Comparing Instagram and TikTok:

Effects on Users' Mental Health

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Abstract

In our tech-centric era, adolescents globally prioritize checking social media as the first task of their day, exposing themselves to platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. While these platforms promise entertainment and instant connections, their use is increasingly recognized for its dangerous impact on mental health and the development of addictive behaviors. This research analyzes the specific effects of Instagram and TikTok on teenagers' mental health, aiming to discern which platform, Instagram or TikTok, poses a more significant threat. Prior studies debated the risks associated with Instagram's visually appealing content, which fosters a culture of perfection detrimental to users' mental well-being. Conversely, TikTok's allure lies in its addictive features, notably the "For You" page algorithm. This paper contributes to the discourse by addressing gaps in previous research while providing detailed explanations, impacts, and theories. A visual case study on celebrities further supplements the analysis. Examining peer-reviewed articles focusing on the negative connection between Instagram's curated content and body image concerns reveals a critical finding: Instagram proves more toxic than TikTok. The emphasis on photographs over text fosters constant comparison, heightening the risk of adverse mental health outcomes. Instagram's curated content, featuring celebrities and influencers, establishes unrealistic body image standards, which contributes to digitized dysmorphia, a socially conditioned mental illness rooted in the social comparison theory. The primary objective of this paper is to identify specific features of Instagram and TikTok that contribute to users' decreased mental health. The research underscores that Instagram's culture of curated perfection and social comparison significantly correlates with negative body image issues, exerting a more detrimental impact on users' mental well-being than TikTok—a platform that promotes authenticity and lighthearted content creation.

Keywords: Celebrities, Instagram, Mental Health, TikTok, Social Media

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Effects on Users' Mental Health

For many young people, Instagram, TikTok, and other social media platforms are crucial in relationship development and socialization. Social media has many advantages, but it can also be dangerous for mental health because it can encourage risk-taking behaviors, foster unrealistic expectations about one's body image and sources of popularity, and serve as a platform for bullying and exclusion (Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, 2021). As adolescents grow and develop their brains, they continuously form their own identities. Their self-image and identity development may suffer due to what they perceive on social media, which defines inaccurate expectations (Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, 2021).

Social media promotes an unhealthy standard of an idealized lifestyle, and users often feel insecure when comparing their current living situations to these standards. Although Facebook remains the most popular social networking site with 2.75 billion monthly users, Instagram has become a significant competitor after rising in popularity and reaching a milestone of one billion monthly active users, many of whom are young, impressionable, and addicted to the app. Users of Instagram share image-based content, such as videos and photos, along with a written caption to demonstrate the highlights of their daily lives. Other users interact with this content through liking, sharing, or commenting on the post to support their digital interests and relationships. According to recent estimates, teens and young adults are particularly fond of Instagram, with most of them reportedly checking their accounts at least once daily (Faelens et al., 2021). On the other hand, TikTok, a video-sharing platform with approximately one billion monthly active users, has risen in popularity since its release in 2016. In recent years, digital

consumers have compared the two platforms due to their similar image- and video-based features. Centered around video sharing, TikTok allows users to create music and lip-sync videos with durations ranging from a few seconds to three minutes long. Though its popularity rose for its dance- and music-focused videos, the platform offers diverse content, including political advertisements, DIY tutorials, humorous skits, and beauty advice, motivating users to spend more time on the app (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

Because social media platforms are visual mediums, a person's physical appearance is inevitably a significant aspect of each user's curated persona. The pervasive negative influence of social media on mental health prompts a growing scholarly discourse. This paper adds insight to the nuanced conversation surrounding Instagram and TikTok, platforms that, on the surface, appear similar but exhibit distinct implications for users' psychological well-being. Given the growing popularity of Instagram and TikTok among adolescents, considerable interest exists in the effects of increased use of these platforms on users' well-being and mental health. This paper aims to determine specific features of Instagram and TikTok that negatively impact users' mental health. The study also highlights the negative correlation between negative body image issues and Instagram's culture of curated perfection and social comparison, demonstrating that Instagram has a more significant negative impact on users' mental health than TikTok.

