

What Was That Again?

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Why can't I remember anything? After a few years of using TikTok and social media heavily, I can barely remember anything in my daily life. My mind is always filled, but it is filled with emptiness. Whenever I have time to think, I notice that I cannot. I cannot think or remember, and I almost feel brainwashed. Zakaria (2023), of The Washington Post, talks about a lot of the negatives of TikTok and social media and how its addictive nature is brainwashing us and destroying our minds. He explains why TikTok's short-form videos are so addictive and how their intricate algorithm makes users stay on there for hours on end, which they do so by collecting lots of data on users and molding the perfect algorithm for them. He argues that we need to start acknowledging these very real problems and to push for laws that help protect children from this brainwashing. Overall, I think he makes a lot of great points on the harms of social media, providing a multitude of very convincing examples on how it and TikTok are destroying our minds. I agree with most of his argument, and I think it is a problem that deserves more recognition.

In the beginning of his article, Zakaria (2023) says that people should be less worried about TikTok's Chinese ownership and states, "[...] but rather just how scarily addictive it — and much of social media — is. That's true and deeply worrying, and we should do something about it — and soon." He shares my and many others' concerns about the detrimental effects that TikTok and other social media platforms are having on our society. Zakaria (2023) goes on to further back his claim by providing some damning statistics. "Two-thirds of American teens use it, with 1 in 6 saying they use it "almost constantly." The numbers are possibly greater as many teens do not realize the amount of time they spend on social media or simply will not admit to overusing it. It is not only about wasting time, but also about the damage TikTok has on our

minds and, most importantly, our attention spans. According to Zaveri (2023) of The Oxford Blue, "In fact, nearly 50% of users surveyed by TikTok said that videos longer than a minute long were “stressful”. This was a very worrying statistic to read because of how ludicrous it sounds. How can people get stressed after watching just 60 seconds of a video. It sounds crazy, but this is the direction we are heading in. If this is a result of just a few years of TikTok, imagine what it will be like in 10 years. This is why we should start to consider this as a major problem and take steps towards fighting it.

A major factor in why TikTok is so addictive is its incredibly advanced algorithm, which makes consumers spend hours upon hours scrolling through it. Zakaria (2023) explains, “Its algorithm is highly sophisticated. [...] TikTok presents you with a stream of videos and gauges what you like to give you more of it, replacing “the friction of deciding what to watch,” As someone who has felt victim to this, I fully agree with what he’s saying. At times I have spent many hours scrolling through TikTok, and I would not notice the time going by. In comparison, when using other sites with short-form videos like Instagram reels or YouTube shorts, I would get bored after an hour or so. The way Zakaria (2023) described TikTok taking away the “Friction of deciding what to watch” is very true as well. After realizing the problem I had, I challenged myself to watch videos that were 10 minutes or longer. I found it difficult to choose a video, and when I did, I could not watch more than a few minutes before looking for another one. It also affected my everyday life, especially my sleep. Whenever I lay down to sleep, my brain just started thinking, and I could not turn it off no matter what I did. Also, it affected my ability to retain information and to stay still and quiet for long periods of time. According to Novak (2023) from Discover Magazine, “The TikTok algorithm is a stream of videos that it thinks will fan your highly personalized interests. This means that each algorithm is different,

based on several factors used to gauge your interests.” She goes on to back up what Zakaria (2023) said, that TikTok takes your personal information and molds the perfect algorithm to hook you into spending as much time as possible on their platform. Novak (2023) goes into more detail explaining, “[...] if you've liked or commented on a particular video, how many times you've rewatched a video, and how long you've watched a video before scrolling on.” TikTok uses these different little factors to get the most accurate results for their users. The idea that TikTok tracks every move we make on the app and saves that information is something many people find quite scary.

In his article, Zakaria (2023) shares Johnathan Haidt’s, a distinguished social psychologist, views on social media’s effects on teens, “Haidt argues that the rise of social media and its reward system is closely correlated with staggering declines in teenagers’ mental health.” Novak (2023) shares some 2021 research from the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health on the negative effects of social media, “[...] TikTok contributed to depression and anxiety in teens and was positively correlated with memory loss. If a TikTok user tends toward sad and upsetting content, that's what they'll get, and for young kids and teens, this can motivate dangerous behavior.” This is easy to see in our society. There are countless examples of social media causing teens to harm themselves, and in many cases these incidents stem from overexposure to the wrong kind of content. Also, when it comes to being a happy and productive person in general, spending hours on TikTok each day will not make you any happier. I have experienced this myself, and I know how bad it can get. About two years ago, for a few months I was on TikTok constantly, from when I woke up until I went to sleep. At the time I was using TikTok as an escape from reality, and it seemed like the only thing to look forward to. Now I realize how much worse it made my situation and how it affected me later on. My

memory started to fade though it was good prior to this, my mind would always feel like TV static, and it made my quality of life much worse.

Children and teens are the biggest victims of this issue. Novak (2023) states, “For teens and children, the TikTok algorithm may be too effective. Reading a teen's innermost thoughts — especially when their vulnerable minds are drawn to harmful content — can lead them to see more problematic content.” Young people are usually curious but tend to not have a great sense of danger, and that can cause a lot of problems. Zakaria (2023) believes that there should be laws protecting children from these harms, but since social media companies are so protected there is not much we can do, “There could be federal laws requiring more notifications when the app has been used for too long, automatic turn-offs at night, and more.” He argues that there should be some sort of regulation on the use of social media to prevent increased harm to young people. I do not fully agree with him on this point. Trying to implement a bunch of regulations may sound good in theory, but there are many problems with it, and kids will find other ways to consume this short-form style of content. Parents need to step in. Instead of making legal regulations, parents need to regulate their children’s usages themselves. If there are some regulations that make sense and could work, then we should try to push for them. However, for now we need to do what we can, instead of waiting for regulations that will most likely not be put in place. We should fight against it with the tools we have now.

Reading all these articles about TikTok and how it shortens our attention span made me a little worried. I always knew that short-form videos affected our attention spans, but I did not realize the extent of it. After thinking about it for a bit, I realized that since I started heavily using social media and TikTok, I stopped enjoying TV shows, movies, and documentaries as

much. I started to care less about things I previously enjoyed and would spend hours upon hours scrolling through TikTok and Twitter instead. I have already started trying to cut back on my social media time. This will motivate me even more, and I think others should consider doing the same. To fight the urge of watching short-form videos, I try to do some hobbies or watch a long form video. By no means is it easy to completely cut it off, but at the very least cutting down on the amount will limit the damage it causes. Using social media as an escape from reality in the short term might seem like a great deal, but it will have unimaginable detriments to your quality of life in the future.

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