Lainey Roberto, Brooklyn Lamb, Janice Li, Haig Tilton

CM321 F1: Communication Research Methods

Professor Wu

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Can’t Stop Scrolling: Emerging Social Media and Procrastination

1. ***Introduction of research topic***

The topic we will be exploring is how modern social media trends have impacted the attention spans of college students. As we live in such a digital world, social media has risen and become one of the most popular online activities. The social media landscape is constantly evolving with growing trends like the increase of short-form video content which many major social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram have been utilizing. It allows for content creators to engage with viewers through easily digestible forms of content. However, we wonder if this trend has an effect on attention spans and procrastination due to the nature of social media content that is meant to be eye-catching and highly addictive in order to capture the attention of viewers. We want to especially focus on college students because of social media usage being very high among younger generations. We will investigate this topic through interviewing college students who use social media to explore the relationship they have with using social media and learn about their experience with these social media trends. We will analyze whether social media trends have caused an issue in their lives by being a distraction from their schoolwork and how their attention spans are affected.

1. ***Literature Review***

In our interviews, we are aiming to examine how more budding, modern social media trends across all platforms, such as the mass production of short-form video content on apps like TikTok and Instagram Reels, and how they have intimately impacted the attention spans and habits of students. These more recent trends are of particular interest in the context of college students, who have grown up with the advent of social media itself. The mental health effects of social media overuse is already known quite generally, but we wanted to delve deeper into the more specific habits that have resulted from new forms of content in recent years.

In a summer 2018 study by Deborah S Carstens., PhD., P.M.P., Samuel K. Doss PhD., and Stephen C. Kies, three hypotheses were developed related to social media accounts, frequency of social media use on different platforms, and their effect on attention span. The hypothesis most adjacent to our inquiry was: “There is no difference of attention span length amongst frequent use of episodic social media and frequent use of non-episodic social media accounts.” “Episodic” social media was defined as platforms that have strict character limits and occur at irregular intervals, providing masses of loosely connected information, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. “Non-episodic” platforms were the opposite – social media with a long-form, blog-type interface that is more narrative-like, such as YouTube or Facebook. This hypothesis was proven *not* statistically significant in their study, or, in other words, there was no effect on attention span across episodic (short-form) and non-episodic (long-form) content. The timing of this study should be noted, though, as Facebook and YouTube, as well as other social media considered “long-form,” have adapted quickly in recent years to the short-form content wave. Both apps both have “reel” features reminiscent of TikTok, and YouTube’s long video essays seem to garner less attention than quick, entertaining snippets of content popular on most channels today.

In more recent research, short-form video (also referred to as SFV) has proven to be addictive for reasons of coping with stress. In a study titled “Drivers and Consequences of Short-Form Video (SFV) Addiction amongst Adolescents in China: Stress-Coping Theory Perspective” by Honglei Mu, Qiaojie Jiang, Jiang Xu, and Sijing Chen, the researchers highlight adolescent’s excessive consumption of SFV, and possible reasons as to why this reliance occurs. It was discovered that some of the biggest drivers of SFV addiction were social stress and school burnout. Immersing themselves in short, gratifying SFV content allowed adolescents to cope with the various stresses of life, which consequently increased chances of addiction. The study also found that this increased usage of SFV harmed adolescents’ happiness due to their addiction preventing them from completing required tasks. According to the study, “Due to SFV addiction, adolescents may encounter difficulties finishing schoolwork on time, and attractive SFVs may dominate adolescents’ thoughts when they attempt to focus on schoolwork.” This conclusion points to our inquiry of how trends of short-form content affect the attention spans of young people.

In tandem with the expansion of SFV, news dissemination is adapting to retain the attention of viewers. In an article by Gary Arlen, he explicates on the experiments news sources, such as BBC and NowThis, are conducting into short-form news content in 15- or 30-second clips. NowThis has partnered with Snapchat, Instagram, Tumblr and other social media sites to deliver these bite-sized news clips to viewers with notoriously low attention spans that already propagated due to existing social media trends. The way these videos are produced are quite uniform: “The typical lnstafax format is three images (either still photo or motion video) with a few words superimposed in sans serif white letters atop the images. Serially, the words and pictures tell a specific story…Alternately, the three segments sometimes cover different headlines; a recent Instafax feed had three separate stories about Ukraine protests, Syria peace talks and Grammy winners.” The seemingly haphazard combination of multiple differing news stories to make the content more digestible can be seen as either genius or jarring. On the one hand, the short-form content distributed via social media could make news more accessible to a more global audience, but at the same time, the severity and important implications of many stories could be undermined in this format.

