



## **Mapping TikTok Adoption in Romanian Universities: A Comparative Analysis of Social Media Communication Strategies Across Public and Private Universities**

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### **Abstract**

This study analyses the adoption of TikTok as a communication tool among Romanian universities, addressing a gap in understanding how Romanian universities use the social media platform preferred by Z Generation for institutional communication and student engagement. We conducted a systematic review of a total of 85 accredited higher education institutions (52 public and 33 private), aiming to map TikTok adoption rates, identify content strategies, and evaluate engagement metrics across different institutional types. Our analysis targeted official university TikTok accounts, where we categorized content types and we measured engagement indicators including views, likes, and comments. We further compared engagement levels between public and private institutions to highlight differences in visibility and communication style.

Our findings reveal that while TikTok adoption remains uneven, institutions that adapt to platform culture (e.g., use of trending audio, short storytelling, or humorous formats) achieve higher engagement. The results underline TikTok's growing role in higher education branding, recruitment, and digital visibility, while also revealing opportunities for more structured



strategies in Romanian academia. Findings provide practical insights for university administrators developing social media strategies and theoretical implications for understanding institutional communication in the digital age.

**Keywords:** TikTok, Romanian universities, higher education, communication, social media marketing, students' engagement

## 1. Introduction

Latest available Gen Z statistics show that this digital-native generation has determined structural changes in commerce and forced brands to rethink their sales, engagement, attrition and marketing strategies. The future adults already have highly different consumer habits compared to their predecessors, Gen Z focuses on social platforms, Instagram and TikTok, as main information sources (Fitzgerald, 2025). This means the new generations are taking decisions based on the content discovered or provided by the social platforms of their interest. Search engines like Google or Bing seem to be soon forgotten by Gen Z, who is shifting to visual platforms looking for information on Instagram (30.4%) and TikTok (23.2%) while Google is third (18.8%) (Fitzgerald, 2025).

Social media channels are popular latest data showing that in January 2025 in Romania, there were registered 13.0 million social media user identities, representing 68.6% of the total population (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2025). The figure is valid for the beginning of 2025 and considers all user accounts active and not unique individuals. Nevertheless, a clear majority of 75.5% accounts belong to an adult population, aged 18 and above (11.6 million accounts out of 13.0 million in total). According to the study, Romania ranks second in Central Europe in terms of the number of users on the TikTok platform: 8.97 million users and has the highest percentage of TikTok accounts compared to population in the entire European Union. Approximately 47% of Romanians have TikTok accounts, being followed by Ireland (46%), Latvia (39%) and Greece with 37% (Diaconu, 2024). Also, it is notable that Romanians spend an average of 32 hours and 30 minutes per month on TikTok, compared to 30 hours on YouTube and 13 hours on Facebook. The same study shows that TikTok ads have reached 47.7% of the local internet user base in Romania, regardless of age.

The demographics presented above support the universities' strategies to shift and adapt their communication styles on social media, considering the most popular platforms and the average time spent



by youngsters. TikTok is one of the leading social networks and has determined organisations targeting especially Gen Z to produce and distribute content on this platform.

This paper makes a comparative analysis of existing TikTok accounts in Romanian universities and identifies the volume of content published online, making a correlation with the time since the account has been set-up. Two questions arise in this context: (1) Are Romanian universities using social media channels popular among Gen Z? and (2) How many universities have official TikTok channels and what is the volume of content published?

## **2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework**

Recent studies show that 87% of prospective students (undergraduate, graduate or adult learners) are searching information about academic programs and institutions about on multiple platforms (Manaferra, 2025). However, according to same data, 63% of them use search engines like Google at the beginning, looking for relevant results during the first stage of decision-making. Afterwards, their attention is shifting on social media channels, 60% of prospective students using TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube to explore universities and programs (Manaferra, 2025). It is worth mentioning that 88% of these users engage intentionally with the content related to educational topics, showing that social media channels are validated as search and evaluation channels, rather than a digital entertainment environment, as they initially started.

Nearly 40% of Gen Z prefer searching on TikTok and Instagram over Google Search (Liam, 2024), and 74% of U.S. college students use TikTok daily for search (Ellis, 2025). Gen Z is using TikTok as a search engine to get authentic, peer-generated content about university experiences. TikTok allows students to see colleges through other students' eyes, providing access to parts of college life that previous generations discovered only after enrolment. Students can tour dorms, judge food quality, and get a feel for daily life through authentic student-created content rather than polished institutional marketing.

