Is TikTok more addictive than other social media platforms: Perception versus reality
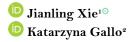
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ABSTRACT

As new social media platforms emerge and the existing ones change in functionality, their impact on students may shift. The current study investigated the number of social media accounts held by college students, and examined the social media platforms students use most, time spent on social media, time spent on schoolwork, and any gender differences in these variables. Additionally, we sought to understand college students' perceptions of the addictiveness of their major social media platform and detect possible discrepancies between their perception and reality (as measured by time spent on social media daily). A total of 306 participants were recruited from a research university in the U.S. Our results revealed that all participants had multiple active social media accounts (over 5 on average) and spent on average 3.8 hours on social media daily, while spending on average 3.7 hours on schoolwork daily. Interestingly, female participants spend more time on social media than males, as well as spent more time on schoolwork than their male counterparts, suggesting a strategy of compensation. As hypothesized, TikTok was the most popular social media platform, followed by Snapchat, Instagram, and others such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Facebook. Contrary to popular beliefs, while TikTok-favoring students were more likely to perceive that they were vulnerable to compulsive overconsumption, their time on social media per day was not significantly different from any other social media active users, $F(3, 302) = 1.43$, $p = .23$, suggesting a discrepancy between student perception and reality.

Highlights of this paper

- As new social media platforms emerge and the existing ones change in functionality, their impact on students may shift.
- As hypothesized, TikTok was the most popular social media platform, followed by Snapchat, Instagram, and others such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Facebook.
- Contrary to popular beliefs, while TikTok-favoring students were more likely to perceive that they were vulnerable to compulsive overconsumption, their time on social media per day was not significantly different from any other social media active users, $F(3, 302) = 1.43$, $p = .23$, suggesting a discrepancy between student perception and reality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over 70% of internet users and more than 30% of the people worldwide use social media (Kircaburun, Alhabash, Tosuntaş, & Griffiths, 2020). Such connectedness is a catalyst for peer influence, which often involves conformity, or changing one's behavior, values, or attitudes to align with those of one's peers. Previous literature demonstrates this clearly. Individuals who saw their friends posting many photos on social media posted more frequently than those whose friends posted fewer photos (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2009). The findings revealed that social media use creates social learning effects, which in turn affect subsequent social media use. Although people of all ages experience peer pressure, emerging adults are more susceptible to it than others (e.g., Harakeh and Vollebergh (2012)). Therefore, since the advent of early social networking sites, young adults (e.g., college students) have been among the first and most enthusiastic users of social media.

1.1. The Benefits of Social Media use among College Students

Social media use provides young adults with several benefits. First and foremost, it can provide a positive connection and a sense of community with others with shared identities and interests. Interacting with others is key to fulfilling one of the core human needs: the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Young adults sometimes struggle with feeling connected to their peers on college campuses, as it may be hard to adapt to a new environment and social culture. Social media use may foster positive subjective well-being and belongingness (Henry, 2012; Kim, Kim, Hwang, & Lee, 2020), increased self-esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011), and improved social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). Routine social media use may also compensate for diminishing in-person communication in people's busy lives. Social media may provide people with a venue that overcomes barriers of distance and time, allowing them to communicate with friends and to create and maintain their social network. In other words, mindful social media use may provide substantial benefits to college students.

1.2. Gender Variations in Social Media use among College Students

Studies conducted worldwide suggested significant gender differences in social media use among college students. However, the findings were inconsistent across cultures. Researchers in the Middle East discovered that although social media use was more likely to influence female college students' academic performance, male students were more likely to be addicted to social media (Alnjadat, Hmaidi, Samha, Kilani, & Hasswan, 2019). Researchers in the U.S. established that females tend to spend more time on Facebook than intended ($p < .001$); often lacking sleep due to Facebook use ($p < .001$); feeling closer to Facebook friends than to those seen in-person ($p < .001$); and sometimes feeling addicted to Facebook (Thompson & Lougheed, 2012). Others confirm that social media addiction patterns are associated with gender, showing more significant sociopsychological factors in females and a mix of biological and social factors in males (Aparicio-Martínez et al., 2020).

1.3. Social Media Addiction among College Students

The use of social media to meet the need for belonging has limitations and potential risks. Researchers have pointed out a link between excessive social media use, loneliness, and academic procrastination (Henry, 2012) as well as reduced academic performance (Junco & Cotten, 2012). Additionally, the emergence of social media platforms gave rise to social media addiction. Social media addiction is the irrational and excessive use of social media, which negatively impact one's life (Griffiths, 2000). College students with social media addiction are excessively concerned about their social media interactions and are motivated by an unmanageable impulse to constantly access social media (Andreassen & Pallesen, 2014). The effects of social media addiction can be observed in negative changes in mood, cognition, physical and emotional reactions, and a rise or increase of psychological problems (e.g., Kuss and Griffiths (2011)). According to a meta-analysis of studies focused on the global prevalence of social media addiction in college students ($N = 35,520$), the pooled global prevalence of social network addiction among college students was found to be 18.4%, with the highest prevalence found in research conducted in Asia, at 22.8% (Salari et al., 2023).

