

# Profitability and Polarization: TikTok's Dominance of the Attention Economy

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## ABSTRACT

With increased access to technology, our dependency on Internet platforms for information has increased. The COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdown measures, such as stay-at-home orders and quarantines, seem to have accelerated the natural drift towards greater technological usage. One Internet platform that individuals use to consume online content is TikTok, a rapidly growing entertainment source that uses algorithms to curate and prioritize user preferences. Increasing technological dependence, however, may be tied to rising concerns about polarization associated with online content. This research explores if and in what way users perceive that TikTok benefits from polarizing content in terms of increasing user engagement and profits. This study of high school TikTok users found that these consumers believe engagement and profits thrive because of the algorithm's increased frequency of displaying divisive content to active users, increasing their use of TikTok.

## Introduction

Polarization is a phenomenon that is being widely noticed across the Internet. Social media platforms have become sources of intense political division, which has been criticized by many for profiting from an unhealthy dichotomy in users' viewpoints. Given the controversy surrounding social media polarization, the researcher sought to identify the extent to which users believe that social media platforms impact polarization.

TikTok is one of the largest social media platforms in the world, with 1.2 billion monthly active users as of the end of 2021 (Iqbal, 2022). While TikTok has experienced strong success, it has not avoided criticism for the polarization and divisiveness typically associated with social networking platforms. It is evident through TikTok's large active user base that its users continue to use the platform despite rising concerns about its divisiveness. This continued widespread usage of TikTok is a phenomenon that the researcher sought to explore through this study, as well as how such usage intertwines with users being exposed to polarizing content.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in online usage, with Internet services typically experiencing 40-100% growth in usage during COVID compared to the period before the pandemic-related lockdown (De at al., 2020). This rise in Internet usage links to TikTok, and the polarizing content individuals are exposed to as individuals have become more dependent on Internet platforms like TikTok for content and entertainment, inherently increasing the impact of online polarizing content on them.

This research was conducted in March and April 2022, just after two years of COVID-related restrictions that saw an increase in Internet service usage. During a time in which individuals may have increased their use of platforms such as TikTok, this study sought to explore user perception of TikTok's content. This research study suggests the way in which polarizing content could shape consumer engagement with the Internet as individuals become more active on social media platforms.

## Literature Review

After doing an examination of literature, the researcher found that the relationship between social media platforms and polarizing content can be best described by its connection to the attention economy. Within the attention economy, subtopics of the collective role of social media in the attention economy, the role of TikTok in the attention economy, the success and profitability of TikTok, polarization in the attention economy, the role social media platforms play in intensifying polarization, the role TikTok plays in worsening polarization, and consumer dependence on social media platforms are widely prevalent throughout the literature explored and are thus highlighted here.

### The Attention Economy

Nobel Laureate economist and psychologist Herbert A. Simon first proposed the concept of an “attention economy” with the idea that attention is a scarce and valuable resource (Duke, 2021). Simon’s framework of attention being a crucial resource has been strengthened by research conducted by Microsoft, which found that since the beginning of the mobile revolution in 2002, the average human attention span has dropped from 12 seconds to 8 seconds (McSpadden, 2015). This decrease in attention span signals the impact of multiple channels of media constantly vying for the attention of individuals. Brands, in particular, have become aware of the attention economy they find themselves in, with constant competition for the attention of mobile device users.

#### *Social Media in the Attention Economy*

The accessibility of content that has accompanied the democratization of the Internet has forced brands and creators into competing for every second of a consumer’s attention, and such competition has found a welcoming host in social media platforms. Sara Brown explains that as social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram are free for users, their revenue derives from selling user attention to brands, governments, and other organizations (Brown, 2021). In this way, attention has become a form of currency for social media companies, who have embraced advertising and content creation that embody the values of the attention economy. To promote content that is maximized to retain user attention, social media companies lean heavily on algorithms, which use predictive power to identify the content that would maximize user engagement. However, while most social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook utilize incremental and linear feeds, there is one platform that far outshines the rest in its algorithmic basis and success – TikTok.

