

“My Algorithm Gets Me”: How TikTok’s For You Page Interacts with College Students’
Perceptions of their Self-Esteem

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Abstract

TikTok, a social media network focused on sharing bite-sized videos, has gained extreme popularity in the past few years, notably during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the high levels of app usage and unregulated user-generated content, there is a large research gap in terms of the possible impact of TikTok on users' self-esteem perceptions. Certain trends such as #WhatIEatInADay are irrevocably tied to conventional beauty and body standards and have gained traction and concern in the media. Other types of videos, such as footage of parties and lively social gatherings, also have potential impacts on users' feelings but gain less media coverage. This thesis consisted of a mixed-method approach to assess some of TikTok's possible effects on its users. First, a qualitative survey was administered via Qualtrics to 92 Tufts undergraduates that assessed user demographics, app behavior, and how those variables related to different facets of user self-esteem. Then, follow-up interviews were conducted via Zoom with 7 survey participants who indicated their willingness to participate. The results indicated that TikTok and self-esteem levels were significantly correlated among this sample. Body image was negatively associated with higher amounts of TikTok use. With regard to the perceived effects of TikTok use on respondents' social lives, results indicated that the ways in which the app was used for social purposes seemed to be more related to respondents' age than anything else, especially while factoring in the effects on social life from COVID-19. Moving forward, it is recommended that researchers study the effects of TikTok longitudinally to see if some of the preliminary findings reported in this thesis are sustained over time and among other samples. Further, researchers might focus on how TikTok use is related to issues of civic engagement.

Table of Contents:

Introduction.....	3
Literature Review.....	6
Methods.....	18
Results.....	23
Discussion & Conclusions.....	44
Acknowledgements.....	57
Appendix.....	58
References.....	68

Chapter 1: Introduction & Problem Statement

As a young person in the digital age, I have been deeply shaped by the presence of social media. Specifically, during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I relied on watching TikTok videos as a way to feel connected to other members of “Gen Z”. As someone who has experienced both positive and negative changes in my own self-esteem after becoming a regular user of TikTok, I am interested in internally comparing my own experience to the ones presented in my literature review, and to those who take part in my study. The idea for this senior thesis evolved after completing a content analysis on body image messaging on TikTok. After completing the project, my professor-turned thesis advisor and I both realized that there was more to the TikTok and self-esteem narrative than body image alone, though that certainly seemed to be a significant component as well.

This topic presents important societal implications because social media has had historically negative impacts on body image, especially for young, female-identifying people (Bagautdinova, 2018; Solomon, 2017; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). In past research, Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and other factors related to low self-esteem have been associated with certain social media behaviors (Robinson et al., 2019; Keles et al., 2020), though the body image issue has had the most coverage in the literature (Marengo et al., 2018; Bagautdinova, 2018; Solomon, 2017; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). TikTok, and how it contributes to the existing dialogue of social media and self-esteem, is still very under-researched given how it is still a new app. However, it has skyrocketed in popularity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

(Su et al., 2020). The literature will investigate how TikTok as an app has contributed to the social media and self-esteem relationship thus far.

Depending on the context of one's For You Page (FYP) on TikTok, which is a user's algorithmically-tailored, never-ending video stream based on their past video interactions, demographics, and interests, the FYP may also offer positive benefits and new information. Some examples of other types of FYP content are cost-effective and simple recipes, mental health guidance, and career advice.

Clearly, TikTok offers a plethora of different streams of information. But is it enough? Interventions promoting media literacy, which refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create [media] messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993, as cited in Livingstone, 2004), can be a key indicator of how young people process this media and internalize it, even with issues such as disordered body image (McLean et al., 2017). Social media literacy specifically is still an under-researched area, but according to Manca et al. (2021), it holds major potential in protecting young people from misinformation and hate that is spread online. According to McCosker (2017, as cited in Manca et al., 2021), social media literacy can also challenge traditional, carefully-curated presentations of the self with the goal of reaching more authentic self-representation. TikTok is no exception to this claim; when users learn how to use these kinds of apps in prosocial, safe ways, the aforementioned negative effects can be mitigated. In my study, I examined this issue through two different methodologies. The first encompasses a large-scale and qualitative survey composed of 92 current Tufts students about their TikTok use and subsequent possible effects on each user's self-esteem. Each method and corresponding paradigm will be dissected for its strengths and limitations. The second portion of this mixed-method approach encompassed 7 in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews

composed of survey respondents who indicated they would be willing to be interviewed. These interviews aimed to construct individual users' meaning out of the phenomenon of TikTok, which may vary due to differing content on each user's For You Page (FYP). Each FYP is personalized based on user interaction, demographics, and interest. Thus, this study aims to find some consistency and patterns out of an app whose user experience varies greatly from user to user.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following review of literature examines salient studies that contribute to the way users may think about TikTok, social media, and self-esteem in young people, specifically college students. I have chosen to examine several bodies of literature, including overviews of the TikTok app structure, how media can interact with people's self-esteem and various theories behind self-esteem itself, works about the possible interactions between social media and perceptions of body image, and literature focusing on media literacy programming and interventions for the digital age. As discussed above, it became clear in both the academic literature and popular press that social media has had historically negative implications on body image, especially for young, female-identifying people (Bagautdinova, 2018; Solomon, 2017; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Oakes, 2019; Cho, 2021). In past research, Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and other factors related to low self-esteem have been associated with certain social media behaviors (Robinson et al., 2019; Keles et al., 2020), though the body image issue has the most coverage in the literature (Marengo et al., 2018; Bagautdinova, 2018; Solomon, 2017; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Again, TikTok, and how it contributes to the existing dialogue of social media and self-esteem, is still very under-researched. However, TikTok's popularity shot up amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Su et al., 2020). The literature review will investigate how TikTok as an app has contributed to the social media and self-esteem dialogue so far.

Given these omnipresent negative effects, it seems difficult to find the "good" in social media. However, depending on the context of one's For You Page (FYP) on TikTok, which is a

user's algorithmically-tailored, never-ending video stream based on their past video interactions, demographics, interests, and content such as cost-effective and simple recipes, mental health guidance, and career advice, the FYP may also offer positive benefits and new information.

Clearly, TikTok offers a plethora of different streams of information. But is it enough?

Interventions promoting media literacy, which refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create [media] messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993, as cited in Livingstone, 2004), can be a key indicator of how young people process this media and internalize it, even with issues such as disordered body image (McLean et al., 2017). Social media literacy specifically is still an under-researched area, but according to Manca et al. (2021), it holds major potential in protecting young people from misinformation and hate spread online. According to McCosker (2017, as cited in Manca et al., 2021), social media literacy can also challenge traditional, carefully-curated presentations of the self with the goal of reaching more authentic self-representation.

The literature will inform and supplement my own study that will investigate the possible relationship between regular TikTok use in college students (defined by browsing their FYP at least once a day) and their perceptions of their own self-esteem. I will begin the literature review by giving an introduction to TikTok as an app and the existing research on social media users' self-esteem perceptions. Second, I will tie these findings in with these effects specifically covering thoughts about one's body image. I will continue by diving into the psychological concepts of self-esteem perceptions in young people. Finally, I will review the existing literature on media and social media literacy, specifically as it ties into TikTok. This literature review is composed of peer-reviewed scholarly articles mostly published in the last five to ten years. While research on concepts behind self-esteem in young people may stay more stagnant through time,

literature on social media and TikTok is constantly evolving and changing. Thus, it is imperative that this literature review has the most updated outlook on the current research and gaps as of this writing. The literature is composed of popular press articles, experiments, and meta-analyses which all contribute to the overarching idea of social media, the addition of TikTok, self-esteem in young people, and media literacy.

TikTok's Contributions to Social Media Dialogue

TikTok is a fairly new, popular video-sharing social media platform that displays many user generated videos, all of which are shorter than three minutes. TikTok has grown exponentially in popularity over the past few years. In fact, TikTok is expected to surpass 1.5 billion users in the next twelve months (Hutchinson, 2021). Currently, over 1 billion people are TikTok users (*U.S. TikTok Users by Age 2021, 2022*). To put this statistic in perspective, TikTok has even more users than its senior social media platform Instagram, who reported 1 billion users in 2018 and has not updated this statistic since (Hutchinson, 2021). 47.4% of TikTok users are between the ages of 10 and 29, while the other 53% of users are 30 years old or older (*U.S. TikTok Users by Age 2021, 2022*). Although TikTok is most popular among members of Gen Z, which is the generation of individuals born between 1997 and 2012, creators and viewers of all ages have found a place on the app. 61% of the app's active users were female, as reported in March 2021 (*TikTok: Users by Gender in U.S., 2021*), though creators of any gender identity are able to find success on the app. TikTok's exponential growth is unprecedented for social media; it has become a cultural phenomenon across the globe, acting as a catalyst for trends ranging from food, style, lifestyle, humor and comedy, and more. Despite its competitors offering parallel social media models such as Instagram Reels, Snapchat Spotlights, and YouTube Shorts, TikTok

has managed to stay on top due to its highly specific For You Page algorithm tailored to user's interests (Hutchinson, 2021). It is important to note that the content of one's never-ending For You Page varies widely based on TikTok's intricate and accurate algorithm that takes note of user interests, video interaction, and demographics.

Unlike social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter that are more carefully-curated, much less casual in nature, and more based on connections one knows in real life (Bagautdinova, 2018), TikTok is a “*virtual play structure*: a recreational space manifested in electronic media” (Kurzrock, 2019). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many people had no choice but to turn towards social media as a means of finding common humanity and distraction from the state of the world, and its popularity surged (Unni & Weinstein, 2021). According to Omar & Dequan (2020), a need for escapism predicted more TikTok video consumption. Ironically, overuse of the Internet and digital games may increase anxiety and depression despite the temporary escape it offers (Akin & Iskender, 2011; Weinstein & Lejoyeux, 2010, as cited in Su et al., 2021). Social media's emphasis on user-generated content means that there are less regulations on what is and is not appropriate or triggering to post. As stated above, there is a major research gap in terms of the emotional effects TikTok may project upon its users. In fact, according to an internal document on TikTok's algorithm leaked to the New York Times anonymously, the person who leaked it was disturbed by the app's push towards “sad” content that could induce self-harm (Smith, 2021).

The structure of the app's For You Page, an endless stream of personalized videos targeted towards certain user demographics based off of past video and user engagement, provides a new layer to the psychology behind social media. Because of this model, TikTok users engage with content that is most engaging to *them*, rather than focusing more on interpersonal

connections. Thus, according to Bhandari & Bimo (2020), engaging with one's TikTok For You page follows an internal model of intrapersonal connection. While my study will only focus on the act of viewing TikTok videos rather than content creation itself, it is worth noting that the app designs prioritizes content creation buttons in a more natural, focused location. The buttons to follow, comment on, or like *other* creators' videos are pushed to the side in a less noticeable location. Bhandari & Bimo (2020) coin this model of social media the "algorithmized self" as opposed to the "networked self" found more commonly on other social platform sites, in which the self is created through the "reflexive process of fluid associations with social circles." In other words, TikTok places a heavier emphasis on self-expression and self-reflection as opposed to engagement with others.

A common narrative that many users face with social media in general is comparing their own "blooper reels" to others', notably celebrities' and friends' "highlight reels" of carefully-curated Instagram feeds and other social media pages. This process represents the "digital version" of Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which is the human drive to compare oneself to others in order to gain accurate self-assessment (Bagautdinova, 2018). Social comparison can apply to many facets of the self, from personality, to social and career achievements, to body image, all of which are documented on TikTok.

