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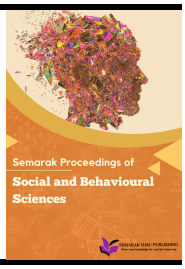

Life of a TikToker: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has become a prominent platform studied across psychological and political domains, often focusing on its societal impact and implications. However, limited research explores how TikTokers themselves perceive their engagement with the application. This study addresses that gap by examining the lived experience of a TikToker through a phenomenological perspective. The research aims to understand the personal journey of an active TikTok user, including his life before TikTok, motivations for joining, and the platform's influence on his well-being. Using purposive sampling, the informant was selected based on his active presence and large follower base. Thematic analysis revealed three core themes: (1) "A Physical Educator and Dance and Pageant Judge: A Life before TikTok," (2) "I am a Proud TikToker: My Coping in this Pandemic," and (3) "Boon and Bane: The Two Sides of My TikTok Story." Findings indicate that TikTok served as a coping mechanism during the pandemic, contributing to both mental and physical health. While the platform offered psychological and economic benefits, it also introduced challenges such as social media pressure and negative feedback from anonymous accounts. Key factors driving his engagement included the pandemic, personal coping strategies, and alternative income opportunities. This study offers an emic perspective, highlighting the TikToker's own interpretation of his digital life and its broader implications.

Keywords: TikTok; TikToker; social media

1. Introduction

TikTok is a social media platform or application for creating and sharing video clips online. It provides users a virtual avenue to express and communicate themselves through dancing, singing, lip-syncing and other forms of online expression. A user who actively creates and shares content on TikTok is a TikToker. Users of TikTok ages 13 and above [1] and usually, teenagers. It has playback-videos, lip-sync videos, challenge for a performance [2,3], and copying or interacting with other created videos attracts people to use Tiktok [4,5]. These motivate users to actively engage in TikTok and are able to experience a sense of gratification [6] but TikTok is not always pleasant and there are users who experiences hate in TikTok [7,8], cyberbullying [9]. In this study, there was a presentation of the TikToker in his journey toward active engagement in TikTok, specifically the factors which hooked him in this social media application and how these affect his life. It was narrated from micro level and qualitative in approach specifically phenomenology where it sought to explain on how the TikToker sees his TikTok life.

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1.1 TikTok and its Nature

TikTok is a social media platform or application for creating and sharing video clips online. It is a highly popular online application from China with 1.5 billion users with 800 million worldwide active users per month where most of the users are teenagers [7,10]. This application has been an avenue for entertainment [4,11-13] such as video editing [14,5] and creating [12], competition [2] to commerce [13,15-20] and even education [3,12,21-24] which can customized according to preferred content [25]. The user-friendliness, easier access, and convenient interface made from creating, editing, and sharing content on TikTok is appealing to people online. Recently, there is a live-streaming which is a new feature that is added in TikTok [26]. In the live-stream the TikToker can engage in many forms of activities such as meet and greet for fans, TikTokers' challenge, games, and other forms of fun and entertaining online activities.

1.2 Factors Why People Actively Engage in TikTok

TikTok is a hybrid of social networking and video-sharing [5,15,17]. Researchers attributed the TikTok's rapid achievement to user-friendly interface [21], and easier editing of preferred content [14,25]. These features hooked users to actively engage in TikTok. Users who actively create and share content on TikTok ages 13 and above [1] or under 35 years old [10]. Colloquially, people who are active users in TikTok call themselves TikToker. It attracted a lot of online users due to its readily downloadable and easier accessible application [27]. According to Bucknel *et al*., [11] gratification of the users which motivates them to become actively engage in TikTok which also supported by the study of Omar and Dequan [6] but for Shao and Lee [8] it is more self-expression and satisfaction. Moreover, users also wanted to have wider connections with other users and viewers for the purposes of fame and self-expression [6,11,29-32]. On the other hand, Meng and Leung [33], cited gratification as reason why user actively participate but specifically on the gaining of satisfaction and entertainment in the form an escape, fashion, entertainment, information seeking [3,34,35] money making [36] sociability seeking, navigability, modality, and interactivity. They added, it is not just gratification but also due to narcissism from likes and comments, and followings received in TikTok. In addition to the above mentioned reasons, the surge in TikTok downloads, as a recent additional indicators and drivers, likely results from the COVID-19 pandemic [43,45-48]. Under lockdown, people are spending increasingly more time on mobile devices and seeking out new entertainment activities and means to stay connected, which drives TikTok downloads [32,45,47,49-52]. It was earlier mentioned that gratification [2,4,6,8,29], fame and self-expression [6,11,29-32], satisfaction and entertainment in the form an escape, fashion, entertainment, information seeking [3,34,35], money making are motivation to be actively engage in TikTok [36]. But in this pandemic, coping and stress can be a factor on why there is an increase in the number of users in TikTok, especially their active engagement.

