

The Popularity of TikTok During the Epidemic Period——from the Perspective of Undergraduates in China

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Abstract: Due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Chinese people are required to implement the home quarantine. During the period of home quarantine, the popularity of TikTok was a remarkable phenomenon and meanwhile, TikTok has a large audience of undergraduates. In this paper, the reasons why undergraduates were addicted to TikTok during the quarantine period are discussed.

Keywords: Communication; Undergraduates; Tiktok

1. Introduction

In 2020, a sudden epidemic of Covid-19 disrupted people's normal life. Due to the need of epidemic prevention and control, many people complied with the policy of home quarantine, reducing unnecessary going out and gathering, making people's normal life turn into a home life. People's entertainment, social contact, study, work, and other aspects of life were transferred to the home.

2. Literature review

Currently, literature concerning the relationship between college students and short videos mainly focus on the negative influence of college students being fascinated even obsessed to watching short videos and some measures to deal with the phenomenon. The content of these papers is comprehensive, including reasons, effects, and countermeasures for the phenomenon. However, the scope of these studies is broad which means it is hard for each paper to study any aspect thoroughly.

In addition, these studies provide thoughts and ideas on the reasons why college students are addicted to short video apps which help me put forward hypotheses. The reasons mainly are that these apps “catering to the expression demands of college students”^[3], “meeting the social desire of college students”^[3], and “the ‘immersive experiences’ attracting college students”^[2], effective access to information^[4] and so on. However, the focus of these studies is mainly on the negative consequences of this phenomenon and the proposed countermeasures. Especially the consequences, these paper list lots of negative consequences of this phenomenon on college students, including these apps “causing addiction and affecting study and life”^[3], “inducing cognitive limitation”^[3], “generating blind adherence to values”^[8] and so on. However, the analysis of the reasons for the popularity of short videos among college students is not quite detailed, and I cannot find empirical survey data among college students showed in these literatures but they present the reasons directly.

3. Discussion

Regarding the reasons why undergraduates were addicted to TikTok, the existing literature “An Empirical Analysis of the Factors Affecting College Students Addicted to Short Video APP”^[1] divides the needs of undergraduates met by using TikTok into different themes including Entertainment Needs, Information Needs and Social Needs. Firstly, I classified my interview data into these three categories.

According to the analysis of the interview data, as my hypothesis, TikTok met the entertainment needs of

undergraduates during quarantine. During the quarantine, most of their entertainment ways which needed them to go out or gather couldn't be accessed and the new entertainment ways relied on electronic equipment. Middle-aged group, by contrast, had new options for entertainment during the quarantine, but these ways didn't depend on electronic equipment heavily. In addition, undergraduates liked "funny videos" and all of them felt happy when they use TikTok. Therefore, I inferred that the quarantine limited the access to undergraduates' former entertainment ways which needed them to go out or gather so that their entertainment needs cannot be met. That led to an increase in undergraduates' demand for using electronic equipment for entertainment and TikTok was one of the entertainments.

Beyond my hypotheses, TikTok met undergraduates' Communication Needs. These undergraduates wanted to talk and communicate with people or make friends and felt their loneliness alleviated. By contrast, after the quarantine, they didn't feel that way. It can be inferred that during the epidemic, due to quarantine, the students felt loneliness and had social communication needs, and TikTok met the undergraduates' social communication needs during the period of quarantine.

As my hypothesis, using TikTok was a way for undergraduates to escape the pressure of reality. Undergraduates wanted to put off doing some things which were tasks that made them feel stressed and meanwhile, TikTok gave them pleasure but only for a short time. That meant they still had to face the reality that is not very happy after using it. When undergraduates are faced with tasks they dislike, get bored with or are likely to fail, they try to avoid them as much as possible. If they can't avoid them, they also tend to procrastinate. The harder the task is, the more they procrastinate.^[6] Hence, I inferred that escaping the pressure of reality is the reason why undergraduates used TikTok. However, after the quarantine, they still used TikTok because of "procrastination". Therefore, it can be inferred that escaping pressure of reality is the reason for undergraduates to use TikTok, but it had nothing to do with the quarantine period.

As what I hypothesized, undergraduates having more free time during the quarantine was another reason. According to the results, the free time of undergraduates increased significantly compared with that before the quarantine, and the time spent on TikTok was also much during the quarantine. Horizontal comparison showed that both of time available and the time spent on TikTok among high school students were significantly lower than the figure of undergraduates. Longitudinal comparison showed that both of time available and time spent on TikTok significantly were lower than the figure during quarantine. In addition, undergraduates wanted to kill time available and got bored during quarantine, and felt using TikTok can alleviate boredom. Therefore, it could be inferred that the increase in free time during the quarantine period, which makes some undergraduates feel bored, so that the time spent on TikTok increased. "More free time" was one reason for them to use TikTok.

