

“People on TikTok aren’t afraid to share stories”: Examining College Students’ Perceptions Regarding Self-Disclosure Behaviors on TikTok

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Abstract

This study is an investigation into undergraduate students’ ($N = 256$) use of TikTok and perceptions surrounding self-disclosure on the social media platform. Online survey responses regarding mood management theory, uses and gratifications theory, and self-perception were used to identify some of the reasons that users may self-disclose on the platform. Further, the impacts of self-disclosure on self-esteem, belonging, and self-validation were assessed. Implications point to a need for a more comprehensive look at platform use as it affects the self, the self as seen by others, and how self-disclosure impacts important perceptions of worth and wellbeing.

Keywords: mood management, self-disclosure, self-esteem, self-validation, uses & gratifications

1. Introduction

TikTok is a social media app on which over one billion users across the globe create and edit videos by selecting from a wide range of sounds, filters, and text to put on top of their original footage (Bursztynsky, 2021; Herrman, 2019). About half of U.S. adults ages 18 to 29 are on TikTok (Auxier & Anderson, 2021) and frequently report using the app to find funny or engaging content (Sehl, 2021). Understanding user motivations and effects associated with the platform is critical, as connections between social media use behaviors and wellbeing have been identified in earlier studies (e.g., Instagram use can impact self-liking; Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2018). Despite the buzz about TikTok in popular media, academic articles about TikTok are surprisingly few. The platform has become an integral part of our dynamic global media environment, making it a site for self-disclosure among users who want to share something about themselves with the world. Thus, gaining a more thorough understanding of self-disclosure habits among undergraduate TikTokers will provide media and communication scholars with a better sense of what kinds of user information is frequently exchanged on the app, and the perceived consequences of such disclosure.

The objectives of this study are to recognize indicators of and relationships between self-esteem, self-disclosure, and self-validation on TikTok based on reports provided by undergraduate college students. The college student population represents a large portion of TikTok users (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), and the combination of closed- and open-ended responses provides a thorough exploratory investigation into perceptions of the platform. In addition, this study examines the use of behaviors and reactions associated with the platform through the lenses of mood management, uses and gratifications, and self-perception, allowing for the expansion of existing media and communication theories through the inclusion of TikTok as a platform that has recently emerged. Suggestions for future research are offered.

2. Literature Review

Uses and Gratifications, Mood Management, and Self-Perception

Uses and gratifications theory describes people’s tendency to choose media to meet a variety of gratifications (Blumler & Katz, 1974). Users often select media because they experience gratifications such as a sense of belonging in virtual communities (Chen & Kim, 2013), or because other users act as audiences for expressive information sharing (Smock et al., 2011). Similarly, mood management theory explains that sometimes people choose media based on a desire to maintain or change their mood at the time of use (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Zillmann, 1988). For example, someone who feels sad may listen to sad songs to acknowledge their mood and/or avoid happier songs if they seem ill-fitting for the moment (Friedman et al., 2012). Previous research indicates that scrolling on social media platforms like TikTok may be

a coping mechanism for feelings of loneliness and anxiety (Cauberghe et al., 2021), thus necessitating the investigation of TikTok as a tool for managing moods and seeking gratifications such as belonging or a place to disclose. For these reasons, the uses and gratifications and mood management frameworks serve as impactful foundations for the exploration of self-disclosure.

Self-perception is awareness of oneself, including traits such as physical appearance, socioeconomic status, and personality (Monteagudo Sánchez et al., 2015). Social networking sites impact users' self-perceptions and wellbeing in both positive and negative ways (De Vries & Kühnw, 2015). Offline, people who perceive themselves as different from a certain standard may experience negative emotional reactions (Higgins, 1987); critically, exposure to such standards increases with the addition of the online environment, giving social media users more opportunities to self-assess based on the standards at hand and positively or negatively reshape the ideas they have about themselves (Bessenoff, 2006). Self-perception may determine social media use behaviors such as whether one posts selfies (Barry et al., 2019) or one's choice of usernames or profile pictures (Taber & Whittaker, 2018); this kind of control makes purposeful self-presentation possible (e.g., Dunn & Abaneme, 2022), and those who perceive that they have such control may be more likely to pursue opportunities for digital social recognition by others (see Palladan & Ahmad, 2021). Self-presentation is an essential consideration of this study because it necessitates some degree of self-disclosure.

