Women's Perspectives of Social Media for Coping

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Abstract: *This paper analyses women's experience of consuming TikTok to cope with everyday stress.*
Our objectives are to examine the significant meanings of TikTok to women as a coping tool, to explore the motivations behind women's engagement with the platform for stress and emotion management, including to investigate the relationship between women's social and economic conditions and their consumption of TikTok for stress-coping. The investigation is carried out by conducting semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data. Six women were purposively sampled from a lower-income (B40) background who all use TikTok. Our results indicate several positive outcomes in women's stress and emotion management, particularly in managing work and personal stressors when consuming TikTok. Moreover, the results revealed that TikTok does not necessarily gratify as a tool for social validation but rather as a tool to comprehend and cope with women's stress. Additionally, TikTok positively affects women by encouraging them to seek self-betterment through its various media channels of entertainment, information, and distraction. The implications of this paper could be used to better understand the nature of stress that women face in this current era, and how social media is capable of becoming an effective tool for stress-coping.

Keywords: *Media Consumption, Social Media, Stress & Coping, Women*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, communication scholars have debated over the mediatisation of everyday life and its impact on our stress experiences, reflecting on how social media (such as TikTok) may lead to media addiction and social media fatigue. Despite the contingency of social media being perceived to cause stress, it can easily be used for coping with our everyday stress and has, presently, become even more prevalent in our media-saturated world since social media has already changed our normative ways of communicating, as well as information and entertainment-seeking, including our ways of fulfilling our intrinsic needs (Nabi et al., 2017; Hampton et al., 2014). Apart from serving as a means for socialisation and information-sharing (Revathy et al., 2018), social media is also capable of cultivating positive emotional patterns like happiness, contentment, and joyfulness (Najmul-Islam et al., 2022; Costescu et al., 2021). Media channels within social media can also gratify various coping needs, such as enhancing our access to professional services, social support, and information related to stress management and coping processes (Wolfers & Schneider, 2021; Nabi et al., 2017).

Stress is a condition, or refers to the emotions we feel when under excessive demands that exceed our internal or external conditions (Selye, 1982). According to Pearlin (1989), we simply cannot exist without experiencing stress, emphasising that stress is a natural reaction to protect ourselves against real or imagined danger. While there are occasions where stress can be useful, especially in encouraging adaptation and development (Maddi, 2006), excessive stress, if not coped with effectively, can severely affect our physical and psychological health (Carver, 2007; Cohen et al., 2007).

Coping refers to the instinctive response we take in attempts to avoid or lessen the impact of stress (Pearlin, 1989). Our acts of coping are distinctive since it varies between the nature or context of our perceived threats. Research inferred that there are four distinct forms of coping orientations which are (1) approach coping; (2) avoidance coping; (3) problem-solving coping; and (4) emotion-focused coping. Approach coping refers to the engagement of seeking coping strategies that can reduce, eliminate, or manage the stressor.

On the contrary, avoidance coping refers to the disengagement of coping by ignoring, avoiding, and physically or emotionally withdrawing from the stressor. Problem-focused coping involves seeking strategies to change or eliminate the stressor, whereas emotion-focused coping involves strategies to reduce or manage the emotional consequences drawn from the stressor (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009). Often, these approaches are combined to manage any given stressful event.

While there is a plethora of research on stress experiences and coping mechanisms, including topics related to media consumption and its impact on people's everyday lives, there seems to be a gap within emerging research regarding the relationship between our stress experiences and coping via media; specifically, from the women's perspective, their stress experiences, and why and how they consume social media to cope with their everyday stress. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine the significant meanings of TikTok to women as a coping tool. In addition, we are interested in exploring the motivations behind women's engagement with the platform for stress and emotion management. Finally, we investigate the relationship between women's social and economic conditions and their consumption of TikTok for stress-coping. This paper aims to contribute to the present literature in two ways. Firstly, we focus on outcome factors that have not been explored in social media research, particularly in the understanding of how TikTok can aid women in fulfilling their intrinsic needs and coping with their daily stresses, including TikTok's role in satisfying interpersonal emotional gratification (e.g., self-expression, social support, and information or entertainment channel) where the act of coping can occur. This paper's second contribution is the impact of TikTok in women's home and work environments. Because our participants are women from the lower-income (B40) background, we pay mindful attention to their motivations for consuming TikTok as a personal coping space.