1.4. Time Spent on Social Media Versus Time Spent on School Work

College students, particularly those highly active users, frequently access their social media platforms on their smartphones. They spend more time chatting, watching short videos, shopping, playing games, and mindless scrolling than engaging in academic activities (Abbas, Aman, Nurunnabi, & Bano, 2019). Spending excessive time on their phones (in and out of class) results in distraction from the learning environment, which interferes with their academic outcomes (e.g., Bekalu, McCloud, and Viswanath (2019)). Heavy social media users are drawn to their social media platforms, and often rush through their academic work to spend more time on social media. This has been true since the rise of social media platforms in the early 2000s. An early study of college students' social media engagement demonstrated that they spent more time online than studying (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Facebook was introduced in 2003, and an early study of Facebook use reported that college students spent up to 70 minutes per day, checking about six times a day (e.g., Hew (2011)). Recent research suggests that some college students spend up to seven hours daily on social media, and social media use reduces the amount of time that students spend on educational activities (Kolhar, Kazi, & Alameen, 2021).

1.5. Social Media Platforms used by College Students

The landscape of social media is constantly changing, particularly among young adults who often adopt new technologies early on. While the older generations might still use Facebook account, adolescents have already moved over to other emerging social media platforms. These include Snapchat, where the uploaded content is visible to the recipients for only a short period of time, or Instagram which focuses on images and video content rather than verbal updates (Brough, Literat, & Ikin, 2020). TikTok, launched in 2016, is one of the fastest-growing social media platforms and has exceeded previous social media in user numbers and usage. TikTok focuses on short videos typically 15 to 60 seconds long (Montag, Yang, & Elhai, 2021). Its primary users are teenagers and emerging adults who, based on their cognitive developmental stage, tend to have short attention spans. This raises serious concerns. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are times of both risks and opportunities in self-regulation development. The changes occurring in the brain prime adolescents for potential massive gains in self-regulation skills. Self-regulation abilities pave a path towards successful adulthood as they help individuals stay focused and attentive in the pursuit of long-term goals (Murray & Rosanbalm, 2017). However, addictive engagement with

content offered in 15-second increments robs the users of opportunities to practice self-regulation involved in completing complex tasks which span extended periods of time.

2. THE CURRENT STUDY

Investigating the amount of time spent on social media can help explain why social media may be distracting or whether its use correlates with deficiency in other areas of life. Research suggests that heavy and light users may differ in some ways. Heavy and chronic social media multitaskers are substantially more vulnerable to distractions from the environment than their light social media use counterparts. Additionally, excessive social media use can lead to more problematic behaviors and poor schoolwork than occasional social media use (Wang, Niiya, Mark, Reich, & Warschauer, 2015).

The average number of social media accounts held by millennial or Gen Z users worldwide is 8.5 (Shewale, 2023). While there are many social media apps available, certain platforms are particularly popular among young adults. TikTok allows users to quickly generate and share short videos with other users. Snapchat users can share photos and videos that disappear after a set period of time, which makes the app feel more private and intimate. While Instagram was originally designed as a platform for sharing photos, young people also use it to follow their favorite celebrities and influencers. Although people may have multiple social media accounts, they have their favorites. The variation is due partly to the nature of the platforms and the characteristics of the people they attract (Knight-McCord et al., 2016). The aggregate numbers of social media users may obscure a great amount of heterogeneity across platforms.

All things considered, the current study aims to investigate the number of social media accounts held by college students, and examine the social media platforms students use most, time spent on social media, time spent on schoolwork, and any gender differences in these variables. Additionally, we seek to understand college students' perceptions of the addictiveness of their major social media platform and detect possible discrepancies between their perception and reality (as measured by time spent on social media daily).

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

A total of 306 participants (190 females, 116 males) were recruited from a research university in the U.S. The participants academic classifications ranged from freshmen to seniors, they pursued various majors, and represented various ethnicities. However, most of them were Caucasian (88%).

3.2. Materials and Procedure

Participants completed an IRB-approved online questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed through e-mail to students via campus organization group messages (see Appendix A for the survey content). Students were told their participation is voluntary and were assured their responses were anonymous. They answered demographic questions and questions related to the number of social media accounts they have, the time spent on social media, and the time spent on schoolwork. They also answered questions related to their perceptions of the addictiveness of their major social media platform (e.g., "I feel I have a difficult time controlling my social media use.").

