



**THE EXISTENTIAL PATH OF PAKISTANI TIKTOKERS: A  
QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION GROUNDED IN MASLOW'S  
HIERARCHY OF NEEDS**

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***Abstract***

*This phenomenological study seeks to understand the existential journey of Pakistani Tiktokers, emphasizing their lived experiences within the framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Employing purposive sampling, adult participants were selected to represent a specific age range. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the data underwent iterative analysis using theoretical coding*



*grounded in the phenomenological approach. The central theme that emerged from the data was the "Impact of Social Media on the Life of Tiktokers," encompassing two superordinate themes aligned with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Belongingness and Love Needs and Self-Fulfillment Needs. The subordinate theme within Belongingness and Love Needs comprised codes such as "Sense of Belongingness" and "Wish to Expand Social Network." The second superordinate theme, Self-Fulfillment Needs, included the subordinate theme of Self-Actualization, with codes like "Career Building," "Creative Activities," "Financial Needs," and "Identity Creation." The findings of this study may have implications for designing interventions aimed at promoting positive mental health outcomes on social media platforms. Understanding how TikTok contributes to existential needs can inform strategies to enhance the well-being of users. This study contributes to the existing literature by deepening our understanding of the impact of social media on individuals in an increasingly interconnected and technologically advanced global society. As social media platforms, particularly TikTok, continue to play a pivotal role in satisfying basic, physical, and growth needs, this research sheds light on the evolving dynamics of online platforms.*

**Keywords:** TikTok, Social Media, Influencers, Tiktokers, Young Adults, Promotion.

### **Introduction**

Abraham Maslow sought to understand the genuine drivers of human motivation. He posited that individuals have intrinsic motivation systems that are not tied to external rewards or unconscious cravings (McLeod, 2016). Building upon his initial argument, Maslow proposed that distinct needs serve as the driving force behind human motivations. According to Abraham Maslow's theory, "there exist four categories of needs that must be fulfilled for an individual to engage in altruistic actions." Often depicted in the form of a triangle or pyramid, the five-tier model is categorized into basic, psychological, and growth needs. Foundational needs encompass necessities such as food, water, shelter, rest, security, and safety. Psychological needs involve a sense of belonging and love, specifically within intimate relationships and friendships. Esteem needs, which fall under psychological needs, involve feelings of accomplishment and prestige. Lastly, growth needs or self-actualization involve realizing one's full potential (Griffin, 1991).

One might not immediately consider that the act of connecting with others through social media holds a significance comparable to the fundamental needs outlined by Maslow (Miller, 2020). Professor Matthew Lieberman in his book "Social: Why Our Brains are Wired to Connect," asserts that "an increasing body of research indicates that the imperative to socially connect with others is just as fundamental as our requirements for sustenance, water, and shelter" (Lieberman, 2013). In a study conducted in 2015, it was reported that "65 percent of Americans currently utilize social media platforms. For numerous users, these platforms serve as a space to showcase professional achievements to potential employers, discover job opportunities through personal networks, and inform friends about available employment options". This observation is closely related to Maslow's concept of safety needs (Smith, 2015).

In line with social media and the belongingness needs, Prior to the contemporary technological advancements, couples cultivated friendships and connections through in-person interactions. In today's era, characterized by widespread computer and smartphone usage, relationships are initiated, nurtured, and sometimes concluded through various social media platforms. As noted by Rianne C. Farrugia (2013), "online social networking sites (SNS) have endeavored to replicate face-to-face interactions on the internet, enabling individuals to engage in both public and private interactions. According to Maslow (1943), fulfilling the need for self-esteem results in emotions such as self-confidence, a sense of worth, strength, capability, and the



feeling of being useful and indispensable in the world. In today's world meeting esteem needs is facilitated in contemporary online communities, where individuals can craft and portray various personas through social media platforms.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, introduced in 1943, has endured over time. In today's dynamic world, human needs are not as neatly structured as his hierarchical model suggests. Life is inherently more intricate, with challenges emerging unpredictably. Recognizing humans as inherently social beings, social media plays a nuanced role in our lives. In an era marked by globalization and technological progress, the connectivity fostered by social media platforms contributes to meeting our ongoing basic, psychological, and growth needs (Miller, 2020).

