

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES OUR ORGANIC RHYTHMS IN THE CONTEXT OF NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM: AN EXPLORATION INTO PERFORMATIVE CONSUMPTION THROUGH TIKTOK

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Abstract

The economic influence of neoliberal capitalism is constantly increasing, resulting in misunderstandings of how the ideology impacts people's daily lives. With the increasing popularity of social media, especially among the younger generations, it is now important to analyze how neoliberal capitalism is being translated into an online medium. This paper examines how social media usage in our society impacts the organic rhythms and health of the younger generations. Through the use of a survey, it was discovered that the respondents used social media, specifically TikTok, as a way to pass the time without caring about the media that they are consuming while they performed activities that are not typically focused on entertainment consumption: eating meals, using the restroom, and attempting to sleep. This phenomenon was thus termed “performative consumption”, a phrase that means performing consumption as a way to escape consuming. Performing consumption during such activities is paradoxical in nature and potentially damaging to people's daily rhythms. While this is an initial exploration into the phenomenon, the discovery that people are consuming to escape consumption is concerning and warrants further exploration on a greater scale.

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With the increasing use of social media in the context of society's underlying ideology of neoliberal capitalism, there is now new potential for mechanical rhythms to become superimposed over organic rhythms. The terms "organic rhythm" and "mechanical rhythm" here are being borrowed from Henri Lefebvre in his *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. An organic rhythm is one that is cyclical, repeating in some way over time, with an origin in the natural world (Lefebvre, 2013). The earth's orbit is an organic rhythm, as is the rhythm of our breathing. Mechanical rhythms are those that progress linearly, are built by humans and are the basis for capitalist production (Lefebvre, 2013). The nine-to-five workday and an assembly line are both examples of mechanical rhythms. Another way of describing this is organic rhythms are biological, and mechanical ones are created by the capitalist drive for production.

Both types of rhythms are experienced by humans in our daily lives and neither is inherently harmful. It is the imposition of mechanical rhythms over organic rhythms that can lead to mental health issues, physical injury, and more (Lefebvre, 2013; Simmel, 1950). This means that organic rhythms must be honored in full, without distraction, in order to prevent health complications (Lefebvre, 2013). An example of this imposition occurs when teachers prevent students from using the restroom. By forcing the student to adhere to a mechanical rhythm (school scheduling) the student is unable to honor their organic rhythm (hydration cycle). In this example, potential complications from this imposition could be decreased learning and attention due to distraction, and eventual pain and a decrease in proper bladder function. It is hypothesized that the same progression applies to social media usage, in other words, that being distracted by social media will prevent organic rhythms from taking place. The goal of this paper is to establish if social media usage is increasing to the point that it is occurring at the same time as the user's organic rhythms due to the influence of neoliberal capitalism.

A Social Climate Built Upon Neoliberal Capitalism

Society today is still uncovering the effects of modernization that humans in previous time periods had not been exposed to as technology and ideology continue to grow. Many new stimuli are being experienced by people in post-modern countries, creating blasé attitudes and other coping mechanisms that are detrimental to mental health (Simmel, 1950). The blasé attitude is the habitation to being over-stimulated so that one is no longer affected by the intense stimuli of life, and this leads to serious health issues, such as depression, apathy, and suicidal thoughts (Simmel, 1950). Social pressures are being felt differently as well, as neoliberalism continues to influence our society, causing a dramatic increase in production, consumption, and waste (Monbiot, 2016). Neoliberalism is an ideology that values free-market forces and money more

than it does government (Monbiot, 2016). Capitalism at its core values production through the exploitation of workers (Labonté, 2020). When the tenants of neoliberalism and capitalism are combined, a society is created in which people are valued for their labor power and are expected to act in accordance with their class and money holdings (Labonté, 2020; Monbiot, 2016).

Workers are continuously exploited, and new ways to do so are being developed by their employers. For example, angled toilets are starting to be introduced in offices and staff bathrooms that cause stiffness and discomfort after a few minutes of sitting on them to force workers to return to production (Pinsker, 2019). This is damaging to the organic rhythm (food processing) as it punishes the worker for attempting to honor said organic rhythm and prevents total completion. All of this shows an increased burden upon people that are performing production to follow the linear, mechanical rhythms of their workplace and ignore the cyclic, organic rhythms of their bodies. As this ideology becomes further ingrained into humanity's psyche, it becomes more integrated into society outside the factories as well.

