

Drivers of Engagement in TikTok Fitness Content: A Systematic Narrative Review

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Abstract. *TikTok has rapidly become a leading platform for short videos, influencing modern fitness communication and the ways users interact with content. Research recognizes the role of social media in promoting physical activity, but the factors that shape engagement with fitness-related content on TikTok are not clearly integrated in the literature. This systematic narrative review aims to synthesize current empirical evidence on how people engage with TikTok fitness content, how this engagement is measured, and what may explain or motivate it. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a systematic search was conducted in the Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus databases, covering studies published between 2019 and 2025. In total, 23 peer-reviewed studies met the inclusion criteria and were examined through a structured narrative synthesis. The review brings together quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies to identify the main theories, engagement measures, content types, and factors that explain user interaction. The findings show that engagement with TikTok fitness content has several dimensions. These include behavioral indicators, such as likes, comments, shares, and watch time; cognitive and emotional responses, such as attention, motivation, and perceived usefulness; and social forms of engagement, such as participation, identification, and co-creation. Higher engagement is commonly linked to motivational storytelling, authentic self-presentation, interactive content, tutorials, and participatory features such as challenges, duets, and live sessions. Engagement also appears to result from the combined influence of psychological factors, including motivation and self-efficacy, social factors, such as community belonging and social validation, and algorithmic mechanisms that increase content visibility through personalization and retention-based recommendations. This review contributes to the literature by presenting TikTok fitness engagement as a social and technical interaction, not just as a number or performance metric. In this view, engagement is shaped by users, creators, platform features, and algorithmic systems. The findings may be useful for researchers, fitness professionals, educators, and content creators who aim to understand engagement in short-video environments and use it in an ethical and responsible way.*

Keywords: TikTok, fitness content, user engagement, content strategies, engagement drivers.

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Introduction

TikTok has become one of the most influential digital platforms for promoting health and fitness behaviors, including physical activity (DataReportal, 2025). Its visual format, short videos, and algorithms that rapidly spread trends have supported the growth of a fitness-oriented visual culture. On the platform, workout demonstrations, body transformations, exercise tutorials, and motivational clips circulate quickly among large audiences. In this context, engagement has become an important indicator of content performance. It influences the visibility of creators and the ways in which fitness-related behaviors may be adopted by the public.

Fitness and gym communities stand as one of the most dynamic sectors on TikTok (Barnhart, 2025). They include trainers, content creators, sports supporters, influencers, sports equipment brands, and users looking for information about exercise, health, and motivation. Unlike traditional media, TikTok encourages direct interaction through virality, imitation, and participation. As a result, engagement goes beyond standard indicators such as likes, shares, and comments. It also includes platform-specific actions, such as duets, remixes, challenges, and the imitation of demonstrated exercises.

Although academic interest in social media and active lifestyles is growing, research on TikTok fitness engagement is still in its infancy. The available studies remain limited and fragmented. Most research focuses either on how influencers shape health behaviors and norms (Kim, 2024) or on the role of motivation and self-efficacy in physical engagement (Xiao, Huang, & Li, 2025). Recent studies on visual social media content point to the psychological effects of social comparison and aesthetic pressure (Vandenbosch, Fardouly, & Tiggemann, 2022). However, an important conceptual gap remains. It is still unclear how TikTok's algorithms and digital strategies generate high levels of engagement with fitness and physical activity content, or how this engagement is sustained and transformed into ongoing interactions.

To address these limitations, this article synthesizes existing studies on engagement generated by fitness-related content on TikTok. It aims to clarify how engagement is defined, measured, and explained in the scholarly literature. The review is guided by the following research question:

- RQ1. How is engagement defined and measured in studies of fitness and physical activity content on TikTok?
- RQ2. Which content types and communication strategies are associated with higher engagement in TikTok fitness communities?
- RQ3. Which psychological, social, and algorithmic factors determine user engagement with fitness-related content on TikTok?

This study combines quantitative and qualitative perspectives to map engagement in TikTok fitness communities. It classifies content types, identifies effective communication strategies, and examines how motivation, authenticity, social influence, and TikTok's algorithm interact to shape engagement. In this way, the study contributes to a clearer understanding of engagement as a dynamic process shaped by users, creators, emotions, social relations, and platform mechanisms.

Our paper examines TikTok's influence on recreational sports communication in digital environments and proposes a practical conceptual framework for researchers, content creators, fitness professionals, and brands in the wellness industry.

