

The Influence of TikTok Within the COVID-19 Pandemic and How it Has Affected Social  
Communication

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COM 3928-106 Research Methods

May 3, 2022

## Introduction

TikTok has broadened social communication in the current pandemic through its digital content uploaded on the application. Social communication in this current study is the social context of how communities interact, relating to how social behavior is the actions demonstrated through members in the same social setting. The present research focuses on how the social setting of TikTok influences the users' shift in societal connection as the pandemic caused a decrease of in-person socialization. The targeted focus group is Generation Z, individuals between the ages of 18-25, who have used TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic. This current state led to a decrease in physical socialization as communication shifted toward a digitally dominant route. The research will measure how the specific age group will continue to adapt to digital connections and implement TikTok into their daily lives. The study is significant because the relevance of TikTok on social lives has been at an increased rate since the first quarantine phase, which started in 2020 (Oliveras, et al, 2020).

TikTok is cyclical in nature as without followers, there can be no consumers, and without creators, there can be no followers. The application is run and based on the interconnected communication and interaction of users and videos. Similarly, followers and viewers can like and comment on videos, altering what they see daily whether that be on their following page, or the participants' 'for you page'; which is videos curated for them and their interests. While this can be maybe just funny short videos, personal stories, or experiences lived by others, consumers can find ways to relate or sympathize with them.

TikTok consumption rose tremendously at the height of quarantine, as it offered Gen Z a creative, social outlet that they can use to refocus attention (Araujo, et al, 2022). The societal behaviors correlating with Gen Z's social communication target multiple categories of users as

the increase in digital media platforms is shown. The occurrence caused the researchers to want to understand why a forced lack of in-person socialization has produced an elevated consumption of TikTok during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. This usage of digital content has become a broad discourse that will be analyzed below. As this research analyzes social connection being dependent on TikTok use during the COVID-19 pandemic, its goal is to examine how TikTok's increase in usage has shifted social communication.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Analysis of Social Communication Through TikTok During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

A study (Oliviare-Garcia et al., 2020) tested the association between quantitative and qualitative analysis of viral TikTok trends implemented in today's cultures and society which relate to the COVID-19 confinement. The research was conducted during the first phase of the quarantine period from April-May 2020. Their goal behind the length of the research was to illustrate that much of the communication switched within the first 25 days of quarantine. The research's objective was to study the specific trends and videos associated with the digital community's social behavior. The results show a brand-new virtualization model of the modern generation's behavior through communication. The content does not shift modern society; however, the trends have shaped the influence of product interests and entertainment awareness during the decrease of in-person socialization.

The hashtags and trends the study focused on were related to COVID-19 and quarantine (Oliviare-Garcia, 2020). It was acknowledged that any content created on the platform would be affected by what's happening in the world. The study shows that the hashtags and trends during the pandemic have a strong effect on the algorithm itself. This study has a strong correlation to

social behavior and how it has changed socialization and how digital communication affects consumer behavior.

The process of conducting the research consisted of analyzing two different portions of the TikTok platform: the hashtags and the videos under them. They obtained the top 20 popular hashtags and then analyzed the labels from the top 50 most viewed videos, then found the top five main trends over the same period of time. It's to be noted that anything can go viral and the algorithm of TikTok is too broad to pin down and study (Olivieres-Garcia, 2020). The study concluded that there is very little impact from the videos on COVID-19 perceptions but instead demonstrates how the entire world is coming together in sharing similar journeys of quarantine. "In the videos that its users have uploaded to TikTok, it has been possible to observe the feelings of all these people, their fears, their way of life, the relationships between family members" (Olivieres-Garcia, 2020, p 251).

This study is effective in showing the influx of social communication from TikTok during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data they collected helps this research to understand how people utilized this form of communication and to see what people were doing on TikTok during the said time frame. Understanding that the basis of this research was to look at how social communication transfixed over the first 25 days of quarantine and shows how TikTok and the pandemic correlate.

A study consistent with the findings above (Araujo et al., 2022) addressed how TikTok utilizes marketing strategies as the increase of Generation Z's population surfaces in the research article. The study identifies the influence of social communication throughout the digital media platform to analyze the perception of content users when exposed to TikTok advertisements in three categorical dimensions: emotional, entertaining, and informative. Emotional dimension

makes the audience interested in the video advertisements by showing content that makes them feel positive and negative emotions. The entertaining dimension is to catch the attention of consumers and help them reduce stress. Lastly, the informative dimension aims to provide customers with practical and functional information that can aid them in their daily life (Araujo et al, 2022, p 143). The results illustrate that TikTok's advertisements' diverse categories positively correlate with the consumer's social interests; therefore, societal behavior influences. The purchase intention of Gen Z, individuals ages 18-24, is strongly related to the social media marketing strategies conducted as it relates to social communication.

