

# Qualitative Comparison between TikTok and YouTube

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**Abstract:** This study compared TikTok and YouTube users' perceptions and experiences of the two video-sharing platforms (VSPs). A thematic analysis of 351 survey responses revealed six key themes. TikTok's short videos and algorithm-driven scrolling were distinct features. TikTok was primarily used for entertainment, while YouTube served practical purposes, such as tutorials and music. YouTube featured longer videos, often used as background noise during other activities. Content length and platform algorithms influenced users' attention and satisfaction. Younger users, especially Generation Z, were drawn to TikTok's short, algorithm-curated content. YouTube attracted users with longer videos and individual searches. These findings offer theoretical and practical insights into gratification niches, competition, and the coexistence of TikTok and YouTube.

**Keywords:** TikTok; YouTube; User Perceptions; Thematic Analysis; Gratification Niches

## 1. Introduction

The impact of video-sharing platforms has become significant in daily life, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Video-sharing platforms (VSPs) enable people to overcome their isolation by uploading and watching user-generated video content and sharing their comments. Thus, VSPs (e.g., TikTok and YouTube) are communities, wherein sharing new videos and establishing communities are central to the video content platform culture [1]. As of April 2024, the first-most popular VSP in the world was YouTube, while the second-most popular was TikTok [2]. TikTok is more popular among Generation Z compared to other social media platforms [3]; therefore, TikTok's rapidly growing popularity needs to be scrutinized.

Currently, VSPs are more than just spaces that provide entertainment, as they are expanding into spaces that allow users to share information about their daily lives and personal issues. For example, content creators on TikTok shared their personal experiences of eating disorder recovery using the hashtag #EDrecovery [4]. YouTube creators have also begun engaging with their subscribers by discussing their problems (e.g., mental health issues and recovery) and giving advice to subscribers experiencing similar problems [5].

Therefore, because they are both global VSPs, YouTube and TikTok share certain commonalities, but closer scrutiny reveals that they differ in many ways. These differences also affect the satisfaction provided to the audience by the two giant VSPs. The two VSPs also influence each other: YouTube has created a new YouTube short video category, while TikTok has taken measures to allow the uploading of videos with lengths longer than the existing one-minute limit. Although the two platforms are different, these changes can be interpreted as measures taken to further satisfy audience needs by incorporating the advantages of each other's platforms to their own.

Notably, the recent trend in VSPs has involved a change from long video sharing to short video sharing, which is popular on TikTok [6]. This trend can be explained by gratification niches [7, 8]. Gratification niches help explain how various social media apps gain traction on their own [8]. The niche theory explains how users choose new media from the existing media landscape when a new social media platform emerges. These

theoretical concepts (i.e., niches and gratification) can also be applied to explain the competition and coexistence of the two VSPs TikTok and YouTube.

In this study, user perceptions and actual experiences with TikTok and YouTube were investigated through a thematic analysis of qualitative responses. Based on an analysis of the open-ended answers provided by TikTok and YouTube users, this study aimed to discuss whether and how the two platforms are similar or different and for what purposes each platform is mainly used. This study adopted an interpretive approach [9] to enrich ongoing discussions on TikTok and YouTube usage and their implications for the media landscape.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Purposes of TikTok and YouTube Usage

Over the past two decades, many researchers have studied the use of social media. With the emergence of TikTok and YouTube, researchers have begun to compare them frequently, as both platforms are mainly based on video content. In a notable study, Al-Marouf et al. [10] compared the acceptance of YouTube and TikTok in the medical field. To this end, researchers focused on factors such as content richness, flow experience, and personal innovativeness. Their analysis showed that YouTube content led users to watch YouTube for both educational and non-educational purposes, which influenced their perceptions of medical information more than TikTok.

Zimmermann et al. [11] found that YouTube was an important source of information on political and social topics. The same was true for Li et al.'s [12] research, which concluded that delivering accurate information through YouTube could help public health agencies manage the COVID-19 pandemic, as it was one of the most dominant sources of online information. Many studies have found that YouTube is a powerful tool for educational purposes, particularly in the medical field.

Klobas et al. [13] collected data from 807 Malaysian students and found that stronger motivation to use YouTube for information or entertainment resulted in either less or more compulsive use. They defined compulsive use as a user's inability to self-regulate their use. Compulsivity was also highly associated with TikTok use. In Scalvini's [14] study, the interviewees mentioned that TikTok's scrolling function and short content length led to its compulsive use.

Moreover, TikTok and YouTube users share knowledge about the treatment of certain diseases (e.g., erectile dysfunction) through video content [15]. In other words, people use social media to obtain medical information or advice. Yang [16] attempted to understand young adults' TikTok usage through interviews with TikTok users and found that boredom led people to use TikTok. It is generally known that TikTok and YouTube are both used for entertainment purposes, but each platform is also valued for its ability to provide various kinds of information.

