

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24297/jssr.v20i.9571>**What does TikTok have to do with it? Experiences of Young Adults with Social Media and Life Satisfaction: A Qualitative Analysis of Influences**Janet Espinoza¹ Arthalia Weekes²

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Espjanet@nmsu.edu ¹, Asweekes22sp@ollusa.edu ²**Abstract**

This qualitative study investigates the impact of TikTok usage on the life satisfaction and its contribution towards self-actualization of young adults aged 18–25. Adopting a phenomenological approach, the research explores the experiences and perceptions of TikTok engagement and its relation to the life satisfaction of five young adults. Six main themes emerged for the analysis: 1) Love & Belonging, 2) Influence, 3) Life Satisfaction, 4) Self-Esteem and Identify, 5) Mood, and 6) Risks and Challenges. These findings uncover various aspects of TikTok use, such as content consumption patterns and emotional responses, offering insights into the nuanced ways TikTok influences young adults' perceptions of their lives and contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the platform engagement and life satisfaction. Furthermore, this research underscores the importance of social workers' role in advocating for ethical social media practices and clinical interventions tailored to address the impacts of social media on the overall wellbeing of young adults.

Keywords: Young adults, Life Satisfaction, Self-Actualization, TikTok**Introduction**

This study's purpose is to investigate the influence of TikTok use on life satisfaction among young adults. This study adapts qualitative methodology, specifically phenomenology, as it aligns appropriately with the research objective of exploring the relationship between engagement with the social media platform TikTok and the perception of life satisfaction and its contribution towards self-actualization among individuals aged 18–25. This approach provides researchers insight into the participants' meaningful and subjective experiences. Qualitative methodology involves examining phenomena in their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 7). Furthermore, a phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry focuses on uncovering the shared meaning of lived experiences of a phenomenon among multiple individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 11). Aligned with these concepts, researchers seek to examine the following research questions: How do young adults who use TikTok perceive personal life satisfaction? How do young adults who use TikTok perceive their self-actualization? How does TikTok use amongst young adults affect the perception of self-actualization? What perceptions do young adults have of one's life satisfaction regarding social media? What is the direct impact on life satisfaction with the use of social media outlets and if so, how significant is the impact?

Social media can be traced as far back as 1844 when telegraph machines were used to produce messages (Maryville University, 2020). The origins of today's online social media date back to 1969 to the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network used by scientists to share software, hardware, and other data between four involved universities. Then, in 1999, the emergence of today's social media platforms began. As of 2019, the most popular platforms include YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter among 18–24-year-olds (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Some of the most popular sites and apps today include LinkedIn (launched 2002), Facebook (launched 2004), Twitter (launched 2006), Instagram (launched 2010), and Snapchat (launched 2011). That brings us to today's most popular and downloaded app of 2019 and 2022, TikTok with its Launch in September of 2017 (previously known as Musical.ly, released September 2016). At the peak of its popularity in 2021, eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds make up the highest percentage worldwide of TikTok users at 34.9% (Iqbal, 2023). The latest statistics reveal a rise in TikTok usage among the young adult population in the US, with 62% of those aged eighteen- to twenty-nine reporting they use TikTok in the US alone (Gottfried, 2024).

The current body of literature on social media's impact on life satisfaction presents mixed findings. Suggesting that the effects of social media on life satisfaction are complex and multifaceted, considering the extent of use (Stevie, 2024; Pang, 2020, Orben et al., 2019), underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of the impact. Some studies indicate a negative association with individuals' wellbeing, discussing the connection of social networking site use to social media "addiction", depression, anxiety, and low-self-esteem (Uram & Sebastian, 2022). While others report that social media positively impacts life satisfaction because it allows networking and connection (Huang et al, 2021; Pang 2020). Little literature discussed perception of self-actualization based on social media use. To the best of the author's knowledge there has yet to be research conducted on one of the top three most popular platforms amongst young adults, TikTok (Gottfried, 2024).