Method

In their research article titled *Attractive celebrity and peer images on Instagram: Effect on women's mood and body image*, scholars such as Brown and Tiggemann argue that a negative connection exists between Instagram's curated content and body image concerns. Specifically, the constant presentation of attractive celebrity photos creates and reinforces an unrealistic beauty standard. Therefore, increased Instagram use promotes self-comparison among its users,

resulting in negative moods and body dissatisfaction. In addition, further research conducted by Barta and Andalibi in their article on *Constructing Authenticity on TikTok: Social Norms and Social Support on the "Fun" Platform* underscores the positive influence of authentic and raw content on TikTok; mainly, users' perceptions of "authentic" content as normalized and valued are influenced by their impression of TikTok as a "fun" platform for sharing lighthearted, quirky, and everyday experiences. Furthermore, the general public considers TikTok's content as significant and genuine due to affordances (i.e., perceived anonymity and association) of platform features (i.e., "For You" page, video modality) and policies (i.e., pseudonymous usernames, multiple accounts). A case study of celebrity accounts on Instagram versus TikTok, specifically those of Kim Kardashian, will also be featured. Using these two sources as primary evidence to support the claim that Instagram has a more detrimental impact on the well-being of its users than TikTok, counterarguments regarding TikTok's addictive features will be studied and addressed. Since Instagram and TikTok are trendy platforms among adolescents and continue to accumulate more users each day, the effects of using these social media apps are essential to examine.

The Cult of Perfection: Instagram's Impact on Mental Health

Social Comparisons and Body Image on Instagram

Social media feeds tend to populate with carefully curated, posed, filtered, and edited photos of attractive celebrities and peers, providing ample opportunities for upward social comparisons (i.e., comparisons to others who appear to have more of a desirable attribute, in this case, physical attractiveness). Instagram, hailed for its visually appealing content, often cultivates a culture of perfection that can be detrimental to users' mental health. Specifically, one of the critical features of Instagram that make it more toxic than TikTok is that it focuses on

photographs over text, which makes it more accessible for users to constantly compare the pictures they post to other posts from other accounts, such as friends and celebrities. Instagram is a photo-sharing platform that makes it simple to edit and manipulate photos, making it a concerning platform for body image because of users' ability to curate and improve the photos they post and to view other users' similarly "perfected" photos (Engeln et al., 2020). Meanwhile, TikTok is primarily a video-based platform, making it harder to retouch videos than Instagram (Gentzler et al.). Therefore, unrealistic beauty standards are more relevant and widespread on Instagram than on TikTok due to images being more accessible to edit, creating body comparisons.

Celebrities and Beauty Standards

Celebrities, commonly featured and idealized on Instagram, are well-known people who draw significant attention from the public, usually due to their participation in entertainment or sports. There are a multitude of celebrities in the media, from TV and magazines to TikTok and Instagram. In their research article titled *Attractive celebrity and peer images on Instagram: Effect on women's mood and body image*, Brown and Tiggemann contend that the media's constant display of attractive and slender female celebrities, as well as fashion models, perpetuates the idea that being thin is unachievable. This notion is reinforced by the fact that women are increasingly asking for specific celebrity body parts—like Kim Kardashian's eyes and jawline—in cosmetic surgery procedures. When Instagram promotes such unachievable beauty standards set by celebrities and influencers, these platforms can create echo chambers of self-comparison and insecurity as followers check celebrity posts constantly.

Since Brown and Tiggemann did not include any theories to provide in-depth explanations for their claims that Instagram creates social comparison and insecurity, scholars

like Harrison and Hefner provide more scientific and grounded evidence, such as the social comparison theory, to support these claims. Because appearance-based social comparisons can drive body dissatisfaction in social media, the self-enhancement motive identified within social comparison theory is relevant to the conversation, according to Harrison and Hefner's research article titled *Virtually Perfect: Image Retouching and Adolescent Body Image*. Their research on image retouching and adolescent body image defines the self-enhancement motive as the need to use contrast to one's advantage by comparing oneself to less fortunate or endowed others (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). According to this perspective, self-concept benefits from downward social comparison, while upward social comparison is harmful. The average viewer processes exposure to perfected human images in an upward-comparison manner, which increases appearance-related self-consciousness (i.e., objectified body consciousness) and lowers physical self-esteem through critical evaluation of one's appearance (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). Since the social comparison theory implies that increased exposure to unrealistic beauty standards results in increased self-consciousness and lowered self-esteem in terms of one's appearance, posts made by celebrities that set unrealistic beauty standards cause decreased mental health in Instagram users.