Body Image and Social Media

With TikTok's structure in mind, I wanted to investigate whether the algorithm might illuminate users' insecurities, especially those about body image. According to Grogan (2008, as cited in Hülising, 2021), body image can be defined as the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings

people have about their physical self. A trend that has enjoyed stable popularity since the app's inception is the #WhatIEatInADay series, in which users document all of their meals throughout a given day. If a user is insecure about their body image and/or wants to lose weight, they might interact with a video showing meals for a calorie deficit, or with videos in which the creator has the user's ideal body shape. Afterwards, "healthy lifestyle" videos encouraging calorie deficits and restrictive eating may appear more frequently on the user's FYP. Results indicate that exposure to manipulated media images of conventionally beautiful, thin, female models has a detrimental effect on women's self-concept, especially body image (Blanchard & Mask, 2011). These kinds of findings are common across multiple social media platforms, but since TikTok is so new, there is limited research on this topic.

Certain behaviors on social media are associated with maladaptive body image-related thoughts. On Facebook, "elevated appearance exposure behaviors," such as posting, viewing, and commenting on images were associated with higher weight dissatisfaction, a drive for thinness, idealization of thin as "ideal," and self-objectifications among female high schoolers (Meier & Gray, 2014). Similar patterns have been found among men, especially with self-objectification on multiple social media sites (Fox & Rooney, 2015). These findings are specific to highly-visual social media (HVSM) such as Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr (Marengo et al., 2018). Twitter, for example, is text-based as opposed to photo-based, so naturally, there is less of a focus on visual content. TikTok, on the other hand, would certainly be classified as a HVSM. Based on the existing literature, despite it being more casual than Instagram or Facebook, TikTok is still associated with negative impacts on adolescents' and young adult's perceptions of their own body image, perpetuated by unrealistic beauty standards and calculated photo and video editing features (Liu, 2021; Hülising, 2021). Several studies have

found a clear correlational relationship between body dissatisfaction and self-esteem in adolescent girls and boys, though the relationship is consistently stronger in girls (Frost & McKelvie, 2004; Polce-Lynch et al., 2001, as cited by Tiggemann, 2005). According to another study by Griffore et al. (1990), however, body dissatisfaction was only linked to more negative self-esteem in girls. Possible reasoning behind this is that women may be equated with their appearance more than men are (Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, as cited in Monks et al., 2021). Additionally, one 2021 study concluded that the COVID-19 lockdown has had a significant impact on social media use, and this may be correlated with an increased drive for thinness and eating disorder risk among adolescent and young women (Vall-Roqué et al., 2021).

However, TikTok does add a new nuance to the social media dialogue concerning body image. Body positivity, perhaps as a reaction to the well-known and alarming findings on negative body image and other social media platforms, has spread far and wide on TikTok (Hülsing, 2021). Although the “thin ideal” still reigns supreme as the body image goal (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019), TikTok adds a new layer of body positivity via audio trends, in which young people of all sizes, mostly female-identifying, pose in front of the camera to songs with lyrics such as, “I’ve got a perfect body / But sometimes I forget” from “Folding Chair” by Regina Spektor. In this trend, users recognize insecurities *and* embrace them. In general, the body positivity movement refers to any message delivered through various mediums that aims to challenge the societal ideals associated with appearance, beauty, and bodies, as well as to encourage self-acceptance (Cwynar-Horta, 2016, as cited in Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019).

At the time this thesis was written, there was a debate throughout the research literature concerning whether there is a causal relationship between body image and social media use, as opposed to a correlational one. Determining an answer to this pervasive question is incredibly

challenging given the limitations of experimental studies, which are heavily controlled and thus give more insight into a possible causal relationship (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). However, since these experiments are so controlled, it can be hard to determine how participants would react if they were in more naturalistic settings. An experimental 2015 study by Tiggemann & Zaccardo in which “fitspiration” images, an online trend focusing on healthy food and exercise, did conclude a causal relationship between fitspiration images and negative effects on body image. Since there are such a limited amount of experimental studies in this area, there is a lack of evidence to conclude a causal relationship in the first place. An added layer of complexity to this debate is the aforementioned body positivity movement on social media, which promotes self-acceptance of all body types as they are.

Self-Esteem in Young People

According to Siiback (2009), there are three types of self-domains: the actual self, which is one’s self-concept of attributes, the ideal self, attributes that one would like to possess, and the ought self, attributes one believes one should possess. Especially with the rise of the internet, people have newfound freedom to experiment with different domains. The concept of self-esteem is both a stable *and* fluid trait throughout one’s lifetime (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991, as cited in Vogel et al., 2014) and is defined as a person’s positive or negative evaluations of the self, or the extent to to which an individual views the self as worthwhile and competent (Coopersmith, 1967, as cited in Vogel et al., 2014). TikTok’s user experience model is focused on the self and promotes social comparison by featuring other users on the feed. An upward social comparison is one in which the comparison is better off than the comparer, while a downward comparison is when the comparer is better off than the compared (Gerber et al., 2018; Vogel et

al., 2014). Interestingly, there are conflicting reports on which type of comparison is more associated with lower self-esteem. In some studies, upward comparison caused people to feel inadequate, have poorer self-evaluations, and predicted negative affect (Marsh & Parker, 1984; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1985, as cited in Vogel et al., 2014). However, according to Gerber et al. (2018) and Wills (1981), downward comparison is more likely to occur with those who have lower rated self-esteem, motivated by self-enhancement for the threatened person. It is currently unclear whether there is a “correct” answer. Both types of social comparison could also occur with different levels of self-esteem.

The theory for downward comparison is two-pronged; after the downward comparison, a positive reaction for the comparer is anticipated (Wills, 1981, as cited in Gerber et al., 2018). It is important to note that people with high self-esteem are likely to have less negative emotions after they engage in both upward and downward social comparisons (Tiggemann, 2005). Additionally, in a 2009 study of adolescents by Zhao & Si, explicit/reflective self-esteem (as opposed to automatic self-processing) was associated with symptoms of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), whereas implicit/automatic self-esteem was not associated with symptoms of MDD or SAD in this study. In other words, conscious thoughts about the self are more likely to contribute to MDD or SAD rather than automatic or unconscious thoughts. I would define a stimulus such as a TikTok video to cause thoughts relating to explicit self-esteem.

Developing Media Literacy

As society has progressed further into the digital age, new types of literacy, including media literacy, have become much more important (Potter, 2010; McLean et al., 2017; Manca et al., 2021). Yet, society at large has not given people, notably young people, the proper tools

needed to traverse the digital world in safe and moderated ways. The mass media have headlined stories of bullying, harassment, and suicide (Mascheroni, Ponte, Garmendia, Garitaonandia, & Murru, 2010, as cited in Livingstone, 2014). Despite the space it can fill in the digital world, according to Potter (2010), there does not seem to be one single, well-outlined concept of media literacy. However, media literacy covers three dimensions: “access and use, a critical understanding of the multiple facets of the media and the production of content and the participation in and through the communication media” (Pereira & Moura, 2019). For the purposes of this research, I have defined media literacy as “the ability to access the media, to understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media content and to create communications in a variety of contexts” (Recommendation 2009/625/EC, as cited in Pereira & Moura, 2019).

It is important that the development of media literacy begins in childhood in order to develop prosocial habits for the future (Livingstone, 2014). In a study by Livingstone (2014) aimed at developing social media literacy for different age groups, the 9-11 year-olds could identify and express their disinterest in risky activities online, had little reason to hide their social networking activities from parents, and welcomed guidance from their parents. Thus, for younger children, it is beneficial to draw on theories behind joint media engagement (JME), a relatively new theory building upon co-viewing, in which people, usually parent and child, engage in media activities together (Ewin et al., 2021). In JME, co-viewing covers modern media, mobile device apps, and additionally includes more active interaction and meaning-making during this co-viewing (Ewin et al., 2021). Examples of JME in action are asking questions, engaging in dialogue about the media, and encouraging critical thinking about said media.

The 11-13 year-old age group in the study by Livingstone (2014) might benefit more from social media literacy programs that do not involve parents as much because said adolescents try to keep their social media life private from their parents for the most part. Consistent with research discussed in previous sections, getting “likes” on social media points to social validation that even children as young as 11-13 begin to crave (Livingstone, 2014; Nesi, 2020). In this study, 11-13 year-olds engaged in cyberbullying and other risky online behaviors. 14-16 year-olds strayed even further from displaying their openness for parent or teacher mediation and relied more on social cues from their friends in developing their media literacy (Livingstone, 2014). Interestingly, researchers recommend using social media itself as a vessel for developing media literacy (Gleason, 2019; Churcher et al., 2014) in social, academic, and activist spaces (Chou et al., 2020; Sobowale et al., 2020; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). One manifestation of this could be having students create social media profiles for a class and engaging with peers on it, posting comments and discussions, and being creative with their content creation.

Implications

TikTok adds a new layer to the social media dialogue. This review of the literature helped illuminate some of the ways TikTok differentiates itself from other social networking platforms. While the research on Instagram and Facebook engagement tends to focus on the solely negative impacts on body image and other components of self-esteem, the newfound but limited body of literature on TikTok provides a more nuanced approach. Users are familiar with the concept of body positivity and have spread it throughout the app. Although the body image-related

discourse on TikTok is still overwhelmingly negative, it seems less so than other research on other social networks.

One surprising variable was that of gender. While many of these studies focused either solely on women or had mostly female participants, my study will attempt to cover different genders more evenly to try and fill that research gap. However, most TikTok users are female-identifying, so that factored into my analysis as well. This review helped to illuminate findings that have already been well-identified and supported. Self-esteem related to body image and social media has been well-identified and supported, but not specifically with TikTok. I was curious to see how TikTok factors into the social media and self-esteem dialogue. In my own study, I hoped to investigate how TikTok fits into the existing literature, keeping the gap about research on the app in mind. In my own research, I specifically hoped to address the literature gap concerning whether social media use *causes* body image disruptions or whether it is a correlational relationship. However, given the limitations of each research method, this would be difficult to ascertain with one study.

Chapter 3: Methods

To investigate the possible relationship between college students who browse their TikTok For You Page (FYP) at least once a day and their perceptions of their self-esteem, I chose to use a mixed-method approach encompassing an online survey, which is attached at Appendix A, followed by in-depth interviews, whose questions are included at Appendix B, with a number of participants who identified themselves as willing to participate.

All participants were current undergraduate Tufts students. I aimed to have a roughly even distribution of all four class years, so ages would range from approximately 18-24. I had a particular interest in the age and class year variable and how it could be related to self-esteem perceptions and TikTok use, though variables such as gender identity, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity were also accounted for; no participant was excluded from this study based on any of these variables. In short, individuals were included in the study if they were within the Tufts undergraduate age range and were regular TikTok users, defined here by opening the app on an average of at least once a day. I used a secure Qualtrics survey to obtain demographic, ordinal, and anecdotal data from participants. The sample size was 92 current Tufts undergraduate students and 7 of those same students who submitted the survey for follow-up interviews.

Participant Recruitment and Consent

Participants were recruited from the start of November 2021 through the end of January 2022. Each participant was recruited at and through Tufts University via personal Instagram stories and Facebook posts, announcements from professors during large lecture classes, and all

four Tufts class Facebook groups. I also recruited participants through word of mouth, text, and direct messaging.