TikTok: The Platform

TikTok has been at the forefront of social media discussions for the last two years, and its time in the limelight has garnered the platform a balance of celebratory (e.g., appreciation for cultural trends) and critical remarks (e.g., concerns about security due to its foreign origins). TikTok has successfully waded through a tumultuous reception to establish its place in many people's daily social media use routines (Günel, 2020). With videos on everything from pop culture and home renovations to addiction recovery and mental health, the platform hosts content on any topic imaginable (Ceci, 2022). Potential benefits of TikTok include opportunities to connect with others, its function as a creative outlet that may eventually become a source of sponsorship or income, and being entertained; potential cons of TikTok use include cyberbullying, a breach of privacy (personal and/or digital), and internal conflicts about self-esteem or confidence (Cyberwise, 2020). These benefits and detriments do not occur in a vacuum, though, and likely depend on certain characteristics of the user and how an individual engages with the platform.

Relevant TikToker Characteristics

Self-disclosure. *Self-disclosure*, which is connected to the concept of "public self-awareness" or sharing information about yourself, is more common online than in-person (Schouten et al., 2009); people spend a good portion of their time online, so understanding what they share about themselves online is critical to having a fuller picture of how they build public self-awareness at large (Joinson, 2001, p. 190). Self-disclosing information online has become an essential part of computer-mediated communication (Lin et al., 2016), and an established network behavior that promotes interpersonal reciprocity on social media platforms (Chen & Li, 2017). Self-disclosure can also be viewed as a strategic challenge because it may result in consequences that are gratifying or harmful for the discloser (Krämer & Schäwel, 2020). Because of such risks, individuals tend to disclose specific things about themselves, including socially desirable behaviors that are true of their real selves (Johnson, 1981).

Self-esteem. *Self-esteem* is the idea that you believe yourself to be a person of worth (Meeus et al., 2019). According to Jan et al. (2017), social media may impact individuals' self-esteem by leading them to make upward or downward comparisons of themselves to other users. Importantly, upward comparisons can negatively affect self-esteem because individuals may begrudge others' lifestyles and become unappreciative of themselves (Jan et al., 2017; Midgley et al., 2021). Though self-esteem may be lowered by comparing oneself to others or receiving negative feedback, social media use can also enhance self-esteem through positive social support and feedback (Barry et al., 2017). In this study, low self-esteem is considered to be synonymous with *insecurity*.

Self-validation. *Self-validation* is the experience of a sense of worth or validation derived from receiving likes and gaining followers. Research shows that one of the main reasons individuals self-disclose is that they are seeking self-validation, often in the form of "likes" on the content they have posted (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Dumas et al., 2017), and that users' self-esteem may be harmed by reliance on such validation (Stapleton et al., 2017). Receiving social support through "likes" matters to some users because they view the "likes" as recognitions and affirmations of themselves and the content they have shared, which may yield a sense of self-validation (Andreassen et al., 2017).

Belonging. Participation in the communal aspects of social media platforms may also yield feelings of *belonging*, another predictor of persistent social media use (Liu & Guo, 2015). Chueng et al. (2010) defined belonging as "the psychological state of being part of the community in an online social network" (p. 1339). They added that the sense of belonging can be obtained through the development of three different kinds of social identity: (a) affective social identity, which is when individuals have an emotional involvement with the social network; (b) evaluative social identity, in which individuals

evaluate their self-worth through association with that social network; and (c) cognitive social identity, which is self-awareness associated with the use of a particular social network. Hence, it is important to investigate whether TikTok provides a sense of belonging to individuals who use this platform as a part of their social identity development.