They are using TikTok to deal with the tragic situation that they are in. These are explained that stress is a response to what is happening around the person that causes their stress [37,38] and for them to keep in balance they are using TikTok as a coping mechanism where the pandemic is viewed as a stressful event. Added, the pandemic as a stressful event can stimulate the users of TikTok to seek response, adjustment, or adaptation with the tragic situation [39]. It was done through active engagement in TikTok. Lastly, Transactional model of stress and coping [40] which can provide a better explanation on the possible link between pandemic and increase in active participation in TikTok. It explained that a certain phenomenon forces the person to respond and cope in order to manage the stressful event or tragic situation. In this case, the pandemic is a tragic situation and the

increased active engagement in TikTok as a response and coping with the previously mentioned situation. Added, aside from the psychological benefits gain by its users, there are commercial and financial aspects which motivates users to create more content and to be consistently active users because there companies who willing to pay to TikTokers to advertise their product [19,41,42]. According to Abidin [19] TikTokers are seeking to find alternative sources of income. In this, the need for income of the TikToker and the invitation to advertise a product or service of a certain company meet the need and demand of both the TikToker and the company. On the other hand, there are also users who want to spread and gain the latest information [3,34,43] while browsing in TikTok reduces anxiety [44] and removes boredom [45].

1.2 Users' Experiences in TikTok

Generally, users expected to use TikTok to creates and shares content [1] for the purposes of entertainment and self-expression where users experiences gratification [2,4,6,8,29] but such expectation is always not realized due to its unpleasant experiences such as hate [7], cyber-bullying [9] and unsuitable and abusive content such as smoking, drinking, or rude language [1,8]. Some researcher claimed that TikToker can be threat to Privacy [45,53,54]. There are those who only browse on TikTok to reduce anxiety [44] and remove boredom [45]. According to Abidin [55] the status of every TikToker varies but what is common is their retention of online visibility will more likely maintain their fame. Famous TikTokers' popularity also varies where these are short while others are maintained. There are those who by accident became famous but there those that it was planned. Their respective goals vary from monetized/not monetized aspiration. TikTok serves as a tool or a platform among people who cannot easily leave their respective houses due to COVID-19 Pandemic and other health protocols [21]. Others use TikTok for educational purposes [12,21,56]. These are psycho-social and educational experiences of users but there are commercial and financial reasons in their experience. Due to the rise of TikTok Influencers, advertising networks, and agencies dedicated to monetizing content and embedding advertising on TikTok, and top TikTok Influencers raking in millions in income annually [19,41,42]. There are users who were paid for these purposes and they were able to gain money from it but it is only available to those TikToker who have many followers and viewers and not to those who are not that famous. Aside from these, some TikTokers seek ownership on various content claiming that it is their original creation where they seek attribution, acknowledgement, or authorship over specific videos, trends, dance moves, or dialogues [36].

2. Methodology

This study utilized qualitative approach using Phenomenology (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) by Smith *et al*., [60] which is a research design for the purposes of capturing detailed life of a TikToker and his personal live-experience where the TikToker is an active interpretative being of his life specifically laying down his life before active engagement in Tiktok, his view of TikTok and how Tiktok affect his life. Added IPA is appropriate research design suited to analyze and interpret the Life of the TikToker. Moreover, the data gathered in study were retold or re-storied by the researcher into themes as expressed in lived and told stories of the key Informant and to configure them into a story using a thematic plot line [59].

2.1 Key Informant

The informant of the study is a Famous TikToker in the Philippines with more than 500,000 followers on Tiktok and currently residing in Western Visayas which was purposely selected through chain-referral method where a friend referred TikToker to Research as a person famous in TikTok. The Key Informant of the study was selected from the pre-determine characteristics based on the need of the study and these are: (1) a male ages above 18 years old; and (2) regular user of TikToker with at least 100 thousand followers.