Conceptual Background

The Rise of TikTok in the Global Social Media Market

TikTok expanded rapidly after its 2018 merger with Musical.ly, a move that helped the platform enter Western markets and grow its global user base (O'Brien, Davoudi, & Nelson, 2025; Li, 2022). Its growth accelerated during 2019 and 2020, when it became one of the most downloaded applications worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic further increased the use of digital media and contributed to TikTok's visibility and popularity. According to digital market reports, TikTok reached one billion monthly active users in September 2021 and has continued to record high levels of user engagement compared with many other social media platforms (Backlinko, 2024; Resourcera, 2024). In this context, TikTok's rapid rise can be understood as the result of three connected factors: algorithmic innovation, the flexibility of short-form video, and changes in global media consumption habits.

Engagement in Digital Fitness Communication: Theoretical Foundations

Engagement is a central concept in digital communication research. It is usually understood as an ongoing interaction between users and media content (O'Brien & Toms, 2008). In digital environments, O'Brien (2016) describes engagement through three essential components: behavioral, affective, and cognitive. The behavioral component indicates visible actions, such as likes, comments, shares, or saves. The affective component involves emotional responses, like inspiration, enthusiasm, or a sense of connection with the creator. The cognitive component refers to attention, interest, and perceived informational value.

In the fitness domain, these components have particular relevance because user interactions can influence motivation, physical activity behaviors, and the decision to start or maintain training routines (Durau, Diehl, & Terlutter, 2022). For this reason, engagement can be understood as active participation that involves users behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively.

Recent developments in digital marketing research have expanded traditional models of engagement by including psychological factors, such as perceived self-efficacy and the need for affiliation (Gangadharbatla, 2008). These elements are relevant on short-form video platforms, where users consume content but may internalize it as part of building a healthy-lifestyle identity.

TikTok as a Short-Form Fitness Media Environment

TikTok has changed the way users consume and share fitness-related content. The platform relies on short, dynamic, and easy-to-follow videos that present exercises, training routines, body transformations, and nutritional advice in a concise format. Garcia (2024) found that videos showing body transformations, exercise demonstrations, fitness recommendations, and motivational content receive the highest engagement. These formats encourage viewers to try similar practices. They also induce strong emotions and generate high affective engagement.

TikTok's algorithm makes relevant content quickly available to established creators and new users. One distinctive feature of the platform is that it supports participatory interaction through features such as duets, remixes, reactions, and participation in trends. In the fitness ecosystem, these tools can turn individual exercises into collective challenges that are repeated, reinterpreted, and adapted by different communities (Roth et al., 2021; Oktariyana, Sukmawati, & Pebriantika, 2025). TikTok is therefore more than a distribution platform. It also creates a collaborative space where engagement emerges through co-creation, where users actively contribute to content production instead of only consuming it.

Fitness Social Media Ecosystem: Actors, Practices, and Motivations

The digital fitness community includes a wide range of actors, such as certified trainers, specialized content creators, lifestyle influencers, sports brands, and everyday users who share their progress or look for advice. Research shows that these actor categories co-exist in a complex digital ecosystem, where influencer types and professional status shape how audiences perceive fitness content. Creator credibility and authenticity are key factors that influence users' motivation to be physically active and their intention to adopt exercise-related behaviors (Wang et al., 2024).

Another important aspect of this ecosystem is that engagement varies according to audience characteristics. Dominteanu, Matic, and Iacobini (2025) show that the engagement of female consumers in sports communication increases when messages reflect their personal values and concerns, such as authenticity, exercise accessibility, and a sense of affiliation. In TikTok fitness communities, these principles are visible in users' preference for customized routines, realistic representations of progress, and motivational messages that promote body acceptance. Engagement depends on the technical quality of the exercises and the creators' ability to meet the expectations of different audience groups.

Users are motivated by different factors: inspiration, practical information, and a sense of belonging to a community with same interests. In this sense, engagement reflects a social and psychological interaction in which users connect with the creator and with the wider community.

Types of Engagement in TikTok Fitness Content

For analytical clarity, engagement in TikTok fitness content can be grouped into three distinct forms:

Passive engagement refers to implicit behaviors, such as watching videos, maintaining attention, or repeatedly viewing similar content. Passive engagement is less visible in standard metrics, but it plays an important role in algorithmic evaluation because it signals the perceived relevance and quality of the content. (Chen, Yao, & Elhai, 2026).