Case Study of Celebrity Comparisons on Tiktok vs. Instagram

With many social media users idealizing celebrities and their beauty standards, seeing these famous profiles firsthand is essential, as previous research articles need to include specific evidence from recent Instagram profiles. The following screenshot (See Figure 1 in Appendix A) depicts Kim Kardashian's Instagram account feed during February 2023. Meanwhile, a second screenshot (See Figure 2 in Appendix A) depicts Kim Kardashian's TikTok profile from January to April 2023. The Instagram page features more posed photographs of the celebrity, which have

more opportunities to be edited than the videos posted on the right. More photos edited for beauty are prone to result in greater appearance-related comparisons for Instagram users. Therefore, Kim Kardashian's Instagram photos provoke more pressure on Kim's followers to conform to her level of outer beauty, which can lead to lowered self-esteem and mental health.

Another key difference is that Kim's TikTok profile features more down-to-earth and genuine content, showcasing Kim getting ready for an event without makeup initially and making lighthearted videos with her children and friends. This kind of video trend depicts Kim's playful and genuine side and, therefore, does not belong with the more formal and "glammed up" version as seen on her Instagram. The fact that the photos posted on Instagram can take multiple tries and poses to perfect makes it more unrealistic for users to compare themselves visually. On the other hand, Kim's TikTok videos feature her getting ready, putting makeup on, speaking, and dancing, which include more diverse content that is harder to perfect in terms of using multiple takes to film videos. As seen from the more authentic nature of Kim Kardashian's TikTok profile compared to her Instagram profile, celebrity content on TikTok is less harmful to users' mental health than the content on Instagram.

Regarding Kim Kardashian's social media posts facilitating beauty standards, there is substantial evidence proving the digitally enhanced nature of her photographs. According to a recent news article titled *Kim Kardashian accused of 'unnecessary' Photoshop after fan spots editing mistake*, Kim Kardashian's photos have been suspected to be photoshopping due to her being famous for and practically living off her curvaceous figure (Clark, 2023). Specifically, the article compares the images side-by-side taken at this year's Louis Vuitton Fashion Show versus the "same" pictures from Kim Kardashian's official Instagram account. In the Instagram post, Kardashian appeared to have edited her chin, jaw, shoulders, arms, stomach, and waist to look

thinner. The news article also emphasizes other occurrences throughout past years where individuals accused Kardashian of digitally enhancing pictures on Instagram and deleting them (Clark, 2023).

Instagram's Cause of Digitized Dysmorphia

As mentioned previously, numerous celebrities such as Kim Kardashian upload edited photographs of themselves online and, therefore, set unrealistic body standards for their followers. The results of this phenomenon are known as digitized dysmorphia, which is a socially conditioned dysmorphia that is on a spectrum with Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). BDD is a mental health condition that is characterized by worrying about a perceived flaw in one's physical appearance (Coy-Dibley, 2016). Social pressures, beauty standards, and the technology currently accessible shape digital dysmorphia to achieve desired beauty standards in image form. Through the use of various apps, digital dysmorphia takes the form of adjusting and retouching an individual's virtual and visual appearance, thereby changing aspects of their ostensibly undesirable self. These characteristics pertain to the collective and individual manipulation of the female body through the use of digital technology to edit the body's image into virtual proportions that conform to societally imposed standards of unachievable, unrealistic, and particular forms of feminine aesthetics (typically based on Eurocentric ideals), which permeate contemporary culture (Coy-Dibley, 2016). When Instagram users view photos where celebrities like Kim Kardashian show off their unrealistic body types, these users start to experience digital dysmorphia due to the constant comparison of their appearance to what they see online. As more Instagram users experience digital dysmorphia as a result of viewing curated content, their mental health is at risk, as exposure to idealized images on Instagram can lead to

increased body dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem. The pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards fosters social comparison, intricately tied to diminished mental well-being.