While existing research predominantly focuses on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, there is a growing interest in exploring other platforms such as TikTok and their impact on life satisfaction. In the broader context, "Satisfaction with life is considered to be a global, cognitive judgment, and scholars have investigated its connection with the entire spectrum of human needs, which arguably form the basis of a global needs theory, as well as narrower constructs such as technology use" (Houghton, et al., 2020). Research from several decades ago underscored the link between self-esteem fulfilment and life satisfaction leading to the development of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985). During the emergence of Instagram as a favored platform among adolescents and emerging adults, researchers found that it posed risks revealing that excessive engagement with Instagram features, such as watching live streams and using the platform as an escape, is associated with problematic usage, highlighting the diverse effects of social media on users (Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2018). More recent research had found that social networking sites can foster connections and support that contribute positively to life satisfaction, specifically among emerging adults (Pang, 2020; Duke, 2021). Alternatively, researchers suggest that the fear of missing (FOMO) out was associated with lower self-esteem and loneliness, resulting in lower life satisfaction and higher potential for adverse effects of excessive technology use on daily life and inter- and intrapersonal functioning (Uram & Sebastian, 2022; Peterka-Bonetta et al., 2019; Sha et al., 2019).

Moreover, studies examining social media use often investigate overall or problematic use. It's important to recognize that overall well-being encompasses life satisfaction and self-actualization within its categories. Previous studies have mainly measured social media discussing differences between active (e.g. posting and commenting) and passive use (e.g. consuming content) (Masciantonio et al., 2021). Results indicate that the specific activities users engage in lead to distinct usage patterns; considering the extent of use can provide a more comprehensive understanding of social media's effects. Choi & Kim (2020) investigated the impact of Instagram use on subjective well-being among young adults, finding that browsing positive posts improved mood, but life satisfaction was complexly influenced by both emotional contagion and social comparison. Recent research suggests a link between social media "addiction" and life satisfaction, in Foroughi et al.'s (2022) study examining 364 university students found that recognition, social, and entertainment needs contributed to Instagram "addiction", while physical activity moderated its effects. The study also revealed the significant impact of Instagram addiction on academic performance, social anxiety, and depression, with academic performance positively predicting life satisfaction, while social anxiety and depression had negative effects on it.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs, known as theories of motivation, states that our actions are motivated by certain physiological and psychological needs that progress from basic to complex (Cherry, 2022). This means that basic needs must be fulfilled before advancing to the next set of needs. This concept was introduced by Abraham Maslow in 1943 and later refined in 1954. Maslow believed that human beings have the desire to be self-actualized; however, one must have several basic needs met prior to achieving the goal of self-actualization. The hierarchy includes five fundamental categories: Firstly, physiological needs pertain to basic needs for survival, such as food, water, and homeostasis. Safety needs involve feelings of safety and security in the environment, including physical well-being and financial stability. Love and belonging needs encompass the desire for emotional connections, including socialization, romantic connections, and familial relationships. Esteem needs revolve around the desire for appreciation and being valued by others, such as being recognized for performance at work or academic accomplishments, contributing to an overall sense of good self-esteem. At the peak of the hierarchy is self-actualization, where an individual reaches their fullest potential, achieving their highest capabilities and accomplishments.

The study, "Who needs social networking? An empirical inquiry into the capability of Facebook to meet human needs and satisfaction with life" (Houghton, Pressey, & Istanbuluoglu, 2020), used a survey approach and applied Maslow's Hierarchy of needs to explore the capacity that Facebook has in satisfying human needs. They tested a model created for measuring need fulfillment by Facebook use. The model was derived from Maslow's hierarchical structure and suggested that the use of Facebook would fulfill human needs and follow the same path as the original, however the key element was the intent behind Facebook usage.

Despite the prevalence of social media use among young adults, gaps in research persist, particularly concerning the TikTok platform and implications for life satisfaction and self-actualization. The literature appears to lack a specific focus on life satisfaction and social media use; although the areas impacted can fall under life satisfaction if coupled together. This observation highlights research gaps considering social media impact. Additionally, literature tends not to target a single social media outlet, instead addressing multiple outlets, which could lead to the assumption that all social media outlets impact users in the same way. Consequently, there is a need to further explore this phenomenon. It is evident that different social media outlets have varying impacts on their users, based on their popularity among specific age groups. Young adults (age 18-25), also identified as emerging adults, are the target population in this study due to the prevalence of social media among this group.

Materials and Methods

In this study, researchers utilize snowball sampling, a qualitative research strategy where researchers identify one or two people to be included in the study and then use the established research participants' assistance in the identification of other potential cases that are information-rich (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.159). The data was collected from individuals 18–25 years who use TikTok. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), phenomenological studies average sample size is 5–15; the researcher's goal for this study particular study was 5–10 participants. However, data saturation was achieved after interviewing 5 participants, indicating that new information ceased to emerge. The inclusion criteria for participants were individuals aged 18–25 who actively use TikTok, with no other exclusions beyond age. This criterion aligns with existing literature on social media use, indicating that this specific age group was among the ages of most frequent users of social media platforms (Yang & Zilberg, 2020 from Reuters, 2019). The interviews were conducted online via Zoom to ensure accessibility for participants while maintaining confidentiality and privacy. Interviews were conducted from the researcher's private offices to safeguard the participants' confidentiality.