3.3. Data Analysis

First descriptive analyses were performed to provide the central tendency (e.g., mean) and variability (e.g.,

standard deviation) of the number of social media accounts held by college students, time spent on social media, and time spent on schoolwork. Second, three independent t-tests were conducted to examine the gender differences in the number of social media accounts held by college students, time spent on social media, and time spent on schoolwork. Third, a frequency test was performed to examine social media platforms college students use most. Finally, two separate one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were performed to: (a) understand students' perceptions of the addictiveness of their major social media platform, and (b) explore the possible discrepancies between their perception and reality (as measured by time spent on social media daily).

4. RESULTS

RQ1: The number of social media accounts held by college students, time spent on social media daily, and time spent on schoolwork daily.

The average number of social media accounts held by the participants was 5.1, with a standard deviation (SD) of 2.09. The average time spent on social media per day was 3.8 hours, with a SD of 2.02. The average time spent on schoolwork per day was 3.7 hours, with a SD of 1.92.

RQ2: Gender differences that exist in social media use.

Female students (M = 5.4, SD = 1.98) held significantly more social media accounts than male students (M = 4.5, SD = 1.69), $t(304)$ = 3.78, p < .001. Similarly, female students (M =3.9, SD = 2.11) spent significantly more time on social media daily than their male counterparts (M = 3.4, SD = 2.01), $t(304)$ = 2.25, p =.025. At the same time, female students (M = 3.9, SD = 1.96) also spent significantly more time on their schoolwork daily than male students (M =3.3, SD = 2.05), $t(304)$ = 2.86, p = .002.

RQ3: Popular social media platforms among college students.

TikTok was the most popular social media platform among the college students in the current study, with 39.5% of the 306 students spending most of the time on it, followed by Snapchat (28.8%), Instagram (15.7%), and others such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Facebook.

RQ4: College students' perceptions of the addictiveness of their major social media platform and possible discrepancies between their perception and reality.

Based on the two separate one-way ANOVA tests, students' perceptions of the addictiveness of social media platforms differed significantly by their major social media platform, $F(3, 302)$ = 5, p =.002. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD suggested that the only significant difference occured between the group of TikTok active users (M = 7.36, SD = 1.71) and the group of other social media active users such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Facebook (M = 6.35, SD = 2.05). However, there was a gap between students' perception and reality. While TikTok-favoring students were more likely to perceive that they were vulnerable to compulsive overconsumption, their time on social media per day was not significantly different from any other social media active users, $F(3, 302)$ = 1.43, p = .23.

5. DISCUSSION

In line with previous literature (e.g., Grau, Kleiser, and Bright (2019)) all students in present study had multiple active social media accounts. This is because people use different social media platforms for different purposes. For example, TikTok users can generate, watch, and share short videos shot on mobile devices. Facebook provides users with a platform to keep up with friends and social circles, while X (formerly Twitter) is often used to keep up with the news. Participants reported spending more time on social media than doing homework. In turn,

spending a large amount of time communicating via social media reduces students' time available for other academic activities like reading and studying, individually or in groups.

In agreement with previous findings (e.g., Scott, Bay-Cheng, Prince, Nochajski, and Collins (2017)) high frequency social media users tended to be women. Social connectedness varies more by gender than any other demographic characteristic (e.g., Caetano, Silva, and Vettore (2013)). Females find social interactions more rewarding than males. This is likely because women tend to be more expressive and willing to share their emotions and experiences. In other words, they are biologically wired for social networking. Interestingly, the female participants spent more time on social media as well as on homework, than males. Others have noted that women tend to spend more time on homework than men (e.g., (Gershenson & Holt, 2015; Lam et al., 2012)). More time spent on homework and more time spent on social media may indicate women's high levels of social media multi-tasking (Hill et al., 2024). Multitasking refers to the performance of more than one task at the same time. Multitasking mainly takes three forms: dual-tasking, rapid attention switching, and continuous partial attention (Wood & Zivcakova, 2015). Attending to multiple streams of information and entertainment while studying has become a common behavior among young people (Deng, Ku, & Kong, 2019). When students multitask while doing academic work, their learning is shallower, and it takes more time than when fully focused on schoolwork. They understand and retain less, and they have a hard time transferring knowledge between domains (Perpiñá, Viñas Poch, & Cerrato, 2019).

The landscape of social media is constantly evolving. New platforms are introduced, along with new content formats, and new user expectations. While Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) appear to be the most successful social media platforms currently, other applications are gaining popularity fast. For example, TikTok has attracted the younger users' attention with its short-form video format and catchy challenges. In China, the largest group of TikTok users is 6–17 years old (31.59%), followed by 18–24 years old (30.14%), 25–30 years old (20.85%), 31–35 years old (8.66%), and over 35 years old, accounting for 8.76% (Qin, Omar, & Musetti, 2022). TikTok did not exist globally until 2018, but it is now more popular among young people than Instagram and Snapchat as reflected in the current study. TikTok's content is heavily influenced by youth culture, with many popular creators and trends being started by young people. This makes the app particularly appealing to teenagers and young adults, who are often at the forefront of cultural trends and movements.