A recent survey revealed that TikTok is actively present in the daily routines of Romanian adolescents, with over 80% of users aged 14 to 19 accessing it every day. They spend an average of 2.5 hours on TikTok, and 43% of them consider the information encountered on TikTok as



highly trustworthy, underscoring the platform's growing influence in shaping youth perceptions and information habits (World Vision Romania, 2025).

The literature on TikTok's educational potential highlights its rapid evolution from an entertainment platform to a tool for informal learning, particularly among younger users. TikTok's short-form video format aligns with contemporary fast-paced information consumption habits, enabling effective conveyance of key concepts (Yang, 2019). Preliminary studies suggest TikTok enhances engagement through attention-grabbing features and accessibility, with 44.5% of students viewing it as beneficial for educational activities, 45.8% noting its ability to capture attention, and 53.6% emphasizing ease of use compared to other platforms (Sari et al., 2022). Challenges include its informal communication style, with emoticons and colloquialisms, which may not suit academic contexts, though it could complement traditional methods by leveraging external cognitive processes (Yang, 2019). Overall, the literature points to TikTok's promise for interactive, real-time learning but calls for more empirical investigation into content quality, privacy, and distractions to transform it into a reliable educational aid. The literature acknowledges the educational potential of TikTok and also that it is a popular platform among Gen Z, representing its consumption habits of online content.

A mixed-methods study evaluated the effectiveness of West University of Timișoara's social media communication strategy for promoting cultural events during Timișoara's 2023 European Capital of Culture designation (Bader et al., 2025). The researchers analysed 143 posts each on Facebook and Instagram, combining quantitative engagement metrics with qualitative content analysis. Despite Generation Z's preference for visual platforms, Facebook proved remarkably effective for institutional cultural communication due to established trust and community strength (55,000+ followers). The study found that guest speaker prominence, high-quality visual content, and interactive giveaway campaigns significantly enhanced engagement. Posts featuring renowned literary figures achieved the highest organic reach without paid promotion, suggesting authenticity and speaker credibility outweighed promotional investment. Instagram showed modest growth (593 followers) with lower engagement metrics, though post-event content featuring photographs consistently outperformed pre-event announcements. The research



revealed that 3,000–4,000 students participated in cultural events, demonstrating successful digital-to-physical conversion. The authors recommend incorporating dynamic formats (reels, stories), developing platform-specific strategies, and recognizing that Facebook remains viable for university communications despite not being Generation Z's preferred social platform for personal use. Although this research is not focused on TikTok channels, its results show the appetite of Gen Z for social media platforms and in a way, sets the path to a smooth transition to content similar or created in the style of TikTok.

In the other corner of the world, in Malaysia, a quantitative study surveyed 101 students from four Malaysian universities to assess perceptions of TikTok's educational utility (Xavierine et al., 2024). While 95% of respondents maintained TikTok accounts primarily for entertainment (86%), they recognized the platform's learning potential. Mean scores indicated students perceived TikTok as superior to traditional learning methods with features facilitating teaching and learning, ease of use, and effective objective communication. Students acknowledged advantages including attention capture and greater interactivity compared to other social media platforms. However, they identified significant disadvantages: lack of education-specific features discouraging academic use, and entertainment content prioritization undermining educational effectiveness. The 76.2% of respondents aged 21–23 predominantly held bachelor's degrees (91.1%), with most attending Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) (47.5%). Despite positive perceptions, only 10% reported using TikTok primarily for educational purposes. The authors recommend developing education-specific features enabling instructors to create engaging content, establishing official subject-specific TikTok accounts, and conducting longitudinal research on learning outcomes and cross-cultural effectiveness variations to better understand TikTok's educational integration potential. If students see TikTok as an educational platform, this means that TikTok might be their first option in searching information about universities' educational programs.

