

**The Effect of TikTok on Children:  
An Interdisciplinary Analysis**

Shacara B. Pitre

IDS 300W

Professor Pete Baker

February 23, 2022

### **Abstract**

TikTok is a social media platform that was created in September of 2016. On the platform, people are able to express themselves by creating short videos that consist of dancing, cooking, fashion, pranks, etc. TikTok has gained popularity throughout the years, especially in 2020 when the pandemic hit. More people started to sign up and created videos that gained popularity amongst many of the youth. However, it has become a prevalent problem for children affecting their mental health, social issues, and privacy. Parents are starting to get concerned about how TikTok is affecting their children. To combat these issues, the question of the effect of TikTok must be addressed and further answered. This paper takes an interdisciplinary approach that uses psychology, sociology, and political science as disciplines to expand our knowledge when it comes to investigating this problem. Each discipline offered empirical research studies that applied the 10 step interdisciplinary research process. This was done by evaluating each insight and theory, identifying conflicts between those insights and their sources, and lastly, offering an interdisciplinary understanding to the question of how children are affected by TikTok. Overall, the research presented in this paper identifies that parents need to be more involved in monitoring how often their children are exposed to this platform.

## **The Effect of TikTok on Children: An Interdisciplinary Analysis**

As the number of children who join TikTok increases, we can see the lasting effect it has had on them. TikTok is a growing platform gaining popularity from its many users. However, as it continues to grow, children are suffering from its impact. Unlike social media platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok has not been around for that long, but it does seem to have similar effects as these other platforms. Proper and accurate research, comprehensive understanding, and communication of the complex problem surrounding the effects TikTok has on children is crucial for coming up with a solution. This paper will draw on different insights from multiple disciplines and use an interdisciplinary approach to gain new knowledge that will apply to the problem - the effect TikTok has on children.

### **Applying an Interdisciplinary Approach**

TikTok can be looked at from an interdisciplinary perspective because there are many ways that it can be applied. It can be looked at from a variety of disciplines since it is a platform that encompasses so many different topics. Comparison, popularity, and self-esteem are just a few topics that are discussed as ways TikTok has influenced children to think and go about their day to day lives. Since the effect of TikTok is a complex issue, it is necessary that interdisciplinary research is applied to understand the relationship between Tik Tok and the effect it has on children. In this paper, it will explore important insights from relevant disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, and political science to offer a more in depth explanation.

First, sociology “views the world as a social reality that includes the range and nature of the relationships that exist between people in any given society” (Repko & Szostak, 2016). TikTok correlates with sociology in the sense that it is impactful on much of our society. Almost

everyone is on the platform uploading videos that are meant to be creative and fun for people to watch. TikTok can also be influential when it comes to behavior, perceptions, and ideas that people have. One aspect that it is important to note when looking at TikTok and how it relates to sociology is the impact that body image has on young children. To clarify, “according to reports of watching TikTok videos every day, social platforms are flooded with unrealistic ideal bodies, that is, what the bodies of men and women look like to make them attractive” (Liu, n.d.).

Second, psychology is defined in our textbook as “human behavior as reflecting the cognitive constructs individuals develop to organize their mental activity” (Repko & Szostak, 2016). In relation to TikTok’s effect on children, psychology involves the mental health aspects, such as stress, depression, anxiety, etc. that comes from it. In other words, psychology focuses on the mindset that a young child could have when watching videos on TikTok. For example, TikTok use disorder (TTUD) is positively linked to memory loss, and it is also positively linked to depression, anxiety, and stress” (Sha & Dong, 2021).

Third, political science focuses on viewing the world as a “political arena” where people make decisions based on how much power they can gain (Repko & Szostak, 2016). TikTok encompasses the political science discipline in the sense that children are vulnerable when it comes to their safety online. This platform and many others allows children to connect with millions of people that have similar interests. However, not everyone is who they say they are. For instance, “mobile social media applications (“apps”), such as TikTok, have recently surfaced in news media due to harmful incidents involving young children engaging with strangers through these mobile apps” (Urquiola et al., 2019).

These three disciplines that were discussed previously are expected to cover the issue related to TikTok and its effect on children further throughout this paper. Each of the disciplines

have their own approach to the topic, but it is important to recognize the conflicts as well as common ground between each discipline. As a result, this will allow for a deeper dive into the topic and better understanding in order to come up with a solid solution. Since there are multiple disciplines involved to analyze this problem, we are able to see different perspectives instead of relying solely on one. Each discipline must be analyzed individually to look for key ideas and concepts that relate to the problem, which will be used to compare and contrast to see if there is any bias or related information between them.