Although TikTok is a substantially younger platform than YouTube, it has already been recognized as a significant source of information. Song et al. [17] found that high engagement contributes to the long-term adoption of short videos as sources of health information. Through a content analysis of videos related to climate change uploaded to TikTok, Basch et al. [18] identified this platform as an important tool for understanding major online opinions; however, the researchers noted that the main problem was the lack of expertise among the information sources. Madathil et al. [19] highlighted the same problem in their systematic review of healthcare information on media platforms. They found that while government or professional organizations provided high-quality information, other YouTube videos contained misleading information. The widespread use of both TikTok and YouTube as sources of information has aroused substantial research interest in the problem of misinformation and disinformation within these platforms.

Guíñez-Cabrera and Mansilla-Obando [20] examined the use of TikTok in learning purposes and investigated why "booktokers" shared content about books on TikTok. After interviewing 13 Latin American booktokers, they grouped the reasons into eight categories: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, facilitating conditions, hedonic motivation, habit, price value, and the generation of community and networks. It is noteworthy that the participants mentioned TikTok's algorithm as related to performance expectancy and the COVID-19 pandemic as related to social influence. Due to COVID-19, TikTok—like YouTube seems to have gained increased use for various educational purposes, such as climate and book information, in addition to providing health information. Moreover, TikTok played a major role as a marketing tool during the pandemic [21]. Both TikTok and YouTube offer a wide range of educational and non-educational content.

## 2.2. Platform Usage Factors of TikTok and YouTube

Previous studies on TikTok and YouTube have primarily concentrated on identifying the specific factors that attract users to these platforms. These studies commonly examined factors related to user satisfaction and intentions and were based on either the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM; Davis) [22] or the expanded TAM (ETAM; Venkatesh & Davis) [23]. TAM is one of the most commonly used theoretical models in the field of information and communication technology studies and explains how technology users' perceptions of usefulness and easiness of use influences their willingness to adopt such technology. While the original TAM provides a streamlined framework focusing on individual perceptions of technology, the ETAM extends this by considering social, organizational, and contextual influences to better explain user acceptance behavior. In the ETAM, constructs related to social influences are subjective norms, voluntariness, and image of the technology acceptance, and organizational and technical support are considered as facilitating conditions of the technology acceptance. This expansion accounts for the external environment's influence in shaping users' perceptions and intentions.

For example, Ma et al. [24] found that perceived usefulness, social value, and entertainment value significantly influence user satisfaction. Satisfaction is a determinant of user loyalty. Youn et al. [25] found that the perceived usefulness, playfulness, and personalization of the service, along with social influences, had positive effects on attitudes toward TikTok acceptance. Furthermore, attitudes positively influenced three types of continued use intentions: consumption, participation, and production. However, perceived ease of use and personal innovativeness did not significantly affect acceptance of TikTok.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, several studies have examined YouTube with a focus on the acceptance of the platform as a learning resource [26, 27]. Similarly, YouTube research based on the TAM examined factors (i.e., perceived usefulness and ease of use) that enhance users' attitudes, and the relationship between those factors and the acceptance of the platform. Moreover, previous studies based on uses and gratification (U&G; Katz et al.) [28] have investigated users' motivations and usage habits regarding TikTok [29-32] and YouTube [33, 34]. These studies, based on traditional theories (i.e., TAM, ETAM, and U&G), explain whether specific factors could explain media users' psychological elements (e.g., usage intentions, satisfaction, and behavioral patterns). However, they did not sufficiently explain the actual usage experiences of TikTok and YouTube users, or how they considered the two platforms relative to each other.

## 2.3 TikTok and YouTube Users' Perceptions

Karizat et al. [35] proposed the folk theory of social feeds and Identity Strainer Theory, which suggests that users believe that their social media feeds are the result of algorithms that classify their social identities. Literat [36] conducted a thematic analysis of 1940 TikTok videos that young users created about online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because TikTok allows users to make videos about online studying using their own narratives and receive support from other users, Literat [36] suggested that TikTok is an important window for young people's emotions, voices, and perceptions. Through interviews with TikTok users, de Leyn et al. [37] found that teenagers perceived TikTok as a channel through which they could remain connected with society. By identifying users' actual perceptions of TikTok (and YouTube), it will be possible to know the diverse characteristics of the platform, and furthermore, what using the platform means to users' lives.

At present, there are a growing number of studies examining audience perceptions of different types of content on TikTok. As mentioned previously, many studies have investigated the educational content perception of TikTok since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic [38, 39]. Moreover, because TikTok is an open platform that gives everyone a voice, many users have initiated discussions regarding social issues on TikTok, causing some scholars to explore the responses to such messages. For example, Krutrök and Åkerlund [40] studied TikTok videos tagged with #BlackLivesMatter and found a relationship between perceived motives and responses to them.