“Infinite Distraction: Paying Attention to Social Media”, a cultural analysis of social media and an associated theory of distraction by Dominic Pettiman, discusses the culture and messages within social media that cause us to become distracted. He makes the argument that our relationships with the world are now mediated by technology, and social media works to calibrate “deliberately framed representations” that distract us – our perception of events and life circumstances that we are supposed to experience are instead represented virtually, as more of an “interactive spectacle.” Therefore, our consciousness itself becomes distracted and warped, shaping a new kind of desire, which Pettiman calls “hypermodulation,” for the additional consumption of this type of content. Through it, ‘dangerous surges’ that fuel social change can be absorbed and rerouted around the system, says Pettiman. The elevated and ephemeral nature of the social media environment is what makes it so distracting, and therefore leads young, impressionable people to lose the capacity to pay attention to real life, rather than its virtual representation.

The combination of highly addicting SFV content, its increased utilization by social media apps and news providers alike, and the overarching distracting principle of social media itself aids in our inquiry of how this up-and-coming content category affects the attention span of students as they navigate an increasingly digitized world.

1. ***Research Questions and Interview Guideline***

Research Questions:

1. How have social media trends impacted procrastination habits of college students?
   1. Are there any apps that affect procrastination habits more negatively than others?
   2. Is there a difference in procrastination habits between different genders? Different majors?
   3. Will students with communication majors/related majors have a different relationship with social media and procrastination?
   4. Does social media inhibit students from completing assignments on time?
2. Have short-form video platforms impacted attention spans of college students more than long-form video platforms?
   1. How have the attention spans of college students changed over time with changing social media trends?
   2. Are there any platforms that affect attention spans negatively more than others?
   3. Are there different kinds of short-form content that are more addicting and/or distracting than others?

Interview Guidelines:

* Must be current college student (18+ years old)
* Must have access to a phone and multiple social media platforms
* Must be engaging in school work outside of the classroom
* Allow interviewee to have their phone on them during the interview and record any observations about use of phone/social media during short interview

Interview Questions:

1. General demographic questions (gender, age, major)
2. Relatively how long do you spend on social media everyday?
3. Relatively how long do you spend doing school work everyday (not including time spent in class)?
4. For how long are you able to do work without picking up your phone? In other words; How long would you say your attention span is when doing schoolwork?
5. How long are you able to watch/engage with one social media video/post before you become bored and move onto other content?
6. Do you often find yourself getting distracted on social media while trying to complete schoolwork?
   1. If yes, how long do you typically spend on social media during this time of distraction?
7. Does your social media use ever inhibit you from completing assignments?
8. Which social media platform do you feel distracts you the most? Why?
9. Do you find that you are as distracted on long-form video platforms as you are on short-form video platforms?
10. When did you feel this specific platform begin to impact your attention span/distraction rates while doing schoolwork? (Ex: In my first year of high school)
11. ***Recruiting Method***

Our study involves recruiting amongst our friends who fit the requirements for participating in our study. This makes the study one that utilizes a convenience sample. Our interviewees needed to be college students over the age of 18, and are accessible through modern internet communication. Before selecting the study participant, they are presumed to be at least moderately active on a contemporary social media platform.

1. ***Interview Procedure***

Prior to the interview, all interviewers will have read all sources in the literature review to better understand the effects of short-form video addiction, as well as the distracting nature of social media itself, as well as to better probe interviewees about their media habits. We aim to understand how the interviewees interact with social media on a daily basis, and to see their reasoning, if any, behind their behavior.

The interview procedure is a straightforward, intimate 1-on-1 conversation where the interviewee answers the interviewer’s set list of questions. The questions are to be finalized prior to the interview. The interview will be non-structured, as the questions asked are based on a specific topic and are more interested in the content of the response, rather than the identity of the person answering. The questions are merely touchpoints – once the interviewee has begun speaking, we can further probe and get to know that person’s specific media consumption habits and how they play into their attention span. The interviewer is to not debate the interviewee and only ask questions that involve their further elaboration without displaying any outward emotion.

