The Dual Role of Student and Creator: Exploring The TikTok Experience

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ABSTRACT

TikTok is one of the most common content-creating social media platforms for youth in the USA. In recent years, its engaging content has significantly influenced people, shaping trends, behaviors, and communication styles among its predominantly young user base. This study evaluates TikTok's impact on college and university students as they invest a lot of time creating content and engaging on TikTok besides their studies. While existing research highlights TikTok's educational benefits and adverse societal and psychological effects, our mixed-method approach provides a focused analysis of student content creators. Survey data quantifies usage patterns and their correlation with academic and mental health indicators, while interviews offer qualitative insights into personal experiences. Findings reveal that TikTok affects students' time management, mental health, academic performance, and self-perception. Although TikTok facilitates creativity and social connections, it also induces stress and distraction. This study aims to fill research gaps and propose new directions, offering practical recommendations for balancing TikTok's benefits and drawbacks for student content creators.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Social media**; • **Applied computing** → **Sociology**.

KEYWORDS

Social Media; TikTok; Mental Health; Student Content Creator; Social Engagement

1 INTRODUCTION AND RELATED WORK

TikTok, a rapidly growing social media platform, has become integral to many people's daily lives worldwide. With over a billion users, approximately 63% of TikTok's users in the USA fall within the 10-29 age group [28]. Many of these users are content creators, many of whom are high school, college, or university students. Understanding how TikTok affects their student life is crucial, as they invest considerable time into content creation. Many studies have explored TikTok's positive and negative effects on its content creators.

Recent research on TikTok as a social media platform has examined its significant global influence across various purposes. As the fastest-growing social platform, TikTok is particularly effective for humorous marketing [1]. Another study highlights TikTok's role in daily routines, serving as a source of escape and relief while emphasizing user engagement and the app's affordances [26]. Additionally, a study on social media's impact on student life discusses its overall effects, noting benefits for networking and professional opportunities alongside risks such as cyberbullying [23]. Furthermore, one article identifies six critical motivations for using TikTok—entertainment, communication, social interaction, support, information sharing, and escapism—challenging the common perception that TikTok mainly has adverse effects [7, 9]. More studies on TikTok highlight its potential as a learning platform for students. For example, TikTok became a significant online learning tool during the pandemic [21], served as an effective medium for pharmacy students [10], and helped non-native English speakers learn English [20]. Other studies explored user behavior and expectations for learning from short videos [22, 30], content dynamics [29], and algorithmic personalization [2, 17], highlighting its influence on engagement and content trends. However, there are adverse effects as well. Studies have examined societal and psychological impacts, including mental health and body image concerns and economic implications for users. One study on adolescents found that while moderate users and non-users showed no difference in school performance and mental health, addictive users experienced significant

negative impacts [5]. Another study concluded that TikTok negatively affects users' physical and mental health by creating a facade of beauty [18]. Moreover, TikTok has indirect effects on students, leading to depression, stress, and memory loss, with male students being more affected than females [27].

In summary, previous research has primarily examined the impact of TikTok on its users as a social media platform. However, more studies are needed to explore the specific effects on student content creators who engage with the platform as creators and consumers. Our study aims to evaluate TikTok's impact on student content creators' time management, academic performance, and mental health. While the platform offers a creative outlet and community engagement, it also presents challenges such as decreased attention spans and heightened anxiety due to its addictive nature. We have employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative data on usage patterns with qualitative insights from students' experiences, to provide a comprehensive understanding of TikTok's influence. Our study investigates the following research questions:

> **RQ1:** How does TikTok usage affect time management and daily routines for student content creators? What strategies do they use to balance the platform's impact on their academic and creative responsibilities, mental health, and overall well-being?
>
> **RQ2:** What psychological effects do student content creators experience due to TikTok engagement, especially concerning content creation, achieving virality, and social interactions while managing academic responsibilities?

In our study, the survey data quantifies TikTok usage and its correlation with academic performance and mental health indicators, while interview data explores students' personal experiences. Our findings reveal that TikTok significantly impacts students' lives as content creators, affecting their time management, mental health, academic performance, and self-perception. Although TikTok provides creative outlets and social connections, it also introduces stress and distraction, with students employing various strategies to balance these effects. This study aims to identify gaps and propose new research directions, contributing valuable insights to academic discourse on social media impacts and offering practical recommendations for balancing TikTok's benefits and drawbacks for student content creators.