#### *TikTok in the Attention Economy*

A platform consisting of short videos typically ranging from 15-60 seconds, TikTok’s core value lies within its unique ability to provide tailored content towards its user base, which is skewed toward younger generations. TikTok’s President of Global Solutions, Blake Chandlee, explains that TikTok is different from platforms such as Facebook because TikTok is a “content graph” company rather than a “social graph” company, prioritizing entertainment over connections (O’Brien, 2021). With TikTok’s mission revolving around quality entertainment for users, it has developed a powerful algorithm that has left its competitors, such as Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, in the dust. A study conducted by the Wall Street Journal found that TikTok’s algorithm recognizes a user’s content interests within 40 minutes to 2 hours of a user signing up for the platform (Forsyth, 2021). Once identifying a user’s interests, TikTok’s algorithm focuses on maximizing content watch time, with 95% of displayed content being carefully chosen by TikTok’s algorithm and user search history.

#### *Success and Profitability*

The platform’s algorithm has made it a great success in the attention economy, with average user sessions on the platforms ranging from 15-30 minutes. TikTok’s unique ability to keep users engaged with the content they have

has made it a popular platform for advertisers, with the number of companies running ads on TikTok in 2020 jumping 500%. The platform boasts \$7.2 million in sales in the first 90 for every \$1 million brands spend on advertising, \$0.6 million better than Instagram, the next highest performer (O'Brien, 2021). TikTok's parent company ByteDance recorded profits soaring by 93% in the recent fiscal year to over \$19 billion, suggesting TikTok has experienced success in the attention economy.

### *Polarization in the Attention Economy*

The profits TikTok and other social media platforms have reaped demonstrate the power of dominating the attention economy, but they do not come without concerns. With the basis of the attention economy lying within capturing and retaining the attention of users, content has shifted away from the objective truth to subjective and polarizing viewpoints that tend to intensify divisiveness but are extremely successful at attracting attention. A study conducted by Sinan Aral found that false news is 70% more likely to be retweeted than true news (Brown, 2021). Additionally, a study conducted by Gordon Pennycook, Jonathan McPhetres, Yunhao Zhang, and David Rand identified that individuals are 50% more likely to share misinformation than to believe it, demonstrating the waning importance of the objective truth and increased emphasis on information that can catch attention, regardless of its validity (Walsh, 2020).

### *The Role of Social Media in Polarization*

When social media algorithms focus solely on user engagement with content, they fail to consider the second-order effects – polarization, divisiveness, and sectarianism. A field experiment conducted by Ro'ee Levy involving 17,000 Americans found that Facebook's content-ranking algorithm could increase polarization by limiting the amount of content displayed that opposes users' viewpoints (Levy, 2021). Furthermore, in a study conducted by Hunt Allcott, Luca Braghieri, Sarah Eichmeyer, and Matthew Gentzkow, subjects who stopped using Facebook for a month possessed views that were significantly less polarized than before on policy issues (Allcott et al., 2020). While Facebook has been notorious for its influence in politics, with government investigations attacking Facebook's controversial stance on political advertisements and usage of user data, Facebook is not alone in its troublesome role in promoting political polarization to attract users' attention. Paul Barrett, Justin Hendrix, and Grant Sims contend that social media platforms generally have a tendency to worsen polarization and intensify sectarianism (Barrett et al., 2021).

### *Polarization on TikTok*

TikTok finds itself in the midst of the concerning tendency that Barrett et al. outlined, with Xueyin Zha explaining that TikTok's algorithmic approach to promoting content that appeals to users' beliefs and viewpoints intensifies the "filter bubble" effect (Zha, 2020). In an effort to maximize user engagement, the platform reduces the risk of users disliking content by not showing content that users may not agree with. In this way, TikTok's profitability is dependent on polarization, with the platform retaining user attention by keeping users in a content bubble that confirms beliefs rather than introducing new beliefs. While the strength of TikTok's algorithm is key to the platform's success, it also means that polarization experienced on TikTok may be more severe compared to other platforms. TikTok's heavy-handed content control enables the platform to be hyper-efficient in determining information about users, such as their beliefs. From here, TikTok can control the stream of content to reinforce users' beliefs, keeping users satisfied and engaged with their experience on the app.