A group of researchers examined how universities' posting strategies affect engagement on social media platforms. They conducted a comprehensive content analysis of over 90,000 social media posts from 70 top-ranked universities across Europe, the United States, and Latin



America, focusing on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn (Capriotti et al., 2023). Their findings show that universities posted an average of 7.04 times per day across platforms, but the general engagement rate was very low (0.237), significantly below recommended benchmarks (e.g.,  $\geq 1\%$  for Facebook,  $\geq 0.5\%$  for Twitter,  $\geq 2\%$  for LinkedIn). Contrary to expectations, increased posting frequency did not lead to higher engagement. In fact, there was an inverse correlation, more frequent posting often resulted in lower interaction rates. The authors argue that University Created Content (UCC) tends to yield higher engagement than University Shared Content (USC), and that increased posting frequency does not necessarily correlate with higher interaction rates. Their review identifies a gap in comparative, multi-platform studies and calls for integrated analysis of activity and presence dimensions.

Apparently, universities are not keeping the pace with Gen Z and must rethink their social media strategies. Simply increasing posting volume is insufficient; instead, institutions should focus on producing original, audience-relevant content and tailoring their presence to the strengths of each platform.

### 3. Methodology

This study used a comprehensive cross-sectional analysis to examine TikTok adoption patterns among Romanian higher education institutions, combining website analysis with social media metrics collection. The research population covered 85 Romanian universities officially recognized by the Ministry of Education, including 52 public institutions (with 7 universities that have a military profile) and 33 private institutions. Data collection occurred in 27 – 28 September 2025, ensuring temporal consistency across all measurements.

The data collection process involved four primary phases. First, a systematic website analysis was conducted for each university's official homepage to identify the presence of social media platform buttons/links for five major platforms: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and TikTok. Each platform's visibility was coded as binary (present/absent).

Second, direct platform verification was performed by searching for official university accounts on TikTok. For institutions with TikTok presence, additional metrics were collected including



total follower count, total likes count, total number of posts, and date of first post. Posting frequency was calculated as the average days between posts, based on the time elapsed between the first post and data collection date, divided by the total number of posts.

Third, comprehensive engagement metrics were extracted using Phlanx.com, a social media analytics platform that provides detailed TikTok account statistics and engagement analysis. Phlanx enables researchers to extract performance metrics without requiring direct API access, making it particularly useful for academic research on public social media accounts. Through Phlanx, the following metrics were collected: comments per post (2025), likes per post (2025), and engagement rate (2025 posts).

Fourth, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on high-performing TikTok videos from Romanian universities. The sample comprised 19 videos that exceeded 800,000 views, representing the most viral content produced by these institutions. Each video was analysed for multiple dimensions: primary thematic content (admissions, student life, humour, academic programs, campus features), video structure, duration, tone and format, visual elements, and hashtag strategy.

Total student enrolment data, including both undergraduate and master's degree students, were sourced from the Government of Romania's open data platform (*Data.gov.ro Open Data Portal*, 2020a, 2020b).

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics characterized overall adoption patterns across platforms and institution types. Given the small sample sizes, non-parametric alternatives were utilized. Specifically, Mann-Whitney U tests examined differences in follower counts, engagement rates, and posting frequency between public and private universities.



## 4. Results

The analysis of TikTok adoption by ownership type revealed no statistically significant differences between public (54%) and private (45%) universities, suggesting that ownership structure does not represent a determining factor in institutions' decisions to adopt this platform. In contrast, university size proved to be a significant predictor of TikTok presence (Linear-by-Linear Association:  $\chi^2=6.178$ ,  $p=.013$ ), with a clear increasing trend: small universities (under 1,000 students) show an adoption rate of only 40%, while large institutions (over 10,000 students) reach a rate of 76% (**Table 1**). This positive association suggests that available resources and organizational capacity associated with institutional size play a crucial role in adopting new digital communication channels.

Category		TikTok Adoption Rate
Total (n=85)		51%
By Ownership Type	Public institutions (n=52)	54%
	Private institutions (n=33)	45%
By Field of Study	Theological/Religious (n=6)	0%
	Military/Security/Public Order (n=7)	0%
	Arts (music, theatre, visual arts, design) (n=7)	29%
	Medicine & Pharmacy (n=7)	43%
	Economics/Business/Administrative Sciences (n=8)	50%
	Private Multidisciplinary Universities (n=19)	58%
	Agronomy/Life Sciences/Veterinary (n=5)	60%
	Public Multidisciplinary Universities (n=16)	75%
	Technical Universities (n=9)	89%
By Institution Size	Under 1,000 students (n=20)	40%
	1,000-4,000 students (n=23)	39%
	4,001-10,000 students (n=22)	59%
	Over 10,000 students (n=17)	76%