2 METHODOLOGY

To explore TikTok's impact on student content creators, we recruited participants from different educational institutions. We gathered data using demographic and experience surveys. Additionally, we conducted several in-depth virtual interviews. Finally, we did a thematic analysis of the collected data and gathered insights into TikTok's effects on student content creators.

2.1 Participant Recruitment and Study Design

To explore and understand the impact of TikTok on student content creators, we adopted a multi-faceted approach that combined online survey distribution, targeted outreach, and in-depth interviews. We

began by advertising our project through various channels to recruit participants. This involved sending emails to multiple colleges detailing the objectives and significance of our study and including links to our surveys. We also reached out to leaders of university clubs and organizations, providing them with pre-written posts and flyers to share with their members. Additionally, we posted about our project in popular Discord channels frequented by students and shared the project details on social media platforms. By leveraging our friends' networks and these diverse communication channels, we aimed to reach a broad and varied student population across different universities.

Our data collection process involved two types of surveys. The first was a demographic survey designed to gather basic information about the participants, such as their age, gender, academic year, field of study, and the university they attend. The second survey, hosted on Qualtrics, aimed to gather detailed information about the students' experiences with TikTok. It included a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to collect both quantitative data and qualitative insights. The survey covered usage patterns, types of content consumed, time spent on the app, and perceptions of TikTok's impact on academic performance, social life, and mental health. We distributed these survey links through the channels used in our initial recruitment phase to ensure broad participation. The experience survey questionnaires are listed in Section 2.1.1.

2.1.1 *Questionnaire for Experience Survey*.

1. How often do you use TikTok? (Daily / Several times a week / Weekly / Rarely / Never)

2. On average, how much time do you spend on TikTok per day? (< 1 hr / 1-2 hrs / 2-3 hrs / > 3 hrs)

3. What types of content do you most frequently engage with on TikTok? (Select all) (Educational / Entertainment / News / DIY-How-to / Fitness-Health / Other)

4. How would you rate the impact of TikTok on your academic performance? (Very positive / Positive / Neutral / Negative / Very negative)

5. How would you rate the impact of TikTok on your social life? (Very positive / Positive / Neutral / Negative / Very negative)

6. How would you rate the impact of TikTok on your mental health? (Very positive / Positive / Neutral / Negative / Very negative)

7. Attention check: How many TikTokers do people follow daily? Choose less than 4. (3 / 5 / 7 / 4 / 6)

8. Positive effects from using TikTok? (Open-ended)

9. Negative effects from using TikTok? (Open-ended)

10. Do you monetize from TikTok? (Yes / No)

11. If Yes to Q10, how often do you create content? (Daily / Several times a week / Weekly / Rarely)

12. Strategies to make TikTok videos go viral? (Select one or more) (Trending hashtags / Collaborating / Engaging / Posting at peak times / Other)

13. Time spent planning and creating content daily? (< 30 mins / 1-2 hrs / 2-3 hrs / > 3 hrs)

14. How often do you engage with followers to increase engagement? (Several times a day / Once a day / Once a week / Rarely)

15. Experienced anxiety or stress due to TikTok usage? (Yes, frequently / Yes, occasionally / No)

16. Used controversial/provocative content for viral potential? (Yes / Maybe / No)

17. Purchased TikTok followers, likes, or views? (Yes / No)

18. Prioritized TikTok over academic responsibilities? (Yes / No)

19. Felt distracted from responsibilities due to TikTok? (Frequently / Occasionally / No / Use < 30 mins a day)

20. Felt pressure to maintain a certain image/persona on TikTok? (Yes, frequently / Yes, occasionally / No / Not sure)

21. Taken a break from TikTok due to pressure/stress? (Yes / No / No pressure or stress)

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

We collected responses from 78 students who create TikTok content across the United States. After a thorough analysis, we discarded any responses that were nonsensical, irrelevant, or too brief. To ensure the quality of the responses, we included an attention-check question in the survey. Ultimately, we retained 55 valid responses for our study. Our initial goal was to conduct a preliminary investigation to understand the experiences of student content creators on TikTok, which would identify areas for further research. The target population was defined by two key characteristics: students and TikTok content creators, making it a homogeneous group. Despite the relatively small sample size, the survey provided sufficient depth to gain valuable insights into the challenges of balancing academic and content creation roles. The demographic information about the survey participants is given in Table 1.