2.2 Data Gathering Instrument

The data-gathering instrument utilized in this study was a researcher- made as a guide question on the stories of lived experiences specifically to the life of a TikToker. In Addition, the instrument has two parts, the first part of the guide questions is all about the key informant's profile, specifically his background. The key informant's background information includes occupation, hobbies and other relevant data. The second part of the questionnaire was on the Life of a TikToker, specifically his life before engaging in Tiktok, the factor which leads him to use TikTok and how did Tiktok affect his life. Added, the following methods were utilized in analysing the gathered data and these are: (1) Interview; (2) Observation of the Key Informant; (3) Memoing derives from the written journal; and (4) Probing of the Key Informant's Data. In validation of the gathered data, the validation strategies of Creswell & Miller [59] were used: (1) Theoretical Triangulation where there was a utilization of multiple and different sources to provide corroborating evidence; (2) Clarifying where the researcher comments on the past experiences, biases, etc. that might shape the researchers interpretation and approaches to the study; and (3) Member Checking utilize after recording of the interviews and observation of the informant as well journal record in the course of the, it was subjected to transcription and translation from the Local Language used by the Informant to English (Language understandable to readers).

Specifically the methods and the validation was conducted through direct observation of the TikToker in the Coffee shop where he frequently created his content and conducted his live-stream to his followers - these written in the observation journal. Added, there is a journal written for the purposes of reflections and comments on the study especially on the behavior of the participant. From time to time, the researcher asks the participant clarificatory questions on his response in the interview. Lastly, the TikToker is actively engaged in the formation of meanings, interpretations, analysis, and themes of the study where the TikToker verifies, clarifies or confirms the finding of the study. In addition to the interpretation and analysis of the gathered data, the coding and analytic memoing writing by Saladana [58] was utilized to provide proper sources and description in retelling of Life of TikToker and how themes are coded and categorize to the forms themes with the TikToker as co-determiner of the said Theme.

3. Result

3.1 A Physical Educator and Dance and Pageant Judge: A Life before Tiktok

The name of the TikToker of the study is Red TikToker [not his real name] and he is a physical educator. He is from a highly urbanized city and an Alumnus of a University in Western Visayas. Prior to TikToker [and the Pandemic], he was actively engaged in the culture and the arts, usually, as a judge in dance and pageant competitions because of these he was able to go to different places in many parts of the Western Visayas. During that time, he does not have an account in TikTok but he

has other social media accounts such as facebook, instagram, etc. Before the pandemic, it was a trend to organize a competition or pageant. He became a busy person because, usually, He was invited as a judge of the previously mentioned events which became his other source of income aside from the teaching profession and owning a studio that he had in the different places in Western primarily on dance and other forms of the arts. It also includes music from guitar, singing, and the like. He also offered acting lessons and during summer, he organized workshops for arts and dance classes. His clients are sons and daughters of a doctor, lawyers, and other white-collar professionals. There are also clients who joined his studio for a competition which, according to him, produced champions in the field of arts and dances. The overall transition from physically and socially active lifestyle to sudden dormant activities because lockdown imposed by the government which lasted for 100 days can be explained by the transactional model of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman [40] which can explain the decision of the TikToker to actively participate in TikTok. In the latter discussion, TikToker explained that the pandemic is a tragic situation in which he can not easily go out and do his usual activity because of the danger of the virus and restrictions enforced by the government. In other words, TikTok was his response and coping mechanism to handle and manage his well-being from the stressful event that he is facing.

3.2 I am Proud TikToker: My Coping in this Pandemic

He learned about TikTok in a post from a friend on Facebook. According to him "TikTok is a social media application where you can do and share your content or craft". He added, in TikToker "In TikTok, you can dance, do a poem and anything you want. If you are a teacher teaching a specific subject like math, english, or, even, dance". It is similar to the statement of [1] where users can create their content and share it to their fellow user and also similar to the observation of Montag *et al*., [25] and Asarch [14]. The statement of informant regarding education conforms to the finding eight (8) studies from the different researchers of TikTok [3,12,21-24,56]. For him, TikTok is a platform where users can discuss varied subjects. In his case, it depends on his preference but usually it is acting, lip syncing, or dancing. His claim of preferred content on TikTok is similar to Montag *et al*., [10] and Asarch [14]. He describes TikTok as "similar to other social media applications but TikTok is limited to a few seconds up to few minutes where users can post their content". He added, unlike "other [social media applications] that can be in [many minutes] but in TikTok, it is of 3 minutes maximum time but you can upload up to one hour but you have cut it into a few minutes. He explained that TikTok has a feature in which you can download and send messages and you can set your message setting in private where people who are to send a message can send messages.