2. METHODS

Samples and data collection procedure
Six women were purposively sampled from a diverse group (Table I) to gain a range of perspectives on their stress experiences and consumption practices, which may or may not be related to their social and economic

conditions. Our selection criteria included married and unmarried women aged 25 to 35, classified under the B40 group, and actively using TikTok. The "B40" classification pertains to the Malaysian household income group with a month-median income of RM4,850 and below. All interviews were conducted individually by the researcher in person or via online meetings (such as Google Meet or Webex), and participants were given a summary of the research, its objectives, and a consent form for a recorded interview. The mean interview duration was 45 minutes (range 25min – 1hr 10min). The researcher used a semi-structured approach with a prepared questionnaire outline to ensure consistent data collection. Interview questions included inquiries about participants' stress experiences at work and home, preferred genres of TikTok videos, and their coping practices. Participants also had the opportunity to report on the current effects of their stress. Our participants are from the different ethnicities in Malaysia, consisting of Malay, Chinese, Bidayuh, Iban, and Kenyah. They are also employed (either full-time or part-time) in various industries like administration, education, information technology, medicine, and real estate. Only one participant is currently working freelance (categorised as Unemployed) as a caretaker. Table I provides a summary of the demographic characteristics and work-related information of the samples.

Table I. Participants' Demographic

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

3. DATA ANALYSIS

After transcribing the collected interview data, the researcher analysed, decoded, and verified all data. Transcribing the interviews helped the researcher to understand each participant's perspectives and compare them with other relevant data. Through data analysis, the researcher identified specific themes that emerged from participants' responses, leading the data to be analysed thematically with incorporations of a conceptual framework (Table II). Thematic analysis is generally applied to qualitative data, in which the researcher arranges the data into categories after reviewing the variables. This analysis allows the researcher to work flexibly yet systematically, when identifying emerging patterns from a wide range of information (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Although the process of analysing the data is generally based on the researcher and their research questions and methodology, their codes can range from a set of themes, a framework or model with themes, indicators, and qualifications that are casually related to or between variables (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the case of our paper, two themes have emerged between the participants throughout our interview sessions: (1) The characteristics of stress faced by women; and (2) Women's consumption of TikTok for coping.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Coping tendency. Coping tendencies were analysed with the Coping Orientation Analysis (Table II), a framework derived and later developed from the Problem-Focused and Emotion-Focused Coping by Lazarus & Folkman (1984) and the Coping Dimensions Derived Theoretically by Carver et al. (1989). In summary, both frameworks conceptualised a single coping strategy's distinctive function while simultaneously implementing it to complementary approaches. Since people may apply more than one coping tendency depending on their intrinsic needs or objectives, the combination or separation of each orientation can vary in coping practices and outcomes. Therefore, this framework helps the researcher systematically analyse participants' coping tendencies and effects across the four coping orientations (approach, avoidance, problem-solving, and emotion-focused coping). Likewise, rather than focusing on a particular type of coping orientation or stress outcome, the participants' tendencies can be captured

into a singular or combined strategy depending on their stressful experience, which the researcher can further analyse thematically.

Table II. Coping Orientation Analysis

Coping Orientation	Definition
Problem-solving coping	
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 coping	Putting the stressor aside, and waiting until an appropriate opportunity to act presents itself
Seeking social support	Seeking advice, assistance, or information
Emotion-focused coping	
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
"Less useful" coping	
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 to attain goals of which the stressor is interfering
Mental disengagement	Attempts to distract oneself from thinking about the behaviour dimension or goal of which the stressor is interfering
Additional coping	
Humour	Dealing with negative emotions through humour
Substance use	Using substance to disengage from a stressor or to feel better

5. RESULTS

The characteristics of stress faced by women

This theme discusses the findings of our paper that explored the stress experienced by women in their everyday lives. The extension of this theme includes how women face, cope, or avoid their stressors, as well as the outcomes of their stressful experiences.