Characteristic	Percentage
Age Group	
18-20 years	16%
20-25 years	80%
Above 25 years	4%
Gender	
Male	51%
Female	47%
Prefer not to disclose	2%
Race	
White	43%
Black	26%
Asian	31%
Employment Status	
Employed	38%
Unemployed	62%

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of TikTok creators (N=55).

After analyzing the survey responses, we invited 24 students for in-depth interviews based on three critical criteria: their activity level, follower count, and diversity of content types. We categorized the activity level of all 55 participants into three types based on their frequency of uploading videos: high (at least weekly), medium (at least bi-weekly), and low (at least monthly). We only invited survey participants with high and medium activity levels for the interview. We also ranked all 55 participants based on their follower count, with an average follower count of 276.7K. For the interview, we randomly selected half of the 24 participants with follower counts above the average and the other half with follower counts below the average. The rationale behind this decision was to understand diverse perspectives and experiences, ensuring insights from both highly followed and less followed creators. Additionally, for content types, we focused on the diversity of content among the participants. These approaches allowed us to ensure a broad representation of experiences and perspectives.

Of the invited participants, 18 agreed to participate in the interviews. Ultimately, we conducted interviews with 15 individuals, as three were unable to accommodate our schedule. Observing that our findings had reached saturation, with no new or varied insights emerging, we decided to conclude our interview study without further recruitment [25]. These interviews were conducted virtually, each lasting around 20 minutes, and they complied with UMBC IRB regulations. During the interviews, we asked open-ended questions to gain deeper insights into the participants' TikTok content creation and usage, including the types of content they engage with, reasons for their engagement, any positive or negative effects they noticed, and their overall perception of TikTok's influence on their lives. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed for detailed analysis.

We employed thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns in participant responses [3, 4], providing valuable insights beyond what was captured in the survey and interview. Four authors initially conducted separate open qualitative coding using grounded theory, developing themes and identifying key insights and patterns that emerged from the responses. The authors met regularly to iterate and converge on broader theme categorizations. Following this collaborative analysis, we utilized triangulation [11] to validate these categorized codes by integrating insights from both studies, identifying similar themes, and sharing experiences among participants from both survey and interview datasets. After three rounds of iterative refinement, we processed our findings into four main categories, as reported in Section 3. By combining quantitative data from the surveys with qualitative insights from the interviews, our approach allowed us to gain a comprehensive understanding of TikTok's impact on student content creators.

3 PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our study involves 55 participants who create diverse types of content on TikTok. Educational content, such as videos related to math, science, and language learning, is produced by 12 creators. The most common category is entertainment, with 15 participants creating content like sports videos, dance performances, and engaging challenges. Eight participants focus on news-related content, discussing current events and social issues. DIY and how-to videos covering topics such as crafts, cooking, and home projects are created by seven participants. Nine creators specialize in fitness and health content, sharing workouts and wellness advice. The remaining four participants produce content in various categories, including travel diaries, fashion tips, and personal vlogs. Most participants have monetized their TikTok content, with only a few exceptions. In the following section, we will delve into the details of our analysis,

drawing from the findings of our mixed-method approach. We have shown the findings from the survey responses in a multi-faceted radar chart in Figure 1.

Time Spent and Engagement: Our study highlights significant daily engagement with TikTok among student creators. Several interview participants noted that TikTok's design encourages frequent interactions. Often, they use the app simply to scroll through and watch videos without a specific purpose. One interview participant, IP05 mentioned,

> *".. to be honest, I spend way too much time on TikTok just scrolling through reels (short videos). But it's not just me– all my friends do it too. We know it's bad, but it's so hard to stop."*

Among the fifty-five students surveyed, about 62% reported spending 2 to 3 hours daily on TikTok, a substantial time commitment that could affect other daily activities. Meanwhile, 29% use the app for more than 3 hours each day, indicating an even higher level of engagement that could interfere with their routines and responsibilities. Only 9% spend less than an hour on the app, indicating that a minority of users limit their usage significantly. We asked the interview participants about this finding, and they mentioned using different strategies from time to time to balance their academic and social lives. Some of the methods we learned from them were time blocking– scheduling specific blocks of time for different tasks throughout your day [8], Eisenhower matrix– prioritizing tasks based on urgency and importance [16] and time-boxing– allocating a fixed unit of time for a particular activity and try to complete it within that timeframe [14].