### *Consumer Dependence on Social Media*

The interdependence of profitability and polarization that TikTok has used as a basis for its success is risky, especially considering the increasing role of social media in consumer behavior. A report published by Deloitte notes that 74% of consumers make purchasing decisions based on social media, and a 2016 PwC Total Retail Survey found that the shopping behavior of 45% of respondents is influenced by information on social media platforms (Duke, 2021). Thus, consumers are placing trust in social media platforms such as TikTok, which are recognizing such trust

and using it to boost profits by promoting appealing content. Additionally, TikTok has taken increasing consumer trust and spun it into financial success by implementing TikTok Shopping and e-commerce offerings through the platform. Thus, TikTok has continually proven that user trust and engagement are key to its success, and the platform is willing to go to great lengths to secure the attention of its users.

## Summary

With a powerful and unrivaled algorithm that is uniquely accurate in identifying users' interests and beliefs, TikTok has built its base through highly personalized and tailored content. However, the extreme level of personalization that TikTok offers threatens the importance of the objective truth and places users in a confirmation bubble, exposing them to content that they are more likely to agree with. The troublesome bubble effect of TikTok's strong algorithm has potentially detrimental impacts of division and polarization. With TikTok's base skewing towards younger ages compared to other popular platforms such as Facebook, the risk of polarization is a more long-lasting concern on TikTok because of the platform's ability to shape the beliefs of younger generations. Identifying the impact of TikTok's heavily personalized approach to content on the division that the platform inflicts on younger audiences is crucial to identifying how the platform can best shape its practices to maintain its high profitability while protecting its users from polarization.

## Methodology

This research was designed to explore the degree to which users perceive that social media platforms utilize polarizing content to capture and retain users' attention, as well as their perspective of the potential financial incentive behind such polarization. TikTok served as the focus of the research as the platform is well-known for its ability to engage users, especially those of younger demographics. The rapid success of TikTok, as well as its unique means of presenting content to users through short videos, presented the platform as a strong option to analyze for the link between polarizing content, user engagement, and platform profits.

This research involved a survey conducted to identify the extent to which high school users believe polarization on TikTok impacted platform engagement. High school students were chosen as the subjects of this research because TikTok's user demographics are strongly skewed towards younger generations, so high school students served as a microcosm of TikTok's greater customer segment. The survey, which used skip logic and had a range of between six and 11 questions, was distributed between March 17 to March 22, 2022, using Google Forms. The survey was sent by email to 51 high school students who attend school in the California San Francisco Bay Area and all 51 students responded. The survey responses were anonymous; demographic data was collected but no identifiable information was requested or given. The school does not have an Institutional Review Board for human subjects research so the researcher relied on school teachers and its principal to review questions in advance to ensure respondents would not be harmed by their participation in this study. In addition, the researcher conducted two pilots from non-participating high school students to gather feedback and make improvements to the research questions. Google Forms was used to improve the reach of the survey and questions were presented in a multiple-choice and short-answer format, providing respondents flexibility to voice their perspectives on their usage of TikTok. The researcher used purposive sampling, identifying participants based on their ability and willingness to share their insight and discuss the research topic as well as the ability of the researcher to access this group of potential participants. The student sample consisted of students from upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds, all of whom have access to technology and have used social media platforms similar to TikTok, if not TikTok itself. Thus, the student sample was well-acquainted with the topic of the research and was qualified to represent TikTok's younger user demographic.

## Findings

Out of 51 survey respondents, 78.4% indicated that they use TikTok. For the 21.6% of respondents who indicated that they do not use TikTok, they were prompted to provide an explanation of why they do not use the platform. Common phrases used in their responses include “addicting,” “waste of time,” “toxic,” “not much useful info,” and “too time consuming and polarizing.” Findings regarding the 78.4% of respondents who expressed that they use TikTok can be sorted by two factors—time spent on the platform daily and the frequency of seeing polarizing content on the platform.

Respondents who indicated that they use TikTok were prompted to express the extent to which they use TikTok on a daily basis. 12.5% responded that they spend less than 30 minutes on the platform daily, 35% responded that they spend between 30 minutes and one hour on the platform daily, 27.5% responded that they spend between one and two hours on the platform daily, and 25% responded that they spend more than two hours on the platform daily. Of the 12.5% who responded that they use TikTok for less than 30 minutes daily, 80% believed that TikTok has polarizing content. In comparison, 85.71% of those who spend between 30 minutes and one hour on the platform daily believed that TikTok has polarizing content while 100% of those who spend between one hour and two hours or more than two hours on TikTok daily believed that the platform has polarizing content. Respondents were additionally prompted to express the frequency to which they see polarizing content. Respondents’ answers to this question sorted by the amount of time they spend on TikTok daily are displayed in Figure 1.