Ketola [41] used a slightly different approach to analyze audience responses by tracking how young people deal with public shaming, which is prominent on the TikTok platform. In her study, TikTok users were interviewed regarding their perceptions of TikTok in general and public criticism of TikTok. First, the participants noted that they opened the TikTok app unconsciously, even if they had no prior intention to do so, suggesting that it was a habit that was difficult to avoid. They also noticed that compared to other social networks, TikTok users typically watched content recommended by the platform rather than following certain pages and watching the content generated by these pages. Ketola [41] also found that in terms of how public

shaming mediated behaviors, interviewees noticed some new patterns in their behaviors. For example, one participant mentioned being more cautious before making any conclusions or taking steps in situations of public shaming. Regarding the so-called “cancel culture” that purportedly takes place on TikTok, participants in Ketola’s study [41] mentioned that their reaction to such events on TikTok could depend on the person at the center of attention, and that they generally needed some time to reach a proper conclusion. This is because, in the case of public shaming on TikTok, shaming typically starts based solely on the story given by one side.

As various social media platforms have begun to provide similar features, the differences between them have gradually decreased. When a certain platform function becomes popular among users, several other social media platforms attempt to include similar services on their own interfaces. Currently, short video services are the most popular. Since its first release in 2016, the popularity of TikTok has grown rapidly worldwide [42]. In response to its popularity, other visual platforms have come to provide their own short-form video-sharing service functions (e.g., YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels).

This was not always the case, as YouTube videos were previously characterized as long, whereas Instagram was associated with horizontal or square videos. However, TikTok started the trend of short— that is, attention-span-friendly and phone-friendly vertical videos, and this specific type of video has since been adopted by most visual platforms. This phenomenon can also be explained by Dimmick’s [43] theory of niche. According to his argument, emerging new media compete with traditional media within the existing media landscape. Interestingly, the media coexist even in this competition. The media may look similar on the surface; however, owing to the subtle yet critical differences that can be seen when viewed microscopically, traditional and new media can coexist.

First, the fact that short-form videos have become the most popular trend aligns with the value of snack culture. The main characteristic of the content consumption patterns in snack culture is a shorter attention span, particularly among younger media users. Kavoori [44] noted that people make time to watch television or films but watch YouTube when they have less time. However, the tendency to watch YouTube videos when someone does not have much time has changed with snack content. TikTok is now a platform that users prefer to use for short breaks, but this does not directly lead to positive effects. One of the findings of Ma et al. [24] was that contrary to their anticipation, time flexibility had a negative effect on user satisfaction with TikTok. Researchers have argued that this might be due to the inability of users to control themselves while watching TikTok. In contrast, Lee and Sung [45] noticed that concentration of attention did not affect user satisfaction with YouTube. As such, short-form videos gained popularity among users because they only required a short commitment time, but this did not necessarily lead to service satisfaction. Therefore, in this study, we asked TikTok and YouTube users about their perceptions of each platform to examine whether they prefer short-form video content.

Second, social media platforms continuously provide highly personalized content, most of which is available without monetary costs, and users can simply log on to and utilize each platform freely. In the United States, 80% of social media users answered that they used social media services at least daily, while 59% used these services several times a day [46]. Moreover, VSPs allow people to experience user-generated video content, which is considered more relevant, engaging, and shared entertainment than traditional content. A total of 41% percent of US consumers spend more time watching user-generated video content online than watching TV shows or movies on streaming video services [46]. Considering this increasing importance, as evidenced by the trend statistics, it is worth examining in detail how users use each video-sharing platform and whether there is a meaningful difference in users’ perceptions and experiences between the platforms. TikTok and YouTube are the most popular video-sharing platforms. Therefore, the present study focuses on how users of TikTok and YouTube compare platforms based on their experiences, and asks the following questions:

**RQ.** How differently do TikTok and YouTube users perceive the platforms?

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1 Data Collection

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, this study conducted a cross-sectional online survey to answer the research questions stated above. The participants were recruited from a large southwestern university in the US. University students were sampled because they are active users of TikTok and YouTube [47]. For survey eligibility, the participants were 18 years of age or older and used both TikTok and YouTube. A total of 395 individuals participated in the survey. Among them, 44 participants did not complete the questionnaire; therefore, their responses were removed from the data analysis ( $n = 351$ ).

In the final sample, in terms of the gender of the participants, there were 125 males (35.6%), 220 females (62.7%), three were non-binary or third gender (0.9%), and three did not respond (0.9%). Many participants described themselves as white (74.4%), with the remainder identifying as non-white Hispanic (8.5%), Asian (6.0%), African American (4.8%), multiracial (3.7%), Native American (1.4%), or other (1.1%). The sample comprised 93 first-year students (26.5%), 97 second-year students (27.6%), 96 junior students (27.4%), and 65 senior students (18.5%). Their ages ranged from 18 to 36 years ( $M = 20.03$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ).