All survey participants who inserted their emails to be contacted for a possible follow-up interview read the informed Tufts SBER IRB Consent form beforehand, which is located at Appendix A. This document explained the purpose and potential discomfort that came with the completion of the survey and interview if they chose to do so. I chose 7 participants for interviews who represented a variety of different class years, perspectives on TikTok, and survey responses. The interviews served the purpose of bringing various perspectives and a bit more narrative/subjectivity to the topic, which is deeply personal. All interviewees reviewed the approved Tufts SBER IRB Consent Form once more. The initial consent process took place via Qualtrics after willing interviewees inserted their preferred email in the Qualtrics survey. The first question on the survey was an opportunity for participants to mark “Yes” that they were willing to participate and “No” if they were not. If they did not check “Yes”, they could not fill out the rest of the survey.

This process took around five to ten minutes total, depending on the time participants wanted to devote looking over the consent form before completing it. Before the interview on Zoom, I reviewed these guidelines with each participant and double checked all aspects of the consent form with them, which took around five minutes. There was no compensation for either aspect of participation.

Procedure

All research procedures took place virtually. The preliminary Qualtrics surveys were filled out remotely in participants’ environments of choice. As mentioned above, once

participants chose to take the Qualtrics survey, which should have taken around ten minutes, they could also opt to include their preferred email to be contacted for a half-hour follow-up interview. The Qualtrics survey covered basic demographic information, the average time spent browsing the TikTok For You Page each day, and asked participants to rate how they felt about certain aspects of themselves like their body image, facial appearance, and personality traits after watching TikTok videos. Additionally, the survey asked what kind of content populated their For You Page and if they shared TikToks with others, or if watching TikToks was a private activity. Finally, the survey asked if watching TikToks changed their current mood in any way, as well as if participants were more likely to open the app if they were experiencing a certain type of mood. For a complete list of survey items, see Appendix A.

Afterwards, the semi-structured interview on Zoom helped to obtain qualitative data about participants' TikTok habits, including what kind of videos most often populated their FYP, how these videos made them feel, and certain creators or trends that had a significant impact on them (positive or negative). For a complete list of semi-structured interview questions, see Appendix B.

Addressing Participant Privacy

All procedures protecting participant privacy were approved by the Tufts SBER IRB. Interview participants were volunteers who completed the survey. Each of the 7 Zoom video interviews were recorded and transcripts were uploaded to the study's secure Box account, but the video recordings were promptly deleted from my computer once they were uploaded to Box. Only the PI and faculty advisor will have access and will see survey responses and interview transcript data. The faculty advisor did not know the identities of each interviewee. These

interview transcripts contained quotations from interviewees that were shared in the discussion portion of this thesis, but always anonymously. These video and audio recordings (and their transcripts) were necessary for the research in order to gain more insight into how TikTok might interact with the ways viewers feel about themselves in a more personal and in-depth way that a survey did not have the capability to cover alone.

Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. The event that a participant would be removed from the data without their consent would occur for one of a few reasons. One, if there was any chance that participants identified or implicated other students in the one-on-one interviews, that data would be a confidentiality breach. The preamble of the survey made it clear that any identifying information that may be shared by a participant in any of the interviews would not be used in the study. Second, if participants said something that was personally damaging to themselves or others that may be too revealing in some way, privacy and confidentiality would be prioritized, and that data would be removed. Again, the initial survey did not ask for any identifiable information except participants' emails if they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up Zoom interview. Otherwise, all information could not be identified to a certain individual. If participants chose to include their email, they could share however much information they so chose, and they could opt out at any time.

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place via Microsoft Excel and Qualtrics after all data collection had concluded. Crosstabs between various categorical variables were used to determine possible relationships between them. Mostly, various descriptive statistics and their frequencies were obtained. Many different combinations were tested, including demographic variables and

self-esteem, class year and social status self-esteem, and other combinations. The goal of this analysis was to find correlations between variables.

I analyzed my semi-structured interviews via narrative analysis after transcribing and annotating them. Then, I categorized different quotations into various themes, such as “Thoughts on body image,” for example. Then, I segmented the data and connected these data points (e.g. positive view of TikTok’s body image content and positive view of one’s body image) to one another via quotations from my interviewees’ experiences. Finally, I integrated the results in the final thesis with direct quotations and summarized findings, but all identifying factors of participants were kept anonymous.

Chapter 4: Results

Survey Demographics

Age & Class Year

The survey sample included 92 current Tufts students aged 18 to 23. 42.3% (n=38) 38 of these students were seniors in college, 19.6% (n=18) were juniors, 29.3% (n=27) were sophomores, and 9.7% (n=9) were first years (see Figure 1). In terms of age, 19.6% (n=18) respondents were 18 years old, 26.1% (n=24) were 19 years old, 20.7% (n=19) were 20 years old, 35.9% (n=33) were 21 years old, 10.9% (n=10) were 22, and 1.1% (n=1) was 23 years old (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

QID1 - What is your class year?

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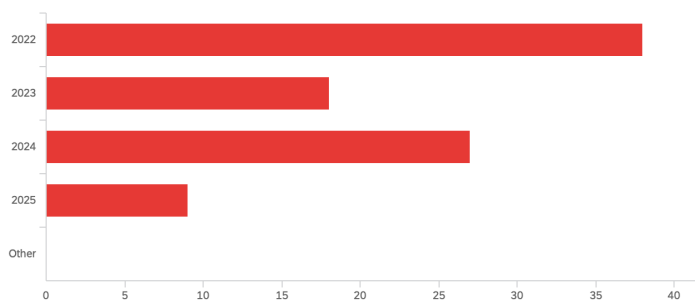
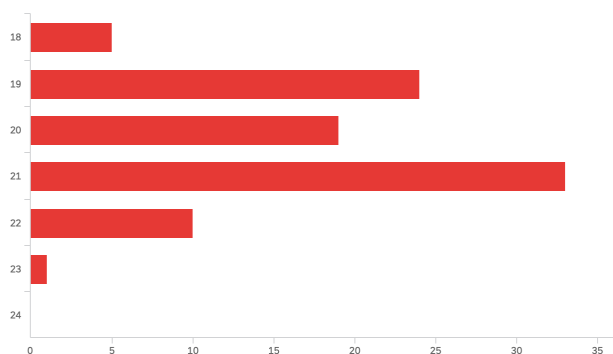


Figure 2

Q3 - What is your age?

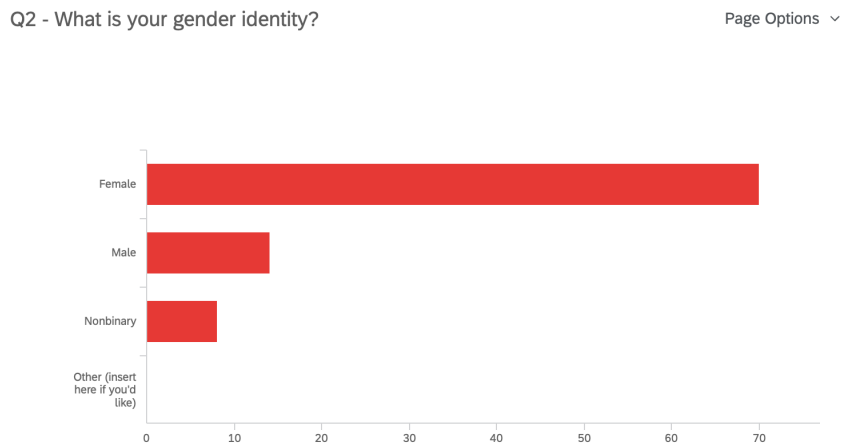
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Gender Identity

76.1% (n=70) survey participants self-identified as female, 15.2% (n=14) self-identified as male, and 8.7% (n=8) self-identified as non-binary. 0 participants reported another gender identity not listed (see Figure 3).

Figure 3



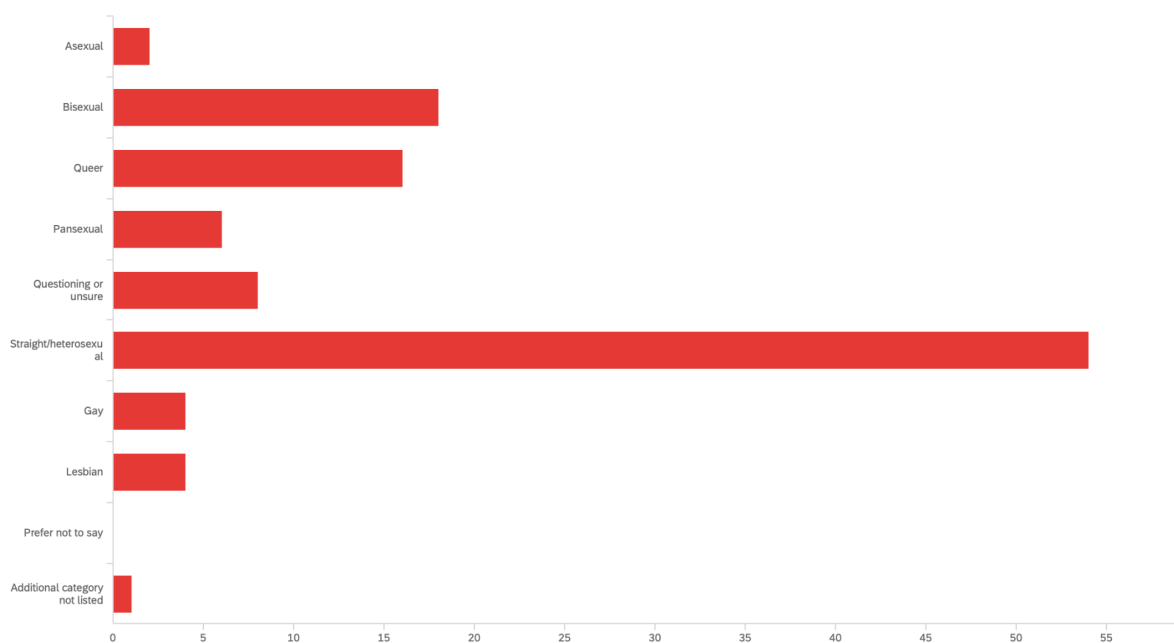
Sexual Orientation

Of the 92 participants, 58.7% (n=54) self-identified as straight or heterosexual, 2.2% (n=2) reported as being asexual, 19.6% (n=18) as bisexual, 17.4% (n=16) as queer, 6.5% (n=6) as pansexual, 8.7% (n=8) were questioning or unsure, 4.3% (n=4) as gay, 1.1% (n=1) as an additional category not listed, and 4.3% (n=4) as lesbian. 0 participants preferred not to say (see Figure 4). It is important to note that in this question, participants could select as many options as they wanted.

Figure 4

Q4 - What is your sexual orientation? Select all that apply.