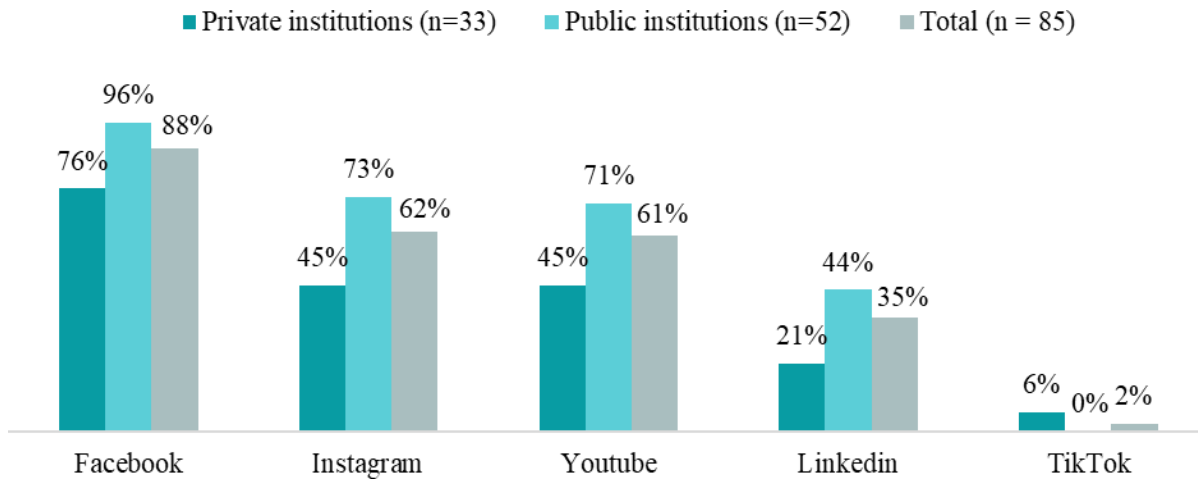
**Table 1.** TikTok Adoption Rate Among Romanian Universities

Field of study also represents a significant factor in TikTok adoption, with substantial variations between different types of institutions. Technical universities lead with an impressive 89%



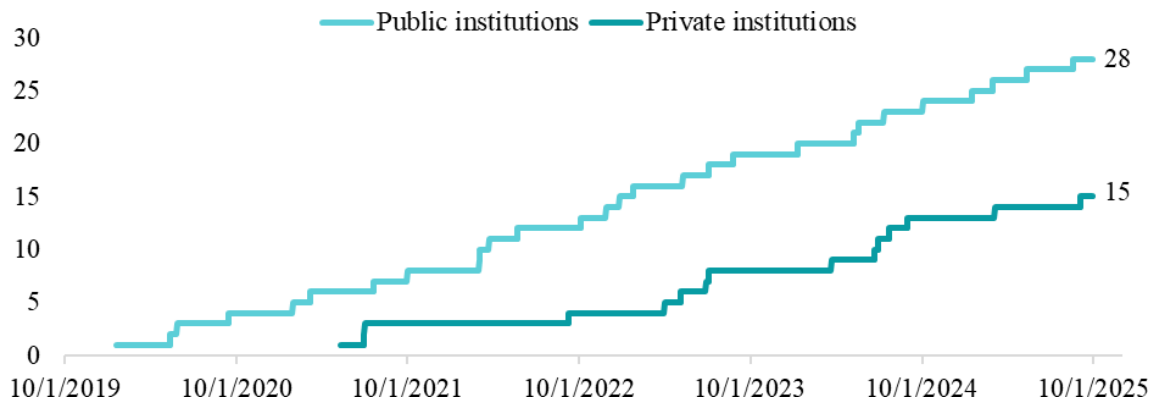
adoption rate, followed by public multidisciplinary universities (75%), while theological/religious institutions and military/security institutions have no platform presence (0%). This distribution likely reflects differences in organizational culture, target audience, and openness to digital innovation specific to each type of institution. Universities with technical specialization and multidisciplinary ones appear to recognize more quickly TikTok's potential to reach the young generation of students, while institutions with traditional profiles or those specialized in sensitive fields show evident avoidance toward this social media platform.