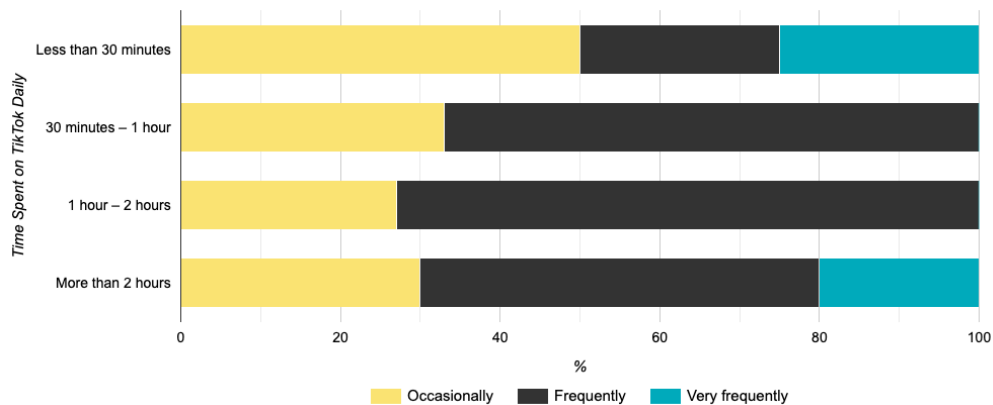


Figure 1. Frequency of polarizing content by time spent on TikTok.

Respondents were also asked about how they believe polarizing content impacts their engagement with content. Respondents’ answers to this question sorted by their daily time spent on TikTok are displayed in Figure 2.

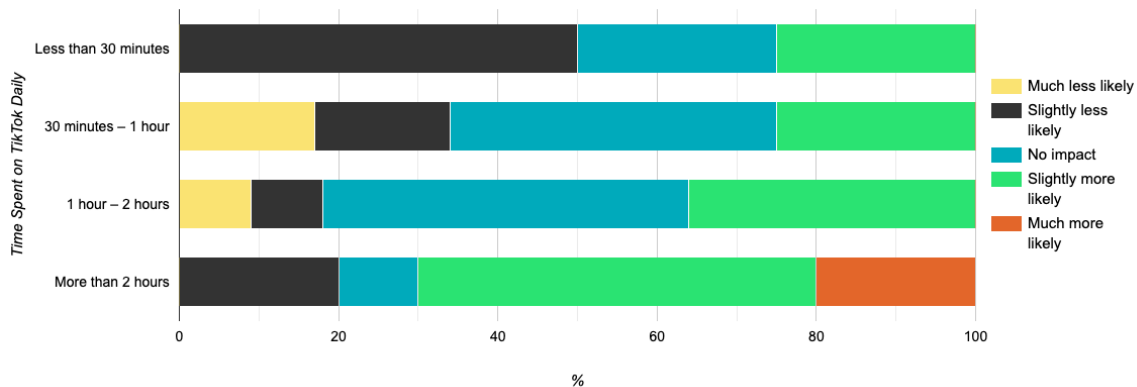
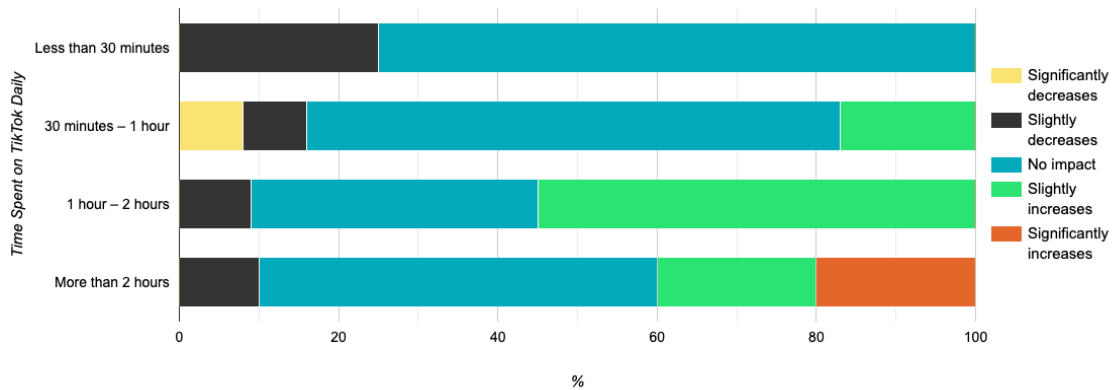


