

# **TIKTOK, IDENTITY STRUGGLES AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES: HOW ARE THE YOUTH OF TODAY COPING?**

**By Erin Harwood - as part of the Identity and Online Advocacy Conference**

## *ABSTRACT*

*The way that young people interact with each other has changed significantly, with a noticeable shift occurring due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in Asian countries in late 2019. Lockdowns around the world led to isolation and a forced sense of loneliness, meaning those with mental health issues were at times forced to find other outlets and ways of coping with such things. Social media sites such as TikTok created a third sense of place for these individuals, and created a unique community of people who were experiencing the same thing, to communicate, share and assist each other in whichever ways they may find possible.*

**KEY WORDS:** Mental Health, Identity, COVID-19, TikTok, Self Esteem

Young people worldwide are using social media platforms such as TikTok as a coping mechanism for mental health issues and identity struggles. While these individuals may experience their self-thought lack of identity for many reasons, the COVID-19 outbreak can be seen as a key factor, alongside the increasing pressures for the generation to work harder and be better than their predecessors (Kira, et al., 2020). Mental health issues in adults and young people present and function reasonably similarly, however the way they deal with it changes, and the increased drive for youth to find their individual identity and presence in the modern world is becoming increasingly common and often come hand-in-hand. TikTok is a social media platform in which people share short clips of them dancing, singing, speaking and engaging with other users and their content (Schwedel, 2018). Through the use of hashtags and the creation of virtual communities, young people in communities all around the world are often able to find their identifiable purpose and begin to feel accepted by others and by themselves, thus combating some of the struggles with their mental health issues. While hashtags and online community are

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not limited to the TikTok app alone, due to current social media trends, TikTok is a large part of this as it had a large growth rate in 2020 and this is expected to continue. Research experts have shown that TikTok engagement went up by as much as 180 per cent after the outbreak of the pandemic last year (Tankovska, 2021). The link between COVID-19 and social media platforms use has been proven, with a significant usage rise recorded across the board due to the increased amount of time young people were spending at home and out of work. Following this, there are relations between COVID-19 and mental health issues and thus there was a stronger bond formed between already-linked mental health issues and social media, demonstrated by the heavy reliance that young people began to form on social media platforms, TikTok in particular.

### *IDENTITY*

The ease of information in today's society has led to the merging of many categories of societal identity (Brusseau, 2019). In simple terms, in the past it has been easy for people to keep their separate 'identities' from amalgamating, which is not the case at current times. It is now more difficult to separate an individual's 'work identity' from their 'home identity', something that was magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic and having to work from home. Further to this it is also more difficult to establish a single identity when information is so much more readily available to dictate such things (Gaither, 2019). Before the technological revolution, it was perhaps easier for people to identify themselves, due to the fact that the basis of an individual's identity was a lot more geographical, and cultural lines and boundaries were more defined. In the postmodern society that is present at this current time, cultures are fluid, geographical barriers are little, and the 'virtual identity' is more relevant than ever. Many people do not understand the idea that an individual's identity is not limited to one or two categories. They have many different personas that can all depend on a large list of factors, such as physical features, such as hair or eye colour, hobbies, academic interests or religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds and so on (Gaither, 2019). With the newly created technologies and opportunities, young people are now creators in a world that used to be solely defined to academics and older generations (Renner, 2019). Singers are younger, children are content creators, and young people have messages to share, such as

Greta Thunberg. During the COVID-19 lockdown, many people had to revert from their everyday lifestyle to a more isolated, quiet and slow day-to-day basis. Meetings were now no longer face-to-face, but now an online forum that lasted for maybe an hour-or-so at a time. It was, and still is a time that definitely began to affect people's mental health, especially young people. It is for this reason that young people are often searching for a purpose, or a singular 'identity', as they unknowingly possess a number of defining identifying traits. For this reason, young people from around the world may fall back on different coping mechanisms, one of which being social media, something that is familiar and comfortable for a generation who has grown up in a technological world.

#### *MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC*

Mental health issues in the younger generations of today are often a lot more complex than previously thought and was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 – also known as Corona Virus and COVID – is a highly-contagious virus that attacks the respiratory system (Government of South Australia, n.d.). During late 2019 and the early months of 2020, Asian countries were beginning to panic and enter mandatory, post-war like lockdowns. Australia progressively increased their lockdown restrictions in mid-to-late March of 2020. For some clarity in the specifics surrounding 'young people', the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare refers to those individuals as between the ages of 15 to 24-years-old (2007). The restricted amount of freedom during isolation and lockdowns, as well as forced distancing between many people and their loved ones, led to many people experiencing feelings of loneliness and isolation. Pre-COVID statistics showed that as high as one in seven – roughly 14 per cent – of young people in Australia have a mental health disorder. More interestingly, the same data showed that the “prevalence of Major depressive disorder was higher when young people aged 11–17 provided the information themselves (7.7%) than when the information was provided by their parent/carer (4.7%)” (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). With the transparency of information and development of technologies, those in the above age groups are exposed to more information in general, but specifically data about mental health. The above statistic suggests two