Active engagement includes explicit actions such as liking, commenting, sharing, or saving videos (Rosli et al., 2024). In the fitness context, comments often include requests for technical clarification, questions about exercise duration or intensity, and feedback on personal progress.

Participatory engagement is the most complex and TikTok-specific form of engagement. It involves taking part in trends, creating duets, imitating demonstrated exercises, or producing videos that reinterpret original content (Zhang, 2025). In fitness contexts, this type of engagement is closely linked to users' motivation to try new exercises and publicly share their personal progress.

These three types of engagement work in a complementary manner. They support creator growth and help build active communities. This classification shows progressive levels of user participation, from passive consumption to active co-creation.

Conceptual Challenges and the Need for Integrated Frameworks

Studying engagement in digital fitness contexts raises several conceptual challenges. Definitions and measurement approaches differ from one study to another, which makes it difficult to compare results and draw general conclusions. Fitness-related engagement is also shaped by psychological factors such as motivation, perceived self-efficacy, and satisfaction with personal progress (Xiao, Huang, & Li, 2025; Baig, Elahib, & Hashmi, 2023). These factors are difficult to capture through standard social media metrics, since motivation and self-efficacy are not fully reflected by likes, views, comments, or shares. Traditional engagement indicators (e.g., likes, comments, shares)

usually show only the visible results of interaction. They do not explain the psychological processes behind these actions. For example, some users may post frequently to gain validation rather than because they are intrinsically motivated. This makes engagement metrics potentially unreliable and misleading.

Another challenge is the influence of TikTok's algorithm. The algorithm may amplify certain types of content and create cycles of virality that are difficult to interpret from a behavioral perspective. TikTok uses a machine-learning-based system that prioritizes content with high retention and interaction rates, which may distort authentic engagement signals (Zhou, 2024). In addition, Dominteanu, Matic, and Iacobini (2025) show that female sports content consumers may display different engagement patterns. For this reason, theoretical models of TikTok fitness engagement should include gender and identity factors.

Accordingly, integrated conceptual frameworks are needed to combine measurable behavioral data, psychosocial factors, and the specific features of short-form video platforms. These frameworks can support a better understanding of engagement in TikTok fitness communities.

Methodology

Study Design

This study used a systematic literature review design to examine how researchers understand, measure, and explain user engagement with TikTok content related to fitness and physical activity. The literature selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted in two major bibliographic databases: Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus. These databases were selected because they include relevant research in social sciences, communication studies, digital media, and interdisciplinary fields.

In the Web of Science Core Collection, the search was conducted through the Advanced Search function, using the Topic field (TS). The following search string was applied: TS = (TikTok AND (fitness OR "physical activity" OR exercise OR gym OR workout OR training) AND (engagement OR "user engagement" OR interaction OR participation OR commenting OR sharing)).

The search was conducted on December 29, 2025. In Web of Science, it produced 123 records, which were narrowed to 117 articles and conference proceedings after applying document-type filters.

The same strategy was applied in Scopus using the database-specific TITLE-ABS-KEY syntax and limiting the search to the 2019–2025 period. The Scopus search produced 107 records. After restricting the results to English-language publications and relevant document types, 80 records remained for further screening.

Study Selection Process

Study selection proceeded as follows. In the first stage, duplicate records from the two databases were removed, leading to the exclusion of 50 articles. Ultimately, 148 unique records were included in the title and abstract screening. The screening was conducted manually, using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria aligned with the research questions. All records were entered into

a screening spreadsheet. Titles and abstracts were then reviewed, and each study was classified as included, excluded, or potentially relevant. After this stage:

- 19 articles were identified as directly relevant to the study topic: 16 from Web of Science and 3 from Scopus;
- four articles were classed as potentially eligible and retained for full-text assessment;
- the remaining articles were excluded because they did not focus on fitness or physical activity related content on TikTok, or because they did not address user engagement in a way that matched the study objectives.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

- a) analyzed the TikTok platform;
- b) focused on fitness, physical activity, or exercise related content;
- c) addressed engagement conceptually or measured it through indicators such as likes, comments, shares, viewing time, or participation;
- d) were peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2019 and 2025.