Page Options ▾



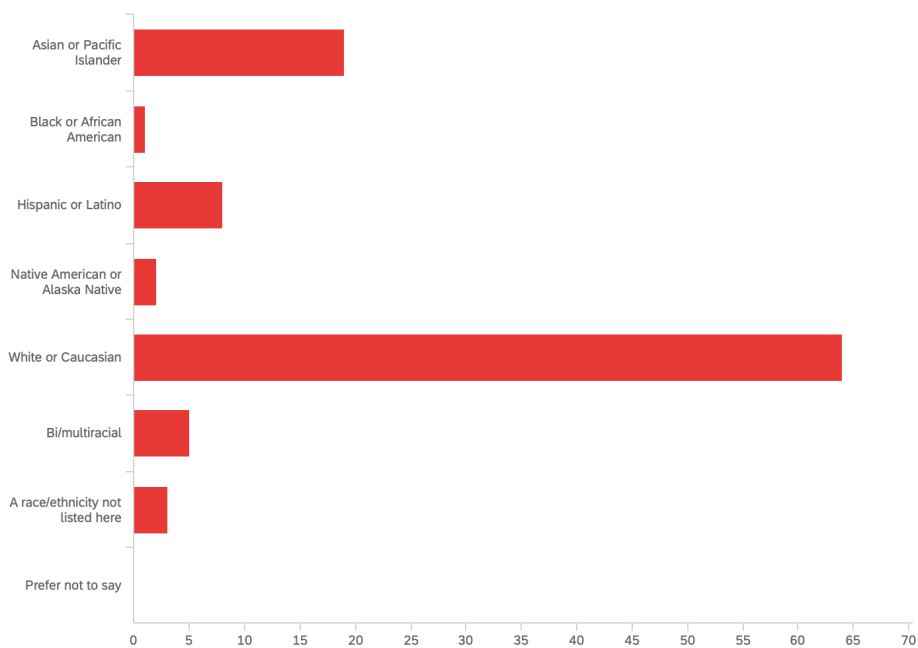
Race & Ethnicity

8.7% (n=8) participants reported being of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, while the remaining 91.3% (n=84) did not. 0 participants chose the “Prefer not to say” option. 20.7% (n=19) participants described themselves as Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.1% (n=1) as Black or African American, 2.2% (n=2) as Native American or Alaska Native, 69.6% (n=64) as White or Caucasian, 5.4 (n=5) as biracial or multiracial, and 3.3% (n=3) selected a race or ethnicity not listed (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Q6 - How would you describe yourself?

Page Options ▾

*Time Spent on TikTok*

The time spent on TikTok varied widely with survey participants. On average, participants opened the TikTok app around 5 or 6 times per day and spent around 2 to 3 hours browsing the app per day.

Interview Demographics

Willingness to Participate & Recruiting

35.9% (n=33) of participants noted they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up Zoom interview about their experience with TikTok and gave their contact information, while the other 64.1% (n=59) participants did not. I aimed to obtain a range of demographics and opinions on the app for my 5-10 follow-up interviews. I settled on 7 interviewees whom I reached out to via their Tufts email. 7 was a manageable number given my limited resources and time, but still offered the breadth of numerous demographics and ranges of TikTok usage habits. All agreed except for 1 who I did not hear from, so I found another respondent who had similar demographics and experience with the app according to their survey results.

Age & Class Year

Of the 7 participants recruited for a follow-up interview, 42.9% (n=3) were seniors in college, 14.3% (n=1) were juniors, 28.6% (n=2) were sophomores, and 14.3% (n=1) was a freshman. 28.6% (n=2) participants were 19 years old at the time of the interview, 28.6% (n=2) were 20, and 42.9% (n=3) were 21 years old.

Gender Identity

In terms of gender identity, out of the 7 interviewees, 42.9% (n=3) self-identified as male and 57.1% (n=4) self-identified as female. 0 self-identified as non-binary; although I aimed to have all gender identities represented, there were other variables relating to TikTok habits and perspectives that were more important to consider.

Sexual Orientation

The interview sample represented a variety of demographics, including sexual orientation. Of the 7 interviewees, 28.6% (n=2) self-identified as bisexual, 71.4% (n=5) as straight or heterosexual, and 14.3% (n=1) was questioning or unsure of their sexuality. Again, it is important to note that participants could select more than one option for this question.

Race & Ethnicity

Of the 7 interview participants, 42.9% (n=3) identified as white or caucasian, 14.3% (n=1) as biracial or multiracial, 28.6% (n=2) as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 14.3% (n=1) as Middle Eastern. In this category, participants could select more than one option if that applied to them, but none of the 7 interviewees did so in the survey portion. 0 of the 7 interviewees reported being of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.

Time Spent on TikTok

One participant browsed their For You Page 3-4 times a day and spent an average of 30-60 minutes on the app a day, while another opened the app 5 times a day and spent around 1.5 hours on TikTok per day. Another interviewee opened the app between 3 and 5 times a day and spent around 30 minutes on the app per day, while another interviewee opened the app at least 6 times a day and spent around 4 hours browsing the app per day. On the other hand, another interviewee opened the app around 3 times per day and spent around 45 minutes per day browsing the app. Another interviewee opened the app around 4 times a day and spent around 30 minutes per day browsing their For You Page. The final interviewee opened the app 3-4 times per day and spent around an hour on the app per day.

Crosstab Results

Body Image

Unsurprisingly, the variable with one of the strongest negative results was body image. In Table 1, people of all ages, with the exception of 18, 22, and 23, expressed feeling particularly negative about their body image after watching TikTok videos. This was consistent with gender as well; in Table 2, both male and female participants expressed negative feelings about their body image after watching TikTok videos. Non-binary-identifying participants, however, rated themselves as feeling neutral about their body image.

Table 1: Age and Body Image

	Q3: What is your age?							
	Total	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Total Count (Answering)	92.0	5.0	24.0	19.0	33.0	10.0	1.0	0.0
Very positive (5)	7.6%	20.0%	8.3%	5.3%	6.1%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Somewhat positive (4)	17.4%	20.0%	4.2%	21.1%	24.2%	10.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Neutral (3)	28.3%	40.0%	33.3%	10.5%	24.2%	60.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Somewhat negative (2)	34.8%	0.0%	37.5%	47.4%	36.4%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Very negative (1)	12.0%	20.0%	16.7%	15.8%	9.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 2: Gender and Body Image

	Q2: What i...ted Choice				
	Total	Female	Male	Nonbinary	Other (ins...ou'd like)
		A	B	C	D
Total Count (Answering)	92.0	70.0	14.0	8.0	0.0
Very positive (5)	7.6%	8.6%	7.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Somewhat positive (4)	17.4%	17.1%	14.3%	25.0%	0.0%
Neutral (3)	28.3%	22.9%	35.7%	62.5%	0.0%
Somewhat negative (2)	34.8%	37.1%	35.7%	12.5%	0.0%
Very negative (1)	12.0%	14.3%	7.1%	0.0%	0.0%

In terms of class year, students graduating in 2022 had a more even distribution of both positive, neutral, and negative feelings about their body image after watching TikTok videos. Students graduating in 2023, and especially those graduating in 2024, expressed particularly negative feelings related to their body image after watching TikToks. Finally, students in the class of 2025 also had a somewhat even distribution of positive, negative, and neutral feelings. This variable was possibly the most striking in terms of negative feelings across the survey and interview results. Interestingly, body image was consistently negative except for the two oldest age categories. This may suggest that self-esteem and self-regulation after engaging with potentially triggering content online may improve with time. However, when looking at age from the perspective of class year, the results were somewhat different. While the class of 2023 and especially 2024 skewed negatively, students whose age fell in classes of 2022 and 2025 represented somewhat even distributions of body image-related self-esteem. These results support that older students have better self-perceptions of their body image after watching

TikTok videos, even video trends such as #WhatIEatInADay. One quotation from an female-identifying interviewee in the class of 2024 is as follows:

“I hate #WhatIEatInADay videos. There are so many things that I don't like about it...I think it can be a really terrible influence because you never know what you're going to get. So sometimes I'll watch it and see this gorgeous girl or whatever. And sometimes they'll have big meals, and then other times they'll just have rice cakes, avocado toast, and like, fruit for dinner. [As a college student,] I don't have access to all that ‘healthy’ food, so that's another thing. So it feels very unattainable. It also feels like it creates boundaries of what food is ‘good’ and what food is ‘bad’ because very seldom will you see one of those fitness people eating something sweet or processed.” - *Female, class of 2024*

Race and ethnicity were also predictors of negative body image among respondents of the survey. Asian and Pacific Islander, Hispanic, White or Caucasian, and Bi or Multiracial participants mostly reported negative feelings related to body image after watching TikToks. However, Black and African American participants reported neutral feelings and Native American/Alaska Native, Middle Eastern, and Hispanic or Latino participants reported positive feelings related to their body image after watching TikToks.

As was somewhat expected, the interviewees had multidimensional perspectives on how body image and TikTok may be intertwined. The impact of COVID-19 added another dimension to this already complex relationship. Many participants expressed that TikTok changed the way they viewed their body in particularly negative ways. According to a female-identifying participant from the class of 2025,

“I would say at the beginning of the pandemic, I had a very unhealthy For You Page. It was totally self-destructive because I started to see all this stuff about body image, and then I actively [sought] out content about body image and content creators who all fit the beauty norms. So I used that as, like, an extension towards myself...I was self-aware [that it was bad] but that didn't make it okay. But I got to the point where I was seeking out that content and thinking, ‘Oh, that's what I'm *supposed* to look like’...I think that's why I have such a problem with my little sister using TikTok. I'm more comfortable with myself now, but there was a long time when [I] wasn't. That's a byproduct of getting older, but these super young kids are exposed to all this content on TikTok now, especially comment sections, that promote body shaming in backhanded ways. It doubly

reinforces the narrative around body image [perceptions] being unhealthy because you see the videos *and* regular people commenting on the video and feeding into it, promoting it.” - *Female, class of 2025*

As discussed in the literature review, the body positivity movement also plays a significant role in how TikTok users may engage with body image-related content on the app. When asked about this movement in the interviews, all participants acknowledged the good and bad behind body positivity on TikTok. According to a female-identifying participant in the class of 2024,

“I think both the body positive movement and fitness movement are both really flawed. Even if you go from one side to the other, there are still restrictions involved most of the time.” - *Female, class of 2024*

Interviewees commonly expressed that at times, the virality and treatment of creators depended on whether they fit the current beauty standard or not. For some participants, TikTok highlighted new insecurities. In my personal life, many TikTok users I have talked to expressed how they did not know what “hip dips” were until watching TikToks about them. For some participants, TikTok has prompted a seemingly drastic and unchangeable narrative related to body image and the thin ideal. TikTok has exacerbated existing insecurities and created new ones for many of the participants. For some, it seemed these insecurities about their bodies were not going away.

According to one interviewee,

“Since getting TikTok, I think I am constantly inundated with who I wish I could be...And it just makes you feel icky, like when you're looking at a girl and she's like prettier than I'll ever be. And then it's just one after another after another after another. And they're so skinny....I start blaming my genetics, my anatomy...I've become a lot more frustrated even with [h]ow I'm built. Just the layout of my body I've become even more frustrated with...With your bones, that's something that you don't have any control over. I'll see videos with girls who are shaped how I want to be shaped. Even if I tried, [I can't change] my hip bones. They're not moving. TikTok has created long-lasting, unchangeable impacts as opposed to just, ‘I feel skinny this morning’ or whatever.” - *Female, class of 2024*

Gender identity also correlated with negative feelings about body image among male and female identifying respondents, though it did not among those identifying as non-binary. It is currently unknown why non-binary participants' results were more neutral, but one could infer that this could be partly because non-binary participants may feel less pressure to adapt and conform to traditional male or female beauty standards. I also received a lower amount of non-binary-identifying responses than female-identifying responses. Female-identifying participants had more to say on body image and overall were more strongly affected, but consistent with the survey results, male-identifying interviewees were also affected by the content. According to a male-identifying participant in the class of 2024,

“Those videos of like, big, buff guys... can be frustrating. It'll be like, 'Do these 10 reps to get the chest you want' so there is [a] narrative of 'I'll never be good enough'. Luckily, I know that's not my goal body type 'cause I'm tall and lean. There are times it honestly gets frustrating because there are those TikTok guys where their only job is to...show off their body...But because of the boundaries I've set, I think they have offset those feelings. For me, it's more frustration and annoyance than anything. Going into the app, I know it's not real and I'm cautious not to compare it to my life too much...It's distorted, trying to get more subscribers and stuff.” - *Male, class of 2024*

As discussed in the quotation above, setting boundaries for screen time and disengaging with potentially triggering content proved a successful way to mitigate negative self-esteem related feelings, especially those related to body image.