The high contrast between TikTok's actual adoption rate (51% of universities have accounts) and its website integration (only 2% include TikTok buttons on their websites) reveals a significant discrepancy in Romanian's universities social media strategies (**Figure 1**). While traditional platforms like Facebook (88%) and Instagram (62%) enjoy prominent placement on university websites, TikTok's near-absence suggests deliberate institutional caution. This pattern aligns with global trends but appears more pronounced in Romania. We also analysed the world's top 20 universities, and we noticed that 60% maintain TikTok accounts while only 35% display TikTok buttons on their websites. Top universities still show hesitancy to formally promote the platform, but to a lesser degree than Romanian institutions. This widespread hesitancy likely reflects concerns about TikTok's controversial aspects such as data privacy issues (Juned et al., 2023), content moderation challenges (Liu, 2024), and geopolitical tensions surrounding the platform (Lin & Kloet, 2023), leading universities to maintain a presence on TikTok without formally recommending it through website integration. The complete absence of TikTok buttons on Romanian public university websites (0%) particularly suggests increased sensitivity to reputational risks, while the fact that even elite global universities show similar (though less extreme) patterns indicates that these concerns transcend national boundaries and institutional prestige levels.



**Figure 1.** Social Media Button Integration on University Websites by Institution Type

The temporal analysis reveals a striking disparity in TikTok adoption between public institutions (28 accounts) and private ones (15 accounts) by 2025. The COVID-19 crisis clearly catalysed digital platform adoption, with both institution types showing accelerated growth beginning in 2020-2021 as universities tried to maintain student engagement during remote learning. Notably, many private universities created their TikTok accounts during June-July or September periods, directly coinciding with Romania's university admission cycles. We can see this as a strategic timing when prospective students actively search for university information and make enrolment decisions. This is in line with what other studies show as well: TikTok is being leveraged as a marketing tool by higher education institutions to enhance brand awareness and engage prospective students (Dali & Aziz, 2023). The sustained post-pandemic growth indicates that what might have begun as an emergency response has evolved into a recognized tool for engaging Generation Z students in their preferred digital spaces.



**Figure 2.** TikTok Adoption Timeline: Public vs. Private Universities. Cumulative number of accounts created (2020-2025)

The comparative analysis of TikTok engagement metrics reveals that public universities maintain significantly larger audiences than private institutions (Mann-Whitney  $U = 119.00$ ,  $p = .020$ ), with a median of 1,742 followers compared to only 310 followers for private universities. However, this substantial and statistically significant advantage in follower count does not translate into significantly different engagement outcomes, as all other performance metrics showed no statistical differences between institution types (all  $p > .05$ ).

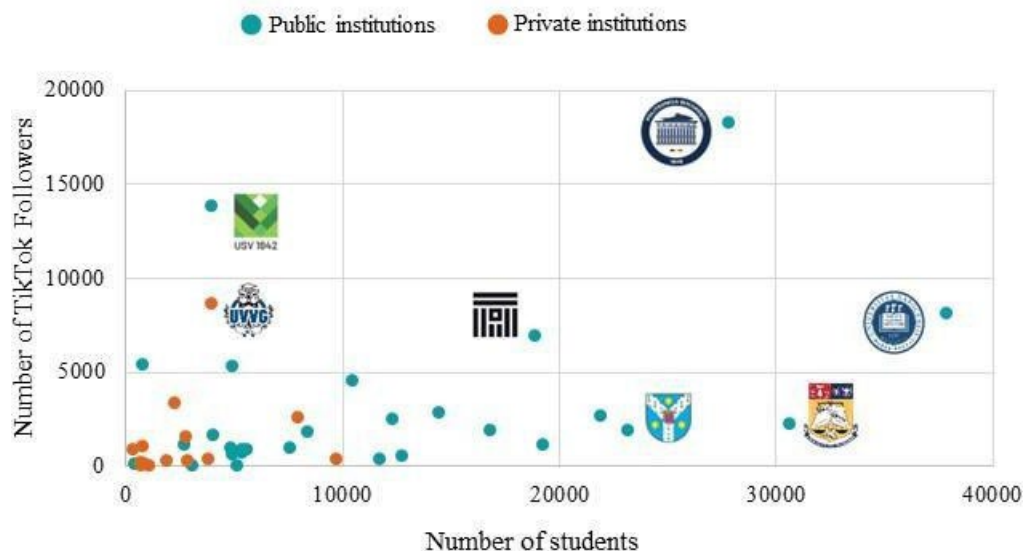
While numerical differences exist in the data, such as public universities having higher total profile likes (median: 10,850 vs. 3,665) and private institutions posting more frequently (median: 7 days vs. 9 days between posts), these variations did not reach statistical significance. These patterns suggest that despite public universities' significant advantage in audience size, both institution types achieve comparable engagement outcomes, indicating that follower count alone does not determine TikTok success.