Regarding content creation, 36% of students dedicate 2 to 4 hours daily, reflecting a serious commitment that may impact their academic and social lives. In contrast, 53% spend less than an hour on content creation, indicating a more casual approach. Engagement with followers varies: 24% engage twice a week, 24% once a week, and a significant portion (30%) rarely or never interact with their followers. Some interview participants mentioned that creating content related to trending issues and authentic storytelling requires substantial time and higher engagement levels. This often results in a significant time investment, which can disrupt their daily lives. Additionally, regular engagement is crucial on TikTok; infrequent interaction makes it challenging for creators to increase their profile reach. Engagement patterns indicate that while some creators actively seek to boost interaction and achieve virality, others maintain a more relaxed approach. IP08 mentioned that they occasionally react to some of the comments but rarely reply to any of them, whereas IP02 is quite active in engagement, as they mentioned,

> *"I have around 1M followers and I value every single one of them. Whenever I post a video, I try to engage as much as I can. But, omg (Oh My God), it takes so much time. Still, you gotta understand, the more you engage, the more people will like you."*

On the contrary, we found that TikTok also helps reduce stress and enhance focus for content creators. Approximately 70% of the interview participants reported improved concentration on activities after using TikTok. Additionally, many content creators noted an increase in social confidence. IP03 shared that they create content as a form of relaxation or a break and are not concerned about going viral. They value engagement, measured by comments and likes, more than follower count.

Impact on Mental Health: TikTok's influence on mental health among students presents a varied picture. Approximately 11% of students frequently experience stress or anxiety due to their TikTok activities, highlighting a significant impact on a minority of users. The pressure to consistently produce engaging content and the pursuit of likes and followers can lead to anxiety, stress, and a negative effect on self-esteem, as several interview participants noted. Additionally, 31% occasionally experience these negative emotions, suggesting that while not constant, TikTok can still be a source of stress for many users. Conversely, 55% report no stress or anxiety related to TikTok usage, indicating that over half of the participants manage their engagement without significant mental health issues.

Moreover, 36% of participants have taken breaks from TikTok due to the pressures of content creation or its overall impact on mental health. Interviewees mentioned that excessive screen time associated with high TikTok usage has been linked to feelings of loneliness and anxiety at certain points in their content-creation journey. This highlights that a considerable proportion of users need to step back to manage their well-being. IP12 shared they have gone through a number of methods to reduce their screen time as it was affecting their education and overall mental health. They said,

> *"I realized I was spending way too much time on TikTok, and it started to mess with my grades and mental health. I tried setting screen time limits, doing digital detoxes, and even deleting the app for a bit. It wasn't easy, but those breaks were totally necessary to get my focus back and feel better overall."*

Another issue we discovered behind mental health problems was negative comments. Several interview participants mentioned this issue as one of the reasons behind their reduced self-esteem. In some cases, they were harshly criticized for their content, which also led to reduced confidence. IP04 shared their experience when they posted a dance to a trending song on TikTok,

> *"I didn't expect to get hate comments on that video. It was just a dance cover. But people went off about my moves, my outfit, and worst of all, my body! This happened in the middle of my second semester. I felt so overwhelmed and started doubting myself, which made it super hard to focus on anything else."*

Though the participants reported several incidents impacting their mental health, our overall survey data reveals a rather balanced result. We discovered that 29% feel TikTok positively impacted their mental health by providing a creative outlet, whereas 24% cited a negative impact, particularly stress and anxiety. Nonetheless, 44% perceived no significant impact on their mental health, suggesting that nearly half of the participants viewed TikTok as neutral in terms of mental health effects.