The innate yearning for connection, love, and esteem through self-expression has consistently been a foundational aspect of human psychology. Whether it manifests in our attire, chosen professions, or recreational pursuits, human culture has long been rooted in tribal affiliations. The advent of the internet, however, has harnessed and amplified this desire in unprecedented ways. Platforms like MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Vine, Instagram, and TikTok have emerged, leveraging the fundamental aspects of human instincts. Despite the introduction of new technologies like augmented and virtual reality, as well as diverse forms of self-expression such as videos, memes, and GIFs, the underlying physiology of the brain has remained relatively unchanged (Viner, 2020).

We all share the innate aspiration to realize our fullest potential, to see our dreams come to fruition. Maslow articulates this as "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming." Platforms like TikTok have notably capitalized on this aspect., TikTok with its limitless possibilities, allows users to create content about their passions and form communities around them. All social platforms are designed with these fundamental principles of psychology in consideration. A prevailing theme among the objectives of certain newer platforms is exemplified by TikTok, which articulates its mission as follows: "To foster creativity and evoke joy." Thus, to Conclude, social media, in essence, has heightened human's intrinsic drive for self-actualization.

The proliferation of social media platforms has significantly influenced the way individuals construct their identities, form connections, and seek fulfillment. Among these platforms, TikTok has emerged as a cultural phenomenon, particularly among the youth, providing a unique space for self-expression and creativity. While studies on social media and well-being exist, there is a noticeable gap in understanding how TikTok, specifically, contributes to the existential fulfillment of individuals. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on Pakistani Tiktokers, a demographic with a distinct cultural context. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the existential path of Pakistani Tiktokers by grounding the research in Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

## **Method**

### **Phenomenological Framework**

This phenomenological study seeks to understand the existential journey of Pakistani Tiktokers, emphasizing their lived experiences within the framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The study aims to explore the subjective meanings, motivations, and perceptions that Pakistani Tiktokers attribute to their engagement with TikTok, considering how this involvement aligns with their fundamental human needs.



### Research Questions:

1. How do Pakistani Tiktokers subjectively experience and interpret their motivations for participating in TikTok, particularly in relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs?
2. What are the essential themes and patterns within the lived experiences of Pakistani Tiktokers as they navigate their sense of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization on TikTok?

### Sample Recruitment and Participant characteristics

For the meticulous exploration of the profound impact of social media, particularly TikTok, on the lives of individuals, purposive sampling was artfully employed to curate a group of participants embodying specific criteria essential for the phenomenological investigation. The recruitment process sought those who voluntarily embraced participation, adopting a deviant case sample approach, encapsulating individuals in the emerging adulthood age range, ardently engaged in social media applications, especially TikTok, and residing under the watchful guidance of their parents. The deliberate selection of participants was anchored in the recognition of the pivotal age range of emerging adulthood, the frequent utilization of social media platform i.e., TikTok, and the unique familial context, all crucial elements for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. Adhering to Creswell's (2012) insights on the potential sample size ranging from 2 to 25 participants in phenomenological research, the recruitment strategy hinged on participant homogeneity to glean a comprehensive understanding of shared experiences. In adherence to the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), participant homogeneity was paramount to capturing the nuanced essence of lived experiences. Consequently, the final sample comprised eight discerningly chosen emerging adults, thoughtfully balanced in gender representation (Male = 4, Female = 4). Hailing from the vibrant city of Lahore, Pakistan, the participants spanned the age range of 18 to 25 years, ensuring a diverse yet cohesive representation of this dynamic demographic. This meticulous approach to sample selection lays the foundation for a compelling exploration into the multifaceted intersection of social media, TikTok, and the lives of these emerging adults in Lahore.

### Data Collection

The researchers devised a comprehensive demographic information sheet to capture various facets of the participants' personal details, encompassing name, age, gender, academic qualifications, socio-economic status, birth order, and family system. In tandem, a meticulously crafted semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed to facilitate in-depth face-to-face interviews, focusing on the profound impact of social media, particularly TikTok, on the lives of participants.

The questionnaire featured open-ended inquiries centered around Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, aiming to unravel the intricate motivations and experiences of Pakistani Tiktokers within this conceptual framework. The interview questions aimed to explore the following aspects: How do Pakistani Tiktokers perceive and articulate their motivations for engaging with the platform in the context of fulfilling their basic needs? To what extent do Pakistani Tiktokers express a sense of belonging and connection within the TikTok community? In what ways do Pakistani Tiktokers seek recognition, esteem, and validation through their TikTok activities? In what aspects do they believe the platform contributes to their journey of becoming their authentic selves? How do Pakistani Tiktokers perceive the impact of their TikTok activities on their overall well-being,



mental health, and sense of purpose in life? To what extent does the content creation and consumption on TikTok serve as a coping mechanism for Pakistani Tiktokers?