Younger Generations, Mental Health, and Social Media

Another new development of society is that of social media. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are providing a new way for massive amounts of information to be exchanged between massive amounts of people throughout our globalized society. Social media sites are especially pungent among younger generations, a phenomenon that adds to the need for their sociological analysis (Hawes et al., 2020). One of the main concerns that social media rises is that of its effect upon mental health. As symptoms of depression raise in younger generations, so do levels of social media use (Hawes et al., 2020). The proposed explanation for this is that as teenagers see their friends posting curated photos of themselves and their social outings, they begin to feel left out and experience higher levels of perceived isolation (Hawes et al., 2020). Younger generations in this society are feeling more isolated than generations before and are reporting greater mental health issues as well (Kumar & Prabha, 2019; Baltaci, 2019). Social media appears to be a solution to these ailments as it claims to bring people together, but in fact, it is the cause of such problems. Social media often becomes a tool for the indoctrination of young people into the ideologies that are harming society, causing these problems to develop further (Kumar & Prabha, 2019; Baltaci, 2019). This proselytization is problematic in itself, but the issues are compounded when it interferes with our organic rhythms as well. Data sourced from Sprout Source, a company that tracks how social media is used to help its customers receive more online traffic, reveal that social media sites are most used during lunchtime hours, and then evening times when most people are off work or school. This means

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people are using social media when they are not actively being forced to follow linear rhythms and instead have the option to honor their own organic rhythms.

TikTok

In order to more specifically study how social media could be altering young generations' organic rhythms, TikTok was chosen to be analyzed for this purpose. This platform was a natural choice for this research because it has the potential to both be extremely addicting, as well as not. Features of TikTok that promote addiction are the funny videos that provide positive stimulation for a short amount of time and the infinite scrolling page that perpetrates the ease of access for finding more videos (Krumar & Prabha, 2019). This exposure of positive stimulation for a brief period of time is characteristic of and necessary for the development of addiction (Wise, 2020). However, Bytedance, the company that owns TikTok, has done some things to allow people to protect themselves from this plight. TikTok's settings have an obvious Digital Wellness section in which users find controls for limiting sensitive content and limiting overall use of the app through setting time restrictions (Safety Center - Resources, n.d.). Bytedance even went so far as to create a series of videos promoting the safe and healthy use of TikTok by teaming up with accredited TikTok creators (Perez, 2019). Regardless of their motivations, Bytedance has provided users with the ability to be safe and manage their use of the app responsibly, and has publicized this well so that users will be aware of it. This makes TikTok a good platform to study because intentional addiction caused by the company has been reduced further than on any other platform and will be less of a confounding variable.

Methods

Having selected TikTok to be studied, a survey was now necessary to gather data about how people use TikTok. In order to target the younger population, the age restrictions for answering were set from eighteen to twenty-one. The survey, a self-select and self-report questionnaire, was constructed in Google Forms to ensure that respondents could access it easily online. While there are problems with self-selecting and self-reporting, this method was necessary because the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 prevented distributing questionnaires and interviews due to health concerns. The questions were designed to explore the habits of when people used TikTok and used a filtered approach by asking general questions at the beginning and specific questions at the end. To ensure anonymity, respondents did not need to login to complete the survey, no demographic data were collected, and data was not collected on the type of content that people consumed. The questionnaire was distributed to Facebook groups containing college students at Florida State University and seventy-four complete responses were recorded and analyzed

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for this exploration. The questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

Results

The first important finding to report is that TikTok users had a poor grasp of how long they spend on the app. One question asked how long participants thought they were spending on the app in minutes ($\bar{x} = 120$, $s = 69$), and the following question asked them to record the amount of time they actually spent according to their phone that tracks this information ($\bar{x} = 164$, $s = 140$) (Figure 1; Figure 2).