Each interview will take place in-person in the College of Arts and Sciences classroom 227, with both interviewer and interviewee sitting at desks having casual conversation. The interviews will take place at various times throughout the day between the dates of April 25-26th. The location is meant to be quiet and non-pressuring, intended simply for the purpose of the interview and obtaining data. Snacks and water will be provided. The interview will be recorded audio-only on the interviewer’s phone via the application [Otter,](https://otter.ai/) which creates a written transcript with timestamps for the duration of the interview.

1. ***Individual Profiles of the Interviewees***

Participant 1 is a 22 year old male who is a senior in the College of Communication at Boston University, majoring in Film and Television. Participant 1 uses social media semi-regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 2 is a 21 year old female who is a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston University, majoring in Psychology and minoring in Deaf Studies. Participant 2 uses social media regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 3 is a 21 year old male who is a senior in the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston University, majoring in Psychology and Advertising. Participant 3 uses social media regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 4 is a 19 year old female who is a sophomore in the College of Communication at Boston University, majoring in Public Relations and minoring in Environmental Analysis and Policy. Participant 1 uses social media semi-regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 5 is a 21 year old female who is a junior in the College of Communication at Boston University, majoring in Journalism. Participant 2 uses social media regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 6 is a 19 year old female who is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston University, majoring in International Relations and Anthropology. Participant 6 uses social media regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 7 is a 21 year old female who is a junior in the College of Communication at Boston University, majoring in Advertising. Participant 7 uses social media regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 8 is a 19 year old female who is a sophomore in the College of Communication at Boston University, majoring in Media Science. Participant 7 uses social media regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 9 is a 19 year old female who is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston University, majoring in Biology. Participant 7 uses social media regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 10 is a 19 year old male and sophomore in the College of Engineering at Boston University, majoring in biomedical engineering. Participant 10 uses social media regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 11 is a 22 year old non-binary junior in the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston University double majoring in Computer Science and Philosophy. Participant 11 uses social media regularly and is currently participating in school.

Participant 12 is a 21 year old male in the College of Communication at Boston University majoring in Film and TV. Participant 12 uses social media regularly and is currently participating in school.

1. ***Findings***

We first asked participants how long they spend on social media every day. Our results showed that most participants spend between 1 to 4 hours on social media every day. This shows that participants are spending a significant amount of time not just on their phone, but specifically on social media platforms. One participant was actively attempting to stop using social media as much, instilling personal rules in her daily social media activities, such as not allowing herself to post on Snapchat until her work was completed. The other participants in the sample did not have a specific social media usage goal in mind.

We then asked participants how much time they spend doing schoolwork everyday, excluding the time they spend actively in class. Our results showed that most participants spend between 1 to 3 hours on school work everyday. This shows that on average, the participants are spending less time on schoolwork than on social media. We then proceeded to ask participants how long they are able to do schoolwork without picking up their phone – in other words, we wanted to find out how long participants' attention span was while doing work while their phone is easily accessible. Participants' answers ranged from as little as 5 minutes to as long as an hour before they picked up their phone for a break.

In addition to this, we asked participants how long their periods of distraction last on social media when they succumb to picking up their phone while doing work. According to our sample, these periods last from a few minutes to over 20 minutes of consistent distraction. On top of this, all of our participants said that they only have a few seconds of patience before becoming bored of a certain video or piece of content before scrolling on to the next. One participant described how easy it was to become distracted: “The social media platform itself is very scrollable content. YouTube, for example, I don’t find myself on that because it requires much more attention than Instagram. It’s so easy to scroll through stories.” The very design of these platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels encourages constant scrolling and consumption of content.

Along with being distracted easily by social media, we found that participants as a result of being distracted aren’t as focused on their schoolwork. All our participants feel social media inhibits them from completing their assignments and makes them take longer to do their work. Participants claimed they would procrastinate doing their work when going on social media. One participant even stated how it has become more of an unconscious habit to go on social media rather than for entertainment purposes: “It was for entertainment and to distract myself from my work but then over time it’s become more of a habit, and I just find myself scrolling when I’m bored or for no reason – even when there’s nothing interesting.” The way social media is so present in her everyday life has made the decision to go on social media turn into a mindless activity for her.