Voluntary participation was sought, and written consent was obtained after providing participants with comprehensive information. Participants responded to the demographic information sheet before engaging in in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted in a secure and confidential environment. The semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately one to one and a half hours, delved into the psychosocial impact of social media, specifically TikTok, on the lives of the participants. To safeguard confidentiality, participants were assigned random pseudonyms (AA, MH, LK, RJ, WN, DF, WZ, AX). The interviews were audio-recorded with explicit permission, and subsequent transcripts were developed for thorough analysis using the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA), ultimately forming emergent themes.

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and analysis was based on the Interpretative Phenomenological Frame (IPA) at the initial state, transcripts were read multiple times, and the audios were also listened to a few times. The researchers noted their significant observations where distinctive phrases and emotions were highlighted and converted into codes. At the second stage, transcripts word transforms into emerging themes, where researchers worked on the detailed and comprehensive notes taken out of the transcripts. These notes are converted into codes were then transformed into emerging themes called sub-ordinate themes. Researchers determine the relationship between the emerging themes and the third stage, group them based on conceptual similarities, and name each cluster. These clustered themes were named superordinate themes, and finally, a list comprised of subordinate and superordinate themes was formed.

### **Findings**

#### **Superordinate Theme: Psychological Needs in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

##### **Subordinate Theme: Belongingness and Love Needs**

##### ***Narrative Examples: Sense of Belongingness***

AA expresses the TikTok community as a place for creative collaboration, where original content is crafted with a sense of belonging. MH emphasizes TikTok's inclusivity, transcending borders of nationality, ethnicity, and gender, creating a familial social platform. LK sees TikTok from a user perspective, highlighting its core elements of fun and entertainment as contributors to the platform's appeal. RJ considers TikTok as a source of support and friendship, with the audience playing a crucial role in creating a daily video routine. WN echoes the theme of inclusivity, portraying TikTok as a space where everyone, regardless of background, belongs and contributes. DF finds joy in creating TikTok content and values the love and prayers received from the community, emphasizing the platform's role in personal fulfillment and support.

##### ***Narrative Examples: Wish to Expand One's Social Network***

AA shares how joining TikTok opened doors to interacting with diverse individuals, including influencers, bloggers, and actors, enriching their social circle. MH echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the expansion of their social circle and the formation of friendships with Tiktokers, influencers, bloggers, and actors after becoming part of the TikTok family. LK emphasizes the social impact of TikTok, noting increased social activity on various platforms and the strengthening of their profile on Instagram through TikTok. RJ narrates a journey from being inspired by friends' musical app videos to creating their own TikTok account, highlighting the



platform's role in fostering interest and engagement. WN reflects on the social connectivity nurtured through TikTok, describing the platform's influence on their social life, with encounters for selfies and videos outside. DF underscores the application's significant impact on social interaction, connecting them with bloggers, Tiktokers, and celebrities, thereby expanding their social network. WZ succinctly notes how TikTok has increased their social interaction and network. AX highlights the application's influence on their social life, attributing it to the substantial increase in followers and profile visibility through TikTok.

**Subordinate Theme: Esteem Needs**

***Narrative Examples: Fame Seeking***

AA finds joy in showcasing talent on TikTok and appreciates the admiration received from people outside. MH credits TikTok for bringing fame and continues to enjoy the platform. LK's video goes viral on TikTok, leading to ongoing fame. RJ recognizes viewers' support as crucial for TikTok fame. WN starts using TikTok, gains fame over time, and values viewer engagement. DF advises on using tools for increased TikTok followers and emphasizes hard work. WZ describes the different life of a TikToker with fame and public interactions. AX considers TikTok essential, attributing fame and positive responses to the platform. AA acknowledges initial disappointment on TikTok, adapts, and enjoys fame, highlighting the distinctive nature of a TikToker's life.

***Narrative Examples: Prestige***

AA manages crowds for photos, feels proud but faces challenges balancing family and fan time. MH finds motivation in TikTok as a passion, seeking mental satisfaction from love, support, and promotion. LK takes pride when people gather for photos and videos while expressing a positive view of TikTok. RJ sees TikTok positively, citing its impact on personality grooming, learning to face audiences, and boosting confidence. WN finds motivation and respect in TikTok fame, experiencing immense love from fans. DF expresses satisfaction and love from the Pakistani audience, remaining enthusiastic about making videos on TikTok. WZ enjoys fame and positive responses on TikTok, covering flaws to keep the audience happy. AX highlights income, respect, and fame gained through TikTok, noting the shift in social dynamics and newfound popularity.

