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Effect of TikTok Usage on the Moral Development of University Students

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Abstract

This study explores how TikTok usage affects university students' moral development. Data were gathered via a questionnaire from 400 students across public and private universities in Faisalabad, Pakistan. The main objectives were to assess the level of TikTok use, moral development. SPSS version 21 was used for analysis, employing descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and regression. The study found significant levels of moral development, Coefficient results indicated that TikTok and moral development have an inverse relationship. Regression results indicated that when level of use of TikTok increases by one unit moral development decreases by 0.62 units.

Keywords: Tiktok, Moral development, University students

Introduction

Social and cultural norms, as well as established laws, play a crucial role in shaping a person's morals (Wang, 2024). Moral reasoning, in turn, requires thoughtful reflection on what actions are appropriate or inappropriate, considering factors such as welfare, fairness, and justice (Yao, 2023). Media plays an essential role in shaping the behavior of teenagers and young adults (Wang, 2020). Numerous communication apps on the internet have significantly contributed to socialization. Among them, TikTok has emerged as one of the most widely used social networking services (SNS) worldwide (Tetteng, 2024). Since its launch in 2017 by Bytedance, a Chinese multinational internet technology company, TikTok has evolved into a diverse platform hosting content on sports, fashion, performing arts, and education, inviting learners to actively participate in its community (Taylor, 2024). The app allows users to create 15 to 60-second videos, featuring lip-syncs, comedy, acting, and other talents, enhanced by background music (Southern, 2021).

Over the past year, TikTok has consistently been the world's most downloaded app, reflecting its global reach and impact (Skues, 2016). The platform's rapid growth illustrates how media, through various channels, can effectively spread messages and influence behaviors (Roth, 2021). By broadcasting content, media has the power to



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reshape belief systems, attitudes, knowledge, and actions, particularly among youth (Qureshi, (2022)). Apps like TikTok, with their broad audience reach, serve as tools for disseminating information and shaping social narratives, producing both positive and negative effects (Nath, & Badra, 2021). The platform hosts a plethora of negative content that misguides students and leads them towards immoral behavior (Plank, 2022). This is important to find the value of Tiktok app on moral development of students at university level students. This research will be valuable for educational policymakers, enabling them to monitor and assess the content on TikTok to safeguard the moral values of university students. It will also provide important insights for Pakistan's social media and communication management, allowing for a deeper analysis of the ethical dimensions of TikTok content. The study aims to explore the effects of TikTok usage on the moral development of university students.

Research Questions

- 1) What is the level of use of Tiktok among students of university level?
- 2) What is the level of moral development among students at university level?
- 3) What is the impact of use of Tiktok on moral development of students at university level?

Literature Review

Users on TikTok have the freedom to create and share a wide variety of videos, though a significant portion involves people dancing to popular songs (Nath & Badra, 2021). The app has gained immense popularity among university students, who are in the phase of emerging adulthood (Montag, 2019). Many students create dance videos to trending songs and attract followers through their posts (Roth, 2021). However, TikTok can be highly engrossing, leading some users to develop an almost addictive attachment to the platform, making it difficult to disengage. As people spend more time on social media, their dependence on it increases (Nicas, 2019).

TikTok is accessed globally, offering a platform for diverse cultures and dance styles paired with various music genres (Joiner, 2023). However, frequent engagement in online activities, especially on social media, can weaken students' ability to display courteous behavior and, if misused, may negatively impact their character (Michaels & Corr, 2024). Content that focuses on moral themes, particularly when designed to evoke moral emotions, can contribute to political polarization and influence moral reasoning and decision-making (Basch, 2020). American singer Macklemore has highlighted how TikTok played a role in protests, noting that even with a potential ban, people have already witnessed the consequences. Teens, driven by their social media habits, often seek to stay on trend, which enhances their sense of belonging. Luxury brands have also embraced TikTok, drawn by its growing Gen Z audience (Biron, 2020). There has been a significant increase in luxury brand advertising on the platform, with major names like Fendi, Balenciaga, Dior, and Stella McCartney joining in July, following earlier additions such as Burberry, YSL, and Gucci.

Recent research published in the journal **Body Image** shows that TikTok videos promoting unrealistic beauty standards can negatively impact young women's body image, especially when the content appears unedited and natural. TikTok has been found to adversely affect body image perception (Harriger, 2023). What sets TikTok apart from other platforms is its algorithm, which tailors recommendations not only based on



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content preferences but also on physical characteristics like race, age, or facial features (Fardouly, 2017). Additionally, TikTok usage has heightened awareness of geographic and ethnic diversity due to the vast number of videos uploaded daily, offering a wide range of perspectives. For many, TikTok has even become a primary source of news (Escamilla, 2021).