Studies were excluded if they focused on other platforms without a clear reference to TikTok, examined only technological or algorithmic aspects, analyzed psychological effects of exposure without addressing engagement, or were review articles, editorials, or opinion pieces.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The included articles were analyzed through a structured narrative synthesis. Studies were coded according to four categories:

1. the definition of engagement;
2. the indicators used to measure engagement;
3. content types and communication strategies linked with high engagement levels;
4. psychological, social, and algorithmic factors identified as drivers of engagement.

This approach helped identify recurring patterns, common findings, and gaps in the existing literature.

Methodological Limitations

The review used two major databases and a systematic search strategy, but the restriction to English-language publications and the exclusion of grey literature may have influenced the findings. Even so, the methodology supports a rigorous and relevant analysis of the proposed research objectives.

Results

Characteristics of the Included Studies

The final synthesis included 23 studies published between 2022 and 2025. This reflects the growing academic interest in TikTok as a platform for fitness and physical activity related content. Most studies used quantitative or mixed-methods designs, while fewer studies relied on qualitative approaches.

Researchers mainly analyzed short-form fitness videos and fitness-related livestreams. They used data from video metrics, such as likes, comments, shares, views, and watch time, as well as user-generated comments and, in some cases, backend platform data. Several studies examined

educational, motivational, and community-oriented fitness content. Others focused on institutional or pedagogical uses of TikTok fitness videos.

Content analysis and regression-based modeling were the most commonly used methods, followed by experimental and survey-based designs. Engagement was generally examined through behavioral metrics, such as likes, comments, shares, views, or watch time. A smaller number of studies discussed engagement as a theoretical concept or included self-report measures related to motivation, attention, emotion, or perceived usefulness.

We examined 23 articles and found that user engagement with TikTok fitness and physical activity content was defined, measured, and explained in different ways. The results are organized according to the three research questions and show how the reviewed studies addressed the behavioral, psychological, social, and algorithmic dimensions of engagement.

Conceptualization and Operationalization of Engagement (RQ1)

The studies included in this review show that engagement with fitness-related content on TikTok is usually understood as a multidimensional process. Definitions and measurements differed across studies, depending on the theoretical framework, research design, and research objectives. The eight articles that directly address engagement conceptualization propose operational models combining quantitative indicators, such as views, likes, comments, and shares. They also include qualitative dimensions, such as behavioral intention, content immersion, and ideological participation.. Based on this synthesis, engagement can be understood through three main dimensions: behavioral, cognitive-emotional, and social-relational.

Behavioral engagement – measurable and visible

Some studies evaluate engagement only through observable indicators that show users' immediate reactions. For example, Zuo et al. (2025) use a quantitative approach and define engagement through views, likes, and shares of educational medical videos. This approach is useful for measuring content impact, but it overlooks affective and motivational factors

Jin, Chen, and Shi (2024) use similar indicators, such as views and comments, but place them within a broader explanatory framework. They define engagement as a motivational response shaped by users' search for health-related benefits and entertainment. In this view, these metrics reflect users' self-regulation and interest in health related content.

Cognitive–emotional engagement – immersion and behavioral intention

Other studies treat engagement as an internal process involving attention, learning, and emotion. Garcia (2024) links engagement to sensory stimulation by using Uses and Gratifications Theory and the concept of Message Sensation Value. Content with strong visual and auditory impact, such as colors, sounds, and movement, seems to be associated with higher engagement. This is especially visible when users intend to replicate the behaviors shown in the videos.

Peng et al. (2025) present the concept of deep engagement, which they define through content immersion and high retention. They measure this form of engagement using watch time and narrative feedback in comments. These indicators suggest sustained involvement that is difficult to capture through traditional metrics.

Along similar lines, Davies and Mann (2023) use the Health Belief Model to show how personal beliefs, such as self-efficacy and perceived risk, influence users' intention to adopt healthy behaviors. In this case, engagement is understood as a cognitive and decisional commitment shaped by motivation, trust, and the personal relevance of the message.

Social-relational engagement – participation, identification, and collaboration

A third group consists of studies that define engagement in social and discursive terms, closely related to collective interaction and community belonging. Bailey et al. (2024) understand engagement as performative and ideological participation. This is shown by users actively supporting messages about body positivity and inclusive fitness. In this view, interactions are not simple reactions, but expressions of shared values and commitment to a community.

This dimension is complemented by the work of Manurung et al. (2025), who analyze engagement in educational contexts. In this context, engagement is defined as a combination of attention, active participation, and receptiveness among students. Content becomes effective when it encourages collaborative interaction, including in structured formal learning environments.