***Narrative Examples: Self-Expression***

MH appreciates TikTok for its focus on individual expression and the opportunity to import one's own experiences and knowledge. LK views TikTok as an inclusive platform that encourages authenticity, creativity, and positive expression in a like-minded community. RJ echoes the sentiment, emphasizing TikTok's inclusivity, creative freedom, and the opportunity to connect with similar-minded individuals. WN finds TikTok an excellent platform to showcase talent and express feelings independently. DF describes the charming life of a TikToker, appreciating the platform for providing freedom to showcase talent. WZ feels empowered on TikTok, citing the ability to raise their voice, solve problems, and address social issues quickly.

**Superordinate Theme: Self-Fulfillment Needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs**

**Subordinate Theme: Self-Actualization**

***Narrative Examples: Career Building***

AA sees TikTok as an excellent opportunity for newcomers to polish talent and gain confidence in acting and singing. MH expresses gratitude to TikTok for fulfilling their dream of acting and providing a family platform to showcase talent. LK views TikTok as a great platform for newcomers to display talent, especially for those who may not have other opportunities. RJ



highlights TikTok as a great opportunity for newcomers in acting, singing, and media, emphasizing the platform's ability to bring out inner talent. WN expresses interest in acting and plans to use TikTok to create quality content for people. WZ appreciates TikTok as a platform to approach social media easily, improve skills in acting, music, and dancing. AX finds TikTok to be the perfect opportunity to showcase talent, especially in singing, dancing, and acting, emphasizing its accessibility through a multimedia application.

***Narrative Examples: Creative Activities***

AA describes TikTok as a time-consuming platform requiring early wake-ups for managing multiple applications and creating quality content. MH compares TikTok to a race for maximum followers and fame, emphasizing the need for creative and unique content over shortcuts. LK acknowledges the time-consuming process of making lyric videos on TikTok, especially for girls who need to dress up and do makeup. RJ advocates for posting unique content on TikTok, dispelling the notion that it's just for dancing and weird videos. WN highlights the challenges of being a TikToker, including the need for readiness at any time and the hard work involved in content creation. DF emphasizes the difficulty of content creation on TikTok, involving hours of practice and tough video editing. WZ discusses the routine of waking up early for TikTok-related activities, spending 2 to 3 hours on video creation. AX shares the enjoyment of making videos on TikTok, emphasizing the importance of being unique, showing talent, and focusing on quality over quantity.

***Narrative Examples: Financial Needs***

AA notes that fame on TikTok attracts different brands, cafes, and restaurants, leading to lucrative PR packages and financial gains. MH, being a famous TikToker, leverages millions of fans and likes to attract brands, cafes, and restaurants, earning money through sponsored posts. LK emphasizes the positive impact of TikTok on jobless individuals, citing an example of a laborer turned famous TikToker who receives PR packages and paid promotions. RJ shares the strategy of converting TikTok traffic to Instagram, earning PR packages and avoiding the need for a traditional job. WN discusses the influence of TikTok fame on social life, attracting PR packages and collaborations with various brands. DF highlights how TikTok transforms an average person into a recognizable figure, leading to brand collaborations and increased followers. WZ mentions brands approaching for paid promotions and PR packages, providing an additional income stream and fulfilling financial needs as a student. AX expresses motivation from TikTok, highlighting the platform's role in generating income for a student from a lower-middle-class family.

***Narrative Examples: Identity Creation Needs***

AA recognizes their talent after a viral video, leading them to create a TikTok account to showcase skills and capitalize on fame. MH describes TikTok as a dreamy world where fame brings recognition worldwide, impacting social life, and leading to increased followers on Instagram. LK shares the experience of a friend's video going viral, prompting them to join TikTok and gain recognition for their talent, emphasizing TikTok as a direct platform for showcasing creativity. RJ appreciates TikTok for providing a platform to display talent directly to the public, becoming a public figure with a pool of friends. WN highlights the positive impact of TikTok, transforming an ordinary person into a public figure through fame, recognition, and the sense of family within the app. DF emphasizes the motivation to continue using TikTok, gaining recognition, fame, and opportunities for brand collaborations. WZ views TikTok as an essential



part of daily routine, providing recognition, fame, and financial benefits unless engaged in another business. AX feels like a celebrity due to TikTok, seeking mental satisfaction and recognition, especially in various corners of Pakistan.