Each of these TikToker characteristics is complex and changes over time. Because young people are in a critical period of development and may depend on each other to shape such characteristics through interactions and self-disclosing, it is essential that we understand how and what they are sharing and what they see others disclose. Because the app itself is still fairly new and, as a consequence, understudied, we employ a mixed-methods approach in order to start building a more comprehensive picture of the platform. Thus, based on the literature above and the necessity for research on TikTok use in these areas, the following hypotheses and research questions are proposed:

H1: Users with high insecurity will self-disclose on TikTok more frequently than users with low insecurity.

H2: TikTok users who self-disclose frequently will experience an increase in (a) self-esteem; (b) belonging, and (c) self-validation.

RQ1: Is the relationship between insecurity and belonging mediated by self-disclosure on TikTok?

RQ2: Is the relationship between insecurity and self-validation mediated by self-disclosure on TikTok?

RQ3: When participants create TikToks, what kinds of information do they personally self-disclose?

RQ4: When participants watch other people's TikToks, what kinds of information do they see other people disclose?

3. Method

Procedures

After acquiring institutional review board approval from Texas Tech University (IRB2021-905), undergraduate students were recruited and asked to complete an online Qualtrics questionnaire with a variety of measures, demographic questions, and open-ended questions about TikTok and self-disclosure for extra credit. Additional extra credit opportunities were available for those who did not wish to participate in this study. Originally, 510 participants completed the entire survey. However, after reviewing the data for multiple attention and accuracy self-checks, only 256 were included because they answered all of the attention and accuracy self-checks correctly.

Participants

According to their reported birth years, participants ($N = 256$) ranged in age from approximately 18-25 years old with the average participant being approximately 20.43 years old. The sample was predominantly female ($n = 169$, 66%), with 32.8% male ($n = 84$) participants and three participants who declined to answer. Participants self-reported as 75.4% White ($n = 193$), 5.1% ($n = 13$) as Black/African American, 2.7% ($n = 7$) as Asian, .4% ($n = 1$) were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1.2% ($n = 3$) American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 16% ($n = 41$) reported "Other."

Measures

Self-disclosure. The measure for self-disclosure was adapted from a series of seven questions on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) in Melumad and Meyer's (2020) study on disclosure and smartphones by replacing references to Twitter use with references to TikTok use (see also Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007; Wang et al., 2016). Melumad and Meyer (2020) performed an exploratory factor analysis and found that the seven scale items loaded onto two unique dimensions of self-disclosure; four of the items—focus on the self, the internal state of the discloser, vulnerability, and one's personal/identifying information—loaded onto a dimension identified as *intimate information* ($\alpha = .78$), while the other three items (controversy, offense, and impulse) loaded onto a dimension identified as *lack of censorship* ($\alpha = .85$). The analysis for this study indicated that the adapted version of the measure is reliable ($\alpha = .92$). Corresponding items include: (a) "To what extent do you focus on yourself in your TikToks?"; (b) "To what extent do you reveal your personal feelings, thoughts, or opinions in your TikToks?"; (c) "To what extent do you disclose personal information about yourself in your TikToks?"; (d) "To what extent do you disclose information that might make you feel emotionally vulnerable in your TikToks?"; (e) "To what extent do you express potentially controversial statements/views in your TikToks?"; (f) "To what extent do you express views that may be offensive to others in your TikToks?"; and (g) "To what extent does it seem like you are impulsive when making TikToks?". One attention check was inserted into this set of items in which participants were asked to "please select 5" on a Likert scale.

Self-esteem. For the purposes of this study, the Rosenberg (1965) scale was used to measure self-esteem. Rosenberg (1965) developed a ten-item questionnaire, which has been one of the most-used self-esteem scales for decades and is very reliable ($\alpha = .92$), to measure five items that describe the perception of negative qualities, and another five that describe the perception of positive qualities. Participants in this study answered each question on a 7-point Likert scale of

1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and reliability for the measure was high ($\alpha = .90$). To be clear, a low self-esteem score is considered a sign of insecurity, whereas a high score indicates high self-confidence and high levels of security. The ten items are as follows: (a) “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”; (b) “At times I think I am no good at all”; (c) “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”; (d) “I am able to do things as well as most other people”; (e) “I feel I do not have much to be proud of”; (f) “I certainly feel useless at times”; (g) “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others”; (h) “I wish I could have more respect for myself”; (i) “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure”; and (j) “I take a positive attitude toward myself”; another attention check was used to break up the ten items.

