

TIKTOK AND ATTENTION SPAN

TikTok and Attention Span in College Students

Research Project

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how college students perceive TikTok's influence on their attention span and study habits. As short-form video platforms have become embedded in daily routines, concerns about digital distraction have intensified. Using semi-structured interviews with four undergraduate students, this study identifies recurring themes regarding perceived changes in concentration, multitasking behaviors, study disruptions, and self-regulation strategies. Findings suggest that while students recognize negative impacts such as reduced sustained attention and increased procrastination, they also describe intentional coping strategies. The results contribute to broader discussions about short-form video consumption and academic performance in higher education contexts.

Keywords: TikTok, attention span, college students, social media, digital distraction, academic performance

Introduction

Unlike other social media platforms, Tik Tok has had the most rapid growth in media, especially amongst young adults. TikTok's specialty was short videos of all sorts, whether they extent to fun challenges, or a medium for discourse worldwide. College students represent one of the platform's most active user groups. At the same time, higher education increasingly demands sustained attention, critical thinking, and extended focus skills that some scholars argue may be undermined by constant exposure to short, stimulating digital content. As discussions about

digital distraction and the lack of attention rise, understanding students' lived experiences becomes essential.

The objective of this study is to explore how college students perceive TikTok's impact on their attention span and study habits. Rather than measuring attention experimentally, this research focuses on students' subjective interpretations of how the platform affects their concentration, productivity, and academic engagement. The guiding research question is: How do college students perceive TikTok's impact on their attention span and study habits? The sample consists of four undergraduate students studying different fields.

Method

This study used a qualitative research design using, one-on-one interviews. Four undergraduate students between the ages of 19 and 21 were recruited through convenience sampling. Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes and was conducted online. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their TikTok usage habits, perceived changes in attention span, study routines, and strategies for managing distractions. Interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. Patterns across responses were identified, analyzed, and organized into recurring themes to address the research question.

Themes

Attention Span

A dominant theme across all four interviews is the noticeable decline in sustained attention. Each participant described some level of reduced concentration since regularly using TikTok. One participant expressed this most strongly, explaining that she can no longer concentrate for more

than 30 minutes without needing a break, which led her to adopt the Pomodoro technique to manage her studying. Another participant similarly shared that she zones out more often than she did before and finds it difficult to complete even simple tasks without feeling the urge to check her phone. A third participant's experience was slightly less severe, but she still acknowledged becoming bored more quickly during long assignments and needing more frequent breaks than in the past. The last participant found that tik tok created a habit where she constantly needs a break, even when doing simple tasks or even so much as doing nothing.

Although not every participant felt that TikTok completely damaged their ability to read long texts, there was a shared sense that maintaining focus now requires more effort. The interviews suggest that the issue is not an inability to focus at all, but rather a reduced tolerance for long, uninterrupted academic tasks. Students described feeling mentally restless, easily distracted, and more dependent on short breaks, reflecting a shift in how they experience concentration. This aligns with research showing that excessive TikTok use contributes to poorer time management and focus difficulties, as undergraduates report challenges sustaining attention and managing distractions when usage is high (Tang & Zhang, 2025). Additionally, a San Diego State University study found that even five minutes of scrolling before reading significantly lowered students' ability to focus on long-form content, causing more rapid eye movements across text and confirming that brief TikTok exposure conditions the brain to expect rapid stimulation rather than sustained attention (Avitabile, 2025).

Procrastination and Academic Disruption

Procrastination emerged as another consistent and strongly felt theme. Two participants described situations where they intended to scroll for only a few minutes but lost track of time. One participant admitted that she has delayed starting assignments because she chose to scroll

first, which later caused significant stress, especially during exam season. Another participant shared similar experiences, particularly during busy academic periods, where short breaks unintentionally turned into extended distractions.

Even when students tried to separate studying from scrolling, the habit still interfered indirectly.

One participant explained that although she avoids using TikTok while actively studying, her frequent overall usage has contributed to concentration issues that affect her homework. The interviews highlight that TikTok's impact is not always immediate or obvious; sometimes it shows up in subtle habits, such as constant phone-checking or thinking about notifications.

Research indicates that high levels of TikTok use among undergraduates correlate with time management concerns and life intrusion, meaning students spend considerable time and mental energy on the app at the expense of academic tasks (Tang & Zhang, 2025).

Emotional and Cognitive Overstimulation

A further theme that emerged from the interviews is the sense of cognitive and emotional overstimulation associated with prolonged TikTok use. Participants described feeling mentally “overloaded” after extended scrolling sessions, particularly when exposed to a rapid stream of diverse and highly stimulating content. Although TikTok is often used as a form of relaxation, students noted that it can leave them feeling pressured rather than relaxed.

Participants mentioned that after scrolling for a long time, they sometimes feel distracted even when they put their phone away, as if their mind continues “jumping” between thoughts. One participant described difficulty transitioning from fast-paced videos to slower academic tasks, explaining that studying feels unusually quiet or unstimulating afterward. Another participant also acknowledged that consuming large amounts of short-form content makes it harder to settle into deeper thinking tasks, such as writing essays or reading complex material.

This theme suggests that the issue is not only reduced attention span or procrastination, but also the mental adjustment required when shifting between high-intensity digital stimulation and slower cognitive processes. The constant exposure to quick transitions, sound effects, and algorithm-driven content may heighten expectations for rapid engagement, making academic work seem comparatively dull. As a result, students may experience temporary restlessness or dissatisfaction when returning to study tasks. The San Diego State University study supports this idea, demonstrating that even brief exposure to TikTok can condition the brain toward rapid stimulation and reduce focus on longer academic material (Avitabile, 2025).

Importantly, this overstimulation does not appear to permanently impair cognitive ability. Rather, it creates a temporary mismatch between the brain's stimulated state and the demands of focused academic work. The interviews indicate that students are capable of regaining concentration, but the transition requires more effort and intentional regulation. This reinforces the broader finding that TikTok's impact is subtle and situational, influencing how students mentally prepare for and engage with academic responsibilities (Tang & Zhang, 2025).

Self-Regulation and Awareness

Despite the challenges, a strong sense of awareness and responsibility was evident in all interviews. The participants did not blame TikTok entirely; instead, they recognized their own role in managing their usage. One participant demonstrated the highest level of active regulation by using an app that restricts TikTok access until she completes her study goals, and she described this strategy as successful. Another participant attempted to use screen-time limits and found them helpful to some extent, though she admitted struggling with consistency and discipline. A third participant openly acknowledged that she needs to limit her usage but has not yet taken concrete action.

This theme shows that students do not view themselves as powerless. Rather than describing permanent cognitive damage, they frame the issue as a habit that requires conscious effort to control. This perspective is consistent with findings suggesting that although TikTok's design can disrupt academic focus and time management, increasing awareness and implementing self-regulation strategies can mitigate negative academic effects (Tang & Zhang, 2025). While TikTok is perceived as highly engaging and difficult to resist, the participants believe that with discipline, structured techniques, and intentional boundaries, its negative academic impact can be managed rather than becoming irreversible.

References

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