In his case, only a TikTok account can send him a message. It shows that the TikToker is highly knowledgeable on the application that he uses from its usage and other features available. It was March of 2021 when I started using TikTok and it was due to the lockdown of the Philippine Government as response to growing concern toward COVID-19 which later on became a pandemic. It was mentioned in the news that the Philippines experienced 100 days of Lockdown where iy said it is one of the longest COVID lockdowns in the world. According to Singh *et al*., [57] lockdown has psychosocial and mental health implications specifically fear and anxiety which conform to situation of the TikToker in the study where he said "*Since lockdown, I have nothing to do and I cannot do anything and as Physical Educator, I am physically active and exercising alone is boring and everything around you seems hopeless but because of TikTok which I became actively engage, I was able to enhance myself – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually*" Added, it is an evidence showing that COVID-19 Pandemic and lockdown can result to psychological and mental deterioration to the people affected especially in the Philippines where Filipinos experiences 100 days of lockdown.

According to the TikToker, during the pandemic, TikTok became his coping mechanism and it really helps him mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually and it really helps a lot. It is a similar circumstance to other people experiencing pandemic which is supported by finding of Singh et al., [57] where in this pandemic, coping and stress can be a factor on their active engagement where the informant of the study is using TikTok to deal with the tragic situation that he is in. These can be explained that stress is a response to what is happening around the person, just like the case of the TikToker, or may be other people, that causes their stress [37,38] which for informant is to keep his well-being by using TikTok as a coping mechanism to endure the pandemic.

This experience is supported by the study of Holmes and Rahe [39], as interpretation of their work, the pandemic as a stressful event can stimulate the users of TikTok to seek response, adjustment, or adaptation with the tragic situation and in the case of the informant, he cope through being active on TikTok. Overall, the holistic coping experience of the Tiktoker in the study can be explained by the Transactional model of stress and coping Lazarus and Folkman [40] which provides an explanation on the possible link between pandemic and increase in the active participation in TikTok. The said model explained that a certain phenomenon forces the person, like the tiktoker in the study, to respond and cope with the COVID-19 Pandemic where he said "it [TikTok] helps me cope not to focus on the problem that we cannot go out, we cannot drink [alcohol], there is no class, and I cannot do anything about it. It only shows the psychological benefit of TikTok and TikTok can be of help on this". In his case, he viewed the pandemic as a tragic situation and he also attributed the increased active engagement in TikTok as a response and coping in the pandemic where the informant of the claimed that the surge in TikTok users was a result from the COVID-19 pandemic which is similar to the finding of these studies [18,43,45,47,48]. Added, studies conducted by Reich [49], Tankovska [50], Kennedy [45], Abidin [47], Haigney [51], Mohsin [52], and Meng [33] shown that during lockdown people are spending increasingly more time on mobile devices and seeking out new entertainment activities and means to stay connected, which drives TikTok downloads.

3.3 Boon and Bane: The Two side of my TikTok story

The informant of the study said that TikTok became his source of self-expression, aside from coping, where he was able to experience enjoyment and excitement. Aside from joyful experience in TikTok where he gets hooked, he gains a sense of fulfilment on being active in TikTok. From enjoyment and self-expression, it evolved into a passion where he, even, became a member of the Philippine TikTok Society. His claim of self-expression is similar to the finding of Shao and Lee [28] where user gained self-expression and satisfaction from TikTok but there is gratification is in the play, like in the study of Bossen & Kottas [11] & [6] where in his narrative where he was able to have social media connection with other users and viewers for the varied purposes such fame and self-expression just like in the find of Omar & Dequan [6], Bossen and Kottasz [11], Escamilla-Fajardo *et al*., [21], Vijay and Gekker [31], Meng and Leung [33] and Lamont [30]. The informant of the study received satisfaction and entertainment in the form of an escape, fashion, entertainment, [3,34,35], money making [36] on being active on TikTok.

Added, it is not just gratification but there is an elements of narcissism shown in the experience specifically from gratitude in receiving likes and comments, and followings received in TikTok where he said that feel good when he receive many likes not just in the Philippines but many parts of the world which motivates him to create more content. These are the mental, emotional and psychological benefits he received of being active in TikTok. Generally, he looks at what is going on on TikTok as a good thing which gives him a platform to follow and be followed, and to create various content on TikTok. On other hand, Physically, because of TikTok, he is again motivated to physically

