**Beyond the Screens: TikTok’s Influence on Academic Outcomes and Mental Health**

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In 2022 the average person, worldwide, spends 151 minutes a day on the Internet. In the United States, people spend an average of 123 minutes on social media (Dixon, 2023). With the amount of time spent and information acquired through social media, one must consider how these practices impact higher education students. In 2023, TikTok reported their average monthly active users sitting between 834 million and one billion, where the largest age group at 21% are 18-to-24-year-olds (Barnhart, 2023).

There are multitudes of factors to consider when researching social media and students’ academic performance, lifestyle habits, mental health, communication skills, and mental health, especially in females. In 2022, TikTok saw a moderate gender split where 61% of users were female and 39% were male. In the past year, this gap has decreased to 54% female and 46% male, making the app a staple among the general population (Barnhart, 2023). A study by Carpenter (2023) found there is a significant positive association between TikTok use quantity and body image, shared content anxiety, and general anxiety among female college students.

These factors became more prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, where social media consumption increased by five hours for the general population and almost nine hours for adolescents and young adults (Pandya & Lodha, 2021). Giancola et al. (2023) interviewed 15 university students where 73.3% were female. Researchers found social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the mental health of students in terms of social comparison, stress, loneliness, poor habits, and difficulty concentrating. From these themes, researchers determined major stresses lie in the lack of attention span and an increased urge to log onto social networking sites to compare their lifestyle to others (Giancola et al., 2023).

Although there is extant research on social media usage among college students, there is always an opportunity to study how new social networking sites, such as TikTok, rise and influence students’ conscious and subconscious decisions. This study will contribute to overarching research on how technological evolution impacts student academic performance and lifestyle habits and how those in education can prepare students for social and academic balance.

**Literature Review**

The literature surrounding the social networking site TikTok is becoming more prevalent but not yet fully established since the app’s relaunch in September 2016 (Iqbal, 2023). With increasing popularity deemed by the 150 million United States users, studying the app is necessary to determine how rising college students function with habits formed by using this app (Barnhart, 2023). College students face a plethora of life changes, socializing virtually and in real life is a balance they must learn to reach optimal academic and mental health success. To further understand how TikTok influences female college students, educators must review and learn how to adapt to where students are mentally and socially.

***He & Li, 2022***

To gain an understanding of the emerging phenomenon where individuals develop deep psychological dependencies on social networking sites such as TikTok, He & Li (2022) used a structural equation model to study the correlation between eating-disordered attitudes and behaviors and social media use in 120 female undergraduate students in China (p. 282). The study also looked at the overall emotions and stress related to social media consumption. The sample’s average body mass index (BMI) was 20.56 and ranged from 17.21 to 24.37. It is important to note that none of the participants had been diagnosed or treated for any eating disorder conditions (282).

Data was collected through various tests and scales to determine the effects of social media on memory, inhibitory control, food-inhibitory control, social media addiction, mental health status, and self-reported stressors. The results of the study confirmed the role of affective state and stress in the relationship between food-inhibitory control and social media addiction among the population. Findings also support the correlation between social media addiction and disordered eating attitudes and behavior through psychological mechanisms (p. 283).

A limitation of this study is the exclusion of how socioeconomic status, family environment, and educational components factor into the mental stressors of the studied population. Without these influences, it is unreasonable to fully confirm social media is the sole negative influence on female college students and disordered eating habits (p. 289).

Although ethically approved by the Biomedical Ethics Committee of the Medical Department of Xi’an Jiaotong University, more trustworthiness could have been established by offering supportive resources for those who participated in the study. Eating disorders are a sensitive topic that can strain the minds of those it impacts, especially since participants did not currently receive care for eating disorders or identify as someone who faces food-inhibitory control (p. 289).

An outstanding component of this study is the use of structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical technique allowed the researchers to examine complex relationships considering multiple variables and provide a robust analysis. There are practical implications for this research as it focused on the specific population of female college students in China and addressed relevant issues such as social media addiction, eating disorders, and mental health. The results of this study provide a deeper understanding of psychological factors in correlation with social media (p. 288-289).

***Derkach et al., 2022***

This research was conducted to evaluate TikTok as a motivational tool for educational activities. Mobile technology and social media are integral parts of the twenty-first century. The integration into education is essential for providing students with essential skills they need for life and the workforce. Traditional teaching methods have evolved to include new technology in coursework, it is important to adapt to new platforms and devices to stay ahead of research and daily practices.

