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Letter to the editor

TikTok and Its Role in COVID-19 Information Propagation



To the Editors:

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic generated the near-complete closure of U.S. educational institutions during the Spring 2020 semester, affecting approximately 55.1 million students [1]. Although such abrupt closures were undertaken to increase compliance with social distancing, motivations among adolescents to participate in social distancing were shown to be mixed [2].

It is understandable that noneducational screen time among young people has greatly escalated [3] during the pandemic, allowing individuals to stay connected with the outside world as more formerly conventional means of communication became increasingly impractical. As such, social media have played a large role in youth resocialization in a pandemic society. However, with recent concerns of a growing number of cases arising from young adults [4], an increased understanding of COVID-19 portrayal on social media is valuable in deciphering young adult sentiment on the virus and how their views on the seriousness of the pandemic may be colored by the variety of messages they receive about it.

One of the most recent platforms to surge to prominence has been TikTok, a social network with more than 45.6 million active users in the U.S.—with 63.5% being aged <29 years—[5] where creators post videos of themselves talking, dancing, or lip-synching. With its unique “For You” page, where the majority of viewed content is randomly selected rather than drawn from a pool of “friends,” TikTok generates a wider and more diverse audience than the traditional “follower”-based social media model. Videos are sorted into hashtags, with search results directly sorted by likes received per post.

Given social media’s ability to propagate factually inaccurate medical information at an alarming rate [6], we analyzed the 100 most popular videos in each of the three largest COVID-19–related categories on TikTok. As of July 12, 2020, these were videos earmarked with the hashtags “covid-19,” “covid19,” and “coronavirus,” which have reached 4.4 billion, 33.3 billion, and 93.1 billion views, respectively, demonstrating the platform’s immense ability to encourage sharing.

Our findings revealed that, on average, 6.33% of videos were filmed by health care professionals, and 2.66% were filmed by young adult patients tracking their recovery journeys. In

addition, 15.66% of videos communicated pragmatic health information, and .66% provided misleading or inaccurate health advice, with the remaining videos depicting everyday quarantine activities in a satirical manner. In addition, although videos by health care professionals were few in number, they were often among the most widely “liked” and shared across the board.

This distribution suggests that demand on TikTok for more health care–related voices currently outpaces supply. TikTok has shown itself to be a viable means for practitioners to educate and dispel myths about COVID-19 to a broad and diverse adolescent demographic. In return, practitioners gain the ability to share their voices with those that they likely would not have reached otherwise while potentially expanding public policy adherence and reducing hospitalizations.

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