exercise and unconsciously memorized the dancing and acting steps in TikTok which, according to him, enhances his dances and acting skills and these are his usual content on his TikTok account. Aside from psychological and physical benefit, he was able to gain financial and material gains. Everytime he engages in a live-stream where he receives gifts from viewers. There is an instance where a follower sent cash which motivates him to do live-stream and TikTok contents. He cited people who sent him cash are rich but bored with their lives, or wanted to sponsor a live-stream games and there those who only wanted to be mentioned during live-stream and other reasons. The cash donation he received is via paypal, Gcash, BDO or BPI but he recommended GCash because of its convenience. The cash he received ranges from a thousand pesos to 30 thousand pesos. In Addition, he also received gifts such as jackets, soap, canned goods, briefs, T-shirts and other expensive products such as GoPro Camera, stabilizer and laptop. In the long-run, he was able to have a fan page created by his fans to showcase his content in TikToker and he is elated about it and the support he received from his followers where, according to him, boosted his self-esteem and he became somebody. Added, because of TikTok, and having many followers, he received offers from SMART Communication where he hosted an online event on Facebook, acting role in an Indie Film, up to endorsement of beauty products. From this, he received talent free and boxes of gifts and products they gave.

This scenario in his experience is similar to the study of Abidin [19] where TikTokers are seeking to find alternative sources of income and the invitation to advertise a product or services of a certain company meet the need and demand of both the TikToker and the company. It was explained from data of Influencer Marketing Hub [41], Hines [42], and Abidin [19] that there is a rise of TikTok Influencers, advertising networks, and agencies dedicated to monetizing content and embedding advertising on TikTok, and top TikTok Influencers raking in millions in income annually and it is somehow similar to the situation of the informant of the study. But Abidin [36] claimed, which supports the situation of the TikToker in the study, these financial privileges and other economic gains are available to those who have many followers and viewers and not to those who are not that famous. His overall TikTok experience further enhances his self-esteem, according to him, and he feels good when someone greets him on the street that he is a famous person on TikTok and he is able to help his fellow TikToker and other people around him both offline and online. His TikTok experience is not always pleasant, ranging from psychological tiredness to online defamation. There was an experience, he narrated, where people, especially his classmates' judge and laugh at him because, in his late 30s, he is active in TikTok and telling him that he is not ashamed of the people around him despite his age. There are situations in which he is longer excited but stressful where there is tiredness that you need to overcome in this kind of thing [and] he realized, it is not always happiness and joy.

A lot of time he feels drained that he feels being pressured to smile or else he worries about ending up with few viewers. Added, he needs to greet everyone especially [my followers with special events]. You sent them greetings in every event - it was the same greetings. There is a live-stream that he didn't even feel like doing it because it started to become a demand from my followers where its forces him to adjust or compromise to his viewers and followers so that they will be entertained on what you are doing especially during live. He also experiences a quarrel with one of the admins of his fan page where the admin is expecting to be available most of the time to his followers but despite what has happened he is still willing to reach out to his fans. The is another instance an TikTok account told him in live-stream that he is nobody and told his follower that you don't know him and there also instance where someone comments to him that his content is usual and it still a dance content up to the point he feels everything he do online people will say negative to him. When he posts his good deed, his new gadget, etc. still people online say unpleasant things to him. He is hurt but he is

trying not to mind those kinds of people on TikTok but remind himself that as long as he doesn't stoop to other people's right that would be fine. The experiences of the TikToker is similar to the findings of Weimann and Masri [7] and Christopher [8] where he received hate from one of his admins and other TikTok users and even cyber-bullying similar to the result of study by Kumar [9]. But the difference is his offline discrimintation from his classmates who saw his TikTok content online. In other words, engaging in TikTok has both positive and negative effects to its user depending on the degree but in the case of the TikToker of the study he still views it positively. His message to his fellow content creator to look into the brighter side, just like he did, that, though, it is tiresome but rewarding knowing your fans will do everything to show their support. He added, when you engage in TikTok don't forget to enjoy what you are doing because other good things will follow. Lastly, his message to non-TikTokers is not to judge them and a lot of them have unknown battles that you people do not know.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the life of a TikToker can be holistically explained using a transactional model of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman [40] where his active participation on TikTok his response and coping mechanism to escape or temporarily forget the stressful or tragic COVID pandemic. Though there is benefits from it such as receiving money [19,41,42] and gifts and donation from his followers while the disadvantage such receiving hate [7-9] but still his initial intention and still one of his significant reason was to cope with stressful event and it was done TikTok to deal with it. In other words, he view COVID pandemic as stressful circumstances [37,38] and his response to stress and keep in balance was through active engagement in TikTok which shows his life as a TikToker is story of coping in a stressful COVID-19 pandemic.

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