Much of the body image space on TikTok is also taken up by fitness and nutrition-related content. Similar to other types of body image content on TikTok, the fitness and nutrition communities on TikTok also prompted a mixed bag of feelings for participants. Some relevant quotations from interviewees are as follows:

“I guess sometimes I get nutrition [videos] that I think are helpful, but... I don't get too much of that. It feels like they're trying to prescribe a lifestyle. It doesn't affect me too much because I just don't see those videos enough.” - *Female, class of 2025*

“Right now, I’m interested in fitness TikTok because I’ll just passively watch for fitness tips and tricks more than anything.” - *Female, class of 2024*

“I think a lot of the fitness influencers I’ve been seeing more often lately focus on muscle gain and stuff like that. So that’s good because they definitely eat more, specifically more protein and stuff. But even with that, I still would never see them eat, like, a chocolate bar.” - *Female, class of 2024*

Again, the relevance of the body image space on TikTok depends on how much the algorithm spews out that content to users most likely to engage with it. One very consistent result for most variables was that topics that were deemed most relevant in both positive *and* negative ways were the topics that populated participants’ For You Pages the most. Table 4 shows that the majority of the 25 participants who reported seeing #WhatIEatInADay videos felt somewhat to very negative about their own body image.

Table 4: #WhatIEatInADay and Body Image

Total Count (Answering)	25.0
Very positive (5)	12.0%
Somewhat positive (4)	12.0%
Neutral (3)	12.0%
Somewhat negative (2)	44.0%
Very negative (1)	20.0%

Even with this in mind, some participants had impressive insight into what might make them feel insecure and how to address it in their usage of the app. According to a male-identifying interviewee in the class of 2024,

“I went in [to the app] with a strict timer limit (1 hour per day) on the app, and I have not broken it once, 'cause I also watched *The Social Dilemma* before I got [TikTok] and recognized that the purpose of these apps is just trying to consistently feed you entertainment to keep you on the app.” - *Male, class of 2024*

This participant was an outlier of participants in the class of 2024, whose self-esteem generally skewed negatively for the variables assessed in the survey. However, this participant’s conscious use of media literacy, such as setting screen time limits, being cognizant of the app creators’ goals and motives, and self-educating about social media, yielded better self-esteem results. This suggests that media literacy initiatives may influence users to take action against content that may be harmful to themselves. While many view engaging with social media as a passive activity, these results suggest that the user is active in their engagement with TikTok. For participants who did not behave in ways that explicitly promoted active media literacy, the results differed. According to a female-identifying participant in the class of 2022,

“I don't even know where [the not interested button] is. I didn't know it existed until someone told me about it a bit ago. I usually just scroll past [the video], or sometimes I think I should sit with this discomfort. Because part of me has like faith in the algorithm and I know that the algorithm gets me...the only real time I would consider pressing that is when I've been on the wrong side of TikTok, where I get a really wacky conservative TikTok that I think is a parody, and then it's not. I watched the whole thing thinking there was a joke at the end. But otherwise I kind of just sit through videos.” - *Female, class of 2022*

However, an important factor to point out is that for this participant, body image was not deemed as particularly relevant to her TikTok experience.

Achievements & Accomplishments

One unanticipated result was the negative skew for how participants felt about their own achievements and accomplishments after watching TikTok. Table 5 shows a somewhat even distribution of results, but 18-year-olds felt especially negatively about their achievements and

accomplishments after watching TikToks and 21 and 22-year-olds skewed a bit negatively. It is important to consider that the first internship search happens at ages 18 and 19, and the post-graduate job search occurs for 21 and 22-year-olds.

Table 5: Age and Achievements and Accomplishments

	Q3: What is your age?							
	Total	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Total Count (Answering)	92.0	5.0	24.0	19.0	33.0	10.0	1.0	0.0
Very positive (5)	10.9%	0.0%	8.3%	15.8%	9.1%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Somewhat positive (4)	19.6%	20.0%	16.7%	15.8%	24.2%	10.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Neutral (3)	34.8%	40.0%	45.8%	36.8%	30.3%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Somewhat negative (2)	31.5%	40.0%	29.2%	26.3%	30.3%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Very negative (1)	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%	5.3%	6.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

One surprising result was from interviewees interested in music. Many music-loving TikTokers find a strong community in that space; creators post videos singing, playing an instrument, or even producing music in a studio. While all participants felt happy to engage with a community with similar interests, this came at a cost to some interviewees. According to interviewees interested in music and singing specifically,

“My interests in the film and media world are not in filmmaking, it's more just helping other people realize their projects...But something that I don't confess to a lot of people, but I will confess to you, is that the music TikToks are a double-edged sword. I question the idea of being one of those people who has a music TikTok. When I see other people post singing videos, I want to watch them because I can learn from them and I like music, but it's loaded. Like, what would people think of me if I did this? Would I be judged and am I good enough? It definitely triggers something.” - *Female, class of 2022*

“I think those resume [tips on TikTok], for the most part, I find helpful. But every once in a while, someone will pop up who’s eons more accomplished than I am...especially with singing and stuff. I'm gonna be honest, I had a little bit of a breakdown the other day because I had the idea of, like, everyone is so much better than me. Why do I try? I will never be the best singer. So like, why do I do it? Because we're constantly in need of the most talented people...TikTok is where I get, especially with my hobbies and stuff, a lot of impostor syndrome.” - *Female, class of 2024*

“In film, I want to be the one who's like, getting the coffee for people. Whereas for music, it feels more connected to my personal, like, talents and abilities. So seeing other people with that skill set is more loaded for me. There's nothing loaded to me about watching someone do some sort of crazy editing trick ‘cause in what world would I be able to do that? But with someone who’s like, ‘Here's a song I wrote!’ and then everyone comments, ‘Wow, if only we saw more people sharing their authentic, vulnerable selves.’ it makes me think whether *I* am hiding my authentic, vulnerable self.” - *Female, class of 2022*

Relevant videos to users’ hobbies and interests can be a double-edged sword. For some participants, it was difficult not to compare their own talents to those of others. Especially after comparing TikTok’s intrapersonal engagement model with Instagram’s interpersonal model, it is clear that TikTok might coax different insecurities out of people than Instagram would. For example, users may feel differently on Instagram after seeing their friends post without them, but on TikTok, where most users do not know the creators on their For You Page personally, they are more likely to see content relevant to their own identity or hobbies. According to one survey respondent,

“I think TikTok has given me a space to relate to other people in the world like Instagram or Snapchat never really did. Whether it’s niche childhood memories or interests/personal experiences I have, it’s nice to see other people have these common experiences with me.” - *Anonymous survey respondent*

Representation & Community

One of the most striking parts of conducting this study was taking note of the communities it offered to users, from hobbies and shared interests to racial and cultural affinity groups. As a white woman and avid user of TikTok myself, my experience with the app can be different than a user who is a person of color; I have grown up accustomed to seeing people that look like me in the media. For those who have not, seeing user-generated, viral content made by creators who look like or share a culture with them can be refreshing and validating. When surveyed about how they felt about their facial appearance after watching TikToks, Hispanic or Latinx, Native American or Alaska Native, and Middle Eastern participants had a positive-leaning distribution of responses. In responses from Asian American or Pacific Islander and Black participants, the gap was smaller and less negative compared to other variables, such as body image, as well. Interviewees who were people of color expressed similar sentiments. According to interviewees,

“There's a... chef who's a really good-looking Asian dude. He has a series where he, like, decolonizes the idea of healthy food... I eat his recipes every day and it's been a really empowering experience to just go to H Mart to pick up frozen dumplings, the same frozen dumplings I've been eating since I was a child. I get to know that it's still healthy in a uniquely Asian way.” - *Male, class of 2022, Asian American/Pacific Islander*

“Seeing a lot of Indian women my age [on TikTok] has just been nice. I don't have many friends that are Indian here at Tufts, or in general, so I think that seeing that has been nice... I think that's definitely brought me positivity and more comfort in who I am.” - *Female, class of 2022, Asian American/Pacific Islander*

“I also see a handful of mixed couples. I'm in an interracial relationship. She's white, I'm Asian, and I see things about that specific ‘Asian guy white girl’ dynamic. Those have been quite relatable and have made me feel like I'm not alone in navigating that dynamic.” - *Male, class of 2022, Asian American/Pacific Islander*

“Not that I watch them that often, but I've seen stuff like, ‘Indian girl eyeshadow tutorial’ which is cool to see... I think there's such a negative and widespread stereotype that Indian kids, in general, don't party and just focus on their studies or whatever. And I think that seeing Indian girls go out and have fun, like what I like to do, is really cool...It's nice

to just be on my For You Page and see an Indian girl post a video and see the comments say things like, ‘You’re so beautiful!’” - *Female, class of 2022, Asian American/Pacific Islander*

In a world of media where it has taken far too long for different racial or cultural affinity groups to get proper and multidimensional representation not plagued by stereotypes, TikTok is a refreshing outlet for solidarity, community, and relatability.

In addition to positive racial and cultural affinity outlets, TikTok also served as a creative hub for those interested in the arts, media, sports, activism, and other niche topics and interests. While the survey results yielded that respondents saw TikTok as a mostly solitary activity, users did report that they send TikToks to people they know. Users also resonated with TikToks that were about something or someone they are interested in. According to interviewees,

“There was a lot of time that I was more or less embarrassed about liking [Taylor Swift] 'cause that's not super typical being a guy. So now, seeing all this fun content on my For You Page is so engaging. When I get to see videos about [Taylor Swift's] lyrics or songs that I resonate with, it's even better to see it also resonates with other people too, especially when it's other guys... Those videos definitely bring me a lot of joy. And now I'm at a point in my growth, I guess, that I am really happy and proud [of liking Taylor].”
- *Male, class of 2024*

“The other side of TikTok that I like is the creative side. I love seeing the really crazy short films and, like, weird tech things, fan edits, and music.” - *Female, class of 2022*

“I look at funny videos [on my For You Page]. I love sending them to friends who also share those interests... like, it'll be a movie the two of us watch and I'll be like, ‘Oh my God, this TikTok is, like, relevant to that!’” - *Female, class of 2025*

“TikTok often gives me a sense of validation, since it shows me videos by people with a lot in common with me, especially things I thought I was alone in. To discover people who go through similar struggles, have similar opinions, and went through similar experiences makes me feel seen - even if it's just little unimportant things, like random habits I didn't know other people had.” - *Anonymous survey respondent*

Correlation or Causation

A major question posed by the literature was whether TikTok *caused* a change in self-esteem or if the relationship was correlational. After assessing my survey and interview data, it became clear to me that there was a significant relationship between TikTok and users' perceptions of their self-esteem. To address the direction of this relationship in my own study, I asked my survey respondents, "Have you felt a change in your self-esteem when comparing your experience before downloading TikTok compared to after? If there was a change, was it positive or negative?" I had expected the response to lean heavily towards TikTok causing a change in users' self-esteem...partly because this had been the case in my personal life. However, the results were more split than I had anticipated. Upperclassmen felt that TikTok caused less of a change than underclassmen, which makes sense given that TikTok was introduced when underclassmen were younger and more impressionable. Consistent with my interview findings, survey respondents were exactly split when asked if the change was positive or negative. Again, participants' relationships with the app were extremely multidimensional. According to one interviewee,

"I would say there are facets of me that TikTok has helped. And there are chunks of me, like body image, [which] is probably worse off. I would say feeling less alone and struggling with mental health and anxiety is better 'cause [TikTok] helps you feel less alone, especially during the college transition period." - *Female, class of 2025*

Since my study was on a small scale, it is still unclear whether TikTok causes a change in self-esteem, especially because so many participants reported that TikTok did not change their self-esteem at all, and that the user experience varies so widely given the intricate algorithm.