Qualitative Information

Researchers seek to obtain qualitative information about the contexts in which young adults engage with the TikTok platform. This includes details about their usage patterns, frequency of use, and the types of content they interact with. Such contextual data provides a deeper understanding of how TikTok fits into participants' daily lives and its potential impact on their perceptions of life satisfaction and self-actualization. Moreover, it is essential to gather participants' subjective experiences of their life satisfaction and self-actualization in relation to TikTok. This involves exploring how they perceive their overall well-being and fulfillment in life, and any changes or influences they attribute to their engagement with TikTok. Additionally, collecting basic demographic information, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and educational background, allows for the comparison across demographic groups and helps identify potential patterns in the perceptions of TikTok use and its effect on life satisfaction and self-actualization among the target population. Lastly, exploring the relationship between TikTok use and the fulfilment of hierarchical needs provides a theoretical underpinning for analyzing and interpreting data. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the subjective experiences and interpretations of the impact of TikTok use on the lives of young adults.

Methods

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected as follows: Researchers first obtained IRB approval, detailing a proposed data collection plan to adhere to ethical research guidelines. Participant recruitment then involved gaining approval to post IRB-approved fliers around Our Lady of the Lake University (OLLU) and sending invitations via the university's email to all students. Recruitment was further extended through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Interested participants underwent a preliminary screening process to confirm their age and active TikTok use. Once verified, they were scheduled for an interview and provided with a Zoom link, along with the study's purpose statement and informed consent form. The initial interviews were conducted with two participants (the administered interview questions can be found in the table below); in which researchers reviewed the informed consent and reiterated the study's purpose, collected field notes, recorded the sessions using Zoom, and transcribed the audio using Otter AI. At the end of the interview, participants were invited to provide an email address to be entered for a chance to win an Amazon gift card through a random raffle and were asked to recommend additional participants as part of snowball sampling strategy. This process was repeated with newly identified participants until data saturation was achieved.

Interview Questions

- When was the first time you used social media? What do you remember the most about that time?
- What was the platform? What made you choose that platform?
- Tell me about the first time you used TikTok.
- What do you remember the most about the first time you used TikTok?
- Tell me about your TikTok use now.
- Tell me about your mood when you are using TikTok.
- What types of feelings come up for you when using TikTok?
- Tell us about a time when TikTok impacted you in an emotional way? What about that time made the impact was so significant?
- In what ways does Tik Tok impact your daily functioning?
- How does TikTok provide meaning to your overall daily functioning?

- What matters the most to you when thinking about your daily functioning?
- What does life satisfaction mean to you?
- Some people think Tik Tok provides a benefit to life satisfaction, others think Tik Tok risks life satisfaction. Where are you?
 - If Tik Tok presented a risk to your life satisfaction, what might the impact be on you?
 - If Tik Tok presented a benefit to your life satisfaction, what might be the impact on you?
- How, if at all, does TikTok influence the way you cope with life?
- Describe your attitude towards life with TikTok.
- Tell me about your relationships.
 - When thinking about these relationships, how has the nature of your relationships changed since using Tik Tok?
- Tell me about a time another TikTok user responded to you.
- What does TikTok mean to you? How, if at all, has that meaning changed over time?

Table 1. Includes the unstructured interview questions used to guide participants.

Data Analysis

This study applies a phenomenological qualitative approach, utilizing thematic analysis to analyze and interpret the participants' experiences and perspectives. This study employs thematic analysis for "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was executed using NVivo 14 software, commonly used for qualitative data analysis in organizing, coding, analyzing, and gaining insight on the data collected; "NVivo 14 helps you find patterns and connections in documents, transcriptions, and surveys in addition to other qualitative mediums like video, audio, and images" (Lumivero, 2023). The transcription service used during interviews was Otter AI.