Self-validation. In order to assess self-validation, we adapted Blachnio et al.’s (2016) use of the Facebook Intensity Scale (Ellison et al., 2007) by replacing the word “Facebook” with “TikTok.” In their study, Blachnio et al. (2016) explored the impacts of Facebook addiction on participants’ lives and reported that the FIS scale was used to determine participants’ use habits with a reliability score of $\alpha = .92$. Participants were asked to report (a) the approximate number of TikTok followers they have in place of “Facebook friends,” and (b) the approximate number of minutes they spend per day on TikTok in place of “Facebook” (Ellison et al., 2007). In addition, this measure included a series of 6 items that participants rated on a 7-point Likert scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We opted to use these items for self-validation in order to determine how much respondents depended on TikTok as a source of likes, social interaction, etc. The six additional items included: (a) “TikTok is part of my everyday activity”; (b) “I am proud to tell people I’m on TikTok”; (c) “TikTok has become part of my daily routine”; (d) “I feel I am part of the TikTok community”; (e) “I would be sorry if TikTok shut down”; (f) “I am careful in what I post to TikTok because I worry about people who are not my friends seeing it”; (g) “Concerns about the privacy of content posted to TikTok keep me from posting frequently”; (h) “Concerns about the privacy of content posted to TikTok keep me from posting personal information”; (i) “I feel good when people like my videos”; and (j) “I comment on other users’ TikTok videos”. The measure was shown to be reliable and valid ($\alpha = .90$).

Belonging. To measure users’ sense of belonging related to their experiences using TikTok, three items were adapted from a study by Lin et al. (2016). In their investigation, Lin et al. (2016) aimed to determine what rewards of social media use could predict continued use, including a sense of belonging, which they were able to do with a high reliability score ($\alpha = .85$). For this scale, participants used a 7-point Likert scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) to rank their agreement with three statements about TikTok, then completed the same three items for another social media platform of their choice that they reportedly use on a frequent basis for comparison purposes. The measure included the following items: (a) “I feel as if I belong to the [platform] community”; (b) “I feel as if I am socially connected to the [platform] community”; (c) “I feel as if I am a part of the [platform] community”; a high reliability score was calculated for the measure ($\alpha = .92$).

4. Results

In order to test hypothesis one, an independent t-test was conducted between users’ level of insecurity (high/low) and their perceptions of self-disclosure on TikTok. As expected, high insecurity ($M = 15.20$, $SD = 9.66$) users demonstrated significantly higher levels of self-disclosure on TikTok, $t(251) = 3.66$, $p < .05$, as compared to users with low insecurity ($M = 12.48$, $SD = 6.92$).

For hypothesis two, a canonical correlation test was run analyzing levels of self-disclosure and self-esteem, belonging, and self-validation and yielded significant results. Using Wilks’ Λ , the overall model was significant, Wilks’ $\Lambda = .86$, $F(3, 254) = .42$, $p < .001$, which indicates that all four variates are significantly associated by the canonical correlation. The canonical variates showed that self-disclosure on TikTok was related to self-esteem (*correlation* = $-.40$, *coefficient* = $-.36$), belonging (*correlation* = $.80$, *coefficient* = $.05$), and self-validation (*correlation* = $.92$, *coefficient* = $.12$).

To analyze research question one, a multiple linear regression was utilized using insecurity and belonging as the independent variables and self-disclosure as the dependent variable. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(2, 253) = 34.35$, $p < 0.001$, $R = .38$. Both independent variables accounted for unique variance: insecurity, $t = -4.18$, $p < 0.001$, $b = -0.16$ and belonging, $t = 7.46$, $p < 0.001$, $b = 0.38$.