### 3.2 Procedure

The participants were invited to complete an anonymous online survey. After reading the informed consent form explaining the purpose of this study, its procedures, and the risks and benefits, participants were asked to indicate whether they agreed to participate in the research, and then verify whether they met the age requirement of 18 years and were active users of both TikTok and YouTube. They were then asked to complete the questionnaire, which began with demographic questions (e.g., gender, college year, and ethnicity) and continued to measure TikTok and YouTube affordances. Each participant took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete the survey, and they received course credit for compensation.

This study used open questionnaires to examine the differences between TikTok and YouTube, as perceived by users based on their experiences. There were three open-ended questions that were part of a larger survey that quantitatively measured other characteristics of usage (e.g., affordances). This study focused on the qualitative data gathered from the survey and analyzed them using thematic analysis [48, 49]. Thematic analysis is used not only in the case of qualitative information derived from sources, but such also as focus groups and interviews. It is increasingly used for the analysis of information (e.g., online reviews and e-comments) derived from the Internet and social media platforms. Therefore, thematic analysis is an extremely valuable analytical tool for qualitative research that entails the identification, analysis, and interpretation of themes within a qualitative dataset [50]. The first question asked participants to freely describe and compare their personal experiences of using TikTok and YouTube. The second question asked the participants to describe the three purposes for which they used TikTok the most. The third question asked the participants to describe the three purposes for which they most frequently used YouTube. No answer limits or categories were set for the survey participants, so that they could write down their thoughts more honestly.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

This study utilized reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as proposed by Braun and Clarke [48, 49]. They explained the importance of properly utilizing the following six-step method in subject analysis: 1) getting used to the data, 2) generating the initial code, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) writing research papers.

Braun and Clarke's [48, 49] method is a popular approach among researchers for analyzing, classifying, and categorizing raw data. For instance, Rizk et al. [51] conducted a thematic analysis of articles to study media coverage of privacy issues in social networks. The authors noted that coding enabled them to organize the data into meaningful groups. Similarly, Niela-Vilén et al. [52] while analyzing peer-support group discussions, collated codes into sub-themes, which were later grouped into major themes. Braun and Clarke's method is adaptable to various studies, with the steps being adjusted to suit the specific features of the data.

The researchers in the present study followed this process and began analyzing the data based on the six-step method. However, during the last step, to achieve agreement between the coders, Steps 2, 3, 4, and 5 were repeated several times. As noted by Braun and Clarke [49], the coding process requires continual bending back on itself (i.e., questioning and querying the assumptions made while interpreting and coding the data). In particular, we went back from Step 6 to Steps 4 and 5 to review whether the topic classification was appropriate. In other words, we analyzed the topic in the order of Braun and Clarke's six steps, and simultaneously, considering the importance of the processes from Steps 4 to 6, we repeated each step to determine whether the definitions and names we used were appropriate.

For Question 1 the individual opinions of TikTok and YouTube, three authors participated in coding the qualitative data. The three coders read all the questions and answers from questions 1 to 3 before starting the analysis. After familiarizing themselves with the contents, they gathered to set the criteria for classification. First, in the case of Question 1, three coders organized the keywords for TikTok and YouTube mentioned by

the respondents because they were allowed to freely write their thoughts on TikTok and YouTube without being restricted to listed categories.

Coder 1 analyzed answers from participants ID#1 to 100, Coder 2 analyzed answers from ID#101 to 200, and Coder 3 analyzed answers from ID#201 to 351. During this process, the three coders shared their opinions on whether they used the same arrangement method to achieve intercoder reliability. Coders 1 and 2 further analyzed their answers regarding the purpose of using TikTok and YouTube. Coder 1 analyzed the answers regarding the purpose of using YouTube, while Coder 2 analyzed the answers regarding TikTok. Disagreements in coding were resolved through discussion between the coders. All the coders agreed on the final classification criteria using Braun and Clarke's [48, 49] method.

For example, the three coders agreed the keywords for TikTok were short, quick videos, and for fun/entertainment purposes. On the other hand, the keywords for YouTube were long videos, for fun/educational purposes. After reviewing the keywords, we discussed the difference of fun purpose on the two VSPs. We finally named the theme of the two VSPs respectively which explains how the two VSPs coexist by providing distinct user gratifications—immediate fun versus purposeful engagement.

*TikTok is more for short video clips and YouTube is for longer videos. TikTok is if you want to watch a quick video and laugh or learn something quickly. YouTube is used to watch long videos to either learn something or enjoy something, or both. [ID#16]*

*TikTok is for fun for me and YouTube is for fun or information. I use YouTube to learn and study a lot. [ID#82]*  
*I feel like I use TikTok for entertainment and YouTube for educational purposes. [ID#257]*

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 TikTok's Theme 1: The video length is significantly shorter

Users who preferred TikTok cited short video lengths as its most noticeable feature. The maximum uploadable video length for TikTok is 3 minutes. Moreover, most TikTok videos were short (within 1–3 minutes). TikTok's policy intends to allow its audience to concentrate on content within a short time. Many participants stated that they had a short attention span and could not concentrate for long periods. Therefore, holding a user's attention is an important factor when comparing video watching on TikTok and YouTube. Survey respondents answered that YouTube videos were relatively longer than TikTok videos. The following four direct quotes from the participants exemplify the theme of short videos and why younger generations might prefer TikTok because of its shorter attention span.