Beyond my hypotheses, undergraduates having no restrictions on using mobile phones and TikTok was another reason. Undergraduates had no restrictions on using mobile phones. In contrast, high school student interviewees had limited time to use mobile phones per day, because their parents or school limited their access to mobile phones. In addition, TikTok's "Youth Addiction Prevention Function" imposed limits on time teenagers could use it every day. Therefore, it could be inferred that undergraduates' freedom to use mobile phones and TikTok was one of the reasons why they were addicted to TikTok.

Beyond my hypotheses, TikTok's videos were more in line with the taste of young people and are of interest to undergraduates. One of the undergraduates' purposes of using TikTok was to see videos they interested in. However, middle-aged people were not interested in or even cannot understand the videos in TikTok. According to official data released by TikTok, youth made up the majority of TikTok's users. Users between 20- and 24-years old account for 32.8 percent of all users, those under 20 years old account for 20 percent, and those between 25- and 29-years old account for 27.9 percent, which meant users under 30 years old account for 80 percent of all users.^[9] According to the "Group Communication Theory", group members always have roughly the same characteristics in gender, age, educational level, social concept, good interest, psychological characteristics, and other aspects, and it is easy to interact with each other. (Liu & Wang, 1993) Therefore, I inferred that the information within the youth group on TikTok platform was more attractive to youth itself. It could be inferred that TikTok's videos are more attractive to young people.

Beyond my hypotheses, TikTok was addictive to undergraduates because of its own characteristics, including "immersive experience", "big data analysis" and "fragmented information". TikTok made them addicted, which made them feel unsatisfied. TikTok wasted their time and took up their learning and social time. That meant that they understood that

TikTok had such shortcomings but still found it's hard to control themselves and spend a lot of time on TikTok every day. However, when they used other social platforms, there would not be such situation to find it difficult to control themselves. Therefore, it could be explained by some special features of the TikTok platform.

The immersive experience offered by TikTok can be one of reasons. "Immersive experience is a new way of information transmission. It is an omnipresent communication that is centered on people and is realized by the human environment that connects all forms of media. The ideal communication effect is an omnipresent experience beyond time and space that people cannot see, feel or touch." "The immersive experience on TikTok is people-oriented and focuses on the communication of user experience. It provides users with high-quality content, good visual and auditory experience, meets the entertainment needs of users in fragmented time, and strengthens user loyalty."^[5] Therefore, "immersive experience" offered by TikTok made it easier for undergraduates to be attracted.

Big data analysis was another reason. "TikTok presented videos that undergraduates were interested in." This finding could be explained not only through the "Group Communication Theory" mentioned in the previous paragraph, but also could be explained by the characteristics of big data analysis of TikTok itself. TikTok will accurately push videos of interest to different users through big data analysis based on their time spent in different videos, as well as their thumb up, comments and followers. It could be inferred that TikTok's big data analysis enabled TikTok to accurately push content that undergraduates are interested in, which made undergraduates more likely to be attracted and become addicted.

In addition, fragmented information was another reason. Undergraduates felt that they always forgot soon what they had seen and they couldn't acquire something meaningful but momentary pleasure. They even didn't feel they were learning anything even when they were watching videos that taught them meaningful knowledge. It can be explained by "fragmenting information". Videos on TikTok are usually only a few dozen seconds or even shorter. The content is fresh and interesting, always arouses people's interest, and always exactly answers our doubts about a certain kind of phenomenon or fact. Therefore, people are immersed in this kind of positive stimulation which can obtain mental pleasure with very little time cost, but the actual result is that people abandon the habit of systematic learning and gradually lose the ability of complex thinking.^[7] Therefore, it could be inferred that undergraduates were attracted and even obsessed by rapid acquisition of knowledge with low cost, but in fact they didn't really gain knowledge because of fragmented information.

4. Conclusion

The reasons why undergraduates were addicted to TikTok during the quarantine period were as follows: TikTok met the Entertainment Needs, Information Needs, Social Communication Needs among undergraduates during quarantine; Undergraduates had more free time and had no restrictions on using mobile phones and TikTok.

The reasons for undergraduates being addicted to TikTok, which had nothing to do with quarantine, were as follows: Using TikTok was a way for undergraduates to escape from the pressure of reality; TikTok's videos were more in line with the taste of young people and interested undergraduates; The characteristics of TikTok were also the reasons, including "Immersive Experience", "Big Data Analysis", and "Fragmented Information".

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