For research question two, a multiple linear regression was conducted using insecurity and self-validation as the independent variables and self-disclosure as the dependent variable. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(2, 253) = 40.54$, $p < 0.001$, $R = .41$. Both independent variables accounted for unique variance: insecurity, $t = -3.56$, $p < 0.001$, $b = -0.14$ and self-validation, $t = 8.21$, $p < 0.001$, $b = 0.72$.

For research question three, qualitative answers were evaluated to see what participants were self-disclosing on TikTok. Participants were provided a textbox and asked, “When you create TikToks, what kinds of information do you personally disclose?” Using Bulmer’s (1979) suggestions for a coding procedure, three coders read through all the answers independently and came up with categories. From there, the researchers developed a codebook and created themes. Each coder then analyzed every answer to determine the appropriate theme via Qualtrics. Intercoder reliability was significant (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.98$, level of agreement; $\kappa = .98$). Twelve themes emerged from the data: none/not much, humor, aesthetic

disclosure, relationships, past/present experiences, TikTok trends, locations/affiliations, name/age, emotional state/health, connections to other platforms/audiences, active avoidance of disclosure, and opinions/beliefs. See Table 1 for themes, definitions, and examples of what participants reported self-disclosing on TikTok.

Table 1. Personal Self-Disclosures on TikTok

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<i>None/Not Much/Nothing of Note</i> PA = 100% n = 168, 33.8%	Answer indicates that they have not disclosed much, or nothing at all, on TikTok.	“I usually don’t disclose any personal information,” or “Not much, I am private.”
<i>Humor</i> PA = 100% n = 50, 11.6%	Answer indicates that they have disclosed something humorous, funny, and/or entertaining.	“I usually just post funny videos of myself doing dumb stuff,” or “I only use funny sounds or sounds I like,” or “Funny content.”
<i>Aesthetic Disclosure</i> PA = 97% n = 46, 9.2%	Answer indicates that they have disclosed something regarding their aesthetic, which can be related to their pets, hobbies, fashion, and/or face.	“I just do cooking and my cat,” or “My music knowledge,” or “Stuff relating to my interest,” or “What I am wearing.”
<i>Relationships</i> PA = 97% n = 41, 8.2%	Answer indicates that they have disclosed something about their relationship to other people (e.g., romantic partner, family, friends).	“People I have had romantic connections with,” or “[I] show my friends or family members,” or “Who my friends are.”
<i>Past Experiences/Present Activities</i> PA = 96% n = 40, 8.0%	Answer indicates that they have disclosed something that happened in their lives that they wanted to share with others.	“I normally do vlogs that say what I’m doing that week,” or “Mostly I talk about things that have happened to me.”
<i>TikTok Trends</i> PA = 99% n = 38, 7.6%	Answer indicates that they have disclosed something related to a trend on TikTok (e.g., dance, song, etc.).	“I just post like the dances and trends that are going around,” or “I mainly just lip-sync to sounds.”
<i>Locations/Affiliations</i> PA = 100% n = 29, 5.8%	Answer indicates that they have disclosed an affiliation with a place/organization or their location.	“[I post videos about] where I go to college,” or “what city I live in.”
<i>Name/Age</i> PA = 100% n = 24, 4.8%	Answer indicates that they have disclosed their name and/or age.	“My name and age,” or “Name,” or “Age.”
<i>Emotional State/Health</i> PA = 100% n = 19, 3.8%	Answer indicates that they have disclosed about their emotional state and/or health status (e.g., chronic illness).	“When I create TikToks, I usually disclose about how I’m feeling in that moment,” or “my mood,” or “TikTok I’ve made was about me getting kidney surgery.”
<i>Connections to Other Platforms/Audiences</i> PA = 100% n = 17, 3.4%	Answer indicates that they have disclosed a connection to other social media platforms or audiences.	“My YouTube channel,” or “an Instagram button in my bio [sic].”
<i>Active Avoidance of Disclosure</i> PA = 100% n = 14, 2.8%	Answer indicates that they tend to avoid self-disclosure on TikTok.	“I stray away from personal information such as my location, school and family,” or “I do not personally disclose any information as I feel that is not a secure place to do so.”
<i>Opinions & Beliefs</i> PA = 96% n = 9, 1.8%	Answer indicates that they have disclosed their personal opinions and/or beliefs.	“[I share] my views about COVID,” or “my political affiliation.”