*Tik Tok is an app I will go on to have a quick laugh and is an app I will go on to kill time. I like Tik Tok a lot because it isn't really time consuming due to the short video length and everything is at the swipe of a finger. With TikTok you don't even have to touch anything besides the app itself and you're already watching a video. [ID#18]*

*TikTok is typically more short videos and funnier whereas typically YouTube is more long vlogs, etc. I personally like TikTok better than YouTube because my attention span is short and I don't get bored watching the videos, as well as the fact that in the same amount of time I watch more types of videos on TikTok than in 1 video on YouTube. [ID#235]*

### 4.2 TikTok's Theme 2: Endless scrolling to grab viewers' attention

Another feature of TikTok that was frequently mentioned by the participants was its scrolling function. Unlike YouTube users, TikTok users can easily receive recommendations for the next video by scrolling. If a video is not sufficiently interesting, the user can easily move to the next video, which is a clear and simple expression of their intentions. This scrolling function also allows users to continue viewing images indefinitely. Considering that the most attractive characteristic of TikTok videos is their short length, TikTok users can deeply immerse themselves in them by adding the advantages of short videos and infinite scrolling functions. This scrolling action appealed to the younger generation, as evidenced by the following quotes:

*Common formats of TikTok include dances, transition videos, and short comedic segments...they're generally much shorter and less polished. I use TikTok primarily for entertainment purposes and YouTube when*

*I know specifically what I'm looking for. In other words, I rarely watch random videos that pop up on my YouTube feed, but can spend quite a bit of time mindlessly scrolling on my TikTok For You Page. [ID#44]*

*... TikTok are fast and more entertaining because you can keep scrolling and scrolling. I personally like TikTok better because I don't really have to focus on anything and I can keep scrolling and seeing something different each time. [ID#125]*

*... I enjoy scrolling through TikTok for enjoyment. ... I enjoy TikTok more than YouTube because of its accessibility. [ID#213]*

#### 4.3 TikTok's Theme 3: Spontaneous entertainment

The participants answered that TikTok has advantages over YouTube in terms of entertainment value. They reported relieving the fatigue and stress they experienced in their daily lives by watching various interesting videos on TikTok. TikTok videos, which do not require much thought and pursue simple fun and interest, have drawn more attention from younger generations than YouTube videos. This argument was also supported by the participants' answers to the question regarding the purpose of using TikTok. They most frequently answered that comedy/humor/fun/skits were their main purpose for using TikTok (see Table 1).

This is because viewers believe that TikTok's videos are short, so they do not consider them as videos from which they can learn. As will be covered later in discussions related to YouTube, the respondents thought that YouTube videos would be more beneficial for learning. We determined that these differences were most attributable to differences in video length. In other words, as mentioned earlier, TikTok is a platform that allows users to access short videos through a scroll function, which can be seen as entertaining users. The following quotes relate to this theme of TikTok's stronger entertainment component. Although previous research suggests that TikTok is perceived as an important informational tool [17, 18], [20], our results show that entertainment remains the main purpose of TikTok usage.

*I think a simple analogy for the two is TikTok is fast food restaurants and YouTube is dine-in restaurants. I use TikTok for quick entertainment but it's really good at keeping me hooked and on the app for a long time. [ID#120]*

*... I use TikTok as a way to kind of learn something new or be entertained for a short amount of time. Although, I prefer YouTube. I think there's just more content and more entertainment in TikTok. [ID#264]*

**Table 1.** Main purposes of viewing TikTok content (1st- to 5th-most common answers)

First purpose	Second purpose	Third purpose
1.Comedy/humor/fun/skits (n = 159)	1.Comedy/humor/fun/skits (n = 66)	1. Comedy/humor/fun/skits (n = 62)
2. Cooking/food (n = 36)	2. Cooking/food (n = 39)	2. Cooking/food (n = 40)
3. Animal/pet/dog/cat (n = 23)	3. Fashion/beauty (n = 34)	3. Fashion/beauty (n = 25)
4. Dance (n = 19)	4. Animal/pet/dog/cat (n = 28)	4. Sports (n = 22)
5. Sports (n = 19)	5. Sports (n = 27)	5. Dance (n = 21)

#### 4.4 YouTube's Theme 1: Beneficial to healthy objectives

The most outstanding theme that emerged from analyzing respondents' answers to YouTube was that participants used YouTube content for beneficial purposes such as self-development and studying. These responses suggest that if TikTok is an app for fun and stress-relieving purposes, YouTube is an app for a specific purpose. This difference seems to have affected not only the users but also the content creators of the two platforms in terms of the length of the videos produced. A long video allows content creators to produce detailed videos on various topics, which may have a positive effect on users by providing educational content. This trend

was also confirmed in responses regarding the purpose of using YouTube. Unlike the answers for the purpose of using TikTok, those for the purpose of using YouTube were evenly distributed across the different categories. For TikTok, the comedy/humor/fun/skits theme was dominant, whereas YouTube showed a relatively even distribution of individual preferences (see Table 2).