### **Evaluation of Insights and Theories**

Sociology, psychology, and political science all need to be evaluated regarding the problem or topic that is being discussed in order to gain knowledge of the theories and insights that are used to develop the conclusions reached by these disciplines. Regarding sociology, it takes a humanistic approach when looking at underlying causes. The insights are based on societal structures, human interactions, the way people or a group affect each other, and the impact it has on society. On the contrary, psychology focuses on the problems that can be explained based on the mind and how it affects our outlook on our personal self worth. Lastly, political science is a more structured discipline focusing on the rules and regulations of the government thus being able to evaluate problems according to the law. Each discipline will be examined individually with respect to the issue at hand, which is the effect TikTok has on children.

The insights associated with sociology regarding the effect of TikTok on children focuses on body shaming and how it has influenced the gen z population. According to research results from Khattab, he found that “most users and video shooters have stereotypes about the body of

both sexes” (Liu, n.d.). This conclusion came from a hashtag trending that stated:

#KarmaisaBitch, in which a person shows themselves looking unattractive in the first clip and transitions into being confident and sexy. Another source that focuses on the sociological aspect when it comes to the effects of TikTok looks to understand how it along with other short video platforms tap into a person’s creative side. In other words, TikTok helps to unleash creativity in children in a different way since it allows them to make up pretty much anything thus making it a trend if many people participate in it. This is completely different from the first source dealing with sociology as they look at different sides of the app even though it falls under the same discipline.

### **Identification of Conflicting Insights and Sources**

Identifying conflicts between disciplines is a crucial part of the interdisciplinary process as it provides opportunities to search for bias along with strengths and weaknesses within each discipline. The disciplines discussed approach the effect of TikTok on children through some bias by the individual fields that they represent. So, it is important to identify the conflicts between said disciplines first and then look to see how they can be resolved. In order to resolve these conflicts, a conclusion from one discipline may be favored over another or the root cause of it may be indicated to understand how said conclusion was reached. When it comes to this paper, the findings will identify the root causes resulting from the conclusion from sociology, psychology, and political science.

Throughout each discipline, it is agreed upon that TikTok does have an effect on children. That is made clear throughout each discipline whether positive or negative. According to a psychological insight, the use of TikTok has been linked to mental health issues, such as anxiety

and depression along with memory loss. This was concluded from a study of 3036 Chinese students in their first and second year of senior high school in which Smartphone Addiction Scale, Short Version (SAS-SV) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales 21 (DASS-21) were used. On the other hand, another source from the psychology discipline concludes that there is not enough information out there to see psychology has any relation to TikTok.

To support this, although user numbers are high and TikTok represents a highly successful social media platform around the globe, we know surprisingly less about psychological mechanisms related to TikTok use” (Montag, et al). This puts into question the other psychological source regarding this topic because now it is starting to have opposing views in the same discipline; whereas, a discipline should be somewhat on the same page when researching a topic. Furthermore, there are conflicting views when it comes to the psychological discipline as it relates to its effect on TikTok. This leads to the fact that there is an overall problem when it comes to this issue because one discipline is not going to simply have all the answers. However, they do agree that children are drawn to TikTok making them vulnerable to experience effects from it.

The political science discipline views TikTok as being dangerous to children by exposing them to strangers. There was a study done to indicate the “level of awareness” that children have when it comes to the dangers of the online world. As a result, it showed that children are aware of what is going on online and are willing to learn more about how to decrease their risk of coming into contact with dangerous or strange activity. However, there was some bias included within this study such as not having a diverse group of children as well as favoring one gender. Towards the end, Urquiola et. al states “future work should investigate how children classify online risks and their ability- and their perceived ability- to address issues themselves, or with

automated intelligent assistance, rather than with the support of adults”. This is an important piece to note within the political science discipline because this involves a weakness.

Recognizing that this is a weakness will help to eliminate this conclusion that was drawn as the solution to the effect of TikTok on children.

As we can see from each one of these disciplines, there are conflicting views that need to be considered when examining the issue at hand. However, they all seem to be universal in acknowledging the problem itself noting the main observations of each discipline have been formed. Underlying issues are to be determined as either being beneficial or useless when it comes to the problem at hand and the solutions offered should be considered for final review.

### **Identification of Commonalities Between Insights**

Conflicts are expected among disciplines as they are looking at the topic from different angles and have their own respective bias. Similarities between the disciplines are essential for creating common ground because of the distinctive insights of sociology, psychology, and political science regarding how TikTok affects children. It is crucial to create common ground between the disciplines in order to construct a better and more comprehensive understanding of the complex question being asked within this paper. Even though all three of these disciplines offer a different lens on the reasoning behind the effect TikTok has on children, commonalities still exist. Sociology views one of the effects of TikTok is body shaming. The psychological discipline could look at this similar issue and say that it can cause low self esteem, depression, etc. affecting a child’s mental state.