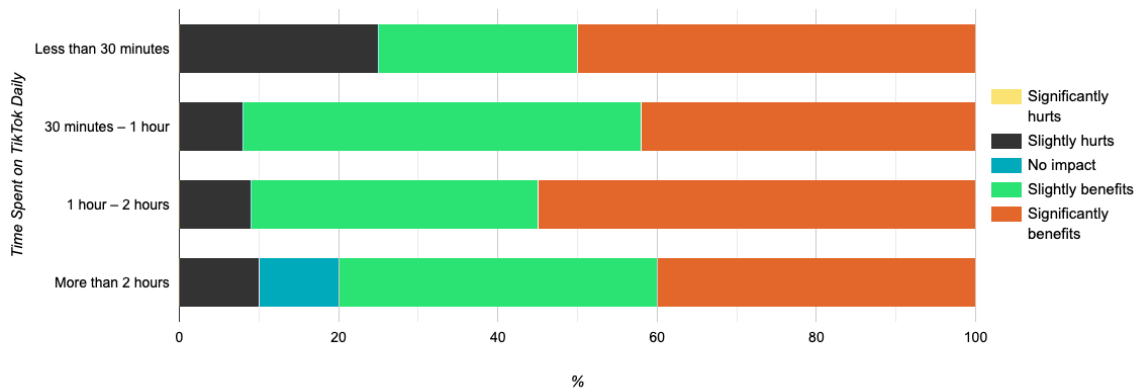
Figure 2. Likelihood of engaging with polarizing content by time spent on TikTok.

Respondents were further prompted to indicate how they believe polarizing content impacts the amount of time they spend on TikTok. Results sorted by daily time spent on TikTok are shown in Figure 3.



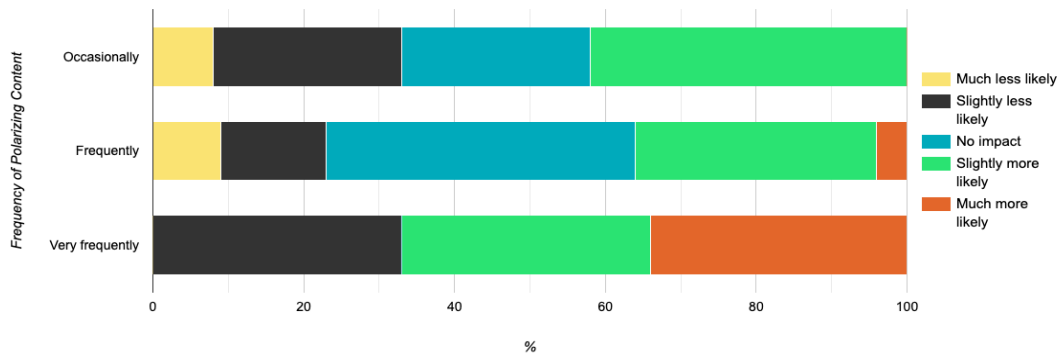
**Figure 3.** Impact of polarizing content on amount of time TikTok is used by time spent on TikTok.

The final question that respondents who indicated that they use TikTok and find its content polarizing were asked was how they believed such polarizing content impacted TikTok’s profits. The results of this question are displayed in Figure 4, sorted by the amount of time respondents spend on TikTok.



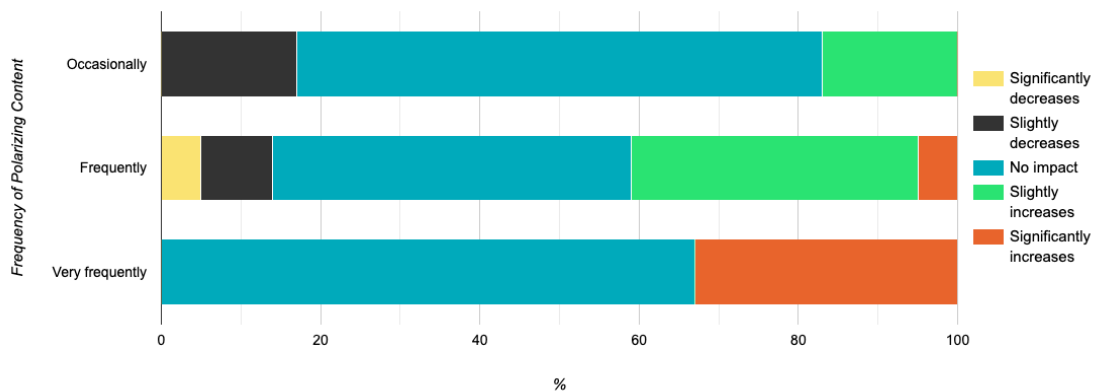
**Figure 4.** Impact of polarizing content on TikTok profits by time spent on TikTok.

Findings regarding the perspectives of TikTok users who find TikTok content polarizing can also be sorted by the frequency at which respondents see polarizing content. Results regarding the question of how polarizing content impacts engagement with content are sorted by frequency of seeing polarizing content in Figure 5.



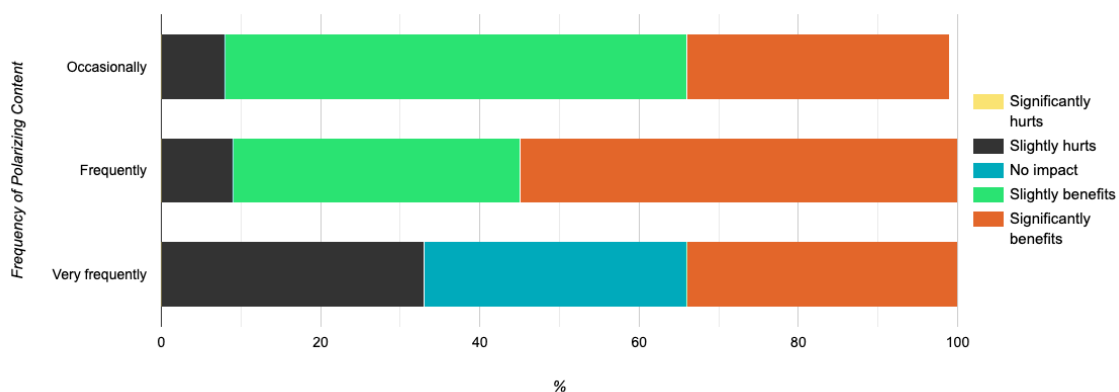
**Figure 5.** Likelihood of engaging with polarizing content by frequency of polarizing content.

Results of the question asking about the extent to which polarizing content on TikTok impacts time spent on the platform are displayed in Figure 6, sorted by frequency of seeing polarizing content.



**Figure 6.** Impact of polarizing content on amount of time TikTok is used by frequency of polarizing content.

Participants' responses to the question asking about the impact of polarizing content on TikTok's profits are shown in Figure 7, separated by frequency of polarizing content seen by respondents.



**Figure 7.** Impact of polarizing content on TikTok profits by frequency of polarizing content.

Overall, 92.5% of participants who indicated that they use TikTok responded that they believed TikTok has polarizing content. Of this group of respondents, 32.43% expressed that they occasionally see polarizing content on TikTok, 59.46% expressed that they frequently see polarizing content on TikTok, and 8.11% expressed that they very frequently see polarizing content on TikTok. 8.11% expressed that they are much less likely to engage with polarizing TikTok content, while 18.92% expressed that they are slightly less likely to engage with polarizing TikTok content, 32.43% expressed that polarizing content has no impact on their engagement with content, 35.14% expressed that they are slightly more likely to engage with polarizing TikTok content, and 5.41% expressed that they are much more likely to engage with polarizing TikTok content. Further, 2.70% of these participants responded that polarizing content significantly decreases the amount of time they spend on TikTok, 10.81% responded that polarizing content slightly decreases the amount of time they spend on TikTok, 54.05% responded that polarizing content has no impact on the amount of time they spend on TikTok, 27.03% responded that polarizing content slightly increases the amount of time they spend on TikTok, and 5.41% responded that polarizing content significantly increases the amount of time they spend on TikTok. Lastly, 10.81% indicated that they believe polarizing content slightly hurts TikTok's profits, 2.70% indicated that polarizing content has no impact on TikTok's profits, 40.54% indicated that polarizing content slightly benefits TikTok's profits, and 45.95% indicated that polarizing content significantly benefits TikTok's profits.

## Discussion

Looking at the overall findings, a few important conclusions can be reached. First, 92.5% of participants who expressed that TikTok had polarizing content confirm that polarizing content is present on TikTok. Further, the fact that 67.57% of such participants indicated that they see polarizing content on TikTok frequently or very frequently demonstrates that TikTok is largely characterized by polarizing content, which is common and widespread throughout the platform. Survey participants noted that they were more likely to engage with polarizing content and indicated that they believed polarizing content increases the amount of time they spend on TikTok. This confirms the research of Barrett et al. that social media is worsening polarization as TikTok is shown to heavily consist of polarizing content being displayed to users (Barrett et al., 2021). Although survey participants indicated that they were more likely to engage with polarizing TikTok content and believed that polarizing content increases the amount of time they spend on TikTok, such indications are much less uniform than the proportion of participants who expressed that they believed TikTok is profiting off of polarizing content. With 86.49% of participants expressing that they believe TikTok profits either slightly or significantly benefit from polarizing content, this survey response supports Simon's concept of an "attention economy"—participants recognize that increased engagement and time spent on TikTok resulting from polarizing content would have a positive impact on TikTok's profits. However, there is a clear disparity between the extent to which survey participants believe that polarizing content impacts their activity on TikTok compared to the extent to which polarizing content impacts TikTok's profits. With only 40.54% of respondents expressing that they believe they are more likely to engage with polarizing TikTok content and 32.43% of respondents expressing that they believe polarizing content increases the amount of time they spend on TikTok, the perceived impact of polarizing content on one's own behavior falls far short of the perceived impact of polarizing content on the platform's collective user base. This suggests that while users are self-aware about the fact that their attention and engagement is key for the success of social platforms such as TikTok, they tend to underestimate the extent to which they personally are manipulated by divisive content that they recognize pushes them to engage more with the platform and spend more time on TikTok. Further, analyzing specific trends within subsets of data reveal more patterns that demonstrate how TikTok's algorithm shapes the activity of its increasingly self-aware user base with regard to polarizing content.

The self-awareness of TikTok users is intertwined with the platform's algorithm that displays polarizing or divisive content to users, which has various implications for the platform's role in the attention economy. Although most participants recognized that polarizing content benefits TikTok's profits, those who frequently or very frequently see polarizing content were more likely to say that polarizing content significantly benefits profits rather than slightly benefits. The connection between greater exposure to polarizing content and the recognition of its greater role in TikTok's profits demonstrates that TikTok users who are more often shown polarizing content understand that it has a significant role in the company's success and profits. Thus, users who find themselves being shown divisive content on the platform do not blindly consume it but are rather able to identify that it is an aspect of the attention economy and a significant factor in TikTok's success. Such self-awareness must be factored into participant responses regarding the impact of polarizing content on their activity, as well as into considerations on how TikTok's algorithm plays a role in tying together polarizing content and the company's place in the attention economy. When looking at the differing exposure to polarizing content, an initial point of discussion is that 100% of those who spend one to two hours or more than two hours on TikTok daily believed that Tiktok has polarizing content compared to 80% of those who spend less than 30 minutes daily and 85.71% of those who spend 30 minutes to one hour daily. This shows that participants who spend more time on TikTok are more likely to be exposed to divisive content on the platform, a conclusion that is further shown by the fact that respondents who spend more than one hour daily on TikTok more frequently see polarizing content than those who spend less than 1 hour daily on the platform. One potential explanation for this is simply that as users are more active, they will inevitably see more polarizing content. However, this means that the TikTok algorithm is also increasing the frequency with which more active users are shown polarizing content. Motives behind this algorithm can be explained by the positive correlation observed between the likelihood