As the majority of our participants are employed full-time or part-time, their stress mainly stems from their work culture and environment. While they generally find their workload manageable, they anticipate it will become mentally and physically taxing when they simultaneously have to handle numerous tasks and high demands. Participants in fast-paced work environments frequently experience anxiousness and high-level stress due to excessive workload, insufficient manpower, and constant demand for proactive involvement in certain work aspects. On the other hand, participants in more established corporations have a structured workflow that enables them to manage their stress and energy. Nonetheless, they may experience stress when confronted with unpleasant social behaviours or the lack of guidance on a particular work task. Their experience can be compared in the excerpts below:

"I work in a fast-paced company, so there are a lot of things that we have to do, mostly because we are expected to be proactive and contributing. And since my office is an open-concept one, no partitions of even walls exist between us or the departments. I don't really have a space of my own. I can't relax. I always feel so anxious because the boss could just walk around or behind me."
(Participant 1)

"I have a great team who are very supportive of me, in work and in my personal life as they know me very well. We're very close. I also have a good leader who always understands and supports me. If I'm unable to handle my stress or situation, they would understand and assist me, guide me on how to find the best solution for it. Or they would give me time to sit back and relax, and to come back once I've calmed down." (Participant 5)

One participant had turned to freelancing by taking up caretaking jobs, to overcome a sudden financial crisis. Despite so, her freelance job does not always produce immediate demands and can therefore be mentally challenging, especially when she has to make ends meet for her family's sake. The following is an excerpt from the participant:

"I feel stressed because my husband just quit his job, so I'm stressed about things like how I am going to find money. So, this is why I'm currently doing freelancing, but even so, it's not instantaneous as in, there's not always going to be patients. I still need to wait for them to contact me and set their appointments." (Participant 4)

Apart from work environments, our participants also experience stress at home. Two of the three married participants live with their in-laws, while one lives independently with their family. Following this, two unmarried participants live with their families, while one lives alone in a rented unit. One participant who is living with more than five family members admits to finding it challenging to constantly experience role and ambience strains because she has to maintain a harmonious atmosphere while fulfilling her designated roles at home, which may or may not be equally distributed. Furthermore, she stated that she lacks privacy and self-expression due to limited space in the crowded household, leading her to withdraw from expressing her stress toward each other.

"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. Expressing myself would only make things harder,
and above all, my stress comes from them. The problems that I'm facing always stems from their side. I don't have my 'me-time', I don't have anyone who would understand me." (Participant 4)

Likewise, participants living with five or fewer family members also experience role strains, albeit to a lesser extent on ambience strains. Their stress primarily arises from the expectations of fulfilling domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for family members, despite being exhausted from work. However, we discovered that these participants tend to feel more relaxed at home than those residing in larger households because they have their personal space for self-expression and can manage stressful situations through flexible family dynamics.

"Sometimes my mom would expect me to instantly do the house chores when I just got off work even though she knows that I'm tired. So, we would bicker a bit there. But at home, I can relax. There's not really any stress at home." (Participant 3)

"Besides my husband and my kids mess up the house. I don't feel stress at home because they too help me feel calm… my kids' antics are funny, cute. And these kinds of things really help me destress." (Participant 6)

Additionally, family relationships play a significant role in how our participants experience and mediate their stress at home. Our findings revealed that participants who do not have close relationships with their family members tend to suppress their thoughts and emotions when stressed.

Contrarily, those with strong family relationships can seek comfort and closure on their stressful experiences at home, which subsequently results in better active coping and stress management. For married participants, having a supportive and understanding partner is crucial to their coping process; they report feeling emotionally and mentally better with their partner's support. Unmarried participants, however, are able to express their thoughts or emotions, seek validation, and process their stress better with supportive and understanding parents or parental figures. Our findings extend that when participants do not receive adequate support or understanding from their partners or parents, their home life and stress levels may be negatively affected.

"When I express my frustrations to my husband, and he shows no signs of support. I would feel even more stressed and frustrated. It torments me mentally and emotionally." (Participant 4)

"I don't talk to my family members about my stress. Because I didn't grow up in an environment where it was comfortable to share our emotions. Usually, we (family) just pretend it never happens, or hopes that it doesn't happen anymore." (Participant 1)

6. WOMEN'S CONSUMPTION OF TIKTOK FOR COPING

This theme discusses the findings of our paper that examined women's consumption of TikTok to cope with their everyday stress. Here, this theme comprises the genres of TikTok videos that women generally enjoy, the coping effects and outcomes of TikTok on their mental and emotional state, and finally, their social engagement patterns on the platform.

