020; Moore & Zoellner, 2012).

As mentioned, moods and emotions are contagious, and social media is vital in spreading emotional contagion. Emotional contagion can happen with/without direct interactions or verbal/non-verbal cues (Kramer et al., 2014), meaning our emotions can be influenced through media consumption. Studies have revealed that engaging with social media contributes to positive moods like happiness, satisfaction, and amusement (Graciyal & Viswam, 2021; Yang, 2016). Besides, social media is a beneficial tool for emotional support and well-being, as it provides information-sharing channels for solutions and entertainment channels for evoking positive emotions.

Essentially, social media can be a valuable tool to stimulate healthy, effective emotion management strategies.

## **TikTok**

TikTok is a social media platform launched in 2016 by a Chinese tech company, ByteDance, and has since become a global phenomenon and is even regarded to revolutionise short-formatted videos (Montenegro, 2021). Apart from watching and sharing, users can create short videos (15 to 60 seconds) and add an endless selection of background music, visual effects, and amusing filters in TikTok. However, the app's most prominent feature is its "For You Page" (FYP), a personalised feed of algorithm-generated content based on users' preferences and engagement (Kaur & Sharma, 2021). As of January 9, 2024, it has an estimated 1.1 billion monthly users worldwide (Shewale, 2024), which is unsurprising considering the app's engaging interactivities and media channels.

TikTok's ease of use and accessibility, combined with the appealing anonymity factor, allows people to fulfil their intrinsic and coping needs when sharing, consuming, and seeking support online with little to no consequences (Harwood, 2021). During the earlier stages of the pandemic, TikTok began surging due to people's desire for information, social interaction, archiving, self-expression, and escapism (Iqbal, 2020; Omar & Dequan, 2020). Notably, the pandemic began pushing people into bearing the burden of self-care, considering the limited access to psychological and social healthcare services available at that time (Gill & Orgad, 2022). It was also during then when hashtags like "mental health" and "self-care" boomed on TikTok, and people began sharing their mental health struggles, learning from therapists, and finding mutual support from online communities (Amato, 2022). Essentially, TikTok became a space for people to learn and talk about their experiences, and by starting these dialogues, it would raise attention to the importance of being aware of one's environment and, most importantly, physical and psychological well-being (Amato, 2022; Harwood, 2021).



## **Theoretical Foundation**

Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur developed the Media Dependency Theory (MDT) to explore the potential effects of media on its audience and society. MDT suggests that mass media, when functioning inclusively and centrally, can alter its audiences' cognitive, affective, and behavioural conditions, stimulating changes within society and the media itself (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

Following MDT, there are two conditions of dependency. The first condition occurs when we strongly desire to fulfil our general, pervasive, and informative needs to maintain a sense of connection and familiarity with ourselves and others. Meanwhile, the second condition occurs when there is a drastic change or conflict, and there is a growing necessity to maintain structural stability for society to coexist amidst the change or conflict (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

In literature, MDT is widely used to research users' dependency factors and media effects on individuals' cognitive, affective and behavioural states. Evidence suggests that dependency is driven by media's availability and facilitation, prevalent in social media's ease of accessibility and ability to facilitate our distinctive needs of information, socialisation, and entertainment (Lowrey, 2004). Additionally, studies found that media is instrumental, particularly during crises, where people trust the media for directions and information (Uran et al., 2022; Hagar, 2013). The implication of MDT in our research aligns with the theory's fundamentals of media effects in fulfilling individualistic needs. Hence, MDT appeals to our examination of women's needs and motivations to engage with TikTok for coping, including its significance to their social and economic conditions.

## **Conceptual Framework**

*Coping Tendency.* The Coping Orientation Analysis (Table 1) is developed to analyse how people use TikTok to cope with stress. Our framework is based on the Problem-Focused and Emotion-Focused Coping by Lazarus & Folkman (1984) and the Coping Dimensions

Derived Theoretically by Carver et al. (1989) since both models focused on conceptualising a single coping strategy’s distinct function with complementary approaches. We recognised that people might apply a single or combined coping strategy depending on their desired coping outcomes; therefore, by having a systematic approach, we can fully capture participants’ coping tendencies and effects across the four coping orientations.