O'Donnell, Jerin, and Mu (2023) propose a transversal approach. They distinguish between cognitive and affective engagement based on source credibility and communicative expressiveness. This model highlights the role of communication quality, including tone, nonverbal cues, and narrative style, in encouraging more complex forms of engagement, such as reflection, empathy, and motivation for change.

Taken together, the reviewed studies define engagement as a complex process that includes, but is not limited to, likes, comments, shares, and other visible metrics. Depending on research objectives, engagement is described as:

- a behavioral response, reflected in likes, comments, shares, views, or watch time (Zuo et al., 2025; Jin, Chen, & Shi, 2024);
- a cognitive and emotional process expressed through attention, motivation, intention, and content immersion (Garcia, 2024; Peng et al., 2025; Davies & Mann, 2023);
- a form of social participation evident in belonging, identification, and support for shared values (Bailey et al., 2024; Manurung et al., 2025; O'Donnell, Jerin, & Mu, 2023).

In this review, engagement with fitness-related content on TikTok is defined as a multidimensional process that includes attention and learning, emotional motivation and empathy, visible actions such as likes, comments, shares, and participation, and identification with communities and shared values. The reviewed studies show that engagement includes both external responses (likes, comments, shares, and watch time) and internal responses (intention, information retention, motivation, and content immersion). This definition captures how users interact with fitness content on digital platforms, moving from simple reactions toward motivation, identification, and possible behavioral change.

This approach supports a clearer understanding of fitness engagement on TikTok and shows that engagement in digital environments involves personal meaning, social relationships, and potential behavioral transformation.

Types of Content and Communication Strategies Associated with High Engagement Levels (RQ2)

This section reviews eight studies on the content formats, message features, and communication strategies that increase engagement with fitness content on TikTok. The analysis identifies three main engagement drivers: eye-catching visuals, personal and motivational messages, and interactive challenges. These elements encourage user involvement through attention, emotional connection, and active participation.

Sensory-rich content and visual capture strategies

Garcia (2024) highlights the sensory value of TikTok fitness videos, especially features such as rapid movement, strong color contrast, and upbeat sound. These elements help hold viewers' attention and increase the chance that users will try the demonstrated workout. Using the concept of Message Sensation Value, the study shows that sensory-rich content stimulates engagement by triggering immediate perceptual responses. This strategy is effective in educational settings that require strong attention and memorability.

Hybrid educational–entertainment content and edutainment strategies

Jin, Chen, and Shi (2024) propose a communication strategy that combines exercise explanations with entertainment features, such as popular music, visual trends, and dynamic scenarios. This hybrid approach increases engagement by encouraging comments, shares, and repeat views. Fitness content becomes both informative and entertaining, meeting users' learning and leisure needs at the same time.

Personal narrative content and emotional engagement strategies

Strategies based on self-disclosure and personal narratives, known as journey narratives, build strong emotional engagement. Davies and Mann (2023) and O'Donnell, Jerin, and Mu (2023) found that personal life stories, such as body transformations and emotional journeys, help build trust between creators and audiences. Audiences often connect with these stories through empathy and show higher engagement through supportive comments, likes, and shares. This strategy strengthens the human side of digital content by turning one-way communication into relationships based on authenticity and empathy.

Activist content and ideological mobilization strategies

Bailey et al. (2024) examine TikTok as a space for social expression and community building around body positivity, inclusive fitness, and body diversity. In this context, engagement is multi-dimensional. It depends on content features, but also on the values and causes promoted by creators and communities. User participation unfolds through comments, remixes, and the creative reuse of sounds, which help support and spread shared messages. Activist content facilitates the formation of digital micro-communities with common goals.

Interactive tutorial content and guided participation strategies

Manurung et al. (2025) analyze the use of TikTok in physical education contexts. They define engagement as active involvement and sustained attention, supported by tutorial content and motor challenges. Interactive videos engage users both physically and cognitively and suggest that interactivity can increase interest in formal physical education settings. This finding highlights TikTok's potential for educational use, not only for recreational fitness content.

Participatory live content and real-time communication strategies

Huang et al. (2023) examine TikTok Live broadcasts and show how they create a sense of presence and immediate connection. Real-time interaction and direct creator-audience communication can improve users' willingness to engage in physical activities. This format serves as participatory communication, especially when individual motivation is supported by group dynamics.

Taken together, high engagement is associated with several content types:

- interactive and tutorial-based videos;

- content focused on personal transformations and emotional narratives;
- materials promoting social values and supportive communities;
- formats that combine education and entertainment with strong sensory elements.