University students, as emerging adults, are increasingly engaged in decision-making processes (Dryman, 2018). However, certain TikTok challenges pose ethical concerns and can undermine societal values. Many young adults participate in these challenges without fully understanding the potential harm they may cause (Roth, 2021). The platform frequently introduces challenges, often accompanied by brand takeovers when users open the app (Crinnion, 2024). Some of these challenges, while fun, can occasionally cross ethical boundaries or be inappropriate (Brown, 2020). TikTok has been criticized for hosting viral challenges that may be hazardous, ranging from innocent dance routines to risky eating contests. (Alhabash, 2015). TikTok has faced considerable criticism for incidents of bullying on the platform, including user-to-user harassment (Hayashi, 2023). This is a widespread issue on social networking sites like TikTok (Barry, 2024). Research highlights both the positive and negative aspects of TikTok's algorithm. On the one hand, it facilitates identity exploration and education, while on the other, it exposes users to online harassment, unrealistic beauty standards, and misinformation (Basch, 2020). Privacy concerns also arise when users unknowingly share personal content, leading to potential security issues. Additionally, young students sharing videos of others without their consent presents serious ethical and moral challenges (Taylor & Choi, 2023).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative approach, using structured techniques to collect numerical data. It follows a descriptive research design, employing a questionnaire and a survey method for data collection.

Population and Sampling

The study focuses on BS, MPhil, and PhD students from the social sciences, physical sciences, and management sciences departments at both public and private universities in Faisalabad. A total of 400 students were selected as a sample from two public and two private universities.

Table 1: Sample Distribution Depending on Background Variables.

Background	Variables	N=400
Gender	Male	181 (45.3%)
	Female	219 (54.8%)
Age	18-22	174 (43.5%)
	22-26	107 (26.8%)
	26-30	73 (18.3%)
	30+	46 (11.5%)
Faculty	Social Sciences	132 (33.0%)
	Physical Sciences	102 (25.5%)
	Others	166 (41.5%)



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Degree Level	BS	259 (64.8%)
	M.Phil.	85 (21.3%)
	Ph.D.	56 (14.0%)
University	GCUF	125 (31.3%)
	UAF	96 (24.0%)
	TUF	77 (19.3%)
	RIUF	102 (25.5%)
Sector	Public	223 (55.8%)
	Private	177 (44.3%)

Sampling Technique

The researcher gathered data from 400 students enrolled in public and private universities in Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. The study sample consisted of both male and female students, divided into three faculty groups: Social Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Others. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to over 30, and they were pursuing either BS, MPhil, or PhD degrees. A non-probability sampling method, specifically convenient sampling, was used for this study.

Instrument

The TikTok questionnaire was developed by combining items from three standardized questionnaires, resulting in 35 items across categories such as usefulness, time, enjoyment, addiction, content type, and engagement. Sources included Carpenter & Toma-Harrold (2024), Qin et al. (2022), and Tuck & Thompson (2024). Confirmatory factor analysis, conducted using LISREL 8.8 with a 0.3 loading threshold, showed no items below this value, so none were removed. The researcher adopted the items, measuring responses on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). A self-made questionnaire was developed by the researcher for measuring moral development. The researcher conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the moral development questionnaire using SPSS. A 30-item questionnaire was developed to assess moral development. The EFA was carried out using principal component analysis with varimax rotation, with a minimum factor loading criterion of 0.30. The Bartlett Test value was .823, exceeding the threshold of 0.6 ($KMO > 0.6$). Six items were removed by the researcher as they showed double loading on more than one factor. It consisted of 25 items (Moral reasoning__10 items, moral values__7 items and moral behavior__8 items). These items were measured through a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1__Strongly Disagree to 5__Strongly Agree).

Table 2: Factor Loading of Items of Use of TikTok.

Items	Usefulness	Time	Enjoyment	Addiction	Content Type	Level of Engagement
U1	0.80					
U2	0.80					
U3	0.57					
U4	0.93					
U5	0.69					



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U6	0.97		
U7	0.83		
T1		0.68	
T2		0.87	
T3		0.90	
T4		0.84	
T5		0.74	
T6		0.66	
E1			0.71
E2			0.92
E3			0.78
A1			0.71
A2			0.54
A3			0.60
A4			0.60
A5			0.80
A6			0.81
A7			0.92
A8			0.70
CT1			0.72
CT2			0.98
CT3			0.87
CT4			0.80
LE1			0.72
LE2			0.60
LE3			0.57
LE4			0.89
LE5			0.53
LE6			0.51
LE7			0.66

Table 3: Factor Loading of Items of Moral Development.

Items	Factor Loading		
	Moral Reasoning	Moral Values	Moral Behavior
MR1	0.81		
MR2	0.71		
MR3	0.70		



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MR4	0.62		
MR5	0.62		.
MR6	0.57		.
MR7	0.71		
MR8	0.51		.
MR9	0.57		
MR10	0.60		
MV1		0.81	
MV2		0.77	
MV3		0.72	.
MV4		0.67	
MV5		0.67	
MV6		0.54	.
MV7		0.58	
MB1			0.78
MB2			0.74
MB3			0.73
MB4			0.69
MB5			0.52
MB6			0.47
MB7			0.45

Table 4: Use of TikTok Questionnaire: Overview, Scope, Item and Example Items.