Figure 1

Perceived Time (min) Spent on TikTok per Day

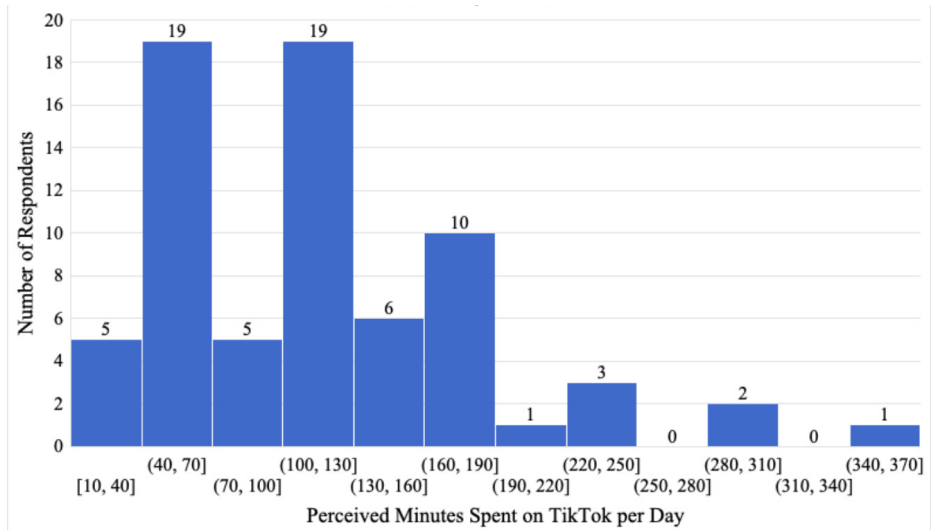
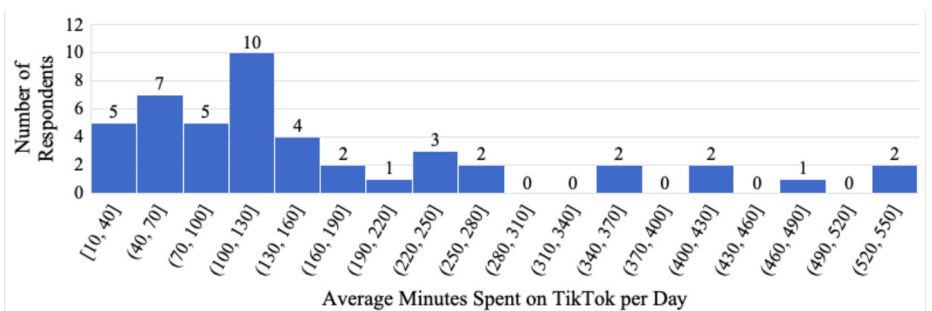


Figure 2

Actual Time (min) Spent on TikTok per Day.



A two-sample test reveals that these two distributions are statistically different at a 95% confidence level. This means that people have a poor grasp of how long they are spending on the app and introduces a setting for disturbing organic rhythms; if one is unaware of the time that they are giving to something,

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that something has a greater ability to disturb the rest of that person's time. Aside from altering further schedules, this disturbance combined with the addictive nature of the app has the potential to lead to things such as further social isolation, resulting in greater reports of depression in the generations that use social media.

To demonstrate that organic rhythms are occurring with TikTok use, respondents were asked when they usually use TikTok. This major question was broken into a few more specific questions, one asking about parts of the day and one asking about different activities during the day. Based on the survey results, as the day passes more people use TikTok: only 31% of respondents use TikTok in the morning, but 87% use TikTok during the night. As for using TikTok concurrently while doing other things, 26% of respondents said they used TikTok during meals, 55% said they used TikTok in the bathroom, and 77% said they used TikTok in bed before going to sleep or after waking up. Each of the activities mentioned is an organic rhythm, so seeing TikTok usage occur at the same time is concerning.

The final two questions of the survey provide the most powerful evidence that TikTok is influencing our daily lives. The penultimate question asked why people used TikTok and allowed for a written response. Almost 75% of the responses indicated that they used the app purely for entertainment, and 69% stated that they used TikTok as a way to pass the time without needing to think. One person explains: "I watch [TikToks] because I can just turn my brain off and not think about anything. It's also better at recommending content for me that I like instead of having to search for stuff like [on] YouTube." The final question asks about this more specifically, asking if people scroll through TikTok without thinking about it, and 92% of respondents answered yes. Further confirming the conclusion that respondents use TikTok for entertainment instead of honoring their organic rhythms lies in analyzing this statistic. A chi-square test for independence between this and the data relating to where people use TikTok shows that there is a relationship between using TikTok mindlessly and using TikTok during meals, the bathroom, and in bed at a 95% confidence level. In other words, there is a statistically significant relationship between using TikTok mindlessly and using TikTok during times of organic rhythms.

Discussion

The results from the survey show that respondents are using TikTok while they eat, use the restroom, and settle down for bed; the results show that the respondents are using TikTok while they honor their organic rhythms. The evidence begins with the discrepancy between how long people think they spend on the app and how long they actually do. This is partially because of how addicting TikTok is. TikTok is so good at this because of the artificial intelligence behind the algorithm that decides what content to show which person. TikTok has one of the most powerful algorithms for determining what

each person likes to see according to other studies, and in this study only 10% of respondents said they did not regularly see content that they enjoyed (see: Barrett, 2019; Krumar & Prabha, 2019). Because people are not aware of how long they are spending on the app, they are then placed into an environment where that app has been granted the power to influence how its users spend their time.