**Table 1**  
*Coping Orientation Analysis*

<b>Coping Orientation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Problem-solving coping</b>	
Active coping	Process of taking active actions to eliminate / avoid the stressor or improve its effects (e.g., direct action)
Planning	The thoughts of how to cope with a stressor (e.g., planned action)
Suppression / Restraint	Putting the stressor aside, and waiting until an appropriate opportunity to act presents itself
Seeking social support	Seeking advice, assistance, or information
<b>Emotion-focused coping</b>	
Seeking social support for emotional reasons	Getting moral support, sympathy, or understanding
Positive reinterpretation & growth	Construing a stressful transaction in positive terms
Acceptance / Denial	Learning to accept / refuse the reality of a stressful situation
Turning to religion	Tendency to turn to religion in times of stress
Humour	Dealing with negative emotions through humour
<b>“Less useful” coping</b>	
Focus on and emotion-venting	Tendency to focus on whatever distress one is experiencing and to ventilate those feelings
Behavioural disengagement	Reducing one’s effort to deal with the stressor, even giving up their attempts on goals affected by the stressor
Mental disengagement	Attempts to distract oneself from thinking about the specific goals or behaviours interfered by the stressor
<b>Additional coping</b>	
Substance use	Using substance to disengage from a stressor or to feel better

## METHODOLOGY

Six women from various backgrounds (see Table 2) were purposefully sampled to gather diverse perspectives on their stress experiences and consumption practices. This sample involves three married and unmarried women aged between 25 and 35 and is classified under the “B40” group – a classification given to Malaysian households with a month-median income of RM4,850 and below. Table 2 summarises the demographic characteristics and income-related information of the participants.

A small-scale sample ensures the primary and secondary variables are controlled before reaching a state where no further nuances or dimensions would contribute to our findings. This is also to avoid problems like information redundancy, data and theoretical saturation, which are common in qualitative research with larger sample sizes (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). There are instances where researchers found no significant differences between having four to six samples or 12 to 15 samples, as only little variations emerged after conducting the tenth interview (Muellmann et al., 2021). Similarly, other researchers observed data saturation after their first 12 interviews, with 92% of codes identified when examining data saturation in 60 in-depth interviews (Guest et al., 2006), whereas other researchers found code saturation after only nine interviews (Francis et al., 2010). Hence, a smaller sample allows us to observe, control, and preserve rich data without feeling overwhelmed by saturation.

**Table 2**  
*Participants' Demographic*

	<b>Category</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Unmarried</b>
Age	25 – 30	2	1
	31 – 35	1	2
Ethnicity	Malay	-	1
	Chinese	-	1
	Others (e.g., Bidayuh, Iban, Kayan, Kenyah, etc)	3	1
Working Status	Paid Employment (Full / Part Time)	2	3
	Unemployed (e.g., Freelance)	1	-
Household Members	1 – 3	1	1
	3 – 5	1	1
	More than 5	1	1
Income	Below RM1,000	1	-
	RM1,000 – RM2,000	1	1
	RM2,000 – RM3,000	-	1
	RM3,000 – RM4,850	1	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>

### **Data Collection Procedure**

We conducted individual, semi-structured interviews through face-to-face interactions or online platforms (e.g., Google Meet / Webex). Before the interview, participants were provided with a summary of our research objectives and a consent form for a recorded interview.

Our interviews include questions about participant's stress experiences at work and home, their preferred genres of TikTok content, and their coping practices. We also allowed them to report on the current effects of their stress.