Considering this research design, the following plan was developed, including data analysis software and the analysis process. Data reviewed, including interview transcripts and videos, to increase their familiarity with the concepts and contexts of the data collected. Initial coding and categorization, as described below under the first cycle coding, serve as a foundational aspect of the researcher's analysis. Researchers identified themes or patterns that highlight the commonalities, variations, or relationships of the data. To confirm interpretations and ensure the themes are consistent with participants' lived experiences, the researchers employ participant validation. This method assesses the analysis' accuracy, applicability, and genuineness of the analysis. Utilizing descriptive phenomenological writing, the researcher strives to portray the structure, dynamics, and subtleties of lived experience. Researchers apply reflective and transparent techniques to critically examine their biases, assumptions, and interpretations. Transparency is maintained through clear documentation of analytical decisions, methods utilized, and the reflection process. This upholds the integrity of the analysis and the study presented.

Data Preparation

Thematic analysis guided the data reduction and analysis across themes within different groups as well as similarities and variations. Thematic Coding enhanced the overall validity and reliability of the analysis. Overall, facilitating the interpretation of data and delving into deeper meanings and explanations within the data.

Using NVivo (Lumivero, 2023) researchers executed the data analysis using Thematic Coding. NVivo software is commonly used for coding using words or phrases from the participants' own language and provides a true voice for the participants, especially since we truly want to understand the impact on our participants (Lumivero, 2023). The first cycle coding aimed to break down data into more manageable pieces for analysis. In the initial thematic coding process using thematic coding, researchers developed code names and assigned them to summarize data chunks. The researcher's first cycle coding included systematically reviewing the data and assigning descriptive labels, or codes, to data segments representing key ideas, topics, or recurring patterns.

The data was organized based on the following codes and definitions: 1) *TikTok use* refers to the act of using TikTok platform, where one is creating content, sharing content, engaging with other users by watching, liking, commenting, and sharing videos, exploring trends such as dances, memes that circulate on the platform discovering content through hashtags and interacting with the community such as joining chats or collaborating with other users including frequency and duration of use. 2) *Perspective on TikTok* encompasses a range of viewpoints, experiences, creativity, and insight on the platform itself including diverse, educational, creative, and culture perspectives. 3) *Mood* is defined as the emotional state or disposition expressed by individuals during

their TikTok use; encompassing a wide range of feelings, including happiness, sadness, excitement, anger, and boredom. 4) *Life Satisfaction* is the overall sense of contentment, well-being, and other areas of life, subjective to the individual's life circumstances, experiences, and achievements based on personal values, goals, and/or expectations. 5) *Esteem* includes self-worth, self-respect, respect for others, recognition and appreciation, positive regard to oneself shaping overall individual self-perception. 6) *Love & Belonging* is the emotional connection, social relationships, and a sense of connection or acceptance within a community or social group. Interpersonal relationships and experiences of emotional intimacy and receiving support for others. 7) *Technological Connection* being the link or access between devices, networks, or systems that allows data exchange communication and interaction. 8) *Safety*, the measures and practices users take to protect privacy, security, and well-being while engaging on TikTok. 9) *Physiological*, the physical and biological responses that individuals may experience while engaging with the TikTok platform including somatic experience, eyestrain, fatigue, and sleep disruption. 10) *Influence*, the ability or power to affect the thoughts, actions, behavior, opinions or decisions of those who use TikTok involving persuading, motivating, guiding, shaping behaviors, and attitudes of individuals.

Data Interpretation Method

Researchers immersed themselves in the data collected from interviews, reviewing notes and interpretations gathered during the interview process. Researchers coded the data by identifying and labeling meaningful segments related to the research questions and objectives. This included TikTok influence, perceptions of interviewees, and other relevant themes that arose. Similar codes were grouped together to form preliminary themes, exploring patterns and recurring ideas within the data. Initial themes were developed to accurately capture the richness of data and refined and combined as needed to create a comprehensive representation of the data, defined based upon the coded data utilizing direct quotes from the participants. Researchers assessed the relationships between identified themes to uncover connections, dependencies, and hierarchical structures; using this approach provided detailed interpretations for each theme, supported by direct quotes and explained the significance of the themes as it relates to life satisfaction in young adults with use of TikTok. Lastly, researchers integrated feedback from peer reviews to finalize interpretations revisiting the data as needed to ensure coherence and consistency across themes.

Statement on bias

As researchers, it is essential to consider biases, recognizing that biases can impede how data is perceived and the decision-making process. The researchers acknowledge and bracket their preconceptions and personal biases as a fundamental step in the data analysis process. Biases undermine objectivity and fairness, which could hinder overall research. As a result, the following statements have been formulated on bias for bracketing and brindling. This is crucial for approaching the research in an open and receptive manner, particularly when interpreting lived experiences; the ability to demystify assumptions is essential for engaging with others' lived experiences.