We then asked participants which social media platform distracts them the most to get a better understanding of the content that captures their attention. Participants were most distracted by Instagram, followed by TikTok. The reason we found was usually of the addicting content that is curated so specifically for each user’s interests. Many participants explained that they could seemingly scroll forever through the apps because of the endless amount of content with all the posts, videos, reels, and stories. There were also a few participants who stated that they mainly use Instagram to message people and stay up to date with what their friends are doing. Social media has allowed for many people to interact with others and keep in contact with people more easily as a way to manage our relationships but this has its consequences when social media becomes addictive and we don’t recognize its distortion of reality.

Our interview responses from each participant show that short-form content is more distracting than long-form content. A minority of the participants stated that long-form content is equally distracting or more distracting than short-form content. We found that short-form content generalizes content found on TikTok and Instagram, where long-form content is found on Youtube and Internet video platforms. One participant that described long-form content as being more distracting said “I feel like I can get sucked into a Youtube video for up to 30 minutes sometimes, depending on what it is.”

Because all participants are of different ages, pinpointing a moment where social media use drastically increased based on our participants’ responses would be inaccurate. However, we found that distracting social media use has begun as early as the eighth grade, and has started as late as university years. Many participants referred to the 2020 quarantine as being a period where they developed social media procrastination habits. One mentioned: “it was a way for my friends to stay connected and entertained.”

Many participants expressed discomfort with the content they mindlessly consumed on TikTok and similar platforms, while also admitting that while consciously knowing it was making them upset, they could not stop. “I would go on TikTok and I'd swipe five times and then I would see something that I was upset about. I would see someone doing a college recap or something and I'd be like, *‘Oh man, I wish that was me.’* Or I would see someone front row at a concert. I'd be like, *‘Oh man, like, I wish I could afford that.’* It was always something that was targeting an insecurity,” said one participant. TikTok specifically was a universal distraction among all of our participants – many mentioned scrolling for hours as a form of relaxation before going to bed, or something they looked forward to doing after a long day. This correlates with our literature review on the addictive nature of short-form video. The constant stream of content in bite-sized video form makes it easy to become overwhelmed and jealous of what one doesn’t have in a quicker and less-doctored way than on other platforms like Instagram.

In addition, the relationship between social media and distraction is different when it comes to students who work or study in certain professions. Many of the students interviewed were in the College of Communication, which frequently requires students to take classes on social media management, be up-to-date on social media trends, and stay on top of multiple social media accounts and interactions for either a job, internship, or extracurricular activity. Because of this, it’s even harder to disconnect and even easier to become absorbed in the addictive nature of these platforms. One participant said: “In the past, I had deleted Instagram off of my phone, and it was very helpful to avoid it. But because I run social media for my extracurricular groups, I’m forced to have it on my phone. I could technically log out of my personal Instagram account, but I don’t want to.” In these instances, there is an even more involved culture of social media usage that is hard to escape from, and even encourages constant distraction in the name of career success.

1. ***Conclusion***

Our research has led us to the following conclusions; Social media trends have impacted the procrastination habits of college students by decreasing attention spans and increasing procrastination, and generally short-form video platforms have impacted this more than long-form video platforms.

Through our participants we found that a majority of them are the most impacted by TikTok, which shows that this app is negatively affecting procrastination habits more than other social media platforms. We did not find a particularly significant difference between how procrastination rates impact different genders. However, we did find that participants in communication majors have a different relationship with social media than those with other majors. A significant aspect of being a communications major is social media in today's society. So, students who are communications majors, who tried to limit their time on social media and in turn, their procrastination rates, were unable to do so because they found themselves having to log back onto the app for school assignments/extracurricular activities. Participants also expressed that social media prolonged the amount of time they would spend completing assignments, because they would continuously get distracted and begin scrolling before completing any task.

Although we could not pinpoint a specific time where most participants felt their attention span became impacted by a specific social media platform, a majority of participants did express that they can recall their attention spans being impacted by short-form video platforms such as Instagram and TikTok over long-form video platforms such as youtube. These platforms became most popular while these participants were in high school/late middle school, reinforcing the idea that research has shown an increase in trends of short-form video social media platforms impacting productivity levels negatively. A majority of participants also claimed that short-form video platforms are still what distracts them the most today, rather than long-form video platforms. We also discovered that some participants were most distracted by content they found upsetting or content they became jealous of – videos that would show participants a lifestyle different from their own that they wish to have. TikTok was the platform that satisfied this addiction for participants; the app allows for users to constantly see new content uploaded by all demographics of people and this made participants easily able to scroll endlessly for long periods of time while trying to complete other tasks.

1. ***References***

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