## Data Analysis

Once the interview data was transcribed, we analysed, decoded, and verified all information to understand each participant's perspectives to draw comparisons and compatibilities between variables. We used thematic analysis to categorise and review our data, then later identified emerging patterns using our conceptual framework. The thematic analysis helped us work flexibly and systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which is a key component, especially when comparing and reviewing participants' subjective points of view. From our analysis, two themes have emerged: (1) Characteristics of Stress; and (2) Coping via Consumption.

## FINDINGS

### Characteristics of Stress

This theme discusses women's stress experiences in their work and home environment, including an outlook on their perceived stress in roles and ambiance strains.

Since most participants are working women, they shared similar stress experiences and perceived stressors. We found that incompatible work cultures and inadequate support are the primary contributors to their stress. For comparison, participants in fast-paced work environments have reported experiencing frequent anxiousness and high-level stress due to excessive workload and constant demands caused by insufficient staffing. Meanwhile, participants in established corporations have structured workflows, allowing them to manage their stress and energy better; nonetheless, stress may still come in the form of unfavourable social behaviours or a lack of guidance on a particular task. Below are two excerpts of this comparison:

*“My company is a fast-paced company, and it could get really stressful when I have to deal with clients who are too fussy or don't follow up. Plus, there's my boss who'd constantly come and ask “why”. Sometimes, we just don't know what to answer the boss, then when we don't have the answer, he'll tell us to keep up and all sorts.” (Participant 3, aged 31)*

*“I’m working in a corporate office. I am lucky to have supportive, understanding colleagues and bosses who would give advices and willing to help me with my situations corporately.” (Participant 4, aged 29)*

Work-related stress carries adverse effects on women’s health and job performance, leading to emotional repercussions like anxiety, depression, and anger, including various physical implications like cardiovascular diseases, headaches, and hypertension (Kumar & Sheeba, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial for management to create a professional, inclusive, and supportive work environment to prevent these outcomes (Muhammad Umair et al., 2021). Unfortunately, some participants are still experiencing inadequate autonomy, over-supervision, gender inequality, discrimination, and job insecurity. Below are excerpts of their experiences:

*“The job, itself, is not causing much of the stress, but how it is delegated to me is causing the stress. My work environment is toxic because, one, I’m the youngest there, and two, I am the only girl. So, there’s a tendency of me getting poured with too much work or gaslighted and all these things is really not good for my mental health.” (Participant 2)*

*“Only certain departments are receiving bonuses, and mine is not included even though the bosses had promised me that I’ll be getting it this year. I’m not happy about this. I don’t think it’s fair that they’re not fulfilling their promise and being all hush-hush about it.” (Participant 1)*

Presently, our unemployed participant is a freelance caretaker due to a sudden financial crisis. She expressed that the sudden transition of becoming her household’s primary bread-winner is mentally challenging, especially with infrequent work demands and increased responsibilities to make ends meet. Below is an excerpt of her experience:

*“I feel stressed because my husband just quitted his job, so I’m stressed about things like how am I going to find money. So, this is why I’m currently doing freelancing, but even so it’s not instantaneous as in, there’s always going to be patients.” (Participant 6)*

Her experiences resonate with the ambiguity of gender roles and expectations entrenched between women's requirement to shoulder household and family care obligations (Stone, 2008). When women participate in non-traditional gender roles (e.g., bread-winner mothers), expectations for fulfilling traditional roles and employment statuses become adversarial (Kaur, 2020; Eagly et al., 2000; Islahi, 2017). Moreover, stress is further exacerbated when they hold precarious jobs (Fan et al., 2019).

Regarding stress at home, participants living in large households are most likely to experience higher stress levels from the constant exposure to role and ambience strains. These strains arise from the need to fulfil designated roles at home that may or may not be equally distributed among the household members. Additionally, a crowded household creates a lack of personal space for self-expression, causing participants to withdraw from expressing their stress at home. A study revealed that crowded households are common among B40 groups due to costly rental and housing prices resulting from extensive migration and booming urbanisation (Nur Farhana et al., 2019).