While TikTok active users in present study were more likely to perceive that they have a difficult time controlling their social media use, their time spent on social media daily was not significantly different from that of other social media users. The perception of TikTok as more addictive than other social media platforms can perhaps be attributed to several factors: (a) the format tends to encourage users to consume a large volume of content in a short amount of time; (b) the diverse and entertaining nature of content on TikTok makes it very appealing to users; and (c) the algorithm is highly effective in serving users content that aligns with their interests. TikTok videos are very short, thus one may watch a high number of them in a row and assume they have spent a long time on the app, which may have not been the case. While reality is the actual state of things as they exist (e.g., time spent on social media daily), perception (e.g., "I feel I have a difficult time controlling my social media use.") is how individuals interpret the information they receive through their senses. Therefore, perceptions can provide an incorrect assessment of a situation (Cheek, Blackman, & Pronin, 2021). This may have an unexpected benefit. If a social media user is alarmed by their addiction and chooses to address it, then it is better to perceive one's use as greater than it is, as it may lead to talking steps to overcome the problem.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

6.1. Implications

Social media have been shown to affect students' academic outcomes because of their impact on mental health, motivation, and more. The amount of time spent on social media daily by participants in present study was greater than the amount of time spent on schoolwork, which raises a legitimate concern. Excessive social media use causes cognitive-emotional preoccupation which results in decreased sleep quality and increased everyday cognitive failures, thereby affecting the overall life of heavy users (e.g., Xanidis and Brignell (2016)). Addictive behaviors can be framed as self-regulation failure (Baumeister & Vonasch, 2015). Self-regulation refers to the internal processes in which an individual exercises control over the direction, continuity, and intensity of their thoughts, emotions and behaviors to achieve a goal (Zimmerman, 2002). If addiction is a matter of giving in to frequent and resistible desires, then self-regulation may be the crucial factor determining whether an individual yields or resists (Baumeister & Vonasch, 2015). Self-regulation is important for students at all levels but is especially significant to those in college. Many college students are faced with multiple academic tasks and deadlines, as well as social challenges, and no day-to-day guidance from parents or guardians for the first time. The ability to self-regulate, including managing one's time, setting goals, and persevering in face of adversity are critical to academic success and are essential skills in professional development. Instructors can play a vital role in regulating students' learning by setting goals and fostering effort (Zimmerman, 2002).

Female students tended to spend more time both on social media and schoolwork than male students. Further research needs to be done to better understand the positive correlation between time spent on social media and time spent on schoolwork. Social media multi-tasking could provide one of the possible explanations. However, it could also be that while women are more emotionally expressive and socially connected virtually (e.g., Chaplin (2015)) they also tend to employ self-monitoring and goal setting much more often than men (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990). Therefore, spending more time on schoolwork may serve as a compensatory coping strategy that can cover up the excessive use of social media.

TikTok is mainly focused on entertainment, with a variety of content categories. The diverse and entertaining nature of content on TikTok makes people feel it is more appealing and addictive than other social media platforms. However, perception does not equal reality because: (a) perception is the processing of reality by an individual; and (b) an individual's past experiences contribute to the development of cognitive schemas that organize and interpret new experiences, influencing their subjective perception. Therefore, whether TikTok is more additive than other social media platforms remains to be seen.

6.2. Limitations

Rresearch participants should reflect the diversity of the population they represent, including ethnicity and gender. The lack of ethnical diversity among research participants in this study (88% of the participants were white) potentially limits the generalizability of findings to a broader population. Additionally, all participants self-identified as male or female. Further, the discrepancy between perception and reality needs further investigation because: (a) student perception of the addictiveness of social media was not measured by a validated social media addiction scale; and (b) time spent on social media is not the only indicator of social media addiction. Addiction can also cause problems with focus, memory, and learning, not to mention mental health issues and academic performance. Therefore, more indicators of social media addiction (e.g., academic motivation and academic achievement) need to be considered in future research.

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Appendix A

Social Media Addiction among College Students.

1. Gender:

   Female   Male   Gender Fluid   Prefer not to say

2. What is your undergraduate classification?

   Freshman   Sophomore   Junior   Senior

3. What is your major?

4. Ethnicity

   African American   Asian   Caucasian   Hispanic

5. What site do you spend the majority of time on? (Circle one)

   a. Instagram

   b. Twitter

   c. Snapchat

   d. Facebook

   e. Pinterest

   f. TikTok

   g. YouTube

   h. Other:

6. Approximately how many hours a day do you spend on social media?

7. Approximately how many hours a day do you spend doing homework/studying for school?

8. I feel I have a difficult time controlling my social media use.

   Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

9. I feel I spend more time on social media than I would like to.

   Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree