

Factors Contributing to Youth's Exposure to Mental Health Misinformation on TikTok During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing number of youth having access to smartphones and technology, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (McClain, 2022). Social media, such as TikTok, grew exponentially during the pandemic alongside increased postings of mental health content. As the majority of TikTok users are young people, this paper examines the question: "what factors have contributed most to the increase in the use of potentially misleading online mental health information among youth during the COVID-19 pandemic?". Reviewing previous research, this paper mainly applies descriptive and evaluation analysis to study the factors that prompted youth to seek mental health information on TikTok. This paper argues that barriers to mental health care and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic have led young people to turn to TikTok for mental health information, in turn leading to youth to be more exposed to misinformation. This paper calls for improvements in mental health care accessibility for youth and identifies the root causes of increased misinformation exposure on TikTok. The increased mental health discussions that took place through TikTok should continue but it is imperative to explore ways to prevent information from overflowing and being unreliable for the users.

Introduction

In 2018, 95% of American adolescents ages 13-17 had access to a cell phone and 45% of them were almost constantly online (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). A study in 2020 reported that 94.6% of adolescents ages 13-18 used social media platforms (Plaisime et al., 2020). Social media is increasingly used by youth, especially through the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 11, 2020, when WHO(World Health Organization) declared the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has experienced drastic changes that have also led to the rise of new social platforms.

In the past, social media platforms mostly referred to media such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, or Snapchat. Recently, a short-form video platform, TikTok, has been added to the list. Since TikTok is relatively new, research on it is lacking. Yet, TikTok is a fast-growing platform that reached over 1 billion users in less than 6 years (Iqbal, 2022; D'Souza, 2022). It is significant to identify this uprising social media app and explore its content.

With more than 60% of the TikTok users aged 10-29 years old, the TikTok user population mostly consists of adolescents and young adults. Including youths, the majority population on TikTok, global mental health was substantially influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Iqbal, 2022). With the difficulties the society went through during the pandemic, mental health-related videos started going viral and received billions of views on social media platforms such as TikTok. This has led to an increase in mental health literacy and lesser stigma about talking about mental health. Despite these positive outcomes, the vast majority of mental health videos posted on TikTok were misleading and encouraged self-diagnosis (Yeung et al., 2022). Misleading mental health information not only wrongfully shapes the public's perception and knowledge of mental health but also impacts users' mental health directly. Since 60% of TikTok's users consist of young people aged 10-29 years old, the young population is more at risk for misleading

mental health information (Iqbal, 2022). It is crucial to identify the root problem of “why” youth are joining the TikTok mental health community and are further exposed to mental health-related information. Therefore, this paper will examine the question of what factors have contributed most to the increase in the use of potentially misleading online mental health information among youth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper argues that young people have turned to TikTok for mental health information because of barriers to mental health care and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though isolation was a factor that specifically intensified during the pandemic, the barriers to mental health care persisted in advance of the pandemic. By highlighting the ethnical or racial disparities in mental health care, this piece discusses the barriers for ethnic or racial minority adolescents. This continues the discussion of greater exposure to mental health misinformation in young people, especially minority adolescents.

Literature Review

As TikTok and mental health misinformation on social media are recent topics, there is a lack of studies discussing the mental health information on TikTok. However, this paper seeks to bring together researchers from various sources relating to TikTok, mental health, youth mental health care accessibility, COVID-19 pandemic, and misinformation and connect them. This literature review will focus on the rise of TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic and its relation to mental health videos on TikTok, and the misleading mental health information on TikTok.

TikTok Description and its Rise During the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok’s users expanded rapidly. TikTok is one of the fastest growing “short-form mobile video” apps that allow users to post videos spanning only 15 seconds with various music audio clips and filters (“About TikTok,” n.d.). In June 2020, the number of short-form video users in China reached 81.78 million (Wu, 2021). “As a leader of the short video industry,” TikTok has reached daily active users of over 600 million (Wu, 2021). Wu’s study further explains how the pandemic impacted TikTok’s growth and identifies that it has become the dominant source of public health information.

With an 87% increase in downloads from 2019 to 2020, TikTok has grown rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic and now has more than 1.3 billion active users (Iqbal 2022). As shown in Figure 1, TikTok’s authentic and casual characteristics were shown through the videos and content posted on TikTok. A paper by Su et al.(2020) states that the authentic and casual traits of TikTok videos provided a source of comfort during the pandemic. Iqbal’s overview of statistics of TikTok contains meaningful information about the growth and users of the platform. However, the reliability of this source is uncertain as it is a compilation of statistics from various sources and is not a survey conducted by a research center.

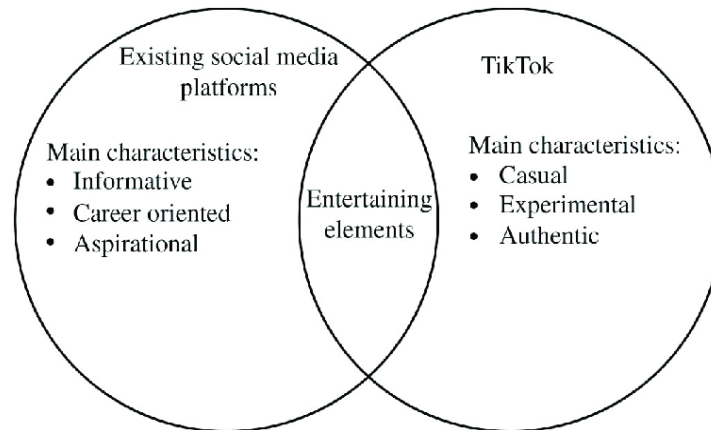


Figure 1. Relationship between TikTok and existing social media platforms. From “Fan Engagement in 15 Seconds: Athletes’ Relationship Marketing During a Pandemic via TikTok,” by Su, Y., Baker, B. J., Doyle, J. P., and Yan, M, 2020, *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 13(3), 436–446.

Mental Health Struggles During the Pandemic and Mental Health Videos on TikTok

Further mental health discussions took place on TikTok, sharing relatable struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic. TikTok’s #mentalhealth hashtag has more than 39 billion views, not including relevant hashtags like #anxiety, #adhd, and #mentalhealthatters which each have 15.8 billion, 13.2, and 24 billion views (“#mentalhealth”, n.d.; “#anxiety”, n.d.; “#adhd”, n.d., “#mentalhealth”, n.d.). Many other mental health-related hashtags such as #depression, #ptsd, #selflove, and #mentalillness have thousands of posts and views.

A recent review of psychological conditions revealed that “numerous emotional outcomes, including stress, depression, irritability, insomnia, fear, confusion, anger, frustration, boredom, and stigma” were related to quarantine and some even persisted after the quarantine (Verma, G. et al., 2022). These sources on mental health hashtags and the COVID-19 pandemic and its relation to mental health provided reliable quantitative and qualitative data. Even though they discuss two different topics, evidence suggests that the mental health struggles during the pandemic contributed to the rise of mental health-related videos on TikTok.

Misleading Mental Health Information on TikTok

The mental health-related videos on TikTok helped spread awareness of mental health and improve mental health literacy. However, youth are learning from misleading mental health information on TikTok. According to a study by Yeung et al.(2022), 52% of #adhd videos on TikTok were categorized as misleading. Although most information posted by mental health professionals on TikTok is correct, the majority of mental health videos are consumer-generated on TikTok (Basch et al., 2022). According to Jia et al.(2021), young adults tend to seek more health information online. This shows that young adults are more at risk for misleading mental health information on TikTok. As my paper discusses the factors that led young people to turn to online sources on the basis of mental health misinformation on TikTok, these sources are a significant background to the study.

TikTok has recognized this problem of misinformation and has taken measures to reduce them. Through partnering with various, leading wellness and mental health organizations, TikTok attempts to combat mental health misinformation. Through partnering with the organizations, they seek to help bring reliable tips, resources, and conversation starters about mental health. The partnerships help protect the emotional health of young people and seek to share mental health resources around the COVID-19 pandemic.

My paper aims to use these sources to explain and analyze the factors that made young people turn to the TikTok mental health community. Despite the literature around TikTok and mental health, there is a lack of research

around “why” youth are seeking and utilizing more information online on TikTok. By connecting the dots between various studies on the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok, youth’s use of social media, mental health care accessibility, and mental health, it will directly relate the factors together and explain the youth’s TikTok mental health information seeking behavior.

Methodology

In order to connect the dots between the series of issues youth faced and their mental health information seeking on TikTok, relevant evidence was researched and collected through scholarly sources such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and JMIR. The “rise of TikTok,” “mental health misinformation on TikTok,” “TikTok Therapy,” “mental health care disparity in youth,” “youth online health information seeking behavior,” and “COVID-19 pandemic and validity” were included as key terms when researching on the databases.

Secondary sources were consulted predominantly with both quantitative and qualitative data. Statistical data were researched through research centers and organizations such as Pew Research Center and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. The paper mainly applied descriptive analysis on the factors that contributed to the increase in the youth’ use of mental health information and how the factors relate to TikTok’s attributes. Alongside the descriptive analysis, evaluation analysis is used to evaluate the current mental health care system and the mental health information available on TikTok.

Results

Barriers to Mental Health Care

The lack of mental health care accessibility for youth, especially minority youth, is making them turn to misleading online sources, such as TikTok. According to a paper by Chu et al.(2017), the main reasons for using the internet when looking for health and mental health information are the lack of doctor availability and barriers to mental health and health care services. This shows that people tend to seek information online when faced with barriers to professional mental health care services.

According to Youth.Gov, white youth are more likely to receive mental health care services compared to youth of color. Asian youth were less likely to receive mental health care services than most youths of other races and ethnicity (Lipari et al., 2016). Also, more Hispanic youth have unmet mental health needs compared to black and white youth (“Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders Among Youth,” 2018). The greater barriers to mental health care, including financial, social, and structural, are making racial or ethnic minority youth turn to online mental health resources like TikTok videos.

Youth first reported that they did not know how and where to find mental health help and whom to talk to. They also perceived their mental health problems as a problem serious enough to ask for help (Radez et al., 2020). When consulting with help sources, informal mental health help sources were more likely to be used than formal help sources for various reasons including privacy issues and lack of mental health literacy (Pretorius et al., 2019). The paper acknowledges that informal help sources could include social media (Pretorius et al., 2019). A study by Radez et al.(2020) shares the four main barriers that are stopping youth from seeking mental health care. First is individual factors, such as mental health literacy and “perceptions of help-seeking”. Second is social factors, such as “social stigma and embarrassment”. Third is “young people’s perceptions of the therapeutic relationship with professionals” such as privacy and trust. Fourth is “systemic and structural barriers and facilitators” such as financial costs and availability (Radez et al., 2020). This paper will be analyzing the second, third, and fourth factors in relation to TikTok.

The accessibility of TikTok as a mobile app combats the structural barriers to mental health care such as financial burden. The cost of an hour-long traditional therapy session ranges from \$65 to \$250 and many are seeking

these sessions on a regular basis (“How Much Does Therapy Cost?,” 2019). Even with health insurance, which is difficult to receive due to the lack of insurance companies' connection to independent mental health professionals, the cost is normally about \$50 or more (Bornhorst, 2021). This makes it difficult for many youth and families to afford mental health care consistently, leading youth to seek more resources online. TikTok is a free-for-all app that is available in almost all countries except India and Afghanistan, where TikTok is banned (Maiorca, 2022). A fact sheet from Pew Research Center shares that 85% of the US population owns a smartphone that can download mobile apps like TikTok (“Mobile Fact Sheet,” 2021). As a free mobile app, TikTok eliminates the financial burden on youth and is accessible to anyone with a smartphone and the internet.

Removing the logistical factors of mental health care, TikTok provides a flexible and accessible platform for young people to seek mental health information. Logistical factors can include lack of time, interferences with other activities, and transportation difficulties (Radez et al., 2020). As most young people are students, they are faced with difficulties to take time for mental health care services along with their schedules for school, assignments, and extra-curricular activities. According to a quantitative and qualitative study analysis by Radez et al.(2020), these logistical factors limited mental health care accessibility to youth in 56% of the studies.

The social and relationship barriers youth face to mental health care is resolved through the privacy TikTok has as an online platform. Relationship factors between youth and mental health professionals were reported as a barrier in 68% of the studies and social factors such as social stigma, personal views on mental health, and anticipated consequences were reported as a barrier in 76% of the studies (Radez et al., 2020). Youth also supported that the relationship and structural barriers such as their reluctance to attend professional sessions are hindering them from seeking professional mental health care services (Meredith et al., 2009; Pailler et al., 2009). Social factors “related to perceived stigma and young people’s experienced and/or anticipated embarrassment as a consequence of negative public attitudes” were a barrier to seeking mental health care from a professional, especially for minority youth (Radez et al., 2020). Since TikTok is a free mobile app, it provides privacy for youth and no face-to-face interaction with professionals. This nature of the platform brings down the social barriers and relationship barriers between youth and mental health professionals, providing a more accessible space for youth to seek mental health information.

The barriers to professional mental health care including lack of accessibility, social, relationship, financial, and structural barriers, are making youth seek more information online in informal sources such as social media platforms like TikTok. As TikTok is an online, free-for-all, social media platform that reduces these barriers, youth who are facing these difficulties are turning to TikTok for mental health information.

Isolation and lack of connectedness during the COVID-19 pandemic

The mental health videos posted on TikTok tend to provide social connectedness and validity to its users. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing and lockdowns heightened the isolation and social connectedness for everyone, including young people. With schools closed due to COVID-19, students did not have in-person interaction at school and spent most of their time at home. A study by Jain et al.(2020), suggests that social isolation and quarantine led to significant mental health issues with loneliness and neglect. Adolescents faced loneliness with the neglected fundamental need to belong which is also the desire for interpersonal attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Baskin et al., 2010). With the physical barriers to social interaction and friendships, young people used the internet and online communication to stay connected.

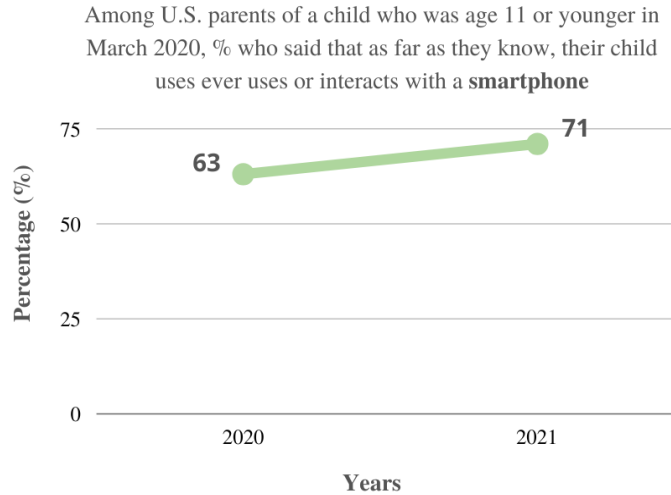


Figure 2. Share of Parents Who Say Their Young Child Used Digital Devices, Many Social Media Sites - Including TikTok - Up in 2021 Versus 2020. From McClain, C. (2022, April 28). How Parents’ Views of Their Kids’ Screen Time, Social Media Use Changed During COVID-19. Pew Research Center. Retrieved July 23, 2022, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/04/28/how-parents-views-of-their-kids-screen-time-social-media-use-changed-during-covid-19/>

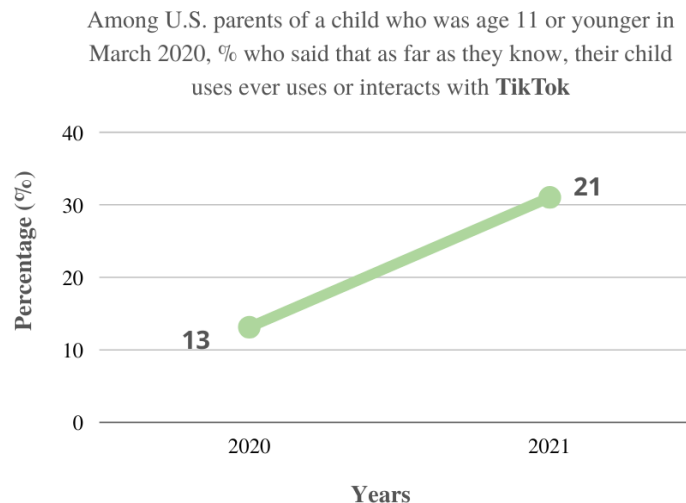


Figure 3. Share of Parents Who Say Their Young Child Used Digital Devices, Many Social Media Sites - Including TikTok - Up in 2021 Versus 2020. From McClain, C. (2022, April 28). How Parents’ Views of Their Kids’ Screen Time, Social Media Use Changed During COVID-19. Pew Research Center. Retrieved July 23, 2022, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/04/28/how-parents-views-of-their-kids-screen-time-social-media-use-changed-during-covid-19/>

As shown in figure 2, young children’s use of smartphones increased from 63% to 71% between 2020 and 2021 which is from the beginning to the middle of the pandemic. As shown in figure 3, TikTok usage by youth also increased from 13% to 21%, increasing the most compared to other social media platforms. Usage of social media and phones increased exponentially among young people during the pandemic. Understanding and sharing experiences online are likely to promote social connectedness (Winstone et al., 2021). Youth sought greater feelings of community and social connectedness through interacting with individuals online through social media and the internet. 59% of

TikTok users feel a sense of community on TikTok and 84% say that they come across relatable content on TikTok (“Nielsen Study Shows TikTok Ideal Place for “Discovery,” content more “Authentic,”” 2021). Since TikTok is a social media platform known for the authenticity of its content, users were attracted to seek their content when struggling with lockdown and quarantine during the pandemic.

As stated in the content analysis by Basch et al.(2022), “general mental health” and “personal stories” were the top two themes within #mentalhealth videos on TikTok. The theme of the video that received the most views, likes, and comments was “offering support or validation”. With the growth of TikTok during the pandemic, mental health videos provided support and validation through sharing mental health information and “personal stories” to the young people going through mental health struggles with the massive change happening. Geographic closeness has been connected to social connectedness between individuals (Bailey et al., 2018). The disassociation and isolation the pandemic brought through the physical distance from others increased the use of social media such as TikTok. The authentic TikTok videos shared relatable struggles that many youths are experiencing through the pandemic. This created solidarity and provided a sense of community and validation to the mental health struggles of young people.

The mental health videos posted on TikTok lessen the feeling of isolation and lack of connectedness that intensified through the COVID-19 pandemic. TikTok’s #mentalhealth videos offer support and validation through sharing general mental health information and “personal stories” (Basch et al., 2022). These videos provided a place for the users to feel a sense of connection and community when going through the sudden changes and anxieties in the pandemic.

Conclusion

This paper uses evidence from quantitative and qualitative sources to argue that youth have turned to TikTok for mental health information because of barriers to mental health care and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their behavior of seeking mental health information on TikTok has led to greater exposure to mental health misinformation in youth.

Explaining a factor that already existed prior to the pandemic, barriers to mental health care, and another factor that was worsened or created due to the pandemic, isolation, and lack of social connectedness, this paper not only hopes to analyze the factors encouraging youth to use online sources but also bring structural disparities and obstacles to mental health into question. Studies have revealed that with mental health care disparity, ethnic and racial minority youth especially struggle to find mental health resources. Along with the lack of mental health care accessibility, TikTok as a mobile app combats the systematic barriers to mental health care including logistical factors such as financial difficulties. Additionally, the social stigma and relationship barriers that hinder youth from seeking mental health help are reduced through TikTok as it is an online platform. Specifically through the COVID-19 pandemic, youth seek social connectedness and validity from TikTok’s mental health videos during quarantines and lockdowns.

Due to the lack of research on TikTok’s impact and mental health misinformation, the range of resources around mental health support and information on TikTok was limited. Thus, this paper uses research from numerous areas and connects the dots to fill in the gap between prior studies about the root cause of young people’s motivation to join TikTok’s mental health community and seek its information. However, more research on the uprising social media platform TikTok would be significant. By using data from secondary sources, some data points were conducted from individual websites and institutions. For the limited primary resources available on TikTok’s direct impact and mental health information, the accuracy of the data points is a possible limitation of this paper.

Further research can explore TikTok’s impact and structure such as audio marketing to provide much-needed research. Various issues are connected to mental health videos on TikTok such as self-diagnosis encouragement, the “for you” page of TikTok and further spread of misinformation through TikTok’s structure, and evaluation and examination of the impact of TikTok’s features resolved the factors mentioned in the paper. Despite the great accessibility of TikTok, the features that are thought to reduce mental health care barriers in this paper might have a negative impact as well.

TikTok has taken measures through partnerships to combat mental health misinformation. TikTok's work to reduce misinformation has been helpful but many of them do not target mental health misinformation. The partnerships focus more on spreading mental health awareness through social media, which helped to spread reliable mental health information on TikTok. As TikTok is a social media platform, its main mission and purpose are to connect individuals from diverse backgrounds and provide content. Therefore, the work of mental health professionals and government or non-governmental mental health organizations is essential in combating mental health misinformation on TikTok. It is significant for these individuals and organizations to utilize these emerging social media platforms for more spreading accurate mental health information.

TikTok is a constantly growing platform that is now bringing in users from various age groups. Although TikTok's mental health videos impressively spread awareness around the importance of and reduced stigma around mental health, it is now an important time to examine and act to reduce the negative consequences of this improvement.

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