The researchers used the qualitative method to gain detailed information about how students in Ukraine would feel about using TikTok in educational activities. They administered a five-question Likert scale survey to 250 students derived from Kyiv University of Culture. Seventy percent of students were 17 years old while the remaining thirty percent were 18 to 21 years old. The results showed strong agreement among participants regarding their satisfaction with current disciplines, course content, professors, student support, and including TikTok in one’s educational experience.

The questionnaire was limited in terms of quantity and quality. Comprised of five questions, the current set could have been written to ask more details or more questions could have been added to further capture student opinion. It is possible that their questions and responses were more wide-ranging, but complete information should have been published with the study. To collect more insightful qualitative data, researchers could have employed interviews with a subset of students to encourage developed opinions and feelings. Although the questions were not all-encompassing of the classroom experience, the researchers made real-world implications as their findings led to the establishment of a TikTok Department to better integrate social media into the classroom. The results yielded practical application of the social networking site to make it relevant for institutions and educators looking to incorporate technology in their coursework. This literature contributes to the range of academic research about TikTok in education by providing tangible takeaways to implement in a department or classroom. It also demonstrates how social media can be used as a helping tool when used in moderation and with purpose as opposed to focusing on detrimental qualities when used in excess.

**Methods**

The current study utilized the qualitative method by employing an eight-question survey to investigate the relationship between college students’ social media use and the multifaceted effects on their academic performance, social interaction, and overall well-being. Participants were prompted to reflect on the frequency of their social media engagement, the underlying motivations driving their interactions, and the specific platforms they favored. Additionally, the research sought to capture the impact on academic performance in correlation to the time spent on social platforms. Furthermore, the survey examined the complex relationship between social networking sites and students’ academic success and overall well-being. Participants were invited to share their screen time, grade point average, campus involvement, mental stressors, and time spent on social media. Participants also had an open opportunity at the end of the survey to share additional thoughts that were not asked about.

The survey was distributed to a sample of female undergraduate college students at The University of Alabama. Data collection was employed through two main channels: social media and email. The survey link was strategically disseminated across various Instagram profiles, making it accessible to a wide range of potential participants. Other students were reached out to via email through on-campus student organizations. A total of 12 responses were gathered from female undergraduate students ranging from 19 to 21 years old. These responses were collected via Google Forms to ensure an efficient and systematic collection of data.

**Findings**

 Findings from this study reveal a complex interplay between social media use and academic outcomes among the surveyed female undergraduate college students. Notably, 41.67% of respondents reported spending a significant four to six hours on TikTok daily, indicating a substantial investment of time on social media. Revealing a negative correlation, 58.33% of the participants maintained strong grade point averages above 3.0, hinting at a potential disconnect between social media engagement and academic performance. However, a substantial 83.33% of respondents acknowledged experiencing severe academic anxiety, suggesting that while high academic achievement is prevalent, it may come at the cost of heightened stress levels. Most participants, 75%, were upperclassmen, indicating these trends might be more pronounced in the later stages of college education. These findings underscore the need for further research to understand the full scope of social media use, academic success, and mental well-being among this group. This study focuses on female undergraduate students’ social media use and its potential impact on academic success and well-being can be seen as a foundational step within the broader research topic of TikTok in the classroom. Understanding students’ motivations, patterns, and outcomes of social media engagement as explored in this study provides insights into how educators can adapt teaching styles and mechanics to encourage academic engagement from students.

**Conclusion**

One limitation of this study is the small population. The sample size of 12 undergraduate female students at The University of Alabama is small. While it is common to have a small-scale study, it may not provide a comprehensive representation of the diverse experiences of female college students. Expanding the sample size to a larger and more diverse group could yield more robust and generalizable findings.

In response to these findings, further research on female undergraduate students’ social media use and its impact could prioritize longitudinal studies and use a mixed-methods approach to collect objective measures versus only self-reported data. Responses from the population are at risk of desirability bias. To increase the validity of the findings, collecting screen time reports and having face-to-face interviews about life happenings can contribute to well-rounded data and fully encompass the effects of social media usage. While this study aims to understand various facets of students’ lives, focusing on one social media usage correlation as opposed to two or three such as mental health and academic performance, could yield more in-depth findings. Developing a niche research topic is vital to collecting useful data.

Educational policies should be instated or updated on an annual basis for institutions and professors. Further research should be performed on how social media can be used as a positive tool in students’ lives. Whether professors incorporate the tool into the classroom to complete assignments or students are learning best social media practices, both topics are valuable and essential to improving the quality of life for young adults. Technology evolves each day and educators must be on the forefront of adaptation to prepare students for rising tools and platforms.

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