Features of TikTok's Content

Some people might argue that TikTok is more toxic than Instagram due to its addictive "For You" page algorithm detrimental to users' mental well-being. An article titled *How Tiktok Addiction Leads To Mental Health Illness? Examining The Mediating Role Of Academic Performance Using Structural Equation Modeling* asserts that youth are severely impacted by TikTok addiction since they spend so much time creating videos on the platform, which leads to students wasting more time on TikTok and losing responsibility for their academic work. Furthermore, the TikTok app has an algorithm offering endless videos students watch while wasting their time; this algorithm causes them to become dependent on the app and neglect their studies, ultimately lowering their grades (Zahra et al., 2022). Neglection to studies can then lead to a decrease in mental health when TikTok users become addicted to the app. While this source provides evidence of TikTok addiction leading to mental health, it does not address the specific reason why TikTok's algorithm is so addictive.

A publication from Brown University's School of Public Health called *What Makes TikTok so Addictive?: An Analysis of the Mechanisms Underlying the World's Latest Social Media Craze* explains the addictive nature of TikTok that previous sources did not cover. According to Sophia Petrillo, an essential factor in TikTok addiction is the customized "For You" stream that artificial intelligence (AI) generates for every user. Unlike other social media applications such as Instagram, TikTok does not allow users to consciously choose the content they want to see. Instead, artificial intelligence (AI) initiates a continuous cycle that begins with the first use. It becomes more accurate with repeated engagement by presenting people with

content and using their reactions to it (likes, comments, and reshares) to identify other content they might like. Because of all the in-app features, users can spend more time using the app, which makes the platform more addictive. To encourage users to spend more time navigating and getting used to the new design, developers also regularly add new features and alter the app's layout (Petrillo, 2021).

While TikTok's "For You" page algorithm is proven to be addictive and decrease productivity, it is not as toxic as Instagram due to its more genuine content and the app's more anonymous features. This feature of TikTok is vital to address, as previously analyzed sources did not address TikTok's content specifically and only covered its addictive algorithm. In their research article titled *Constructing Authenticity on TikTok: Social Norms and Social Support on the "Fun" Platform*, the argument model presented by scholars Barta and Andalibi supports the idea that authentic content creation contributes positively to users' satisfaction and mental well-being. TikTok's emphasis on genuine expression fosters a sense of inclusivity, challenging the detrimental impact of social comparison on platforms like Instagram. For instance, most TikTok posts are video-based and last between 15 and 60 seconds; they frequently convey "goofiness" and mundanity and may include voiceover, music, or other "sounds" such as recorded audio to accompany videos (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). Compared to Instagram, another feature that TikTok offers is voice effects, which create humorous and lighthearted content. In addition, the platform allows for customizable, pseudonymous usernames and automatically generates random usernames upon account creation, providing discursive anonymity (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). TikTok, a more anonymous and "goofy" platform, allows users to feel more comfortable posting content, which is why content on TikTok is more genuine than Instagram.

Therefore, Instagram's content of images fostering social comparison remains more detrimental to mental health than the content on TikTok.

It is also important to note that Instagram and TikTok share many of the same features that can be harmful or neutral to users' mental health. For example, Instagram Reels is a feature on Instagram that offers posts of short-form videos. Like TikTok, Instagram Reels provides endless streams of videos and mindless scrolling (Ghaffary, 2020). Despite the similarities between these social media platforms, the critical contrast to Instagram is that TikTok positions itself as a platform that celebrates authenticity. The authentic videos featured on TikTok are not as harmful to mental health compared to the edited images of unrealistic body types posted on Instagram. Therefore, the degree to which TikTok's "For You" page is considered addictive and toxic is not as detrimental to users' mental health when compared to content on Instagram.