These results indicate that respondents have a clear motivation to pursue fun when using TikTok, whereas each individual is likely to have a different motivation when using YouTube. Moreover, there was no significant difference in the frequency values of items below the 5<sup>th</sup> most common answer on YouTube.

*YouTube is also accessed from the computer. I use YouTube more to see certain creator's content I enjoy, or for help on school [ID#190]*

*TikTok is bite sized entertainment, YouTube is a time investment. YouTube is better for actual research or hearing discussions and tutorials on things, but TikTok is more social media oriented so it's something you can do in the moments of boredom or short-term free time. I primarily use TikTok for entertainment whereas YouTube is both for entertainment and education/information. I currently like TikTok better, but I've used YouTube for much longer. I get more moment-to-moment interest and enjoyment from TikTok, but I wouldn't be surprised if I fall off use of the app in a year or two. YouTube has pretty much always been a reliable source of "infotainment" for me. [ID#277]*

**Table 2.** Main purposes of viewing YouTube content (1st- to 5th-most common answers)

First purpose	Second purpose	Third purpose
1. Daily life/vlog/lifestyle (n = 51)	1. Daily life/vlog/lifestyle (n = 39)	1.Information/study/ research/news (n = 52)
2. Games (n = 34)	2. Fashion/beauty (n = 33)	2. Daily life/vlog/lifestyle (n = 33)
3. Music (n = 33)	3. Music (n = 32)	3. Music (n = 32)
4.Information/study/ research/news (n = 28)	4.Information/study/ research/news (n = 27)	4. Comedy/humor/fun/skits (n = 25)
5. Comedy/humor/fun/skits (n = 24)	5. Games (n = 20), TV/clips/video(n = 20)	5. Fashion/beauty (n = 23)

#### 4.5 YouTube's Theme 2: The length is long enough to meet various needs

Participants mentioned long playback times as a feature of YouTube videos. This feature of YouTube seemed to have influenced its audiences in various ways: First, it made them hesitant to begin running the YouTube app. For younger generations, who prefer short videos, YouTube content with relatively long videos was not very attractive. In contrast, videos with long running times have other advantages. The long running time of the videos allowed creators to produce videos for various purposes in depth, thus allowing the audience to learn about videos in various ways. The interviewers preferred YouTube to TikTok when learning or studying. This is a strong feature of YouTube, in contrast to the characteristics of TikTok, which pursues a sense of improvisational fun.

Participants also answered that they watched YouTube to pursue fun, but the fun provided by TikTok and the fun provided by YouTube appeared to have slightly different meanings. If TikTok's fun makes viewers smile as soon as they see the video, YouTube's fun is combined with the preference of the viewers, thus allowing them to experience more personal enjoyment. The following quote exemplifies the theme of long videos, which is contrary to the first theme of TikTok (i.e., short videos).



*YouTube videos are typically multiple minutes long. I use YouTube for more informative purposes (like for school or I'll watch my favorite Youtubers' videos)... I also think I am more engaged in YouTube videos because I choose what I am watching. [ID#42]*

*... I use YouTube less because the videos I would want to watch are 10 plus minutes and would require me to be sitting down for a long period of time to fully engage in what I am watching. [ID#131]*

*YouTube videos that have things such as intros, outros, effect, and background music. ...I also use it to watch sports reviews and highlights.... In my opinion I believe that YouTube is better because it has been around longer and, in my experience, it has been way more beneficial to me then TikTok. [ID#324]*

#### 4.6 YouTube's Theme 3: Video that audiences can predict, background playback

Additionally, the long playback time of YouTube videos allows participants to use them for distraction and background playback while performing other activities. In other words, when they focused on other activities at home, they did not actively watch, but only listened to YouTube videos. This indicates that YouTube is primarily used for multitasking. Media multitasking refers to doing two things at the same time, including accessing two different types of media [53]. Many respondents answered that they used YouTube videos for background stimulation (e.g., music) while doing other things (e.g., eating, doing homework, and makeup). This behavioral pattern is a characteristic of YouTube users and is clearly distinguishable from TikTok usage patterns. TikTok users use it with the clear purpose of time-killing in the middle of their work, and they must stare at the video screen to engage with TikTok. YouTube is different in that YouTube users often do not watch the screen while a video is being played.