Survey Data Visualization Through Radar Chart: Student Content Creation on TikTok
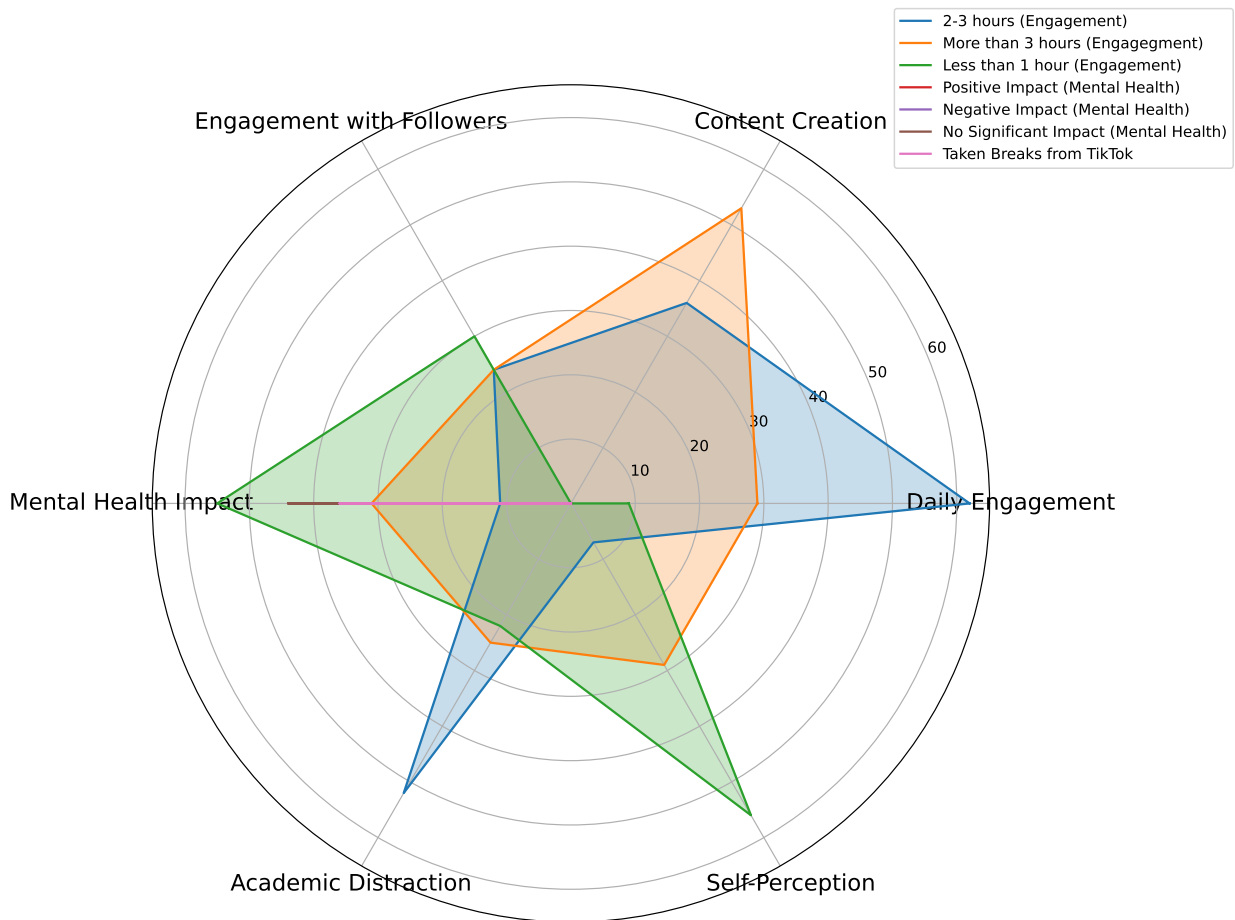
Figure 1: The radar chart illustrates TikTok usage patterns and impacts among student creators across different categories: Daily Engagement, Content Creation, Engagement with Followers, Mental Health Impact, Academic Distraction, and Self-Perception.

Academic Distraction: Our findings reveal that around 52% of students have experienced a negative impact on their academic performance due to TikTok. The platform serves as a distraction for some students, with 25% frequently and 22% occasionally finding themselves diverted by its content. This indicates that nearly half of the participants struggle to balance their TikTok usage with academic responsibilities to some extent. Several interview participants reported that TikTok's addictive nature, characterized by its endless stream of short, engaging videos, makes it challenging for students to manage their time effectively. Additionally, they often stayed up late to balance their time between academic and creative responsibilities, leading to fatigue and reduced concentration. One interview participant, IP07, a content creator who makes videos about football games, mentioned,

> *"During the last World Cup, I had to stay up late to cover the games and make videos about the matches. It was exciting, but it seriously messed up my sleep schedule. I found it really hard to focus on my studies the next day because I was so tired."*

Another concern we discovered is that the parents of these students often expressed dissatisfaction with their children's social activities interfering with their studies. Several interview participants shared that their parents disapproved of their TikTok usage. They felt that the time and effort spent on the platform detracted from their academic responsibilities and overall well-being. For instance, one participant, IP07, mentioned that their parents frequently voiced concerns about the late nights and the distraction caused by TikTok, emphasizing that academic performance should be the priority. Another participant, IP13, noted that their parents even set strict rules and time limits to curtail their TikTok activities in an effort to ensure that their studies were not compromised. However, almost every participant in our study monetizes their TikTok presence. For several of them, parents were supportive because their children were earning money through TikTok, which they saw as a viable alternative to traditional part-time jobs. IP01 mentioned,