Conclusion

This research paper explores the intricate relationship between Instagram, TikTok, and users' mental health. Social media apps like Instagram are the very embodiment of unhealthy and Eurocentric beauty standards. Furthermore, when some influencers and celebrities can make lucrative careers by adhering to these beauty standards on media platforms, these toxic ideals are further encoded into the minds of young users as desirable and profitable. The values of a generation are often directly influenced by the values of their media environment. As social media becomes increasingly all-encompassing, these platforms can create echo chambers of self-comparison and insecurity. When the very essence of social media lies in posting content for others to view, users will inevitably want to garner approval. This dangerous mindset of craving validation from others creates an endless cycle of consuming unrealistic content, comparing one's life to the highlight reel one sees online, and feeling self-doubt about one's worth and

happiness. With its chokehold on users' mental health and its addictive qualities, there is no doubt that social media, especially Instagram, facilitates toxic body image comparisons. These unfavorable comparisons can lead to digitized dysmorphia and even suicide. With more and more adolescents having suicidal thoughts and mental illnesses related to body image, Instagram's emphasis on curated perfection and social comparison emerges as a more significant contributor to adverse mental health outcomes compared to TikTok's focus on authenticity and anonymity. This research paper encourages a critical reevaluation of social media practices and advocates for platforms prioritizing users' well-being over unrealistic standards.

Suggested Solutions

With increased social media use negatively impacting users' mental health, actions to help mitigate these effects need to be implemented. For younger users such as preteens, parental control can be implemented by restricting a child's exposure to various social media platforms and limiting adolescent users' accounts. For other users, setting limits on the phone itself may not be enough for some users, as they can ignore the time limit when mindlessly scrolling. Therefore, one solution is to encourage the use of third-party platforms that strictly limit the amount of time social media users can spend on apps. Specific time limit apps that increase are "ScreenZen" and "One Sec." One Sec seeks to reduce phone usage by pausing for ten seconds, forcing users to reconsider when opening an app. Users can choose which apps are considered distracting or addictive; when they attempt to open these apps, One Sec makes users consider whether their social media use is a conscious need or impulsive behavior. To assist its users with overcoming habits of mindlessly scrolling, ScreenZen similarly asks users questions such as "Is this actually productive?" when they open certain apps. According to the American

Psychological Association, peer-reviewed studies by Christ Palmer support these productivity apps and found that limiting social media boosts mental health (Palmer, 2023).

In order to address the issue of children's and teenagers' safety on social media platforms, frequent conversations are encouraged between social media developers, educators, parents, legislators, medical professionals, and most importantly, the general public and social media users. The discussion or debate needs to cover the following topics: social media app regulation, ways to build trusting relationships between teenagers and their adult networks, safe social media app environments, and increased medical professionals' knowledge of the adverse effects of excessive exposure to both technology and the content it offers.

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Appendix A

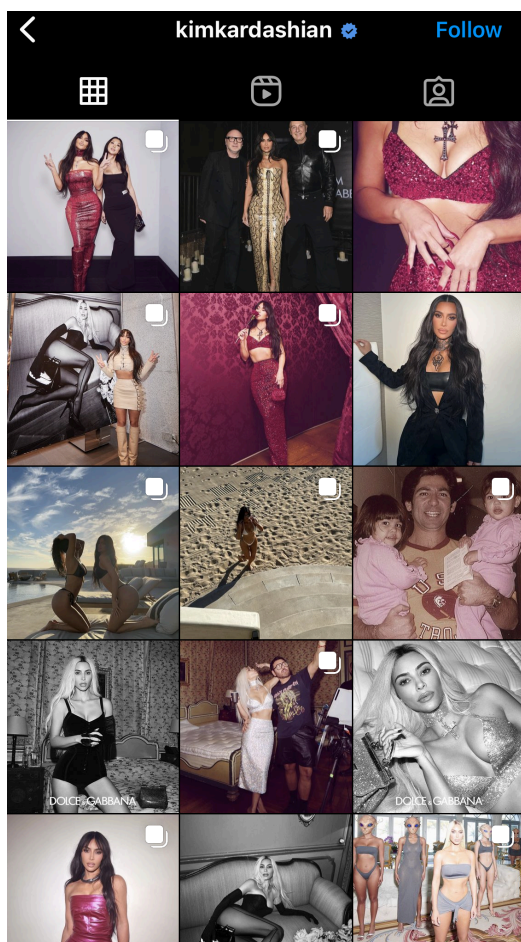## Kim Kardashian's Instagram and TikTok profiles