Our participants actively consume TikTok for various purposes such as entertainment, information and solution-seeking, staying up-to-date with current trends (e.g., beauty, fashion, and celebrities or influencers), keeping in contact with friends, including online shopping. The genre of videos that they generally enjoy are videos featuring funny animals (particularly cats), cooking or baking, cleaning or organising, product reviews, prank or skit videos, and feel-good or inspirational videos.

Apart from that, we found that working participants rely on TikTok for tips-and-tricks videos to improve their work performances and skill development. A participant shared that she would search for videos related to her profession or for specific work-related issues, and has learnt from various content creators of a similar profession. Often, these videos are about handling specific or general medical care and patient treatments. Another participant also shared that she would go on TikTok to help with her anxiety; she stated that she would usually watch videos from content creators who are licensed psychologists for information validity. Besides that, she would read through the videos' comment section for additional information; overall, she expressed extreme satisfaction with the newfound knowledge as she has learnt the different kinds of food that induce stress. Moreover, our unemployed participant would also watch tips-and-tricks videos on TikTok to improve her soft skills like, for instance, communication, language, critical thinking, and emotional management. This participant believed that enhancing these skills would personally benefit her in preparation for future employment opportunities.

Our findings also revealed that videos about cooking, baking, and domestic house chores (e.g., cleaning tips) positively affect the mood of our participants. They expressed high motivation to imitate the recipes and methods demonstrated in the videos. Our participants shared that they have

learnt recipes of Korean Fried Chicken, Western dishes, and healthy meal preps, amongst others, from the numerous recipes available on TikTok . Below are some excerpts of their experience:

"When I'm stressed, I would watch some cooking or baking videos. There are a few (TikTok) channels that I love to watch from and I always feel happy and relaxed." (Participant 2)

"I love following cooking recipes from TikTok because they not only help me feel calm but they also inspire me try out new dishes that I can share with my family." (Participant 6)

"I suck at folding my wardrobe. So, after watching those organizing or folding tutorials on TikTok, I've learnt to enjoy the process and now I can fold and organize my closet neatly." (Participant 5)

Regarding motivation, all participants take pleasure in shopping on TikTok Shop, mainly because of its affordable selections and lower shipping fees. During the interview sessions, we observed that participants became incredibly pleased when discussing their online shopping experiences and the variety of products available on the platform. Interestingly, they acknowledge that their impulse purchases are often a result or reaction to their stress, and thus, they consider their actions as a way to cope with their stress while simultaneously being a self-motivation to work harder. Further inquiries revealed that most of our participants would most likely purchase essential items for work purposes and rarely indulge in non-essential purchases. Only one participant admits her likeliness to purchase non-essential items for self-fulfilment.

When feeling overwhelmed, our findings revealed that participants would turn to TikTok to take their minds off their stressors. Their habit typically resulted in them finding content that either distracts or improves their mood; most commonly, these contents involved comedy and funny cat videos for entertainment. Besides, our participants also sought motivation from inspirational videos to help them cope with their long days at work or home. In addition, participants mentioned watching videos related to their religion or religious scripture to calm themselves down or feel enlightened. The following is an excerpt of this example:

"Somehow when I'm mentally drained, TikTok will always suggest me the Quran scriptures and whenever I watch these kinds of video, I feel that it really helps me relax mentally and emotionally." (Participant 2)

However, some participants are able to simultaneously distract and calm themselves down simply through passive scrolling:

"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 by playing on my phone and scrolling through TikTok." (Participant 1)

"I would go on TikTok when I'm stressed and just scroll through the random videos. Some are quite repetitive but there are those that would catch my interest, like funny cat videos of cats falling down – I know it's bad to laugh but they are really funny!" (Participant 3)

Although our participants consume TikTok daily, they do not necessarily use it for social fulfilment. Most participants only post sporadically and have minimal interactions with friends or content creators on the platform, expressing that they are most satisfied as passive viewers. With that said, only one participant actively posts on TikTok, but not as herself. Instead, she portrays herself as a musician and enjoys sharing her videos on the platform. She shared that she appreciates receiving feedback and engagement from her viewers – primarily fellow musicians – since she viewed their feedback as being valuable to her musical skills. Through TikTok, she also connects with online friends with similar musical interests and talents.