The study's quantitative data support the TikTok advertisement's influence on consumer behavior by "utilizing the marketing strategy of diverse and emotionally-provoking content that should be featured and focused on the advertisements if they want to direct and connect it towards Gen Z" (Araujo et al, 2022, p. 151). The study demonstrates the validity of TikTok usage on consumers' intentions as a measurement of socialization. The research findings help to expand knowledge for this researcher's study as it is related to the method of social behavior positively correlates with different communication behaviors specifically uploaded on TikTok and the various categories of advertisements: emotional, entertaining, and informative. The data of all three categories show a connection to how individuals use digital media videos in their daily lives.

TikTok's measurement of social communication is demonstrated in another study (Guo J, 2022) as it conducts an investigative study on the impact TikTok is having on individuals ages 15-25 years old. The presence of TikTok users between the given ages grew by 180% during the peak of the first stage of quarantine (Ceci, 2022). This statistic was released soon after the transition to remote academic settings and the rise of digital communication. The data from the

focus groups for this study was analyzed using statistics to conclude the final result. The reason for this research study was to identify shifting social communication due to the influx of TikTok usage and the impact that short videos have on the influence of social normativity. The study was conducted to weigh the effects that the application has had on Gen-Z in recent years during the pandemic.

The study (Guo, 2022) concluded that there is a positive correlation between popular TikTok videos and the shift in the biased value of young adults in today's youth culture. Due to popular trends that were analyzed on the application, it was concluded that young adults are utilizing TikTok as a forum for knowledge and growth in the most formative years of their development through mental maturity. This has an immense effect on the social communication of Gen-Z as TikTok is very influential in young adults' development in morality, self-actualization, expression, knowledge, and culture. The results from this study illustrate that TikTok, as a big part of Gen-Z's world of networking, has had "a profound influence on the youth, in an educational, social, and perceptual way" (Guo J, 2022, p. 4).

This study shows the shift in social communication due to the influx of Tik Tok usage during the first stages of quarantine. The data collected in this study helps further research by pinpointing exactly when this form of communication started to have a profound influence on the communication of teens and young adults. The study highlights the correlation between Tik Tok's influence on the beginning stages of the pandemic and how it relates to a shift in social communication.

Relating to the social normativity of the platform's community, storytelling content on TikTok is presented in a research study (Triwidyati et al, 2021) that shares events and social communication by consumers on the platform. TikTok has revolutionized social communication

and digital behavior (Triwidyati et al., p.127). Communicating through TikTok allows individuals to transfer content to other media platforms, similar to Instagram and Twitter. This is used to engage and share with others, whether it be through entertainment or in personal lifestyles.

TikTok has made social communication easy and accessible, providing features such as direct messaging through the application in which consumers can send videos directly to friends and family. A share tab at the bottom right of the screen is where users can share videos by copying links or to other multimedia platforms like Snapchat and Instagram (Triwidyati, p.130). This form of sharable content through the platform that is not only through the social media platforms, allows for an increase in traction on videos. Said traction is allowing for people to talk about their content interaction through personal communication without having to have shared the video.

Storytelling provides new forms of communication and exposure to different social interactions, and TikTok offers the platform. It offers people to evaluate their beliefs and/or actions by integrating both on an open space of communication that simply offers and redirects how people interact with one another in-person and on digital interfaces; hence communication becomes collaboration. There are many people with varying perspectives, beliefs, and opinions. TikTok allows others to reengage their thought processes, interactions, and communication.

Reviewing the process of how social media, specifically TikTok, is shaping social communication, is also conducted in a study (Omar et al, 2020) that utilizes the uses and gratification theory (Omar et al, 2020, p. 121). This theory aims to prove that people choose to continue using certain media outlets because they get a certain gratification from doing so. In this research, the use is TikTok and the gratification comes from finding content specifically made

for them on the algorithm. It discusses how user-generated content keeps users on the platform and is easily changing their behavior. Using specific media that is shaped by consumers, the platform can influence the ideas or products that the videos are presenting, shifting the users' ideologies in a naturally occurring way. One of its hypotheses is that personality traits are related to consumers' TikTok use and participation in social communication. The second hypothesis discusses the relationship between motivation to use TikTok and the social communication tools that the application provides. (Omar et al, 2020, p. 123).