Based on the interviews, two married women live with their in-laws, while the other lives with her own family in a rented apartment. Besides, two unmarried women still live with their parents, while one stays with her sibling's family.

Although participants in smaller households experience less intense stress than those in larger households, we observed that it is more related to role strains than ambience strains. These stresses stem from the expectations of managing domestic responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, and caring for family members despite feeling exhausted from work. Interestingly, participants have expressed feeling more relaxed at home because they have personal space for self-expression and can even manage stressful situations through flexible family dynamics. Below are excerpts from participants from crowded households:

*“I have to manage not only my mom, but also my siblings because they're not that old yet. They're still very childish. When I get home, not only do I have to manage them, I still have to get my work done.”*  
(Participant 2)

*“I’m married and am staying with my in-laws. Certain things are very sensitive because it’s not your brother or sister or your husband. The problems that I’m facing always comes from their side. I don’t have my ‘me-time’, I don’t have anyone who would understand me at home.”* (Participant 6)

For comparison, we included excerpts from participants with fewer household members:

*“At home, it’s just me, my husband, and my two kids. We stay with my mom-in-law and I’m very blessed to have great support and love from my family.”* (Participant 5)

*“My home is very quiet, very peaceful. Even though my niece is running around, she doesn’t get into my way. I can totally be myself and be more relaxed at home.”* (Participant 1)

Family relationships are also significant to our perception and mediation of stress. We found that distant relationships lead women to suppress their stressful thoughts and emotions, while stronger relationships help women to cope with their stressful experiences actively. In interviews, participants reported feeling emotionally and mentally better when they can share their thoughts and emotions, seek validation, and process their stress with family members or partners. These findings are consistent with Fogel et al. (2022), who inferred that positive emotions like comfort, happiness, and love essentially promote family cohesion, which was also evident in participants’ need for support, understanding, and gratitude from their family or partners. Their experiences are as follows:

*“I have an understanding husband. Of course, normal couples may fight because of disagreements, but I’m quite blessed that he’s understanding towards my nature.”* (Participant 5).

*“When I’m stressed, I’ll tell my husband. He’s able to support me emotionally, then he’ll also try to comfort me through various ways.”* (Participant 4)



For comparison, these are excerpts from participants who lack emotional support at home:

*“Sometimes when I expressed my frustrations to my husband and he shows no signs of support. I would feel even more stressed and frustrated.”* (Participant 6)

*“I am the eldest among my siblings and there are things where it’s not easy to express at home, and especially to my parents. My mom, for one, panics really easily, so you can imagine what will happen if I express my frustrations to her.”* (Participant 3)

### **Coping via Consumption**

This theme discusses TikTok’s presence in women’s coping processes and how it became a space to seek resources to manage or suppress their stressors for better psychological and emotional well-being.

TikTok has a positive presence on participants’ stress and emotional management, and even though they acknowledged their increased screen time and dependence on TikTok, they believed the platform greatly benefits their coping and emotional needs. They described TikTok as an entertaining, easy-to-access, and personalised platform capable of uplifting negative moods and emotions, including distracting them from their stressors. Interestingly, most participants do not use TikTok to socialise; instead, they simply prefer to watch content and read comments.

The reluctance to socialise on a massive online space like TikTok is an outcome of positivity bias, reinforced through affirmation and validation from users who perceived negative expressions or difficult emotions as inappropriate for social media (Liu & Kang, 2017; Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013). Hence, users may cope with stressful situations or intense emotions through private messages (Bazarova et al., 2015), healing or comedic content (Sot, 2023), or passively engaging with online groups (e.g., scrolling or reading comments) (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). That said, participants reported positive coping outcomes when they passively scrolled through TikTok’s FYP, stating that it helped them distract or suppress negative emotions. Below are excerpts of their experiences:

*“When I’m stressed, I just like to scroll through [FYP] like funny videos just to have a laugh.”* (Participant 3)

*“Sometimes, I would overthink and even though I try to avoid the issues, I would still be thinking about it. So, the only way I could really unwind is to play my phone and scrolling through TikTok.”* (Participant 1)

Based on our findings, participants actively consumed TikTok for entertainment, information or solutions, current trends (i.e., beauty and fashion), and online shopping. They also tend to enjoy content that features funny animals (especially cats), cooking or baking, “satisfying” videos (e.g., organising, cleaning, or decorating), product reviews, including comedic skits, religious, and feel-good or inspirational videos.