Considering the length of YouTube's long videos, the audience decided that they would watch the videos and learn something, but it was surprising that the respondents turned on and listened to long YouTube videos when they engaged in activities that required concentration in the real world. We judged that this would be possible because YouTube's video recommendation algorithm recommends videos from creators which audiences are already "subscribed" to or plays videos that audiences are expected to be interested in. YouTube also provides a service that allows similar videos to be played automatically through algorithms after the playback of one video, even if the users have not subscribed to a specific channel. These characteristics of the YouTube algorithm—that is, its function of recommending relatively longer videos than TikTok—seem to be a factor in increasing media multitasking among its users. Therefore, users can experience a video by simply listening to the sound, without having to watch it. We also discuss this as a phenomenon wherein YouTube has long videos that make it possible for audiences to play videos for the purpose of interest or learning. The following quotes illustrate this trend of using YouTube videos as ambient sounds while engaging in other activities.

*Depending in the videos, you could leave them on as more of background noise while doing something else. Overall, I prefer YouTube. Reason being that you have more control over what you watch, it's less distracting, and you can leave it on while doing another activity. [ID#68]*

*Personally, I use YouTube to watch podcasts and vlogs that are uploaded by my favorite creators, I usually play them in the background if I am preoccupied by other tasks. [ID#185]*

*... I normally watch TikTok when I want to zone out and scroll for hours, but I usually watch YouTube videos in the background when I'm eating or doing my makeup. [ID#234]*

Based on this result, the question could be raised as to whether the number of views of a video on YouTube properly reflects the number of actual views. Nevertheless, the audience does not actually watch the video but chooses which video is played and understands what the video is saying by listening to its sound. This implies that the number of video views shown on YouTube can be interpreted as the number of views with various levels of engagement and that it serves as a clue to the number of continuous viewings of the video by audiences.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, participants preferred TikTok's short videos because they allowed them to concentrate on watching the content while considering the relatively short attention span of younger generations. Thus, attention is an important factor that users consider when comparing their experiences with TikTok and YouTube. In other words, limited attention leads to the allocation of attention to content that matches user preferences

[54]. On YouTube, the participants answered that they needed to sit down to find and watch the videos. For TikTok, short videos allowed people to engage fully every time they were watched, whereas for YouTube, long videos allowed people to sometimes use them as background noise, such as while eating or engaging in other actions. This difference between the usage of these two platforms can also be explained by the uses and gratification theory [28], as participants may use TikTok and YouTube to satisfy different needs. While TikTok may have been used to gratify students' immediate desire for fun and entertainment, YouTube seems to gratify educational needs rather than immediate fun.

Moreover, differences in the length of available content caused the content creators of each platform to produce different types of content. "TikTok creators get straight to the point." Distinct video types then shape the differences within the platform algorithms. TikTok, based on what people liked and watched, showed respondents random videos made by random creators; therefore, all of these videos were somewhat different. Most participants in this study mentioned the YouTube and TikTok content recommendation algorithms, and it seemed that one of their assessment criteria for VSPs was whether the algorithm suited them. We confirmed that most users were aware of these algorithms. For example, in Alvarado et al. [55], most participants were aware of YouTube's algorithmic recommendations. AI-based algorithms on TikTok can significantly influence medium- and social-interactive engagements [56]. In other words, users are receptive to personalized experiences offered by AI-enabled algorithms. In our results, users who preferred TikTok felt that TikTok's algorithm was more random, and they reported liking the "For You Page," which reflects this algorithm. Therefore, AI-based algorithms are the key functionalities of VSPs.

In Scalvini's [14] research, interviewees connected TikTok's scrolling function to the compulsive use of the platform. Participants in this study also mentioned that they did not need to choose a video on TikTok and could keep "scrolling." This seemed to make the use of TikTok "mindless." YouTube also considers what people view and like, but unlike TikTok, it keeps recommending them to the same channels; therefore, all videos to which participants are exposed are similar in terms of content and type. Thus, users felt that YouTube's algorithm was more relevant to the videos they had previously watched or liked, but they had to find the right video for them to watch, and therefore needed to invest some time watching and focusing on that video.

As mentioned in the introduction, for TikTok and YouTube, the reason users choose each platform can be explained by gratification niches. The new social media platform's characteristics overlap with those of older social media platforms; however, it also provides unique gratification [8], [57]. In other words, the functional overlap and superiority of the new occur simultaneously. TikTok has unique innovations that distinguish it from YouTube. TikTok has no homepage or start button; its videos are played automatically when the app is opened, and users can view content using recommendation algorithms. These innovations have led to TikTok's unprecedented success, particularly in terms of engaging and retaining users [54]. That is, both recommendation algorithms and an effortless operating process (i.e., playing short videos automatically and a scrolling function) improve the user flow experience. Therefore, in the current VSP environment, younger generation users prefer the new VSP (i.e., TikTok), which has gratification niches, while retaining the video-sharing features of the previously popular app (i.e., YouTube).