Subscale	Scope	Serial# (Final scale)	Item	Example item	Reliability
Usefulness	The beneficial aspects of TikTok app.	1-7	7	I become more creative by watching educational Tiktok videos.	0.82
Time	The amount of time spent on app.	8-13	6	Time goes by very quickly when watching Tiktok videos.	0.83
Enjoyment	Level of enjoyment using TikTok app.	14-16	3	I think that using Tiktok is enjoyable.	0.80
Addiction	Level of addiction by TikTok app.	17-24	8	After frequently using the Tiktok application, I will become a lazy	0.81



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Content Type	Variety of content on Tiktok app.	25-28	4	person. I watch content that is related to social justice.	0.86
Level of Engagement	Student's of engagement level on Tiktok app.	29-35	7	I comment supportively or like/"react" supportively on other's post(s).	0.77

Table 5: Moral Development Questionnaire: Overview, Scope, Item and Example Items

Subscale	Scope	Serial# (Final scale)	No of items	Example items	Reliability
Moral reasoning	How people perceive right and wrong and how they learn and use moral principles.	1-10	10	I believe that everyone has the right to their own opinions and rules.	0.87
Moral values	Guidelines or rules that direct a person's actions.	11-17	7	I value fairness and justice in all interactions.	0.80
Moral behavior	Act based on one's own moral values and standards.	18-24	7	I try to be honest and transparent in all my interactions.	0.86

Data Gathering

Data were collected manually with the approval of university heads. The researcher personally visited two public and two private universities and, after obtaining permission from the respective authorities, also distributed a Google Form link to students through WhatsApp.

Data Analysis

The researcher utilized both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate frequencies, means, and standard deviations, while inferential statistics involved t-tests, one-way ANOVA, correlation, and regression analysis, all performed with SPSS software.

Findings and Discussions

Table 6: Descriptive Analysis of the factors of Use of TikTok

	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Enjoyment	400	1.00	5.00	3.44	1.04
Content Type	400	1.00	5.00	3.22	0.93



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Time	400	1.00	5.00	3.12	0.83
Addiction	400	1.00	5.00	3.03	0.86
Level of Engagement	of400	1.00	5.00	3.01	0.90
Usefulness	400	1.00	5.00	2.86	0.89
Use of TikTok	400	1.00	5.00	3.11	0.62

Table 6 shows that enjoyment has the highest mean score ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.04$), while usefulness has the lowest ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.89$). This suggests students derive more enjoyment from TikTok than using it for practical purposes. Overall, the average TikTok usage ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.62$) indicates that most students engage with the app.

Table 7: Descriptive Analysis of the Factors of Moral Development.

	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Moral Behavior	400	2.14	5.00	3.66	0.72
Moral Values	400	1.86	5.00	3.63	0.78
Moral Reasoning	400	1.60	5.00	3.49	0.82
Moral Development	400	2.15	5.00	3.60	0.73

Table 7 presents the factors of moral development. The highest mean score is for Moral Behavior ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.72$), while the lowest is for Moral Reasoning ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.82$). The overall mean score for moral development is ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.73$), indicating that most students demonstrate strong moral development.

Table 8: Impact of Use of TikTok on Moral Development.

Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>R</i> ² _{adjusted}		
	-0.62 ^a	0.38	0.38		
	<i>Unstandardized</i>		<i>Standardized</i>		
Coefficient	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	3.64	0.18		20.22	0.00
Use of TikTok	-0.90	0.15	-0.62	-6.00	0.00
ANOVA	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>		
Regression	114.00	1	114.00	0.00 ^b	
Residual	185.00	398	0.46		
Total	299.00	399			

Table 8 illustrates the impact of TikTok usage on moral development. The R-squared value of 0.38 indicates that TikTok usage accounts for 38% of the variance in moral development among university students. The ANOVA results show a significant connection between TikTok usage and moral development, with a p-value of 0.00 (less



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than 0.05). The coefficient result ($B = -0.62$) indicates that for each additional unit of TikTok usage, there is a corresponding decrease of 0.62 units in the moral development outcome. The negative beta value further suggests a negative relationship between TikTok usage and moral development.

Conclusion

TikTok usage is notably high among university students. The mean score for moral development is statistically significant, indicating that most students exhibit strong moral development. There is an inverse relationship between TikTok usage and moral development among university level students, some of the factors of use of TikTok like addiction or usefulness may lead to the negative relationship with a 38% variance in moral development attributed to TikTok use. Specifically, an increase of one unit in TikTok usage is associated with a decrease in moral development.

Recommendations

- Invest in creating advanced algorithms and tools to improve the filtering and moderation of content on TikTok.
- Instructors and administration of Higher Education can provide Instructional guidelines to students in critical thinking skills to help them identify and avoid harmful content and misinformation.
- Partner with TikTok to showcase content that emphasizes moral values, social responsibility, and community engagement.
- Invest in creating advanced algorithms and tools to improve the filtering and moderation of content on TikTok

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