For research question four, qualitative answers were investigated to determine the types of themes that capture what participants noticed other people doing on TikTok. Again, participants were provided with a textbox and were asked

“When you watch other people’s TikToks, what kinds of information do you see them disclose?” The same analysis procedures used for research question three were followed for this research question. Intercoder reliability was significantly high (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.98$, level of agreement; $\kappa = .98$). Twelve themes emerged from the data: everything/super personal, contact information, relationships, aesthetic disclosure, opinions/beliefs, lifestyle info/routines, emotional state/mental health, pop culture/news/stories, none/not much, affiliations, physical health/concerns, and finances/business. See Table 2 for themes, definitions, and examples of what participants have seen other people self-disclose in TikTok videos.

Table 2. Observations of Others’ Self-Disclosures on TikTok

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Descriptions</i>	<i>Examples</i>
“Everything”/“Super Personal” PA = 100% n = 159, 23.4%	Answer indicates that they disclose “everything” and/or super personal information.	“Literally everything, they show too much,” or “their whole lives.”
Contact Information (i.e., name, age, location, phone #, other SNS accounts) PA = 100% n = 117, 17.2%	Answer indicates that they disclose contact information.	“Full name, addresses, Instagram, Snapchat,” or “Give out their home city, phone number, social media account. You can see where they are.”
Relationships PA = 100% n = 66, 9.7%	Answer indicates that they disclose about their relationships with others.	“I see information about who they are with,” or “information about friends or a significant other.”
Aesthetic Disclosure PA = 96% n = 57, 8.4%	Answer indicates that they disclose their aesthetic features (e.g., face, body).	“Some pretty revealing videos of women,” or “I see a lot of TikToks where people do dances.”
Opinions & Beliefs PA = 96% n = 55, 8.1%	Answer indicates that they disclose personal opinions or beliefs.	“Sometimes I see videos of people with strong opinions about a subject,” or “things they believe in and are passionate about.”
Lifestyle Info/Routines PA = 96% n = 45, 6.6%	Answer indicates they disclose information about their routines and/or daily habits.	“Their daily routines, how they organize their lives,” or “lifestyle info/habits.”
Emotional State/Mental Health PA = 100% n = 33, 4.8%	Answer indicates they disclose information about their emotional state and/or mental health.	“Their mental health status,” or “mental breakdowns and how they are feeling.”
Pop Culture/News/Stories PA = 95% n = 30, 4.4%	Answer indicates that they disclose information about pop culture or current events.	“Movies or sports,” or “What’s going on in the world, local news ...”
None/Not Much/Nothing of Note PA = 100% n = 29, 4.2%	Answer indicates that they disclose “nothing” or not much.	“Not very much,” or “Nothing too personal.”
Affiliations (i.e., college, job) PA = 100% n = 29, 4.2%	Answer indicates that they disclose about their affiliations with organizations and groups.	“I’ve seen colleges,” or “their job and what specific project they are working on.”
Physical Health/Concerns PA = 100% n = 24, 3.5%	Answer indicates that they disclose something about their physical health.	“Medical struggles,” or “fitness and health,” or “sexual assaults and domestic violence.”
Finances/Business PA = 99% n = 9, 1.3%	Answer indicates that they disclose about financial information.	“Good investment ideas,” or “Most I see are of flexing their money.”