The respondents who participated in this study said that they chose TikTok or YouTube because of different gratification factors. Most users mentioned video length as the main difference between the two platforms. However, because these two platforms are video-sharing platforms, they currently provide similar service functions (e.g., sharing user-generated video content and recommendation algorithms). YouTube, which is much older than TikTok, provided YouTube Shorts in response to the popularity of TikTok's algorithm-based short video services. In contrast, TikTok gradually expanded its maximum video length from 15 seconds to 60 seconds to 3 minutes, and up to 10 minutes and is testing 15-minute video uploads [58]. Consequently, it seems that only recommendation algorithms and fundamental platform design will remain as gratification niches, not video length. Moreover, user-perceived effortlessness plays a more significant role in the context of short-form video platforms than long-form video platforms. The perceived recommendation is also important for promoting flow experiences among high-experience users [54]. Future research needs to consider whether changes in platforms (e.g., YouTube Shorts or increasing video length of TikTok) influence acceptance and user experience, including perceptions of content quality and recommendation algorithms, on each platform.

### 5.1 Implications and Future Research Directions

Although there has been research examining YouTube [11, 12], [59, 60], TikTok [16], [18], [20], [54], [56] and both [61], the two VSPs have not been extensively compared based on the qualitative data of younger

users. This study aimed to fill this research gap. Most studies on social media tend to use a quantitative approach. This study has theoretical implications, as the thematic analysis of open-ended questionnaires helped to better understand media users' perceptions and experiences. The qualitative data of this study were part of a larger survey that quantitatively measured other usage characteristics (e.g., affordances). According to Author et al., TikTok is easier to use, and young people spend more time using TikTok than YouTube. However, YouTube is more useful to them; therefore, respondents have a more positive attitude towards YouTube. This qualitative study detailed how young people perceive and experience both VSPs through their perspectives.

As mentioned previously, platforms continue to add different functions and change their characteristics to expand their user base. Thus, there is constant demand for further research on the perceptions of various platforms. Moreover, this study focuses on the content consumption type of users (i.e., viewing content). Therefore, future research is needed on other engagement variables such as consumption (i.e., read comments) or participation behavior (e.g., like/dislike, comment, share, and upload) on TikTok and YouTube.

The results of this study not only help elucidate users' perceptions of popular VSPs, but also have implications for content creators and platform representatives to guide them in interacting more efficiently with users. For example, content creators and marketers should tailor their strategies to align with the unique gratifications of TikTok and YouTube users. On TikTok, content should be concise, attention-grabbing, and engaging to cater to younger users with shorter attention spans, while YouTube creators should focus on in-depth, educational, or immersive content that satisfies users seeking comprehensive information or long-form engagement. Leveraging AI-based recommendation algorithms is crucial; creators should optimize TikTok content for high engagement metrics to reach broader audiences through its random yet effective algorithm, while maintaining consistent themes on YouTube to appeal to its algorithm's preference for recommending content from previously viewed or subscribed channels. Additionally, marketers should capitalize on TikTok's effortless scrolling and auto play features to sustain engagement, while utilizing YouTube playlists or series to encourage longer viewing sessions.

Furthermore, this study analyzed data that freely explained the experiences of 351 Americans with individual perceptions using TikTok and YouTube. TikTok, a short-form video platform, is popular with millions of U.S. users. It has proven to be a valuable tool for U.S. political campaigns, especially as it can reach young voters in the U.S. [62]. It is the first time that the U.S. has banned major social media platforms, and TikTok has been targeted [63]. Considering the fact that TikTok's use in the U.S. has become unclear due to a new U.S. law banning TikTok, therefore this is a very meaningful study as it covers topics with timeliness.

However, these studies had some limitations. First, U.S. students were recruited as the sample, while people from different countries and age groups may show different attitudes towards these VSPs. Second, this study does not address the question of whether the platform itself forms an attitude toward specific content; that is, whether it has a mediating effect on the platform interface. Therefore, it is necessary to determine whether the fundamentally different interface design of the platform has the greatest impact on user perceptions and experiences, and not on video content or length. Researchers must experimentally observe or conduct in-depth interviews to determine whether users perceive the same content differently depending on the platform they use to watch it. As previous studies have shown, both TikTok and YouTube have adjusted their platforms to capitalize on the strengths of their competitors. TikTok has expanded its content options to include videos longer than one minute, while YouTube has introduced shorter-form video capabilities. A longitudinal study of these evolving platforms would undoubtedly yield valuable insights into the deeper implications of these changes. Last, we suggest future studies to adopt a longitudinal perspective and collect relevant data as technology users' motivations, satisfaction, and platform interfaces (including algorithms) can change and evolve overtime and interact with one another in the environment where both short- and long-form contents coexist. Taking this dynamic perspective will provide more valuable insights than a cross-sectional approach in comparing the popular visual social media platforms.

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