An online survey was done using snowball sampling throughout a growing group of TikTok users. It was determined that the independent variables were positively significant as they related to the dependent variable. The research also tested the hypotheses again using “hierarchical regression analysis; a more robust statistical test which provides a framework for model comparison” (Omar et al, 2020, p. 128). Demographics were taken into consideration this time and the variables were split into categories. The research then evaluated the variances in relationships between variables. The research made a defining conclusion stating, “we empirically confirm findings of past research that found different types of motivation influence media usage. Specifically, the study found that social media users consume or watch TikTok for escapism, social interaction, and archiving purposes.” Meanwhile, social media users participated in TikTok to socially present interests in communication. (Omar et al, 2020, p. 121). Surveys proved useful in collecting data on TikTok use and social communication over time, adding to the growing research on the topic.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The research questions in this study address the effects of TikTok on the community of Gen-Z's and if there is a strong correlation between two variables, the pandemic, and the shift of



social communication. The independent variable is the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning from the first quarantine which started in March 2020 (Araujo et al., 2022). The dependent variable is the social communication methods shared between young adults' TikTok use. This dependent variable includes individual pages, personal videos, and consumers' interactions that are most frequently seen. The study focuses on how demographics are changed by TikTok and its societal interactions. The hypothesis will question whether there is a correlation between the pandemic and social communication as they both relate to TikTok's form of digital behavior.

H1: The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the use of TikTok which affected social communication primarily for Generation Z.

H2: As individuals are exposed to the social media platform from the lack of in-person socialization, society conforms to The TikTok communities' videos and communication purposes which influence individuals to follow certain social interactions.

## **Methods**

### ***Study Overview***

The purpose of this study is to measure the change in social communication throughout the TikTok platform as the decrease in physical social interaction was present after the COVID-19 pandemic began. The general design of the study was a Likert scale on which the participants could rate interval questions from 1 to 5 depending on if they completely disagree or completely agree. We recruited 105 individuals who answered the questions on an online Qualtrics survey.

The individuals' responses depended on if they used TikTok primarily for content, messaging other consumers, or communicating with other people who share similar interests. Social communication and TikTok's influence on such are reflected in the survey responses.

### ***Participants***

The participants are individuals ages 18-25 to direct the research toward college-aged communities that share similar interests on social media platforms and communication technologies. The participants were recruited through social media platforms, which allow all viewers of a consumer to see a specific link or other content shared by a specific individual. Based on the data collection in our study, we were able to analyze that the average answer was 2, which correlates with the SPSS data that states the mean was 2.03 (IBM SPSS Statistics, 28.0). The median is also 2, which shows how many of our participants were in the targeted demographic. The percentage of our demographic, ages 18-25, is 94.7. The percentage of the outliers' demographic is 2.4 as there were two individuals. The college-aged individuals are targeted because of the research's significance of college students' increase in TikTok consumption and digital communication since the COVID-19 pandemic caused long periods of quarantine in which the community could no longer socialize with persons. Another recruiting method utilized was contacting college students in the same area of study or from other classes.

By contacting and targeting college-aged students via social media and other messaging platforms, data was able to be collected in the same way as the study pertained to those being the same ways in which TikTok's videos were also shared. The descriptive statistics include the hourly usage of TikTok. The frequency of individuals using the TikTok platform for more than an hour daily as well as downloading TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic, as both medians are presented as 4. This frequency indicates the demographic agreed that the pandemic had a

strong relation with using digital social communication more after the first quarantine began. Between five researchers collecting this information in a time span of roughly two weeks, 105 participants went through to take the survey, showing just the reach of social media and messaging through different platforms, where multi-mediums can easily be spread through different groups, people, and platforms.

### ***Procedure***

This method was conducted in the spring of 2022 on social media platforms such as Instagram and numerous group text messages which the researchers already formed for socialization. The specific research has grown in popularity when it comes to learning about social media users as study samples (Omar et al, 2020, p. 126). The survey was shared through social media platforms that have messaging capabilities. The study overall asked respondents to rate their agreement on a 1-5 scale about personality statements. Based on the two hypotheses, the independent variables were the consumers' motivation to use TikTok and their different personality traits exhibited throughout the communication (Omar et al, 2020, p. 128).