In detail, we discovered that working participants relied on TikTok’s informative and educational content to improve work performance and skill development or to cope with work-related issues. These contents are usually short-formatted, instructional, or demonstrative videos about their work issues, professions, or emotional well-being. For instance, a participant shared that she had learned about video editing or information about their profession from numerous content creators. Another participant had also used TikTok to watch videos created by licensed psychologists to gain accurate information and solutions for managing her anxiety at work; she would even read comments for additional insights and expressed satisfaction with her experiences. Generally, participants felt that such content promotes a sense of calmness, especially when dealing with stressful situations beyond their control. Similarly, our unemployed participant viewed these contents to improve her soft skills as she believed that enhancing these skills would personally benefit and prepare her for future job opportunities. Apart from work or profession-related content, participants would view them to enhance their domestic skills, such as cooking, baking, house chores, and personal hobbies. Their experiences are as below:

*“I love following cooking recipes from TikTok because they not only help me feel calm but also inspires me to try out new dishes that I can share with my family”* (Participant 6)

*“I like watching hair styling or fashion-related videos because I’m into those kinds of things. Watching these videos really helps me with my stress too.”* (Participant 4)

When participants were asked about their satisfaction after replicating the same outcomes as seen on TikTok, phrases like “satisfied”, “happy,” “content,” “inspired,” and “calm” were commonly used. They also acknowledge that these contents help them find inspiration, motivation, and comfort while boosting their self-esteem. Their sentiments persisted when consuming feel-good or inspirational content, and we identified that these contents usually contain positive messages, relaxing videos (e.g., scenery or farming videos), and religious quotes or prayers. Our findings were consistent with the works of Najmul-Islam et al. (2022) and Costescu et al. (2021), who suggested that social media can serve as a mediator between stress and coping, leading to positive reaffirmations towards users’ emotional support-seeking responses. Below are excerpts of their experiences:

*“I do view motivational or psychological content, also memes just to have a sense of calmness while also distracting myself from thinking about all the things that I’m dealing with.”* (Participant 2)

*“Sometimes, I would come across Bible quotes or prayers on my FYP and when I’m angry or stressed, reading them can calm me down... help me relax and gather myself.”* (Participant 3)

All participants are also drawn to the comedic content on TikTok, with most remarking funny cat videos as their favourite content. Comedy is significant to participants’ coping process as it helps to distract themselves from their stressors and suppress intense situations or emotions, including promoting positive emotions and desired coping outcomes. Comedy also allows people to associate themselves with or poke fun at everyday experiences or situations, which indirectly helps them cope with their own experiences (Schaadhardt et al., 2023). These researchers even revealed that satirical comedy has similar positive effects on users, particularly by helping people feel connected and self-accepted through shared experiences.

Online shopping via TikTok Shop is another interesting way for participants to cope with stress. In interviews, participants became incredibly joyful when discussing their shopping experiences and the diverse range of products on the platform. While acknowledging their shopping impulses, they believed these impulses were a reaction or result of their stress and considered their actions a coping tendency and self-motivator. Most participants also reported purchasing only essential items for work or household use and rarely indulging in non-essential purchases. Only one participant admitted to buying non-essential items for self-satisfaction. Below is an excerpt of a participant's experience:

*“When I'm stressed, I will open TikTok and browse through. I'll add to cart, add to cart, add to cart, but- I don't checkout! Adding items into the cart is just for self-fulfilment. Once the streak is over, I'll go back and delete them.”* (Participant 4)