7. DISCUSSION

The main objectives of this paper were to examine the significant meanings of TikTok to women as a coping tool, their motivations in engaging with the platform for stress and emotion management, and the relationship between their social and economic conditions to their consumption of TikTok for stress-coping. Our results strongly indicate that TikTok is an ideal platform for women to unwind, be entertained, learn new information, and gain new solutions without necessarily gratifying their social needs. Additionally, our results suggested that women practised variations of coping orientations

when consuming TikTok to accommodate their needs and desired outcomes when experiencing a stressful experience.

As we previously discussed, women have been consuming TikTok to cope with stress through the variations of coping orientations; however, our results presented that the most practised coping orientation is the problem-solving coping strategy – approach coping strategy. In particular, women turned to TikTok for information and solutions to help them manage their stressful experiences; this comes as no surprise as TikTok has moved towards knowledge dissemination, as evidenced by the hashtag #LearnOnTikTok, which has garnered 656.4 billion views as of August 2, 2023. Users can access various content through this hashtag, including tips-and-tricks, tutorials, demos, challenges, questions and answers, and more (Garcia et al., 2022). During the pandemic, TikTok became especially popular among its young users, and as people depended on the platform for information and educational distribution, content creators have become progressively focused on debunking fake news, manipulated media, and other types of misinformation while subjecting their videos to be more informatively digestible and entertaining for their audience (Newman, 2022; Paoletti, 2022). This supports our results that implicated short-formatted videos accompanied by straightforward messages with a small amount of humour are effective for user engagement and encourage learning experiences, which is also consistent with our findings of participants relying on humour for coping.

Moreover, the consumption of TikTok has also impacted women's emotion-focused coping consequent to its nature of hosting relatability among its users. Since the pandemic, TikTok has become a platform where many users may share similar backgrounds and experiences (Klug et al., 2023), hence, fostering a space for an individual to reflect on each other's personal experiences or opinions through short-formatted videos. Even though our participants do not actively express their thoughts and emotions online, they reported relief when they came across videos related to the said problems. In this regard, women can foster mutual emotional support and motivation via TikTok content related to their stressful experiences; most significantly, exposure to these contents helps them be conscious of the necessities of effective coping and emotion management when experiencing stress. Subsequently, though some women may not wish to engage with anything

related to their stressful experiences; they may cope through other forms of distractions available on TikTok, such as seeking entertainment or comedic content, including calming content such as inspirational, feel-good, and religious-based videos.

Many women in Malaysia turn to TikTok for stress-coping due to the negative stigma surrounding stress and mental health in society - those suffering from excessive stress and its consequences often face discrimination and stigmatisation in various aspects of their lives, such as physical health, social relationships, financial independence, and employment (Hanafiah & Bortel, 2015). Family, friends, and employers commonly perpetrate this mistreatment because of the poor education regarding this topic; additionally, lower-income groups perceive it as a spiritual, rather than health, issue (Radhi, 2022). Hence, when women's daily lives revolve around work, home, and social life, the stigmatisation can instigate perpetual feelings of distrust, hopelessness, rejection, social exclusion, and isolation. Our participants also expressed such sentiments, whereby they admitted to not appreciating the reactions or perceptions that others displayed when they addressed their stress or mental struggles. Apart from that, lower-income women in Malaysia lack the funding to access professional mental health services, resulting in many not seeking help (Radhi, 2022). While the country has gradually progressed by offering helplines for counselling and emotional support, there is still a shortage of psychiatrists and psychologists, causing citizens to endure a long waiting list for treatment (Radhi, 2022). As Hanafiah & Bortel (2015) pointed out, addressing the issue requires years of effort from advocacy and education to combat the stigma surrounding mental health.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this paper has shed light on women's stress and their consumption of TikTok for stress-coping. TikTok is significant in women's stress and emotion management because it allows them to cater to their intrinsic and coping needs accessibly and easily. The platform's short-formatted, algorithm-generated videos provide information and solution, entertainment, and distraction, which enables women to manage and cope with their

everyday stress. This paper also highlights Malaysian women's social and economic realities when seeking professional services for their mental health struggles and how TikTok has become a space for these women to cope. These findings can be utilized to develop further interventions that address the distinctive characteristics of women's stressors. Ultimately, we hope this paper contributes to a better understanding of women's stress in this current era and how social media can be an effective tool for coping. Future research may explore gender differences in stress-coping and consumption practices.

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