> *"At first, my parents were worried about how much time I was spending on TikTok, but once they saw I was actually making money from it, they were cool with it.*

> *They realized it was a legit way for me to earn without having to get a regular part-time job"*

Through the survey responses, we learned a significant portion of students (45%) manage to balance their TikTok usage with their academic duties, demonstrating that many can integrate TikTok into their lives without it significantly hindering their studies. Furthermore, 91% of students have not allowed TikTok to take precedence over their academic responsibilities, indicating that the vast majority prioritize their education over the platform. This suggests that while TikTok can be a source of distraction, many students are still able to maintain a healthy balance and ensure their academic performance does not suffer.

Self-Perception and Social Interaction: In terms of self-image, 7% of students frequently feel pressured to maintain a specific persona on TikTok. While this percentage is small, it highlights a significant stressor for these individuals. Meanwhile, 29% occasionally feel this pressure, indicating that a notable portion of users sometimes concern themselves with their online image. The majority, 56%, do not feel pressured to maintain any particular image on TikTok, suggesting a healthier approach to content creation and self-perception. Two interview participants shared that the platform often promotes unrealistic beauty standards and lifestyles, which can impact users' self-esteem and body image as IP09 shared,

> *"TikTok can really mess with your self-esteem. You see all these perfect people and perfect lives, and it makes you feel like you don't measure up."*

A few other creators mentioned that the feedback loop of likes and comments can make users more reliant on external validation, prompting them to frequently check their uploaded content for affirmation to feel better about themselves. They also remain anxious about the overall performance of their videos, as IP10 explained,

> *"The pressure to constantly create great content for likes and comments is super stressful. I'm always worried my next video won't hit, and that stress gets worse because I rely on the income from TikTok. Balancing all this with school is a lot."*

On the other hand, several participants mentioned forming communities and connecting with people who share similar interests, enhancing their social interactions, and expanding their social networks. IP15 shared that through TikTok, they got close to someone who later helped them with something really important. This variation in perception reflects the diverse experiences and motivations among student creators. While a minority of student creators feel pressured to maintain a specific persona on TikTok, many benefit from forming supportive communities. Some participants experience stress due to external validation and performance anxiety, but others find meaningful connections that offer real-life support.

4 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our findings suggest that TikTok plays a complex role in the lives of student creators, significantly impacting their mental health and academic performance. While some students manage to balance their digital engagements effectively, others struggle with the pressures of maintaining public personas alongside academic responsibilities. This highlights the need for strategies to help students manage their time and mental health while creating content and engaging with TikTok. Our findings outline that TikTok influences students' daily routines, with varying effects on time management, mental health, academic performance, and self-perception. Although the platform offers creative outlets and facilitates social connections, it also introduces stress and distraction. Students employ techniques such as screen limiters, the Pomodoro method [6, 12], and digital calendars to manage these impacts, indicating proactive approaches to maintaining focus and priorities.

To effectively support students who are also content creators, educational institutions should implement a range of important initiatives. Offering flexible class schedules can help these students better manage their time between school and creative work [15]. Workshops focused on skills like efficient time management and high-quality content creation would also be valuable [13]. It is essential that schools educate student creators on strategies for monetizing their work while staying within legal bounds [19]. Targeted scholarships and grants can ease financial burdens [24]. Since the mental health impacts of being an online creator can be significant, especially for young people, schools should ensure access to robust counseling services. Teaching best practices for staying safe on the internet is also key. Connecting students with experienced mentors and providing opportunities to network with others in their creative fields can nurture their development. Finally, schools can be a powerful voice in pushing social media companies to adopt creator-friendly policies and features that empower students to thrive as content creators.

The main purpose of this study is to draw the attention of policy-makers and educational institutions to the need for better support for student content creators through effective measures. These initiatives can help student content creators balance their academic and creative responsibilities. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of supporting mental health and well-being through access to counseling services and promoting healthy online habits. However, the study has limitations, such as reliance on self-reported data and a cross-sectional design, suggesting the need for longitudinal studies to better understand these relationships over time. Furthermore, this study focuses solely on students and people from diverse professions who may have different experiences and perspectives that are not covered here. Future research should explore the experiences of individuals from various professions and conduct temporal analyses to observe the impact of TikTok on their lives while balancing their professional responsibilities.

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