It should also be considered that the respondents stated that they were using TikTok most when they were doing other things like eating, using the restroom, and preparing for bed. This shows that people are using TikTok when they should be honoring their organic rhythms. Organic rhythms must be attended to with complete attention for them to be completed properly (Lefebvre, 2013). This finding is worrying because it suggests that there is a potential for TikTok users that display these usage patterns to develop health issues like social isolation and poor eating and sleeping patterns which can accumulate to depression. Combined with the evidence that TikTok users are not aware of the amount of time they're giving to the app, we can begin to see that TikTok is gaining control of how people honor their organic rhythms.

The final piece of evidence to consider is the fact that the respondents overwhelmingly stated that they were using TikTok as a means of passing the time and entertainment. This suggests that people are consuming media for pleasure when they should instead be honoring their organic rhythms. Consumption is a mechanical rhythm, and the direct imposition of mechanical rhythms over organic rhythms creates a conflict that will result in the organic rhythm being rejected (Lefebvre, 2013). This rejection of the organic, as stated before, has the potential to lead to many health problems (Lefebvre, 2013; Simmel, 1950). From this, we can determine that additional studies should be run to determine if the continual usage of TikTok while one performs organic rhythms will create poor health outcomes.

Since people mostly use TikTok for entertainment, are unaware of their usage, and use it when they aren't conforming to society's mechanical rhythms, the conclusion must be drawn that TikTok usage is occurring simultaneously with the organic rhythms of the people surveyed. This phenomenon needs to be expanded upon further because as society continues to operate under neoliberal capitalism, we see that consumption is the driving force behind us. The mindless consumption that is developing on social media is something that I am going to deem "performative consumption". Performative consumption is the act of consuming media or objects without thinking about doing so in order to relax; another way to describe this is consumption with a blasé attitude. This phenomenon is a much more insidious side effect of neoliberal capitalism because it works to reinforce the way things are and prevents further subversion. People have become so addicted to consuming that they use it as a way to relax, and this addiction presents itself as curable by way of highly consumable media.

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In desiring a break from working, people are, unconsciously if not otherwise, rejecting the mechanical rhythms enforced upon them (Lefebvre, 2013). Performative consumption inhibits true relaxation then because it prevents people from ceasing their consumption and doing things that will actually be relaxing, such as following their organic rhythms. This works to emphasize our society's reliance on consumption and shows further support for Simmel's theory that people are objects and subjects within communicative networks. People are being objectified as they produce content to be consumed, and they are being subjected to the one-sided terms and conditions imposed upon them by Bytedance and also by the control neoliberal capitalism has on them when they do performative consumption.

Conclusion

Our organic rhythms are likely being intruded upon by performative consumption through the use of social media for relaxation. As this continues, people will become more entrenched in neoliberal capitalism and potentially find they are unable to honor their organic rhythms, leading to the health problems mentioned at the beginning of this paper. TikTok was chosen for this exploration into factors affecting organic rhythms, and it was shown that TikTok is being used while people attempt to honor their organic rhythms. More social media platforms should be analyzed to see if this phenomenon occurs on them too. The research of this paper shows that people are using TikTok when they are doing things like eating, resting, and using the bathroom, revealing that consumption has been so ingrained into people that they are unable to cease and now do performative consumption alongside their organic rhythms, potentially leading to health problems like greater levels of social isolation, depression, and the blasé attitude.

The development of these health problems can be shown in the following example: By using TikTok while winding down for bed, it is likely that one will have low quality sleep, less sleep overall, and become more addicted to TikTok as well because it has been shown that people aren't aware of how long they're spending on the app. This is because it has been shown that using social media before bed correlates with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem in adolescents (Woods & Scott, 2016). Further studies should examine the outcomes of using TikTok and other social media sites alongside other types of organic rhythms, like eating and using the restroom.

There are a few limitations to this study, the foremost being the sampled population. The number of responses was good for the size of the study, but the overall group sampled was very specific and not far-reaching. Another limitation of this study would be how the respondents were selected. Due to the time period, randomly selecting large groups of students was not possible and self-response surveys are not as strong as surveys in which the participants are randomly selected. Additional studies should consider randomly selecting

individuals from larger populations within the younger generations to search for evidence that TikTok, or possibly other social media platforms as well, is causing a health problems due to its imposition on organic rhythms.

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