### **Discussion**

The findings from the qualitative investigation grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs reveal significant themes related to psychological needs, particularly focusing on belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and self-fulfillment needs, including self-actualization. These themes are reflected in the narratives of TikTok users in Pakistan, shedding light on the platform's impact on their lives and well-being.

#### **Belongingness and Love Needs**

The narratives of participants, highlight the sense of belonging and connection fostered by TikTok. The platform serves as a creative space for collaboration and self-expression, creating a community where individuals from diverse backgrounds feel accepted and supported. This aligns with Maslow's concept of belongingness and love needs, emphasizing the importance of social connections for human well-being (Maslow, 1954). TikTok emerges as a virtual tribe, fulfilling the innate human desire for social interaction and affiliation.

TikTok's inclusive nature, transcending nationality, ethnicity, and gender, further reinforces the sense of belongingness. This resonates with Maslow's idea that satisfying belongingness needs involves building meaningful relationships beyond superficial differences (Maslow, 1954). The platform becomes a family social space for users, offering joy, entertainment, and a support system in times of need.

#### **Esteem Needs**

Fame-seeking emerges as a significant narrative theme, with participants seeking recognition and validation through TikTok. Participants express the joy and satisfaction derived from being recognized, admired, and supported by their TikTok audience. This aligns with Maslow's esteem needs, emphasizing the desire for recognition, respect, and a positive self-image (Maslow, 1954). TikTok provides a platform for users to showcase their talents, receive admiration, and fulfill their esteem needs.

The narratives also touch upon the challenges and adjustments required in the pursuit of fame, reflecting the inherent struggle in satisfying esteem needs. This struggle and eventual success resonate with Maslow's notion that individuals must overcome challenges and achieve competence to fulfill their esteem needs (Maslow, 1954).

#### **Self-Fulfillment Needs - Self-Actualization**

TikTok emerges as a platform that facilitates self-expression and creativity, aligning with Maslow's concept of self-actualization – the realization of one's full potential (Maslow, 1954). Participants view TikTok as an opportunity for newcomers to showcase their talents, fulfilling their aspirations in acting, singing, and various forms of self-expression.

Creative activities on TikTok involve significant effort, reflecting Maslow's idea that self-actualization requires the commitment of time and energy to develop one's potential (Maslow, 1954). The narratives emphasize the importance of being unique, creating quality content, and the transformative impact of TikTok on users' lives.



### **Identity Creation Needs**

The narratives showcase TikTok's role in identity creation, with participants transitioning from ordinary individuals to recognized figures. The platform not only provides fame but also shapes participants' identities, leading to public recognition, respect, and social influence. This resonates with Maslow's hierarchy, as self-actualization involves the realization and expression of one's identity (Maslow, 1954).

### **Financial and Career Building Needs**

TikTok is acknowledged as a potential source of income, especially through brand collaborations and sponsored posts. This financial aspect addresses the practical needs of participants, aligning with Maslow's hierarchy where financial stability is a fundamental requirement for well-being (Maslow, 1954). TikTok serves as a platform for career building, providing opportunities for individuals, including those who might not have access to traditional avenues.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The study's findings are based on narratives from TikTok users in Pakistan, which may limit generalizability to other cultural contexts. Future research should include a more diverse and representative sample to explore variations in the impact of TikTok across different regions and demographics. The study's interpretation relies on a Western psychological framework (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs), which might not fully capture cultural nuances. Future research could incorporate culturally sensitive frameworks or explore indigenous psychological theories to enhance cultural relevance. TikTok is a dynamic platform, with features and user experiences evolving. The study's findings might not fully capture the current state of TikTok, and future research should consider the platform's updates and changes.

### **Conclusion**

The study's findings illuminate the complex ways in which TikTok fulfills various needs in Maslow's Hierarchy, offering insights into the psychological impact of social media on individuals in the context of Pakistan. The platform emerges as more than just a source of entertainment; it becomes a space for social connection, self-expression, and fulfillment of esteem and self-actualization needs. This discussion contributes to the growing literature on the psychological implications of social media use, underscoring the multifaceted role that platforms like TikTok play in shaping individuals' lives. The findings of this study may have implications for designing interventions aimed at promoting positive mental health outcomes on social media platforms. Understanding how TikTok contributes to existential needs can inform strategies to enhance the well-being of users.

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