As clinical social workers, researchers acknowledge their inclination to view TikTok through the lens of mental health implications. Additionally, it is recognized that researchers are aware of their predisposition to TikTok based on personal experiences. In this research, researchers commit to bracketing their professional and personal biases, focusing solely on participants' genuine experiences. As clinical social workers who closely engage with the complexities of human experiences, researchers recognize the biases towards viewing social media through a lens of its impact on mental health and community support. Through a brindling approach, researchers recognize, acknowledge, and reflect on their professional insights regarding the analysis, in how these biases can impact interpretations of young adults' experiences with TikTok.

Ethical considerations

In addressing ethical considerations, the study prioritized informed consent and confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 55). Participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood their rights and could withdraw from the study at any time. To maintain confidentiality, participants' identities were kept anonymous, and data was securely stored.

"Qualitative research is frequently criticized for lacking scientific rigor with poor justification of the methods adopted, lack of transparency in the analytical procedures and the findings being merely a collection of personal opinions subject to researcher bias" (Nobel & Smith, 2015). However, validity and reliability serve as a foundation in all research; "researchers assert that rigor of qualitative research equates to the concepts reliability and validity, and all are necessary components of quality" (Cypress, 2017). Establishing reliability and validity in research data integrity, replicability, and result accuracy. Furthermore, this practice enhances transparency and decreases the opportunity for researchers' biases to influence the research.

To strengthen the quality of the data, researchers employ various strategies, including addressing researcher effect and biases, ensuring representativeness, obtaining participant feedback, triangulating data, and assessing for ulterior motives and deception (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2020). Triangulation of data sources and member checking were used to validate the findings and interpretations. This involved gathering information from multiple sources and seeking feedback from participants to confirm the accuracy and credibility of the data. Additionally, NVivo software facilitated coding and ensured transparency in the analysis process. Reflexivity was embedded throughout the study, with researchers regularly reflecting on their own biases and assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 44). This helped ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than influenced by personal biases.

While generalizability is not a focus in qualitative research, efforts were made to enhance transferability by providing detailed descriptions of the study's methods and context. This allows readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings or populations. Overall, the strategies for ethical consideration aimed to ensure the integrity and quality of the research findings.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of this qualitative study's investigation on the effect of TikTok usage on young adults' life satisfaction. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this study delved into the feelings, perceptions, and experiences of young adult TikTok users to gain insight into how the platform affects their sense of self-actualization and general well-being. The results are organized according to major themes that emerged from the data, offering a nuanced understanding on TikTok's effects on various aspects of young adults' life. Among these themes are love and belonging, influence, life satisfaction, self-esteem and identity, and risks and challenges.

Each theme is accompanied by direct quotes and insights from participants, providing a firsthand perspective on their experiences and perceptions. By delving into these themes, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between TikTok usage and life satisfaction among young adults.

Theme 1: "I was thinking about you"

Participants expressed a strong sense of connection on TikTok, emphasizing the platform's ability to foster relationships and create communities. One participant stated,

"Maybe I don't see you very often or we don't hang out every day, but I can send you a TikTok and it's like a poke. Like, hey, friend, look at this funny video of the cat dancing, you know? And, like, to me, it's like I'm reaching out without putting so much heaviness on it. It doesn't have to be a plan to get our nails done. It doesn't have to be a dinner or coffee. It doesn't have to be anything that takes time out of either of our lives. But just know I was thinking about you when I saw this silly little cat video. It makes you feel loved, and it makes me feel loved when you react to it. Like, oh, she likes the video I sent, or it made her laugh, or it made her day... I was thinking about you."

Participants expressed feelings of love and belonging within TikTok communities. They described how interactions with like-minded individuals on the platform contributed to their sense of connection and support. One participant stated,

"I think that it has affected the world around me, and affected me at times positively, because I feel like I can relate to others, and I'm not alone."

While another participant shared that,

"TikTok has provided me some comfort in knowing that there are other people out there who, despite their bad days, want to wake up and be a nurse, and they want to help people."