of engaging with polarizing content and time spent daily on TikTok. This correlation demonstrates that higher engagement with polarizing content is linked to increased amount of time that TikTok is used, so it is logical for TikTok to display polarizing content more frequently to keep active users engaged for longer stretches of time. This also means that a primary goal for TikTok's algorithm is minimizing user churn, or the loss of active users. TikTok's algorithm has enabled the company to succeed in the attention economy because of its ability to increase the frequency of polarizing content as users become more active, which in turn keeps users more engaged with the platform. In fact, people who spend more than one hour daily on TikTok were more likely to say that polarizing content increases the amount of time they spend on TikTok than people who spend less than one hour daily. Thus, more active TikTok users have become more susceptible to influence by polarizing content, evident by its impact on the extent to which they use TikTok. This is further demonstrated as respondents who frequently or very frequently see polarizing content on TikTok were more likely to indicate that it increases the amount of time they spend on the platform than those who occasionally see polarizing content. Thus, the true power of TikTok's algorithm derives from the platform's ability to thrive in the attention economy by increasing the frequency with which it shows polarizing content to active users to not only keep them constantly engaged, but to actually increase their usage of the platform when more consistently shown divisive content.

## Conclusion

This research offers new insight into how platforms like TikTok have been able to succeed within the attention economy. Polarizing content is something that many of TikTok's users are exposed to, and users are evidently able to piece together how polarizing content allows TikTok to engage its user base. The results of this study carry important implications for TikTok users and other platforms seeking to thrive in the attention economy.

This study highlighted an important trait within TikTok users—self-awareness. While the attention economy is often criticized for its manipulation and exploitation of consumers, this study demonstrates that individuals who consume content on TikTok are increasingly understanding their role within the attention economy. TikTok users in this study recognize how beneficial divisive content is for TikTok's profits and they can also understand how polarizing content increases user engagement, but self-serving bias slightly hinders user self-awareness as individual users feel that they are less susceptible to the impact of polarizing content as compared to the overall user base. This suggests that, as the attention economy moves towards increased transparency, it is important for individuals to recognize and actively seek to reduce their self-serving bias when identifying how they fit into the attention economy.

As for platforms who are seeking to thrive into the attention economy, this study demonstrates how the form of content being displayed shapes user engagement. While this study demonstrates that polarizing content can draw user attention and increase engagement, it is also important for platforms to consider the ethicality of using divisive content to engage users and increase profits. Further, the study's results demonstrate that TikTok's algorithm is largely successful because of its ability to make active users even more active – creating a high-quality user base that enables the platform to succeed in the attention economy. Thus, for other platforms who seek to engage consumers and prosper in the attention economy, this study's results suggest that the best course of action is to prioritize high-quality users by targeting engagement efforts towards users who are already relatively active on the platform.

As this study has demonstrated how polarizing content contributes to TikTok's success within the attention economy, many potential future research topics arise to further identify the role that polarization and divisiveness play in the attention economy. While this study focused solely on TikTok's utilization of polarizing content, identifying how other social media platforms use polarizing content can help best understand the collective role of polarizing content for social media platforms that dominate the attention economy, as well as differences between platforms' approaches to polarizing content. Further, research into TikTok's algorithm can be done to identify how specific user actions drive the platform to display polarizing content to an extent that is tailored to maximize user engagement. Other research could move beyond the scope of teenagers and analyze how other age demographics are involved in the attention economy, which would help best identify similarities and differences across consumers of different ages

in the attention economy. Such research would strengthen the findings and conclusions of this study and improve understanding of different aspects of the attention economy.

## Limitations

There are several limitations to the survey respondents. The survey sample had a skewed cultural/ethnic background, with the majority of respondents being Asian Americans. This lack of diversity may have led to a less reliable representation of TikTok's user segment, as not all cultures and ethnicities were equitably represented in the sample. Furthermore, the respondents' skew towards a high socioeconomic status within the sample does not equitably represent TikTok users of lower socioeconomic status. Individuals of differing socioeconomic backgrounds may possess different interests, which could cause the influence of polarizing content on their engagement with TikTok to be inconsistent with the results of the survey in this research. This research thus best represents the influence of polarizing content within TikTok on California high school students of upper-class socioeconomic background, which is consistent with TikTok's user demographic.

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