Earlier, we mentioned that most participants do not use TikTok to socialise. They expressed that they post irregularly and have minimal interactions with friends or content creators on the platform. However, only one participant enjoys posting on TikTok and has expressed satisfaction and delight when socialising on the platform. Below is an excerpt of her experience:

*“I post as a guitarist. Most people on TikTok are mere strangers, we don't know each other but we can relate because of our same interest. I find that I can discuss about music, bands, albums with them. Their reaction to my videos is a reflection of how good or bad I play [guitar]. So, it gives me a sense of confidence and accomplishment. It's nice to have this kind of support from people and fellow musicians online.”* (Participant 5)

## DISCUSSION

The presence of TikTok is quite significant for women as it has become a space where they gain new information and solutions, be entertained, and unwind without necessarily gratifying their social needs. Specifically, women cope with TikTok through entertaining, informative, educational,

and relaxing content, including content related to their hobbies or interests and content that carries meaningful messages to their emotional and psychological needs.

Coping is an instinctive response, and our research has shown how TikTok helped women seek healthy, effective coping practices when they lack emotional support or when their environmental variations prevent them from fulfilling their emotional, mental, and coping needs. These findings align with studies suggesting that coping via social media benefits women by helping them avoid or overcome their stressors, as well as promoting positive emotions and better emotional management (Najmul-Islam et al., 2022; Costescu et al., 2021; Revathy et al., 2018).

TikTok's ease of accessibility, personalised functionalities, and countless content channels drive women to engage with the platform. Additionally, the platform's short-formatted, straightforward, and entertaining visuals make coping and consumption fun and, most importantly, digestible compared to other search engines like Google or YouTube, where we need to scroll or sit through multiple advertisements before getting the actual content.

This shift in knowledge consumption is expected given the tremendous impacts of information dissemination during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby social media platforms, TikTok included, began focusing on information and educational distributions through a simple search or hashtag (Garcia et al., 2022; Newman, 2022). As of January 24, 2024, the hashtag #LearnOnTikTok has garnered over 871.4 billion views and spans innumerable topics of interest, from cooking or baking recipes to plant care and DIY projects.

Previously, we have established that women have a higher vulnerability to stress due to their tendency to perceive stress emotionally, which motivates their coping practices to be more focused on emotional well-being. Amid the pandemic, TikTok became a platform where people would share their experiences and opinions online, providing a space for individuals to relate and reflect on each other's similar backgrounds and

experiences (Klug et al., 2023). Despite some reluctance from participants to express their emotions and thoughts online, there is evidence of them finding comfort and relief in content related to their stressful experiences. In this regard, having mutual emotional support via TikTok content encourages women to learn and be conscious of the necessities of effective coping and emotional management (Nabi et al., 2017); and if they do not wish to engage with their stressors, they too may cope through other forms of distractions or suppressions available on the platform, such as seeking comedic content or passively scroll through their FYP.

There is also the lingering stigma surrounding stress and mental health in Malaysian society. Even today, people suffering from excessive stress and its consequences frequently face discrimination and stigmatisation in varying aspects of their lives, like their physical health, social relationships, financial independence, and employment (Hanafiah & Bortel, 2015). These mistreatments are frequently committed by family, friends, and employers due to the poor education on mental health and its impact on physical and psychological well-being (Bernama, 2023); furthermore, lower-income groups tend to perceive this as a spiritual issue rather than a health issue (Radhi, 2022).

When women's daily lives revolve around work, home, and social life, stigmatisation instils constant mistrust, despair, social exclusion, and isolation (Bernama, 2023; Radhi, 2022). Women may also be perceived as too emotional, vulnerable, or unable to adapt to the hardships of life when expressing their stressful experiences (Matud, 2004). In interviews, some participants shared such sentiments, admitting feeling ashamed and disliking how others would react or view them after discussing their stress or mental health struggles. Moreover, women in B40 groups face difficulties in accessing professional mental health services due to the lack of financial resources or emotional support, causing many not to seek help (Radhi, 2022). Although Malaysia has taken steps by providing helplines for counselling and emotional support, there is still a shortage of psychiatrists and psychologists, thus creating a long waiting list for treatments (Radhi, 2022). As Hanafiah and Bortel (2015) have pointed out, addressing this issue requires persistent efforts in advocacy and education to combat the stigma surrounding stress outcomes and mental health.