Effective communication strategies combine informational content, emotional honesty, and clear calls to action. Content becomes more effective when it engages thought, feeling, and social interaction at the same time. TikTok offers a suitable space for this type of collaborative interaction because it encourages users to watch, respond, imitate, and create content.

Psychological, Social, and Algorithmic Determinants of Engagement (RQ3)

The reviewed literature highlights several factors that shape user engagement with fitness content on TikTok. These factors can be grouped into three main categories: psychological, social, and algorithmic. They explain how users engage with, respond to, and participate in TikTok fitness communities.

Psychological factors

Davies and Mann (2023) use the Health Belief Model to show how perceived benefits, perceived barriers, and self-efficacy shape engagement with health-related messages on social media.. Engagement is defined as an active behavioral intention that develops when users assess the usefulness of the information presented.

Jin, Chen, and Shi (2024) offer a complementary perspective. They show that personal motivations, especially those related to health, entertainment, and social connection, drive people to engage with home fitness content. The study also emphasizes perceived satisfaction, which helps keep users engaged even without direct interaction with creators.

Social and cultural factors

Bailey et al. (2024) highlight the social-discursive dimension of engagement by analyzing activist content that promotes body positivity, body diversity, and inclusion. In this context, user involvement is driven by ideological identification and collective solidarity, turning participation into performative activism.

Zapatero-Ayuso et al. (2025) examine TikTok challenges with a specific focus on gender inequalities. Their findings suggest that gender stereotypes and cultural norms shape how users participate and how visible they become on the platform. Engagement therefore depends on how gender representations are perceived, negotiated, and reproduced, leading to unequal participation and visibility across sexes.

Algorithmic factors

Peng et al. (2025) underline the role of TikTok's algorithm in creating "immersion bubbles". The algorithm shows users similar content based on their previous preferences and behaviors. This keeps users watching and can turn viewing into a personalized habit.

Engagement is influenced by three main groups of factors:

- psychological factors: motivation, self-efficacy, and perceived authenticity;
- social factors: belonging, validation, and identification;
- algorithmic factors: personalization, automated recommendation, and visual recurrence.

The findings suggest a feedback loop between users and the algorithm. Users' actions shape the content they receive, while algorithmic recommendations influence what they continue to watch, like, share, or imitate. This loop can increase both engagement and retention.

General Conclusion

The 23 analyzed studies support the conclusion that user engagement in TikTok fitness communities depends on more than content visibility. It results from the interaction between message quality, creator authenticity, psychosocial needs, and TikTok's algorithmic logic.

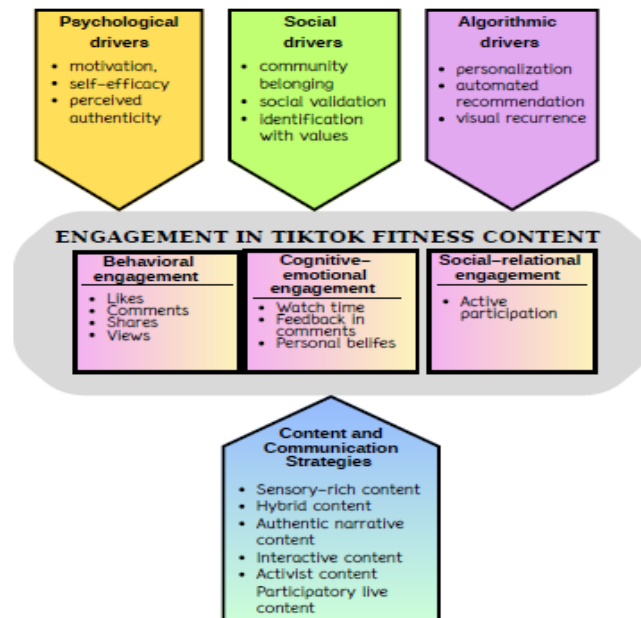


Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Framework of User Engagement in TikTok Fitness Content

Source: Authors' own research.

TikTok can be understood as a hybrid social and media ecosystem. In this space, engagement reflects what users do, how they express identity, and how they participate in digital culture.

Discussion

Synthesis and Interpretation of the Main Findings

The findings of this narrative systematic review show that user engagement with fitness-related content on TikTok is a complex phenomenon. It goes beyond likes, comments, shares, and other visible metrics. The analysis of the 23 included studies shows that engagement involves behavior, thought, emotion, and social interaction. It is also shaped by TikTok features such as short videos, participatory tools, and personalized feeds.