Participants discussed the presence of supportive relationships among TikTok users, characterized by empathy, encouragement, and mutual understanding. Participants discussed how interactions with others on the platform helped them navigate challenges and celebrate achievements. A participant shared,

"It's nice to see too sometimes that you can have a healthy relationship with your significant other and still have arguments or do things differently than other couples. It's nice because while I'm very happy in my relationship, and I love my partner, sometimes you just want to hear that you're not alone in moments where you're sad or you're fighting with them, and other people go through these things too, and they have very long term, respectful relationships. So, I find it relatable and helpful in that way."

Participants highlighted the role of validation and acceptance in fostering a sense of love and belonging on TikTok discussing how positive feedback, likes, and comments from peers contributed to their self-esteem and feelings of acceptance. A participant stated,

"...It's those days where your own people, your own peers, who you would love to relate to, make you feel small or inferior, whereas the people on TikTok make you feel comforted and like you have someone to relate to because they're going through it too. And everyone puts on this hard exterior like, I'm this bad-ass doctor, I'm this bad-ass nurse, and, you know, realistically, I think we all just need a hug sometimes at the end of a really hard shift."

Theme 2: "I felt like everybody else has it. So why not me?"

Many participants discussed the influence of TikTok on shaping trends and influencing behaviors. They noted the platform's role in popularizing content in a way that you are left with no choice but to engage in the content and respond. One participant remarked,

"I think that's also because the algorithm is catered to you and also because it's so easy, and accessible because you click on the app and you, you just move one finger, and you can instantly see a whole bunch of content from people around the world. Every single person who's trying to jump on trends of stuff that you like, so it's just the fact that it's right there. And so, quick and easy to get to."

While another participant stated,

"I can find myself like, being sucked into a rabbit hole of a content that interests you because they put it in your face. So, watch."

Another participant remarked,

"I think when you start digging into a or it has impacted me when you start seeing videos that relate to your childhood, like, for example, you're scrolling through it and you see this little Mexican kid or isn't a kid no more, right? He's your age and he's talking about some story with his mom and think about you, start reflecting and you're just damn like, that's how life was back then. And you just sit there and reflect and be like, Oh, there's more people out there than just you going through something..."

In another instance TikTok influenced sense of identity. A participant shared that,

"I think the influence it a lot because, if you see something like the body, like you have to be a certain skinny but you can't be too skinny, but you also can't be too fat for guys to like you, so that's a thing that I've noticed that has influenced my surroundings and stuff..."

Many participants discussed the influence of others using TikTok as a main reason for their use which connected them to those they wanted to be connected to. One participant stated,

"I think it was because most of my friends had it and I just got it to just because it was the trendy thing to do...So, everybody was taking pictures in class sending notices like that, and I still prefer texting. But I felt like everybody else has it. So why not me?"

Another participant stated,

"I probably say because of friends because at first a lot of people didn't have it and then eventually everybody had it. So, I thought why not download it?"

Theme 3: "My family and friends is good enough for me"

The study revealed mixed perspectives regarding TikTok's overall impact on life satisfaction, ranging from no effect, attributed to being in a place of maturity, to contradictory views on its influence on life satisfaction. One participant shared,

"I would say I'm almost in the middle. Because I know that social media sometimes lies about people's lives and it's definitely a highlight of the highs more than the lows of what's happening in everyday life. So, I think it's more of I know when I can tune out when things aren't as good as they seem in the moment. And I know that just being here living getting an education, being here with my family and friends is good enough for me... I don't feel extremely dependent on like social media standards. But I understand that there are pressures to have an almost perfect lifestyle and like showing that you're adventurous. You're going out and you're doing things, and your life is interesting."

Another participant stated that,

"As far as my satisfaction in life, it can be a hit or miss, because sometimes it feels like relatable content, and other days it feels like comparing myself to the world around me, and maybe I'm not ready for what I'm reaching for...I feel supported, I feel like I'm relating to people, versus on a day where it's like, man, I'm questioning, and there's a lot of uncertainty, and this is just kind of reinforcing that..."

Theme 4: "I'm not doing enough"

The study revealed that TikTok plays a role in shaping participants' self-esteem and identity. Many participants discussed how positive feedback and validation from peers boosted their confidence. A participant shared,

"It really does show you the better side of life and society. So, to me, I feel like there are times where I do feel like oh, my life could be better at this point. Or I could be doing something completely different with my life or oh, I should be reading this book, or I should be going out doing this thing and going over here. So, there are parts where I wish I was doing other things, but not as much feeling like, I'm not doing enough."