Theoretically, MDT's conditions of dependency arise from our strong desires to fulfil our general, pervasive, and informative needs for connection and familiarity, as well as to maintain stability between changes or conflicts. Our research indicates several instances where these conditions had occurred, most prevalently through women's dependency on TikTok to fulfil their emotional, intrinsic, and coping needs when experiencing stress in environments or situations beyond their control. Women are also evidently dependent on TikTok for information and solutions when attempting to cope with their stressors or intense emotions. Similarly, other studies have concurred that the platform's accessibility and endless streams of media channels draw people to consume it for their various needs (Ramsden & Talbot, 2024; Sot, 2023), including socio-emotional coping and psychological adjustment (Sun et al., 2023).

Dependency is also driven by the media's ability to provide accurate and credible information to its audience (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Nevertheless, our research identified that women tend to rely on media messages that emotionally and mentally resonate with them, allowing them to gain aspects of gratification. Consistent with Schaadhardt et al. (2023), our findings inferred that people, including women, often lean on media content that reflects or is related to their professions, emotions or experiences. Besides, when people receive helpful information about their circumstances, they are more likely to be more conscious and adopt certain behaviours (Yang et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2023). This statement is evident in our research, where women demonstrated a change of behaviour when adapting or managing their stressful experiences in everyday situations.

Throughout our research, we have established the platform's impact on women's coping processes and emotional well-being. Despite this, there is correlating evidence suggesting patterns of dependency within the social and economic conditions of women from lower-income (B40) backgrounds. Specifically, the absence of resources (e.g., financial or emotional support) and persistent stigmatisation amplifies women's dependence on TikTok to instil positive emotions whilst seeking support and effective coping strategies without fearing the repercussions of their environments and circumstances. However, we agree with Sot (2023) that while dependency

can provide relief from negative emotions and everyday stress, it may also address the burden of self-care and productivity.

Nonetheless, MDT provides clarifications on dependency factors in common occurrences, evidently through women's distinct responses to cope with their everyday stressors via TikTok. Besides the outcome, MDT emphasises the role of media in facilitating individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural growth, as well as their need to fulfil aspects of their intrinsic or general needs to maintain a sense of connection, familiarity, and stability.

## CONCLUSION

Stress will always be a part of our lives; therefore, healthy, effective coping is essential for improving our overall health and emotional well-being. TikTok emerged as a valuable resource for women to cope with their everyday stressors by providing a space for self-expression, connection, information, and suppression. The platform also creates a sense of purpose for women, enabling them to find comfort and emotional support within the online space, ultimately stimulating better stress and emotional management. The inclusion of theoretical perspectives in our research also highlights the understanding of TikTok's presence in women's distinctive consumption and coping practices, as well as their ways of fulfilling their intrinsic needs and desired coping outcomes. As such, we hope that our findings contribute to a better understanding of women's stress and how TikTok can be an effective tool for coping.

## LIMITATIONS

The present research has some limitations. First, this research's findings cannot be generalised as it had a small sample size and focused only on women from lower-income backgrounds. Secondly, the self-reported nature of our interviews does not allow us to determine potential biases. Lastly, although our research focused on the positive aspects of TikTok for women's stress and emotion management, we have not evaluated potential downsides like addiction or exposure to harmful content.



Future research may focus on the effects of women's healthy and unhealthy coping tendencies when coping via social media against everyday stressors. Researchers could also investigate whether women have different coping tendencies when using different social media platforms. Lastly, it may be beneficial for future research to explore the sex differences and their dependency on social media for coping.

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