As O'Brien (2016) notes, user engagement is not limited to visible reactions. It also includes internal processes, such as sustained attention, motivation to act, content immersion, and identification with promoted values. This multidimensional view is supported by studies that define engagement as behavioral intention (Davies & Mann, 2023), immersion and retention (Peng et al., 2025), and social-discursive participation (Bailey et al., 2024).

The findings related to RQ2 show that high engagement is associated with content that combines useful information, emotional appeal, and opportunities for active participation. Sensory-rich videos, authentic personal stories, interactive tutorials, and live streams can capture attention and help people connect, supporting sustained engagement.

Engagement as the Outcome of the Interaction Between Motivation and Authenticity

Sensory-rich videos, authentic personal stories, interactive tutorials, and live streams can capture attention and help people connect, supporting sustained engagement. Personal narratives, self-disclosure, and realistic portrayals of progress often resonate emotionally and mentally with users (Davies & Mann, 2023; O'Donnell, Jerin, & Mu, 2023). Users tend to engage more strongly when they see creators as credible, transparent, and consistent with the messages they promote.

Authenticity on TikTok often functions as both a personal expression and a performance shaped by the expectations of the platform. Creators often need to balance genuine vulnerability with stylized content because the algorithm rewards attention and retention. As a result, authenticity can both build relationships and serve as a communication strategy. It may generate strong emotional engagement, but it can also increase the risk of superficial or simulated involvement.

Social Influence and the Community Dimension of Engagement

The findings related to RQ3 reveal that engagement in TikTok fitness communities is strongly shaped by social influence and a sense of digital group membership. Users join trends, copy exercises, and reuse sounds or video formats. These practices make engagement a collective and imitative form of social affirmation.

Content that promotes body positivity, inclusive fitness, and acceptance of body diversity generates a distinct form of engagement based on solidarity, support, and participation in shared discussions (Bailey et al., 2024). In these cases, engagement goes beyond simple reactions and becomes an act of belonging to value-based communities.

At the same time, social influence can be ambivalent. Studies on gender norms and body representations show that engagement can be shaped by social comparison and normative pressure (Zapatero-Ayuso et al., 2025). Some communities encourage acceptance and motivation, while others may reinforce restrictive aesthetic standards. This can negatively affect self-perception and authentic motivation for physical activity.

Potential Negative Implications of Engagement on TikTok in the Fitness Context

High engagement on TikTok can motivate users and promote active lifestyles, but several studies also highlight problematic aspects of fitness content consumption on the platform.

Aesthetic pressure and social comparison appear as recurring risks in the literature. Vandenbosch, Fardouly, and Tiggemann (2022) show that repeated exposure to idealized bodies in digital environments may increase body dissatisfaction, especially among young female users. Bailey et al. (2024) demonstrate that TikTok offers space for body positivity and inclusive fitness, but this content exists alongside dominant aesthetic norms that can reinforce pressure related to body image..

A crucial aspect is the demand to present physical performance and aesthetic appearance. TikTok often rewards visual appeal and attractive presentations of physical performance. This can push creators toward repetitive, trend-aligned clips, such as mirrored gym videos, transformation videos, or stylized workout transitions. These formats may sideline body diversity and emotional authenticity..

Authenticity itself, although highly valued by audiences, often becomes a calculated performance. Davies and Mann (2023) argue that authenticity in digital environments is often carefully crafted rather than fully spontaneous. Creators may shape their online personas to satisfy algorithmic demands and audience expectations. This overlap between honest expression and strategic communication raises questions about the authenticity of user interactions.

From a technological perspective, TikTok's algorithm actively shapes engagement. Peng et al. (2025) highlight the platform's tendency to create "immersion bubbles," meaning repeated content patterns customized according to users' past interactions. This personalization can increase retention, but it may also limit exposure to diverse perspectives and encourage compulsive viewing habits driven by instant social feedback.

Gender and representation issues shape a critical understanding of engagement. Zapatero-Ayuso et al. (2025) show that, despite the apparent democratization of expression, TikTok can reproduce and amplify gender stereotypes. This is especially visible in fitness and dance-related content, where the platform often promotes hypermuscular masculinities and aestheticized femininities.