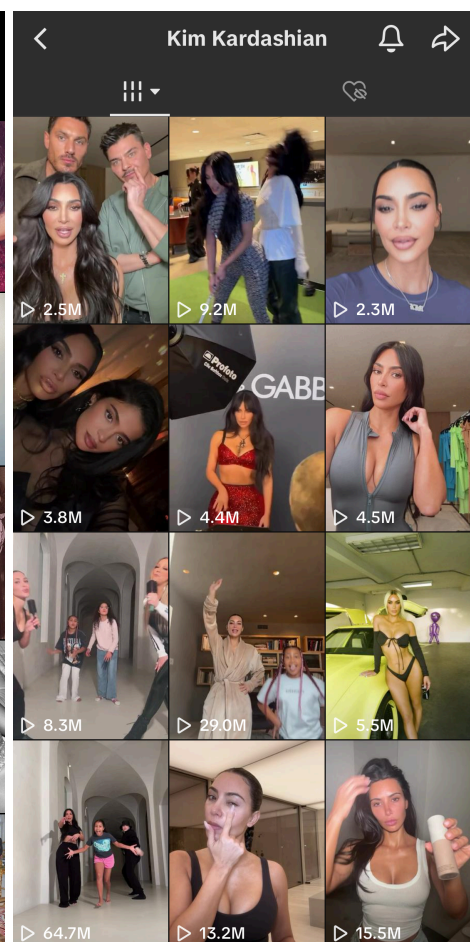Figure 1. Screenshot of Kim Kardashian's posts from February 2023

Figure 2. Screenshot of Kim Kardashian's Instagram TikTok posts from January to April 2023

Audience Analysis

The targeted audience of this research paper is deeply invested in the well-being of social media users, particularly those of Instagram and TikTok. After reading this paper, educators are likely to be concerned about the potential impacts of students' social media use on academic performance. They seek practical recommendations for cultivating positive online environments and discussions within educational settings. Parents who are highly interested in their children's mental health expect specific strategies that limit their children's social media use to be effective. Mental health professionals are interested in evidence-based insights to implement counseling and intervention strategies for the growing mental health challenges linked to social media use. Instagram and TikTok users are interested in and concerned about the negative impact of specific social media apps they spend the most time on concerning their mental health; they expect to access information on mental health improvement strategies and ways to limit social media use. Different groups of this paper's targeted audience have varying reactions, and this research aims to create a more informed environment for social media users in the digital age.

Reflection Letter

Dear Professor Tomlinson,

Upon reflecting on the process of crafting my research paper on the detrimental effects of Instagram and TikTok on users' mental health, I have learned quite a bit about my scholarly writing approach. Scholarly arguments and factual/statistical reports were essential tools throughout my research, proving claims about the differing impacts of Instagram and TikTok on users' mental health. Implementing critical theories, particularly the social comparison theory, contributed depth to understanding how these platforms shape perceptions of body image.

In terms of rhetorical strategies, I strategically incorporated background information to contextualize the widespread influence of social media on its users. The use of exhibits, such as the visual case study on Kim Kardashian's profiles, helped provide specific and compelling evidence for my argument that Instagram's curated content contributes to unrealistic beauty standards. One of my strengths in this paper is my ability to incorporate and break down complex information. I am proud of crafting a compelling argument that includes diverse sources, such as images and statistics, while engaging readers with a cohesive structure.

If I were to write this research paper again, I would make a detailed outline that includes specific sources and how to address counterarguments. This project taught me the importance of choosing sources wisely, using rhetorical strategies to further insight, and giving scholarly writing continuous proofreads. I will continue to enhance these skills in future research projects and writing courses. Thank you for guiding me through this process!

Sincerely,

Sabrina Yeh