There were a few survey questions that aimed to deconstruct and hopefully untangle the question of correlation versus causation. These questions asked participants to report their mood

before, while, and after watching TikTok videos. Interestingly, while most of the moods reported before opening TikTok to watch videos skewed negatively, every single age category skewed towards a positive mood for participants both while and after watching TikToks. If TikTok represents a stimulus that can change one’s mood, this data suggests that TikTok may improve users’ moods while and after browsing the app. However, it is imperative that there is more research built upon these findings, as other data in this study directly opposes this finding.

Social Life

After experiencing multiple years of COVID-19 and social distancing restrictions, I was particularly interested in how my college-aged sample would respond to the prompt: “Some people report that watching TikTok videos makes them question their friends and/or social life. Please indicate how you feel about your friends and/or social life after watching TikToks.” Unsurprisingly, in Table 6, seniors in the class of 2022 reported some of the highest feelings of contentment with their own social life after watching TikTok videos, while the other classes were composed of either an even or negatively skewed distribution.

Table 6: Age and Social Life

	Q3: What is your age?							
	Total	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Total Count (Answering)	92.0	5.0	24.0	19.0	33.0	10.0	1.0	0.0
Very positive (5)	12.0%	20.0%	8.3%	15.8%	12.1%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Somewhat positive (4)	20.7%	0.0%	20.8%	15.8%	27.3%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Neutral (3)	39.1%	40.0%	45.8%	26.3%	36.4%	50.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Somewhat negative (2)	22.8%	20.0%	16.7%	36.8%	21.2%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Very negative (1)	5.4%	20.0%	8.3%	5.3%	3.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

These results were expected, as seniors had more time to establish themselves in school and make a group of friends not limited by COVID cohort. The class of 2022 had, by far, the most opportunities to meet peers organically throughout university. The other three classes were more severely impacted by COVID-19 during their formative months of meeting peers and solidifying friendships. Many respondents expressed their initial frustration and disappointment seeing TikTok videos posted by students at other schools with less social distancing restrictions than Tufts, especially underclassmen. According to one interviewee,

“When I switched to college, I was comparing myself to my other friends at home and would see TikToks of people at parties. I would go to parties too, but I was like, ‘Oh my God, they have all these close friends immediately and I have nobody and I’m alone...[TikTok] made it easy to believe that people were closer than they are...Like in the beginning of college, I took so many videos ‘cause I was trying to prove to myself that I had friends. Now that I actually do [have friends], I’ll look through my camera and will have like 3 videos. I think people tend to overcompensate.” - *Female, class of 2025*

With restrictions being less severe during the time of survey collection than the 2020-2021 school year, it was not surprising to see a more even distribution of responses for this variable. One surprising element was to see the class of 2024’s even distribution of responses for this variable. I had anticipated, especially after taking other data categories into account, that these students would feel the most negatively about their own social life after watching TikToks of young people being social because their first year at Tufts was severely impacted by COVID-19. This more even result can be attributed to a few factors. For one, during the time of survey collection, these students were halfway into their sophomore year of college. Even if they did not feel confident in their social life at the time of data collection, they at least would be used to it, especially compared to the class of 2025. Whereas the class of 2023’s results skewed negatively, the class of 2024’s results were a mostly even distribution. Juniors in college experienced a “normal” social life before the limited scope of opportunities that COVID-19 offered, but

sophomores in the class of 2024 did not. Thus, sophomores had no frame of reference for what Tufts “used to be” before COVID-19. It is still important to consider that these results also depended on the social outlets respondents had in their real life. According to one interviewee,

“I was in a pretty good spot last year where I was living in my dorm with nine other guys where we got along for the most part and I also still had my sports team; we practiced every day so I felt like I had a lot of great outlets for having a community. Even if I saw [social TikToks] like that, I wasn't too jealous ‘cause I was pretty happy with what I had. And on the flip side, I really like the time that I get when I'm just on my own. I appreciate my me time and my me time is usually when I'm on TikTok. Anyways, so I don't really envy folks going out in big groups.” - *Male, class of 2023*

But on the flip side, for those with less of a social outlet at school, TikTok use may yield different results. According to two anonymous survey respondents,

“I do think TikTok does make me feel certain ways about my friends and social group. On TikTok there's always group TikToks and videos of best friends...those videos do make me miss my high school friends and make me wonder whether I've met the right people at the moment, particularly in college where I have not met many good friends yet.” - *Anonymous survey respondent*

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusions

Discussion

It was not hard to gain survey participants, particularly during the first few days the survey was posted online. College students were eager to participate and share their views on TikTok. However, since TikTok is still in its adolescence and does not have a large body of research dedicated to it, participants could have been eager to contribute to an emerging field of research. TikTok's popularity has grown remarkably quickly and many people have dedicated much of their time and energy to the app throughout the past few years. TikTok has become a global phenomenon and interviewees and survey respondents alike did not shy away from sharing their honest opinions, whether they were positive, negative, or somewhere in between. After comparing different variables to one another, it became clear that different demographics and usage habits with TikTok prompted widely different results relating to self-esteem.

The age variable was exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 on so many participants' college experience. Even so, according to an article from the *New York Times*, survey responses from 84,000 people of all ages in Britain "...indicated two distinct periods of adolescence when heavy use of social media spurred lower ratings of 'life satisfaction': first around puberty — ages 11 to 13 for girls, and 14 to 15 for boys — and then again for both sexes around age 19" (Hughes, 2022). This makes a lot of sense given that underclassmen experienced more negative feelings about different aspects of the self after watching TikTok videos.

This research is difficult to make true sense of since there are so many variables at work, even beyond the ones I included in my research. People can have particularly high or low self-esteem for a multitude of reasons not associated with TikTok or other social media use. With

that being said, based on the findings from my literature review, it is clear that there is a correlation between certain types of regular social media use and changes in self-esteem. Moving forward, I would be curious to see whether TikTok may present different effects than other social media platforms long-term.

So much of the literature focuses on how TikTok and social media at large is harmful. However, it is crucial to realize that there is a reason users keep coming back for more content. Although the app is keen at identifying user's insecurities and capitalizing on them, TikTok is also a hub for users to connect like-minded people, even if they are located across the globe. Since the app is hugely popular, there are many subcategories such as "RelationshipTok" and even "RamenTok", many of which could not be assessed by the survey just because of the sheer number of them. One can infer that finding these communities, especially in the height of a time as seemingly hopeless as the pandemic, could offer positivity and solidarity. In the survey category asking participants about how TikTok made them feel about their personality, every single bracket of participants attested that TikTok made them feel positive overall about their personality traits. As discussed above, perhaps this could be attributed to finding validation and community for different parts of users' identities.

Body Image

It can be difficult when content that fits the beauty standard gets a lot of attention and comments, whereas content that does not may not get the same kind of attention. One type of comment that has been transformed into a meme of sorts is the "I love your confidence!" trope that commenters insert under videos of people whose body type may not fit the conventional

beauty standard. As stated by a few of the interviewees, the body positivity movement is certainly flawed online, especially given the tropes mentioned above.

As Marengo et al. (2018), Meier & Gray (2014), and Fox & Rooney (2015) predicted in the literature review, “elevated appearance exposure behaviors” such as posting, viewing, and commenting on images were associated with higher weight dissatisfaction, a drive for thinness, idealization of thin as “ideal,” and self-objectifications among female and male high schoolers, but these findings are specific to highly-visual social media (HVSM) such as Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr. As TikTok would also be equated as an HVSM, it was not surprising to see the overwhelming negativity related to body image after watching TikToks. Compared to most of the other variables, body image-related results had the highest percentages of a rating of a 1, or a very negative feeling about their body image after watching TikToks. Overall, I was not surprised to see the overwhelmingly negative results, but was satisfied reflecting back to my interviews where even the users with the strongest negative feelings also recognized the potential good in the sharing of recipes, workout routines, and other sustainable fitness and health-related content. With TikTok’s video-sharing format in mind, TikTok has the potential to be even more harmful to users’ impressionable feelings of body image compared to other social media platforms, but it also has the potential to be very beneficial for the reasons stated above. This is why I advocate for users to be active participants in their TikTok experience moving forward, such as the interviewee in this study who talked about how he navigates the app with strict timer limits and others who regularly hit the “not interested” button on potentially triggering content. Many other participants did not even know the “not interested” button existed.

Especially considering body image, I highly recommend that media literacy curriculums be implemented in schools or town/youth centers to teach young people how to navigate the

digital space with boundaries. Given the fact that young people aged 11-13 begin to crave validation in the form of online “likes” (Livingstone, 2014; Nesi, 2020) and begin to engage in cyberbullying and other risky behaviors, I recommend TikTok implement social media literacy programs as well, as researchers recommend using social media itself as a vessel for developing media literacy (Gleason, 2019; Churcher et al., 2014) in social, academic, and activist spaces (Chou et al., 2020; Sobowale et al., 2020; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). Users of TikTok skew incredibly young and many impressionable users are faced with unregulated stimuli that will eventually contribute to their self-concept.

Achievements & Accomplishments

One interesting variable assessed that did not have a lot of coverage in the literature was self-esteem relating to one’s personal and/or professional achievements, such as sports and music/art-related talents or career and school accomplishments. Though the results were not as heavily skewed negative as something like body image, for example, there was certainly a majority of participants in the survey and interviews who felt negatively about themselves after watching TikToks about others’ accomplishments. Negative feelings from participants aged 18 and 19 may have been exacerbated by factors like imposter syndrome and the college transition, especially at an institution as academically driven as Tufts is, while negative feelings from upperclassmen participants could have been exacerbated by the difficult internship/job and full-time job search. Again, consistent with the findings from the body image variable, respondents agreed that Tiktok also had the potential to also be used for a lot of good in this area. Some of these helpful videos discussed included professional advice such as job interview tips,

how to negotiate a salary offer, resume tips, as well as content related to personal achievements in the arts and sports.