While another participant stated,

"Any time anyone in my life has ever had anything negative to say or if it makes me feel belittled, small, or if I feel stupid for my actions or words, it sends me into this spiral of thinking negatively. Like, now I look stupid, and now I feel dumb, and so I get defensive, and I get angry, and I probably would have responded with some smart-ass remark to make them feel as small as I felt. what I would have described as a mature way, but it really just means using big words to make myself seem smarter than I am, because I was confronted with something that I didn't like to feel."

Some participants discussed how TikTok can be used to seek validation and approval from others. They mentioned feeling a sense of achievement when their content received positive responses. A participant stated,

"There was a time where I saw a TikTok about a show that I loved growing up and I reposted that content. And I basically made a comment like singing the song. And I was really excited because a lot of other people understood, and they liked it. So that made me feel good. About that content. And there was someone who like said that I spelled something wrong or something like that. And I was like, okay, that's fine, whatever. But there was definitely a positive response of people also liking the same content that I like and reposting it or even saving it or leaving comments under my comment."

Theme 5: "The sad ones affect you more"

Participants shared the emotional impact of their experiences on TikTok, ranging from joy and fulfillment to anxiety and insecurity. They highlighted the relatability of experiences and emotions. One participant reflected,

"There was a TikTok of a man who was documenting his journey with his mom because his mom had early onset Dementia. And I could relate to that because my grandmother has dementia. And I was I was like, watching him go through like, just like interacting with his mom and like, how, like his feelings were at the time. I really, really did that because I could see myself going through the exact same things."

Another participant shared,

"I would say when I do get affected easily it's because of the current news like what's happening in the world or what has happened. Sometimes makes you, really sad. And also, when I see videos of people, I can relate to going through the same struggles as me. That also can affect me, but I'd usually say like nine times out of 10 the videos that I'm watching they are happy. It's just that sometimes the sad ones affect you more because you're used to feeling positive emotions and then when you get that negative emotion out of the blue is sometimes sticks with you more."

Many participants mentioned using TikTok as a form of escapism and distraction from daily stressors. They appreciated the platform's ability to provide entertainment and divert their attention from negative thoughts. A participant mentioned,

"TikTok has different sides to it. So, when you're feeling happy, you can look at happier content, but also when you're feeling sad, you can look at content that is made by people who are also might be feeling that way. And I sometimes do that just because it's a way to have people who know kind of what you're going through and I can relate to that. So, I'd say that, it helps me cope by having that accessible and very varied content."

Theme 6: "TikTok is crazy"

Despite the positive aspects, participants acknowledged the risks and challenges associated with TikTok. They expressed apprehensions about accessibility ease regardless of age, negative comments, and comparison with unrealistic standards. One participant expressed:

"The algorithm is so advanced I dismiss there's not an effective way to restrict people who shouldn't be seeing certain content like younger people from seeing like suggestive things, but there's really no way to do that because like age restrictions are so easy to bypass."

Some participants acknowledged TikTok's addictive nature and the challenge of managing their time spent on the platform. They described how scrolling through endless content could lead to procrastination and neglect of other responsibilities. A participant reflected,

"TikTok is crazy. Most of my time, I'm not going to lie. Sometimes I like to pick my phone up. If I'm bored, I just start scrolling. I just trudge through and through it, and I'll find something that I like and I'm like, oh my gosh, that was so great. So, then I like go through a little rabbit hole. Something like okay, that was great. And then let's go to the next one. And let's go to the next one, the next one...I'll be on there for like at least four hours just like look at as go into videos."

Another participant shared,

"I think I was just looking for an excuse to procrastinate on my homework. I was like, let me see what this is all about. And I opened the app and never looked back."

Participants held diverse perspectives regarding the risks and benefits associated with TikTok usage. While some acknowledged the potential risks such as privacy concerns and cyberbullying, they also highlighted the platform's benefits in terms of entertainment and social connection. One participant stated,

"I Feel like the way that people interact through social media. When I was growing up, I know that there used to be a little bit more boundaries with what you can say and communicate. Like I said, I had a rough start because I didn't understand that concept. And my parents never sat me down and said like you can just post about certain things or talk about certain things that not everyone needs to know your business or your life. like boundaries and privacy was a big thing that I learned growing up and at the start of the technology era, because I was right there on the cusp of where people went from like pagers to BlackBerry, Myspace to Facebook, it all happened very quickly. I feel like COVID affected a lot of people. Because now there's not as much privacy or boundaries with what we post or what we say. Especially our youth, they post their whole lives on social media. And then we have adults and people all over the world criticizing you for your private life that is no longer private."