	Averages per account			Medians per account		
	Private institutions (n=15)	Public institutions (n=28)	Total (n=43)	Private institutions (n=15)	Public institutions (n=28)	Total (n=43)
Followers	1,313	3,167	2,520	310	1,742	1,060
Posts count	123	182	161	116	105	108
Likes on profile	23,606	49,073	40,189	3,665	10,850	10,249
Posting interval	14 days	23 days	20 days	7 days	9 days	7 days
Likes per Post	163	256	224	55	179	159
Comments per Post (2025)	1.2	1.9	1.6	0.5	1.5	1.3
Likes per Post (2025)	30	15	20	12	11	12
Engagement Rate (2025 posts)	30%	15%	20%	12%	11%	12%

**Table 2.** Comparative Analysis of TikTok Engagement Metrics: Public vs. Private Universities

The correlation analysis reveals a statistically significant positive relationship between university size (student enrolment) and TikTok followers ( $r = .421$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $n = 43$ ). This moderate correlation indicates that larger universities tend to have more TikTok followers, though the relationship explains only about 18% of the variance ( $r^2 = .177$ ) (**Figure 3**). This moderate correlation suggests that while institutional size provides some advantage in building TikTok audiences (likely due to larger potential student bodies, alumni networks, and marketing resources), it is far from deterministic. The success stories of smaller institutions and the underperformance of some larger ones indicate that strategic factors, such as content quality, posting consistency, early adoption timing, or targeting specific niches, may be equally or more important than institutional size in determining TikTok success. Several smaller institutions significantly outperform expectations, such as Iasi University of Life Sciences (with almost 14,000 followers despite having around 4,000 students) or the "Vasile Goldiş" Western University of Arad (with 8,600 followers despite having around 4,000 students). The finding reinforces that both small and large universities can build substantial TikTok followers with the right approach, though larger institutions have a statistical advantage.



**Figure 3.** Relationship Between Student Enrolment and TikTok Followers Among Romanian Universities

Regression and correlation analyses reveal fundamental dynamics of TikTok success for Romanian universities that challenge conventional social media assumptions. The regression model demonstrates that content volume, not longevity, drives follower growth: each additional post is associated with approximately 14 new followers ( $\beta = .771, p < .001$ ), while account age shows no significant impact. This finding, combined with the negative correlations between account age and all 2025 engagement metrics ( $r = -0.35$  to  $-0.40$ ), suggests that simply maintaining a long-term presence offers no advantages and may actually harm engagement rates as accounts mature. Universities cannot rely on passive accumulation of followers over time but must actively produce content to grow and maintain their audiences.

A critical trade-off emerges between reach and engagement quality. While larger follower counts correlate strongly with absolute metrics like total profile likes, they also have a weak negative correlation with engagement rates ( $r = -0.27$ ), indicating that followers' growth might come at the cost of audience quality. Universities with more students achieve higher absolute engagement ( $r = 0.67$  for likes per post) but not necessarily better engagement rates in 2025.

The content analysis of the top-performing TikTok videos (each exceeding 800,000 views) published by Romanian universities reveals a predominantly informative and promotional



orientation. Rather than relying on humour or entertainment, these videos emphasize clarity, institutional credibility, and concrete benefits. Thematic distribution shows that approximately 42% of the viral content directly addresses university admissions, while 37% focuses on student life and campus culture, and only about 10% employs humour as a primary engagement strategy. Overall, the most viewed posts promote career prospects, affordable living costs, and international opportunities. Complementary themes include the advantages of specific programs (dual studies, scholarships, modern laboratories) and the accessibility or uniqueness of certain campuses (e.g., Alba Iulia, Braşov, Arad).