To get accurate results, the questions in the study needed to properly reflect the hypothesis and the goals of the study. By asking questions related to how an individual uses TikTok, specifically during quarantine, the study can obtain data that reflects its theory. Using SPSS for the data from the Qualtrics survey, the study concluded that the average Generation-Z individual downloaded the TikTok app during the rise of Covid-19. The same individuals also socially communicate through sharing TikTok videos with others, averaging more than an hour a day on the application.

***Independent Variable***

The independent variable is the time of the COVID-19 pandemic due to its cause of physical isolation after the first stages of quarantine began. The time allowed the TikTok application to increase social communication as communities relied on the social media platform to talk to their peers and other community members with similar interests. The time of the pandemic affected how people interacted with each other which allowed the positive increase in digital communication to occur.

***Dependent Variable***

The dependent variable was social communication throughout the digital platform. Measuring how much users consumed, produced, and participated in the social behavior of using TikTok, and remained the same for both hypotheses (Omar et al, 2020, p. 128). Social communication was measured by asking the participants different questions regarding TikTok's diverse communication techniques. Consumers can use the application for direct messages, sharing content, liking content, commenting on videos, and other various forms of social communication types.

**Results*****Correlation (Pearson's R):***

The study used two-interval questions from the survey, "I quote TikTok daily in conversations" and "I watch my 'For You Page' content more than my 'Following' page" to support the reasoning of TikTok's influence on social communication. There is a positive correlation between the two variables in the Pearson r frequency,  $r(72) = .304, p = .008$ . The data presents a valid correlation between multiple variables which were asked in the survey.

***Hypotheses:***

**H1. The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the use of TikTok which affected social communication primarily for Generation Z.**

The correlation between social communication on digital platforms since the COVID-19 pandemic began and the rise of TikTok” occurred during the pandemic is significant,  $r(76) = .325, p < .004$ .

**H2. As individuals are exposed to the social media platform from the lack of in-person socialization, society conforms to The TikTok communities’ videos and communication purposes which influence individuals to follow certain social interactions.**

The correlation between observing their friends' interactions and their social communication on TikTok has transitioned mostly onto digital platforms is significant,  $r(72) = .248, p < .036$ .

**Additional findings:**

Additional research which is relevant to the findings are:

- There are 94.7 percent of participants aged 18-25; therefore, the outliers, ages 26-41 were 1.1 percent and 42+ is 1.1 percent. There is not a distinct comparison between the age groups.
- The correlation between observing other people’s comments and observing friends’ interactions on TikTok is significant,  $r(72) = .278, p < .016$ .
- The correlation between quoting TikTok’s daily and watching their “for you page” more than their “following” is significant,  $r(72) = .304, p < .008$ .

### ***Summary***

The researchers used Pearson's  $r$  to find out if the two hypotheses in this study are supported. They discovered that all frequency charts present in the results prove the variables' correlation to be significant. The variables *I quote TikTok daily in conversations* and *I watch my 'For You Page'* were found to be more significant than *my 'Following' page*. This chart supports the hypothesis that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the use of TikTok which affected social communication primarily for Generation Z. The variables, *observing their friends' interactions* and their *social communication on TikTok* has transitioned mostly onto digital platforms is significant, which supports the second hypothesis: as individuals are exposed to TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic, society conforms to the digital community content which influences them to follow specific social interactions. Each of the additional findings were also reliable as each frequency is significant with different variables.

### **Discussion**

In the study we found that our hypothesis was supported. The COVID-19 pandemic did have an influence on how people used TikTok and how social communication was affected among a mainly Generation Z audience. From the study researchers could also conclude that due to the lack social communication because of the pandemic, the influence of using TikTok was greater.

The research method of conducting a survey was favorable. The method used was snowball sampling via survey. Using a survey allowed researchers to gain the most accurate responses which helped support the hypothesis. The hope is that this research will help other studies on TikTok and help to analyze behavior that comes from it. Through the study, it was

proven that there is a significant correlation between the amount of people that use TikTok and their social behaviors.

Limitations of this research are that one of the questions in the survey, “Do you use TikTok?” was not recorded. This question was an important one the researchers wanted to analyze. Also, the data could have changed the outputs, the correlations. Having more in-depth questions on demographics could have helped us look deeper into behavioral usage of TikTok. In the future, more questions could be asked on how people use TikTok. For instance, what type of content they watch, what side of TikTok they’re on, or if they use products recommended by the app.

The findings from this study could help others figure out how TikTok was used during the COVID-19 pandemic. The growth of the application took off at the beginning of the pandemic and influenced what could be said, all the world. There are multiple ways to look at this study and many more questions you can ask.

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