Engagement enables visibility and participation, but it can also involve psychosocial costs and risks of representational homogenization. Researchers and practitioners in digital communication and public health need a nuanced understanding of these dynamics.

The Role of Algorithmic Technology in Shaping Engagement

A key contribution of this review is that it highlights how TikTok's recommendation algorithm shapes visibility by recommending and amplifying certain types of content. TikTok's algorithm does more than distribute content. It selects, promotes, and customizes videos according to users' past behavior, creating highly personalized viewing experiences.

The reviewed studies indicate that the algorithm prioritizes content with high retention and frequent interactions, contributing to the formation of "immersion bubbles" (Peng et al., 2025). In these contexts, engagement is sustained through repeated exposure and continuous viewing, which can boost motivation but narrow media diversity.

This raises concerns about user autonomy. Engagement is partly shaped by platform predictions, not only by conscious choice. The algorithm operates as a co-creator of the digital fitness experience. It shapes which bodies, messages, and practices become visible and normalized.

Critical Integration of Motivation, Authenticity, Social Influence, and Algorithms

The integrated analysis suggests that engagement on TikTok emerges from a circular system in which motivation, authenticity, social influence, and the algorithm work together. Authentic content and social validation activate individual motivations, while the algorithm reinforces these dynamics through personalization and repeated exposure.

This interdependence turns engagement into a seemingly spontaneous process that is still strongly shaped by platform logic. Users participate actively in an ecosystem that drives performance, participation, and visibility. This can make the distinction between authentic and induced engagement less clear. This creates ethical and methodological challenges for future research.

Theoretical and Practical Implications and Future Directions

This review proves that engagement models need to combine psychological, social, and technical factors. Numerical indicators alone are not enough to capture the complexity of user experiences on TikTok-like platforms. Future models should also consider elements such as comment quality, narrative coherence, repeated viewing, motivation, and perceived authenticity.

In practical terms, effective fitness communication strategies should combine:

- authenticity and narrative clarity;
- educational content with emotional appeal;

- interactive features for group participation.

Future research should examine the relationship between engagement and long-term behavioral change, analyze how algorithms influence content diversity, and develop standardized tools for assessing multidimensional engagement.

Conclusion

This review examined how engagement is defined, explained, and sustained in TikTok fitness communities. Based on 23 studies published between 2022 and 2025, the analysis shows that engagement is shaped by the interaction of psychological, social, and technical factors.

At the conceptual level (RQ1), engagement goes beyond traditional behavioral indicators such as likes, comments, and shares. Users also show engagement by intending to act, becoming absorbed in content, and identifying with the values promoted by creators or communities. The reviewed studies show that engagement appears both as measurable reactions and as internal experiences, including emotion, attention, motivation, and social connection.

Regarding content types and communication strategies (RQ2,) the findings show that users tend to engage more with formats that combine strong sensory appeal, authentic storytelling, and opportunities for active participation. Educational, motivational, participatory, and activist videos stimulate engagement because they help users build both personal and collective connections.

Regarding determining factors (RQ3), engagement is shaped by the interaction between individual motivations, social mechanisms, and platform algorithms. Individual motivations include self-evaluation, personal progress, health goals, and the need for belonging. These factors influence users' willingness to interact with fitness content. Social mechanisms also play an important role by encouraging community identification, social validation, and continued participation. At the same time, TikTok's algorithm shapes engagement through personalization, retention mechanisms, and repeated visibility. It influences what content users see, how often it reappears, and which engagement patterns are reinforced.

This study contributes to the literature by offering an integrated perspective on digital engagement. It shows that engagement is a result of media consumption, a cultural practice, and a relational activity shaped by digital platforms.

The practical implications are relevant for content creators, educators, fitness professionals, and digital communication strategists. Success on TikTok depends on more than aesthetic appeal. It also depends on creators' ability to share personal stories, reply to comments, encourage participation, and create content that matches users' goals and motivations.

The study has several limitations, including its reliance on English-language literature, its focus on abstract-level analysis, and the exclusion of ethnographic or experimental data. Despite that, the methodology helped identify meaningful trends and provides a useful foundation for future research.

Future studies should examine how TikTok engagement affects long-term health behavior. More research is needed to understand how educators, trainers, and fitness professionals can use TikTok-based interactions to support sustained exercise adherence.

Researchers should also explore how algorithms shape digital identity and influence users' self-perception. These findings could help professionals promote healthy, realistic, and inclusive fitness norms online.

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