Most viral videos begin with an institutional hook, followed by enumerated benefits and a clear call to action. The average video duration ranges from 25 to 60 seconds, consistent with TikTok's optimal engagement span for informational content. Shorter videos (under 30 seconds) tend to focus on admission deadlines and pragmatic details, whereas longer ones introduce visual storytelling elements such as laboratory activities, student testimonials, or campus imagery.

In terms of tone and format, most viewed videos adopt an informative style, combining lists of advantages, emoji-based bullet points, and direct appeals to prospective students. The sample of 19 videos we have analysed integrate hashtags, the majority of which are generic (#studentlife, #facultate, #admitere2025, #universitate) or institutional (#PolitehnicaBucuresti, #UAB, #UNITBV). Only a minority use topic-specific hashtags (e.g., #Robotica, #Energetica, #Erasmus), which suggests a strategy aimed at maximizing general visibility rather than targeting niche audiences.

## **5. Conclusions and Practical Recommendations for Universities**

Our findings indicate that TikTok success requires active, strategic management rather than organic growth. With 72.6% of follower variance explained by just two variables - posts and number of students - the path to growth appears straightforward: post consistently and leverage institutional size. TikTok account age is irrelevant, reinforcing that success on this platform is not about longevity but about activity. However, the correlation matrix warns that this growth



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trajectory leads to declining engagement rates, forcing universities to choose between maximizing reach or maintaining community quality. For Romanian universities entering TikTok or reassessing their strategies, the message is clear: success demands continuous content creation, as each post ads approximately 13 new followers regardless of how long the account has existed. The data suggests that rather than hoping for organic growth over time, universities must commit to sustained content production while accepting the inevitable trade-off between audience size and engagement intensity.

Universities must move beyond viewing TikTok as merely another social media channel. The viral content analysis reveals that successful posts emphasize institutional credibility and concrete benefits rather than entertainment. Universities should create informative videos of 25-60 seconds focusing on career prospects, program advantages, and campus life. A potential successful TikTok strategy for universities could be adopting a 40-30-20-10 content mix (student life, career outcomes, admissions, humour). Universities should prioritize authentic student voices over institutional messaging, address specific anxieties about employment and costs, and fully embrace platform-native features including trending audio and vertical format optimization. The significant disconnect between TikTok adoption (51%) and website integration (2%) highlights the need for a clear social-media policy within universities. This hesitancy, while understandable given privacy and content moderation concerns, may limit universities' ability to fully leverage TikTok's potential for reaching Generation Z students who increasingly use the platform for educational research. Institutions should develop formal social media guidelines that address platform-specific risks, while still enabling creativity and innovation in communication. Also, Universities should establish internal approval protocols for TikTok content that balance institutional caution with the platform's demand for authenticity, ensuring that official messaging remains both credible and engaging for younger audiences.

This comprehensive analysis of TikTok adoption among Romanian universities reveals a platform in transition from emergency pandemic tool to strategic communication channel. Our findings demonstrate that while 51% of Romanian universities have embraced TikTok,



significant disparities exist based on institutional characteristics rather than public/private ownership.

## **6. Limitations and Future Research**

Our study has several limitations that should be mentioned. First, our content analysis examined only top-performing videos (over 800,000 views), potentially overlooking valuable insights from moderate-performing content that may more accurately reflect typical university TikTok strategies. Future research should therefore employ stratified sampling across performance tiers to capture the full spectrum of content approaches. Second, while our regression model explains 72.6% of follower variance, it notably excludes content type as a predictor variable. Third, the engagement metrics used (Comments per Post, Likes per Post, and Engagement Rate for 2025 posts) were calculated only for the 2025 dataset, restricting longitudinal interpretation; future research would benefit from access to analytics tools capable of tracking engagement across different time frames. Finally, further studies should explore the actual impact of TikTok presence on enrolment decisions through student surveys, assess the return on investment of varying content strategies, and analyse how platform algorithm changes influence institutional visibility and user engagement over time. Additionally, our study lacks data about the way the TikTok content is produced by universities: whether they have “social media department”, they rely on ad-hoc content creators, or they outsource content production to external agencies. A further study could analyse the relationship between the success/popularity of the TikTok account and the existence of an internal or external dedicated team. Another valuable topic that could be covered is whether published content is decided based on information collected via surveys, is based on a communication strategy or is rather a spontaneous content without a strategic framework.



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