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative research study shed light on the multifaceted impact of TikTok on various aspects of life satisfaction among young adults including influence, risk and challenges, love and belonging, and mood. Several major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of participant interviews, offering insightful information about the complex ways that TikTok affects the lives of young adults. A recurring theme that emerged concerned the impact of TikTok on the conceptions of love and belonging among young adults. The platform's ability to connect users with like-minded people and build a sense of welcome and community was highlighted by the participants. Because it offered opportunities for social connection and assistance, this feature had a critical role in determining their total level of life satisfaction. The study also examined how TikTok affects young users' behavior and decision-making. The participants related instances in which the content on the platform affected their decisions about social interactions, career moves, and specific trends. Participants acknowledged these effects but also emphasized the importance of using judgment and critical thinking while interacting with TikTok content. To minimize any bad effects and make wise judgments, they underlined the significance of media literacy and responsible usage. Additionally, the study provided new perspectives on the emotional impacts of TikTok use on young adults' ability to regulate their mood. Participants talked on how the platform, which provides amusement and escape, could have a good effect on their mental well-being when they interact with uplifting or relatable content. Overall, these results show how TikTok, and many aspects of young people's lives interact in a complicated way, bringing both advantages and disadvantages to light.

Strengths

The study's varied sample size is one of its most noteworthy strengths. Participants were chosen by researchers from a range of demographic backgrounds, including gender, socioeconomic position, and place of residence. Through the inclusion of a wide range of young adults, the study's findings become more universally applicable, hence augmenting the research's validity. Furthermore, the diversity of the sample makes it easier to look for moderators or mediators of the connection between using TikTok and life satisfaction. Finally, the participants were evenly distributed across the age group of interest, ages 18 through 25.

Limitations

Although the study's goal was to explore the experiences between young adults' use of TikTok and life satisfaction, one significant drawback is the lack of longitudinal data. This study captured a momentary snapshot of the participants' attitudes and behaviors. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, small samples size, and demographics of the participants there is no basis for generalizability. Furthermore, while the interviews yielded substantial information and data saturation was achieved, many insights, including those related to love, belonging, and self-actualization, still require additional investigation. These elements emerged as prominent themes in the data, underscoring their significant importance in understanding how young adults' use of TikTok and sense of happiness are interconnected.

Recommendations for future research

To fully grasp the nuances and complexity of this topic, further research and in-depth analysis are necessary. Recommendations for future research include exploring the cultural context of TikTok usage and its impact on life satisfaction among young adults from various backgrounds. Examining differences in TikTok usage across age groups, and comparing these, could also be beneficial. Additionally, investigating similarities across age groups, genders, and cultures would produce a more comprehensive study. A longitudinal study would offer a deeper understanding of the relationship between TikTok use and mental health diagnoses by examining the long-term impacts of the platform on mental health outcomes. Moreover, such a study would provide an understanding of consumption habits and how they change over time.

During this study, in March of 2024, President Joe Biden signed a law that would ban Chinese-owned TikTok unless it was sold in a year. The researchers believe that due to this new regulation, further studies on social media use and government intervention should focus on how these issues affect individual liberty and other fundamental rights in the United States, such as the right to autonomy. Additionally, investigating whether the platform being controlled by Chinese individuals raises ethical concerns about discriminatory tactics associated with this kind of legislation.

Implications

The experiences of young adults' TikTok use, and their life satisfaction offer valuable implications for social work and other related fields. The results of this research highlight an understanding of the sense of community and support young adults receive through the platform. Social workers are encouraged to advocate for policies and practices that address the ethical challenges associated with social media platforms like TikTok, such as data privacy, content moderation, and algorithmic bias. By raising awareness of these issues and advocating for user rights and protections, social workers can contribute to creating a safer and more equitable online environment for young adults. Implication for clinical practice includes addressing the impact of TikTok on young adults' self-esteem and identity development and facilitating discussion on media influence and societal standards. Young adults must be educated about the risks associated with TikTok use and offered online mental health resources for coping with negative emotions triggered by social media content.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative research study provides a comprehensive exploration of the impact of TikTok on life satisfaction among young adults, considering key dimensions such as love and belonging, self-esteem, influence, risks and challenges, and mood. The findings highlight the complex interplay between social media use and well-being, emphasizing the need for critical reflection, digital literacy, and strategies to promote positive online experiences and well-being among young adult TikTok users.

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