of many conclusions. The first being that young people aren't telling their parents about their mental illnesses, or that perhaps that they are self-diagnosing themselves with mental illnesses after reading information online. While it is still unknown whether these mental illnesses were actually developed within individuals or just magnified and uncovered during lockdowns, there was definitely a shift in numbers and a concerning spike in self-diagnosis. Experts have recently expressed that the "prolonged social isolation of the COVID-19 lockdown increases the delirious effects of stress and uncertainty on physical and mental disorders, increasing feelings of anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and posttraumatic stress syndrome," (Cauberghe, Van Wesenbeeck, De Jans, Liselot, & Koen, 2020). Many people were now forced into an uncomfortable situation, with individuals scrambling to 'find themselves' and their identity. Many people lost their jobs and were forced to reduce their human contact, hobbies and freedom as a whole. For this reason, social media became their new hobby. It is estimated that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 43 per cent of people aged 16 to 64 spent longer using social media, 36 per cent spent more time on mobile phone apps, and 16 per cent spent their time creating and uploading videos (Mander, 2020). TikTok can be identified as one of the most significant trending video content creation apps at the moment, therefore this statistic has direct relation to the increase of usage and mental health through the COVID-19 lockdown.

### *SOCIAL MEDIA AND TIKTOK*

Social media can be used for many different reasons and the fluidity of apps of this nature was demonstrated especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. Not only was social media used for entertainment, humour and occupying boredom, but also as a method for young people to cope with mental health issues and lack of identity (Cauberghe, Van Wesenbeeck, De Jans, Liselot, & Koen, 2020). Many people in the world engage with some form of social media, whether they realise it or not, with Curtin lecturer Tama Leaver even suggesting that individuals can be engaging with social media whilst they are still in their mother's womb, by parents sharing growth and other updates via social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Leaver, 2015). For this reason, many teenagers are born into the comfort of social media, and apps such as

TikTok are a social norm for them now. Alongside other social media platforms, TikTok usage was heavily increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tankovska, 2021). TikTok mostly shows the convergence and remediation of existing media types, with people making up dances, remixes and covers to already-existing media. The app is now so popular that there are people whose job is solely to create paid content for TikTok, such as well-known stars Loren Gray and Addison Rae (Influencer Marketing, 2020).

During COVID-19 people turned to TikTok both as a hobby and also as a community. The idea of peer-to-peer support was originated when social media usage began to spike, and takes the form of forums, hashtags and communities in which people ask for advice from others in their same position (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016). It can impact identity and mental health issues, as rather than young people going to their parents for help, they are going to the internet, which may seem like a safer and easier option for them. As much as the stigma behind mental health illness is beginning to break down, there is still a certain shadow hovering over the issue that can lead to embarrassment, and is often the reason young people, especially males, are too scared to ask for help. There is also the appealing factor of anonymity, something that people can begin to heavily rely on when they are dealing with personal issues such as these. The ease of access during the COVID-19 lockdown meant that young people were able to access the support they wanted at any time of the day, and from total strangers, which meant there were little to no consequences of sharing how they were feeling. For these young people, especially those who weren't yet adults, they could bypass the whole process of telling their parents, seeing doctors and psychologists, to find the support that they were searching for in the palm of their hand. Through them creating content that people were able to consume and engage with, and others sharing their own stories, the youth of today began to fall in a pattern of finding the help that they needed through social media sites such as TikTok

*#MENTALHEALTHMATTERS*

Alongside the evolution of social media, the hashtag has been a powerful tool to create and enhance trends (Clark, 2016). The most popular hashtags on TikTok tend to include algorithm-based tactics such as #foryou #comedy, however there are some hashtags that have been created with an aim of creating a particular conversation and bringing people together as a community (TikTok, n.d.). An example of this is #mentalhealthmatters, which is a hashtag that, as of 12pm Sunday the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, has 7.3 billion views. The bio that TikTok has created for the hashtag reads:

*“It’s time to break stigmas, and start talking openly about mental health. Whether it’s educating others, being compassionate, or sharing resources, lets support one another because #MentalHealthMatters”* (TikTok, n.d.).

By people who have suffered from mental health issues posting about their experiences, this is a coping mechanism in itself. They are in a way, venting and getting out their emotions, and hearing from other people who are in the same situation as them and are doing okay. The hashtag demonstrates hundreds-of-thousands of people who have shared a video, either telling the tale of their own mental health struggle, or someone close to them. By them sharing the video that tells their story they receive supportive comments such as “I went through the same thing, it will be okay”, and “my heart goes out to you”, and even some offering psychological and financial advice. A ‘third place’ is seen as somewhere where people are able to interact in a place that is other than the workplace or their home and, in this instance, it relates to those virtual communication methods, such as on TikTok (Soukup, 2006). The idea behind TikTok being a ‘third place’ as such, means that people are able to communicate with each other and in a lockdown situation for some, this is the only interaction that they may be having inclusive of work and home. For young people this third place was crucial for some in maintaining their mental health and coping with things such as stress, anxiety and isolation.

## CONCLUSION

Mental health issues and identity struggles are now extremely prevalent due to the nature of the world currently. Situations such as working from home, cancelled events and hobbies, and being restricted to how long an individual can be outside, impact the mental health and wellbeing of not only young people, but most groups who were forced into this situation. There are many young people around the world who often question their existence and their purpose. By creating and engaging a 'third place' within TikTok and other social media, they are creating a type of persona for themselves and becoming a 'TikToker' or an 'Influencer', thus leading to less of an identity struggle within themselves. It creates this new sense of purpose for that individual, that they may have been lacking, or may have been forced into by the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdown situations. Hashtags and other groups that form community on the app were able to link like-minded individuals, and in this case, lead to an additional coping mechanism that some young people around the globe may have been lacking.

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