5. Discussion

The results of this study suggest several interesting relationships between college students’ self-disclosure on TikTok, the way they see themselves as users and as individuals as compared to others on the platform, and what they think they get out of using the app. The results for H1 indicate that participants who are more insecure/have low self-esteem are more

likely to self-disclose on TikTok than users who feel secure in themselves/have high self-esteem. Previous literature on self-perception identifies social media as an outlet for self-assessment (Bessenoff, 2006), meaning that users often think more critically about who they are and how they may regard themselves when engaging with others online, including instances of self-disclosure (Krämer & Schäwel, 2020). Rosenfeld and Kendrick (1984) suggested that individuals are more likely to self-disclose to those with whom they have a close relationship for the purpose of maintaining or bettering the relationship but may self-disclose to a stranger in the hopes that they will experience catharsis; this catharsis may also be achieved online (Da Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008; Tong et al., 2013; Yeo & Chu, 2017).

Users who are experiencing insecurity may not have close relationships in which to disclose and resort to disclosure on TikTok, or perhaps the self-assessment encouraged by social media use puts those users in a state of mind that necessitates catharsis; another way of framing this is by labeling catharsis as a gratification that users may seek through TikTok use. Similarly, results for H2 suggest that increased self-disclosure on TikTok can lead to a decrease in self-esteem/an increase in insecurity. However, an increase in self-disclosure on TikTok was also predictive of an increased sense of belonging and self-validation, which may indicate that an other-focused approach to TikTok use (e.g., relating to others on TikTok may drive belonging; others supporting your self-disclosure through likes or comments may heighten self-validation) could yield different results than a self-focused approach (i.e., self-esteem). Further, if users are feeling low as a result of lacking belonging or self-validation, the use of TikTok to self-disclose and subsequently experience an increase in those feelings may lift their mood, in line with mood management theory research on coping with loneliness (Cauberghe et al., 2021).

The results for RQ1 and RQ2 indicate that the relationship between insecurity and belonging is mediated by self-disclosure, with insecurity having the aforementioned negative relationship with self-disclosure and belonging having a positive relationship. Likewise, the relationship between insecurity and self-validation is mediated by self-disclosure, with self-validation having a positive relationship with increased disclosure discovered above. Importantly, these mediations suggest that we can get a more comprehensive picture of TikTok users' experiences by considering how they view themselves as persons of worth (self-esteem), in relation to others (belonging), and whether they feel that others affirm their worth and belonging (self-validation) in tandem *and* as separate influences.

By including self-checks for accuracy and attention, we feel that the participants in this study truly offered their candid opinions and honest assessments about TikTok self-disclosure behaviors. Yet, the study has a few limitations, including an imbalance in sex representation due to a predominantly female sample pool. The sample also consists of college students whose socioeconomic status may not reflect the experiences of the public in a way that is generalizable. Kang et al. (2022) noted that young people are hesitant to self-disclose on TikTok due to privacy violations and management concerns. It may be possible that the participants in this sample were also concerned about how this information might be used and wanted to only provide socially desirable answers even though they were briefed about the intentions of the study and their participant rights. At the same time, this was a young sample and they may not necessarily be aware of the disclosure that posting on TikTok may require of themselves and others. Hence, they may not have truly contemplated the ways in which they disclose and how others disclose on this social media platform yet.

6. Conclusion

This study provides important and timely insights into TikTok users' experiences on the platform and is some of the first TikTok-specific work engaging with the nuances of self-disclosure and its impacts. Findings imply that the dynamics between the self and others on TikTok are far more complex than they may seem on the surface and that making oneself vulnerable through self-disclosure can often determine how important factors that are associated with wellbeing (i.e., self-esteem, belonging) may be impacted by use of the platform. Sharing with others is foundational to our lives as humans who must build relationships with one another to survive and thrive, and who find great value in spreading and collecting information about each other and the world (Cauberghe et al., 2021; Rosenfeld & Kendrick, 1984). TikTok is front and center in today's social media environment, so recognizing how people may or may not be using it to share information is critical to understanding contemporary avenues for self-disclosure and related concepts (i.e., self-esteem) or consequences that can help shape the quality of life of its users. Future research should expand on our contributions by applying new theoretical foundations to the functions and use patterns of TikTok, and compare the findings presented here to scores for other emerging social media platforms.

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