However, when such content is closely linked with talents the user also has, specifically music and singing, it elicits similar types of upward social comparison discussed in the literature review. My own findings oppose some of those from the research. According to Gerber et al. (2018) and Wills (1981), downward comparison, the type of social comparison in which the comparer feels better than the compared, was more likely to occur with those who have lower rated self-esteem, motivated by self-enhancement for the threatened person. However, the interviewees in my own study showed many more signs of upward social comparison in which they felt the compared person was better off, or in this case, more talented, than they were.

These results were not as drastic in the survey portion in the study, which showed a more even distribution with other participants sometimes even feeling extremely positive about their own accomplishments and achievements after watching TikToks. Since TikTok has a more intrapersonal model of user engagement, one can gather that the types of social comparison users experience on TikTok would be very different than the type of social comparison experienced by using Instagram, for example. Since Instagram is focused on interpersonal connections, social comparisons on that app might focus more on user relationships with other users as opposed to user interests. Thus, since TikTok's type of engagement model is different than many mainstream social media platforms, I would recommend TikTok-specific media literacy programs to be implemented, ideally by the app itself.

Social Life

Social life was a particularly difficult topic to analyze because there were so many other confounding variables at work, notably the impact of COVID-19 on the college experience for the survey and interview participants. There was not a lot of literature covering social life specifically as it relates to self-esteem and social media use, which made the data analysis more difficult. However, my own results from this section were particularly striking. Although there was a significant percentage of survey participants who felt negatively about their own social life and connections after watching related videos on TikTok, there was also a significant portion who felt positively or neutral. I would have loved to also ask these participants how seriously they took social distancing restrictions at Tufts over the past few years because many students wanted to socialize with their peers, but felt they could not because of COVID. Others did not take restrictions as seriously and were able to connect socially. Of course, these results cannot be fully attributed to COVID because the college transition is different for every person regardless.

These results make sense given that so many of the interviewees preferred TikTok than other social media platforms because of the focus on user interests rather than relationships with other users. Thus, TikTok could certainly impart different, more positive effects on users than Instagram because social life specifically is not as big of a focus on the app as opposed to other variables. However, connections of any kind are important on all types of social media, so it is important not to discount this variable entirely.

The pandemic certainly altered people's social lives. As TikTok's popularity spike happened at the height of COVID, TikTok filled that void in certain ways. According to one article written during April 2020, "It's impossible to talk about TikTok's current success without talking about the larger context of the coronavirus. People are cut off from physical human

contact and need a diversion to get them through a difficult period. TikTok provides all of the above in an easy-to-use and accessible format” (Johnson, 2020). From dance challenges to online music festivals to the “Quarantine Olympics,” TikTok offered a virtual outlet for countless individuals who were, quite literally, left to their own devices inside.

Representation and Community

Though it was not a variable in the original survey, representation and community through various user identities was a huge variable in why so many of the interviewees kept returning to check their TikTok For You Page. This variable specifically is a huge reason why TikTok differentiates itself from other social media platforms. Seeing people who share similarities to users can offer solace and community, especially during the heights of COVID when so many people were faced with loneliness during isolation. TikTok has clearly helped people embrace their individuality and “find their people,” which simply is not possible with an interpersonal model of user engagement such as Instagram or Facebook. I realize that TikTok has a long way to go with this variable and I have limited data outside of the interviews to support it. However, I would encourage TikTok creators to keep this variable in mind; it is clear they are making a huge difference in users’ lives.

People of color are chronically underrepresented, stereotyped, or completely absent from the media. As discussed in the results section of this thesis, POC interviewees had similar thoughts. It could be argued that TikTok parallels real life more than television, as TikTok is usually not scripted and people are, for the most part, posting videos of themselves rather than of a character. One of the most positive findings from the results section was hearing from the interviewees of color, especially, who talked about seeing people who looked like them on

TikTok. In fact, some creators have turned to TikTok to educate their platform about otherwise forgotten parts of history and culture. One creator discussed “The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It,” a self-published book from 1857 that “argued the South’s prosperity and cultural development were being held back by slavery, which stunted enterprise” (Dawson, 2022). This creator studied cities both in the North and South and concluded that those in the North had a better quality of life than their counterparts in the South. As seen here, TikTok is used not only for representation, but for education on these issues as well. By no means is TikTok perfect in this area and all social media platforms struggle with representation and algorithmic bias, but especially after the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, social justice has become a forefront of the app (Dawson, 2022).

Limitations

Although a concerted effort was made to reach a variety of students, the majority of them identified as female. This was expected, as 61% of the app’s active users are female. I used a variety of different methods for recruitment, including to but not limited to Facebook and other social media posts and professor announcements in class. Perhaps more females use Facebook and social media than men. This could also be because mostly female-identifying people use TikTok, female-identifying people felt more inclined to take the survey, whether that be because of motivation or connectedness to the topic, or because some people I knew personally chose to take it. Additionally, because I could only draw from Tufts students, the survey sample was skewed to begin to begin with. This most certainly could have skewed the data, especially because everyone’s For You Pages are so specifically tailored to niche interests and traits.

Arguably the largest limitation of this study would be the lack of a control group. Since this is such a difficult topic to make sense of due to so many confounding variables, it would

have been beneficial to gather a control group of college students who do not use TikTok and ask them how they felt about their own self-esteem. Thus, this study cannot determine the strongest relationship possible between regular TikTok use and self-esteem.

Because of the limited resources for a senior thesis, I could not interview as many people as I had hoped for. Thus, my interview sample was not representative of all people who use TikTok on a daily basis. Additionally, my interview sample was limited even further because only a certain portion indicated they would be interested in being interviewed. Because of this, there could have been additional perspectives that were missed from people who opted out of being interviewed. My sample was also not representative because Tufts students are not representative of all college-aged people. Additionally, it is very possible that both younger and older age cohorts use TikTok differently; this was apparent even when assessing all four class years surveyed in this sample.

In terms of outreach, there was a majority of participants in the class of 2022 because most of my connections are in that class here at Tufts. I attempted to mitigate this by reaching out to different classes online and in-person, but people are more likely to participate in the study if they know or have a connection to the primary investigator. One method of outreach I used was via my own social media accounts. This alone skews the data towards people I know personally. Finally, I reached out to professors in large lecture classes and professors I knew personally to encourage their students to take my survey. A lot of these large lecture classes are introductory courses such as Introduction to Psychology or Sociology; these classes encourage students to think critically about themselves, their self-esteem included. If I were to do this study again, I would have made a more concerted effort to research more into different classes and professors to reach out to, especially those in the STEM fields where taking surveys like this one

is not as commonplace. Additionally, if professors of these large introductory classes filled with mostly first years and sophomores did not give extra credit for taking the survey, those students would probably be less inclined to do so.

In addition, this sample was not collected during a particularly politically-charged time. Since the time of collection, the Russia/Ukraine conflict has escalated exponentially, and a number of people, notably Ukrainian civilians, have turned to TikTok as a vessel to share their own, unedited, raw perspective of the conflict in real time. These efforts have brought further awareness to the conflict and have shaped TikTok into a tool well beyond a humorous and entertaining video-sharing platform. Now, TikTok is harnessed as a weapon promoting social justice and advocacy. According to a 2022 article in *The Guardian*, "...the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, appealed to "TikTokers" as a group that could help end the war. Last week, Joe Biden spoke to dozens of top users on the app in a first-of-its kind meeting to brief the influencers on the conflict in Ukraine and how the US is addressing it" (Paul, 2022). Although the article recognizes TikTok's tendency for carrying misinformation through factors like username pseudonyms and the date of upload not being prominently displayed, influencers do have massive reach for donations to the cause and awareness (Paul, 2022). The impact of this global event varies depending on the types of content users engage with on their For You Page, but it nevertheless improves access to information about current events in raw form. Despite the tendency for misinformation to be spread on the app, if users can navigate it with boundaries, it can be a very powerful tool for political and activist engagement specifically.

My analyses also had limitations. Again, since I was the primary investigator and did not have extensive resources, my bandwidth was somewhat limited compared to a research facility, for example. In particular, I wish I could have interviewed more people instead of the seven

participants because there were many more demographic variables, notably gender identity, that I wanted to dive deeper into. My survey sample itself was not representative due to the reasons discussed above, and because some people would be more likely to mark themselves down as willing to participate in a follow-up interview for a number of reasons, the seven participants were also not representative of my survey cohort of 92 participants. However, it was helpful to have these interviews as a whole to get a deeper and more personal perspective about user experience with TikTok; I would encourage other studies to take these interviews, and perhaps with other age groups, to a bigger and broader level.

Directions for Future Research

In the future, I would love to see researchers expand upon my work, not only in terms of reaching a wider variety of people to include a truly representative sample of TikTok's diverse user network, but also in terms of timeline. Since TikTok as an app is still very much in its adolescence, the long-term effects of use are still unclear. It would be beneficial to create a study that tracks the trajectory of how the app might interact with self-esteem over time, not just at one point. This would also be relevant to investigate how TikTok's popularity will fare over time. As has happened with Facebook, MySpace, and even Instagram, it is abundantly clear that as soon as "adults" start engaging on social media platforms, young people tend to flee and find another platform to use. I would also recommend for researchers to focus more on social life and social media after the onset of COVID-19 and social distancing restrictions.

As discussed above, TikTok has started to be used for a myriad of different purposes. While it was designed primarily for entertainment, TikTok can be used to encourage civic engagement through voter registration initiatives for young people and education and awareness

about particular ideologies or even candidates. For instance, Jon Ossoff, senior United States senator for Georgia, was one of the biggest names to harness TikTok to reach young people. The results of this strategy paid off; Ossoff won the critical race in Georgia. According to Miryam Lipper, an Ossoff campaign spokesperson from a 2020 article by Business Insider, “Georgia's unprecedented youth turnout in the general election was a result of years of Georgia Democrats' hard work and Jon's relentless focus on turning out young voters. Our digital program's strategy is intended to meet young voters where they are: online.” In fact, close to one in five young voters who voted in the Georgia Senate runoffs did not vote in the 2020 general election, including 25% of Black youth, after Ossoff's strategy had taken full force (Beadle et al., 2020, as cited in Perrett, 2020).

Ossoff is not the only political figure to take advantage of the app by any means. According to Ed Markey, Senator of Massachusetts, in an interview with the *New York Times*, “I listen and learn from young people on TikTok. They are leading, they know what's going on and they know where we are headed, especially online. I'm with them” (Kambhampaty, 2022). It is clear that there is much more to unearth when looking at TikTok as a vessel for activism, especially as it relates to political misinformation. I would encourage future researchers to analyze TikTok user behavior from both political and psychosocial perspectives and investigate how the two ideologies interact with one another as they relate to user behavior.

Concluding Statement

Throughout this process, my biggest takeaway was that social media, and TikTok, has the power to be harnessed for good. I encourage educators, policymakers, employees at social networks including those at TikTok, and everyday users of these apps to think critically about their boundaries with social media and how the content makes them feel about themselves and others. Media literacy initiatives must be taken seriously, as these programs yield positive results, notably for young people who otherwise might have to traverse the digital space blindly.

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I am so grateful to all of my study participants and especially to those who took the time to be interviewed as well. Your unique, vulnerable, and multifaceted perspectives helped my work truly come to life.

I want to thank my family for always encouraging me to dive deeply into my passions, who always offer a supportive ear and more love and support than I can describe. Finally, I want to thank my best friends, Sam Raymond, Emma Winey (especially for her expertise on the political side of TikTok), Mikayla Fier, and Jula Harrington, as well as the Jackson Jills and all of the other Jumbos I've made memories with, for making my undergraduate experience as unforgettable as it was. I could not have dreamed you all up if I tried; I am so grateful for everything we've experienced together over the years, from the laughter and happiness to the good and bad memories...I am so excited for the journey to come.

Appendix

Appendix A

Qualtrics Survey Items & Informed Consent Information

You are being asked to volunteer in a research study. Please find below information about this research for you to carefully consider when deciding about whether or not to participate. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide whether to participate.

Key Information for You to Consider

Statement of Research:

You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation. Please know that you must be aged 18-24 to participate in this study.

Purpose:

The purpose of this research is to investigate how college-aged students who browse their TikTok For You Page regularly (at least once a day) perceive their own self-esteem.

Duration:

The follow-up Zoom interview will take around 30 minutes.

Procedures and Activities:

You will be asked to complete a Qualtrics survey asking about your TikTok usage habits and how these might interact with your self-esteem.

Risks:

The risks or discomforts associated with this research include possibly uncomfortable questions about self-esteem.

Benefits:

There will be no direct benefits as a result of your participation.

Study Purpose:

Lily McIntyre, a Tufts University Senior, is conducting her Senior Honors Thesis on TikTok's growing popularity and how it might interact with college students' sense of self-esteem. The purpose of the research is to advocate for the emotional well-being of college students and shed some light on TikTok's advantages of use as well as its drawbacks. You are being asked to participate because you are a current Tufts student who has indicated that they use the TikTok app to browse videos regularly and are 18-24 years of age. You are one of 100-150 participants to take part in this study. Your participation in the study will last 10-20 minutes, plus another 30 minutes if you are willing and chosen to take part in this Zoom 1:1 interview asking for more insight on your experience. The study is supported by the Department of Interdisciplinary

Studies, but the study is not receiving funding from any source.

What will happen during this research?

If you agree to be in this research, your participation will include filling out an online survey via Qualtrics, plus an optional follow-up Zoom interview.

If you are willing and then chosen to be contacted for a follow-up Zoom interview, your audio and video will be recorded, but your identity will always be kept anonymous and confidential in the thesis. Your name and any other information that could identify you will be saved separately from the data. Only the PI and faculty advisor will be granted access to survey and interview data, but the faculty advisor will not be able to access its sources/identifiers. After interview transcription, the interviews will be deleted to ensure confidentiality and all identifying factors will be removed or changed. Quotations from the interview may be referenced in the final thesis, but your identity or any identifying features will always be kept anonymous. It is important to have this audio recorded in order to cite what students have to say and that phrasing and wording is exact. Again, taking part in the Zoom follow-up interview is optional and you can opt out at any time.

What will you do to protect my privacy?

The results of the study may be published. We will take measures to protect your privacy and confidentiality including not sharing your name or any personal demographic information to anybody. Your name and any other information that could identify you will be saved separately from the data. Only the PI and faculty advisor will be granted access to survey and interview data, but the faculty advisor will not be able to access its sources/identifiers. After conducting follow-up interviews via Zoom, all data will be uploaded to a secure and private Box account and deleted from the personal computer from which the data was collected. Again, the thesis will not include any identifiable information.

Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, we can never fully guarantee your privacy will be protected. If you tell us something that makes us believe that you or others have been or may be physically harmed, we may report that information to the appropriate agencies. Individuals and organizations responsible for conducting or monitoring this research may be permitted access to and inspect the research records. This includes Tufts Social, Behavioral & Educational Research Institutional Review Board (Tufts SBER IRB.)

The information collected as part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research studies, even if all of your identifiers are removed.

What are the risks or discomforts associated with this research?

The discomforts associated with the research include the possibility of experiencing negative feelings about one's self-esteem while/after completing the Qualtrics survey or while/after the Zoom follow-up interview.

How might I benefit from this research?

There may be no personal benefit from your participation but the knowledge received may be of value to humanity.

What is the compensation for the research?

You will not receive any compensation for your participation in this study.

What will happen if I choose not to participate?

It is your choice to participate or not to participate in this research. Participation is voluntary.

Is my participation voluntary, and can I withdraw?

Taking part in this research study is your decision. Your participation in this study is voluntary.

You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you can stop at any time. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the university.

There are no penalty/consequences/loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you do not participate.

You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from continued participation at any point in this study without penalty/consequences/loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study, the data collected to the point of withdrawal will be deleted from Qualtrics and the Box account used for research, and therefore not included in the study.

Can I be removed from the research without my OK?

If participants say something that is personally damaging to themselves or others that may be too revealing in some way, privacy and confidentiality will be prioritized and that data will be removed.

Who do I talk to if I have questions?

If you have questions, concerns, or have experienced a research-related injury, contact the research team at:

Lily McIntyre (Primary Investigator)
(203) 907-5654 / Lily.McIntyre@tufts.edu

Dr. Julie Dobrow (Faculty Advisor)
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An Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) is overseeing this research. An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you have questions about your rights or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact: Tufts Social, Behavioral, and Educational Research IRB 75 Kneeland Street, Suite 623 Boston, MA 02111 617.627.8804 SBER@tufts.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT I have read and considered the information presented in this form. I confirm that I understand the purpose of the research and the study procedures. I understand that I may ask questions at any time and can withdraw my participation without prejudice. I have read this consent form. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study. I consent to participate in this study.

Do you agree to participate?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Page Break

What is your class year?

- 2022 (1)
 - 2023 (2)
 - 2024 (3)
 - 2025 (4)
 - Other (5)
-

What is your age?

- 17 (1)
 - 18 (2)
 - 19 (3)
 - 20 (4)
 - 21 (5)
 - 22 (6)
 - 23 (7)
 - Other (8) _____
-

What is your gender identity?

- Female (1)
 - Male (2)
 - Nonbinary (3)
 - Other (insert here if you'd like) (4)

-

What is your sexual orientation? Select all that apply.

- Asexual (1)
 - Bisexual (2)
 - Queer (3)
 - Pansexual (4)
 - Questioning or unsure (5)
 - Straight/heterosexual (6)
 - Gay (7)
 - Lesbian (8)
 - Prefer not to say (9)
 - Additional category not listed (10)
-

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
 - Prefer not to say (3)
-

How would you describe yourself?

- Asian or Pacific Islander (1)
 - Black or African American (2)
 - Hispanic or Latino (3)
 - Native American or Alaska Native (4)
 - White or Caucasian (5)
 - Bi/multiracial (6)
 - A race/ethnicity not listed here (7)
-

- Prefer not to say (8)

Would you be willing to be contacted for a half an hour, 1:1 Zoom interview about your experience with this topic in the future? All of your information will remain confidential and you may or may not be selected to participate.

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

If yes to question 7, what is your preferred email?

Do you have the TikTok app? This survey is intended for people who have TikTok. If this doesn't apply to you, please exit the survey.

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

How many times a day do you browse your TikTok For You Page?

How many hours do you think you spend browsing the TikTok For You Page in one day? (your best estimate works!)

Some people report that watching TikTok videos makes them question their own facial appearance. Please indicate how you feel about your facial appearance (or attractiveness) after watching TikToks:

- Very positive (5)
- Somewhat positive (4)
- Neutral (3)
- Somewhat negative (2)
- Very negative (1)

On average, how many TikToks per week do you send to others?

Some people report that watching TikTok videos makes them question their personality traits. Please indicate how you feel about your personality traits after watching TikToks:

- Very positive (5)
 - Somewhat positive (4)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Somewhat negative (2)
 - Very negative (1)
-

What kind of content populates your For You Page (FYP) the most? Check all that apply.

- Day-in-the-life vlogs (1)
 - What-I-eat-in-a-day vlogs (2)
 - Recipe/other food content (3)
 - Dances (4)
 - Popular audios and memes (5)
 - “Glow Up” videos/those involving TikTok video transition effects (6)
 - Makeup tutorials (7)
 - Try-on hauls/fashion content (8)
 - Career advice or guidance (9)
 - Social justice and advocacy content (10)
 - News/current events (11)
 - Mental health advice/guidance (12)
 - Do it yourself crafts or activities/DIYs (13)
 - Other (14) _____
-

Some people report that watching TikTok videos makes them question their body image. Please indicate how you feel about your body image after watching TikToks:

- Very positive (5)
 - Somewhat positive (4)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Somewhat negative (2)
 - Very negative (1)
-

Do you usually watch TikToks on a mobile phone or computer?

- Phone (1)
 - Computer (2)
-

Do you commonly experience a certain type of mood right BEFORE watching TikToks?

- Very happy (5)
 - Somewhat happy (4)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Not very happy (2)
 - Not at all happy (1)
-

Do you commonly experience a certain type of mood WHILE watching TikToks?

- Very happy (5)
 - Somewhat happy (4)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Not very happy (2)
 - Not at all happy (1)
-

Do you commonly experience a certain type of mood AFTER watching TikToks?

- Very happy (5)
 - Somewhat happy (4)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Not very happy (2)
 - Not at all happy (1)
-

Some people report that watching TikTok videos makes them question their personal and/or professional achievements. Please indicate how you feel about your personal and/or professional achievements after watching TikToks:

- Very positive (5)
 - Somewhat positive (4)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Somewhat negative (2)
 - Very negative (1)
-

Do you live off-campus at Tufts?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Have you felt a change in your self-esteem when comparing your experience before downloading TikTok compared to after?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

If there was a change, was it positive or negative?

- Positive (1)
 - Negative (2)
 - There was no change (3)
-

Some people report that watching TikTok videos makes them question their friends and/or social life. Please indicate how you feel about your friends and/or social life after watching TikToks:

- Very positive (5)
 - Somewhat positive (4)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Somewhat negative (2)
 - Very negative (1)
-

If you'd like, please use this space to express in more detail how TikTok makes you feel about yourself, in any way that you deem most relevant to you:

Do you mostly view TikToks alone or with others?

- Alone (1)
 - With others (2)
 - Evenly split (3)
-

If you like sharing TikToks with others, what kind of content do you usually share? Check all that apply.

- Day-in-the-life vlogs (1)
- What-I-eat-in-a-day vlogs (2)
- Recipe/other food content (3)
- Dances (4)
- Popular audios and memes (5)
- “Glow Up” videos/those involving TikTok video transition effects (6)
- Makeup tutorials (7)
- Try-on hauls/fashion content (8)
- Career advice or guidance (9)
- Social justice and advocacy content (10)
- News/current events (11)
- Mental health advice/guidance (12)
- Do it yourself crafts or activities/DIYs (13)
- Other (write here) (14) _____
- I don't send TikToks to others (15)

Appendix B

Follow-Up Interview Questions

1. What are your favorite types of TikToks to watch and why?
2. What are your least favorite types of TikToks to see and why?
3. In your opinion, has your experience with TikTok been more positive or more negative? Why?
4. Are there any TikTok creators who have had a positive impact on you? How? What about creators who have had the opposite impact?
5. Some people report that watching TikTok videos affects the way they feel about different things. Have you ever had that experience?
6. If a Junior or Senior, do you think TikTok would have had a different impact on you if you were an underclassman?
7. If a First Year or Sophomore, do you think TikTok would have had a different impact on you if you were an upperclassman?
8. What kind of videos populate your FYP the most? How do you feel about each type that is significant to you?

Note: These interviews were semi-structured. I asked personalized follow-up questions based on what participants responded to the above questions.

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