

LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS: INVESTIGATING THE PHENOMENON OF TRAUMA
DUMPING ON TIKTOK AND ITS EFFECTS

By Joi T. Johnson

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in Communication

Northern Arizona University

May 2023

Approved:

Zhan Xu, Ph.D., Chair

Jiun-Yi Tsai, Ph.D.

Ashleigh Day, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS: INVESTIGATING THE PHENOMENON OF TRAUMA DUMPING ON TIKTOK AND ITS EFFECTS

JOI JOHNSON

This present study investigated the phenomenon of trauma dumping on TikTok and measured its effects for users who participate in this behavior. Participants were found through social media and on Northern Arizona University's Mountain Campus, and they were required to be at least 18 years of age. Participants were asked to identify their attitudes towards questions and/or statements regarding their TikTok usage, TikTok and trauma dumping, and the uses and gratifications of trauma dumping on TikTok. Participants reported trauma dumping behavior on TikTok to be associated with therapeutic reasons even if they did not personally experience such feelings when they were trauma dumped on the social media platform. Given its novelty, more research is needed to better understand the impact that trauma dumping has on the sender.

Keywords: TikTok, trauma dumping, therapeutic, social media, traumatic experience, behavior

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Literature Review.....	1
Methods: Data Collection.....	12
Methods: Data Analysis.....	13
Results.....	15
Results: RQ #1.....	15
Results: RQ #2.....	16
Results: Uses and Gratifications.....	16
Discussion.....	18
Practical Implications.....	21
Limitations.....	21
References.....	23

Literature Review

Although there is not a lot of information surrounding trauma dumping, people have used social media, and the Internet in general, as a virtual diary for the better part of a decade. Trauma dumping is a phenomenon that has not garnered a lot of conversation, but it can be defined as the sharing of a traumatic experience “without asking permission” for the receiver’s “capacity to hear or interact with that type of information” (Colombo, 2021). Social media sites employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Websites and applications such as TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr have allowed individuals to use their accounts as online diaries because they can post content that may only be viewed by a select group of people, and many even create personal blogs to express their feelings outside of these social media platforms. It is important to study this topic because social media has become more prevalent in our daily lives, and with its multiple uses, this study serves to understand why individuals choose social media to trauma dump.

Though individuals may have different meanings of trauma, the common theme usually deals with negative emotions associated with the experience. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), traumatic events and experiences are marked by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death (CDC, n.d.). Within this study, the senders of trauma dumping (trauma dumpers) are the focus with less attention being on the receivers (trauma dumpees). The senders, in particular, are participating in computer mediated communication (CMC) with others who they may not know while sharing personal, traumatic information about themselves, and this behavior serves as the foundation for the study overall.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media became increasingly popular for self-disclosing and finding community when people had to social distance and telework. With the societal shifts to distancing, cessation of normative in-person socialization, and disruption of typical schooling during the pandemic may motivate particular uses of social media keyed to reducing a sense of isolation (Unni & Weinstein, 2021). There is limited research regarding social media and trauma dumping, but the COVID-19 pandemic may have propelled this phenomenon to relevance. TikTok, in particular, is a newer application that easily allows for this type of content to be posted because of its video aspect as well as use of popular sounds to gain more views. Based on this research, the first research question is:

RQ #1: Does content on TikTok regarding personal traumatic experiences serve as a coping mechanism to content creators?

Using social media as a coping mechanism has become more prevalent especially because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Wolfers and Utz's (2022) study included information about Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping and its extension by Wolfers and Schneider. The authors state that the theory provides a useful theoretical framework to identify the functions of social media in the stress-coping process, and the model proposes that individuals assess the (dis)balance between resources and stressors in a first appraisal. In a second appraisal, individuals evaluate the available coping options (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). Social media aids in helping people to address their needs of human interaction, coping with the pandemic, and providing people with a platform to remain socially connected and universalize distress caused by the crisis (Singh et al., 2020).

A social media platform that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic is TikTok. TikTok is a social media platform that allows users to upload short video content on anything they want

from dancing videos and comedy to cooking videos and daily vlogs. The app is used globally, and as of 2021, TikTok is available in more than 150 countries and reports to have more than 800 million active users (Southwick et al., 2021). TikTok, although having an array of different users, boasts a young number of users. Research shows that 41 percent of TikTok users are aged 16-24 and that children aged 4-15 spend almost as much time on TikTok as they do watching YouTube videos (Kennedy, 2020). Regardless of age, there is a wide variety of people who use TikTok to share traumatic, personal experiences. This paper serves to study the theories that connect with trauma dumping on social media and the possible therapeutic effects that come with sharing this type of information.

Theoretical Review

Although the phenomenon of trauma dumping is not yet formally rooted in any particular theory, the uses and gratifications theory may be applied to why people choose to self-disclose personal, traumatic experiences or, moreover, how people interact with this sort of content.

Social Media as a Virtual Diary and Self-Disclosure

Many people treat social media as a virtual diary where they can discuss daily struggles, positive moments, amongst other aspects of everyday life. Sujon (2018) conducted a study that touches on the tensions between privacy and sharing culture online, and Sujon asked participants to keep a media diary study to track the social media they used and why they shared what they did (or did not) on their chosen social media platforms. The participants were also asked to define what privacy meant to them and to note anything interesting/surprising about their sharing behavior during this time. Sujon's study found that all diarists used social media to communicate

with the people who were important to them, and many also used different platforms to promote themselves or their work. Some participants used social media to relive shared childhood memories and connect with others by sharing interest specific content (videos, chats, images, etc). This research also found that control-based ideas of privacy were dominant, and social privacy was more important to the participants than institution privacy (government, companies, third-party data collection, surveillance, etc).

During this study, the participants were aware of the people in their networks, and they often reflected on the kinds of content that would be interesting or relevant for their networks in order to tailor their content for the different audiences. It was during this that Sujon identified the term “public friends” and mentioned how participants see social privacy and the contexts for public affiliation as composed of “public friends” and “private friends.” The idea of public friends includes personal and impersonal connections and relationships that have implications for social and institutional privacy. Private friends, according to some participants, are the ones who can receive information and be trusted with said material.

This particular study connects with the research being studied because Sujon talks about how social media users interact with platforms and how they view their own privacy when it comes to self-disclosure on the Internet. In terms of public friends, the participants in Sujon’s study appeared to not trust them with private information about themselves while private friends could interact with said information. Even though the participants were still posting online, they were tailoring who was allowed to see what type of information. This study aims to answer something similar, but the content getting posted on TikTok is often always for the general public to view, so Sujon’s study put into perspective how some people cherry pick who is allowed to view personal information about themselves. Sujon’s article also focuses on the uses and

gratification of social media amongst a diverse age group, so it was interesting to see how individuals interacted with social media and what they deemed appropriate for their public and private friends to know. Computer mediated communication (CMC) tends to focus on establishing and strengthening relationships through the internet, so knowing that individuals are often tailoring their messages to certain people online shows how important it is to maintain positive relationships online through communication.

Similarly, Botterill et al. (2015) documented the ways that university students use devices and platforms as well as online and off-line sites during a standard day. The researchers' study found the most common main media uses reported were engaging with digital content—on cell phones or computers—watching television, and listening to music (Botterill et al., 2015). They also found that participants are co-media users with 92 percent of the sample reporting that they used at least two media during a 30-minute period, and some participants switched between up to eight different media devices in a 30-minute span. These results demonstrated that watching computer content, browsing the Internet, and using social media comprised the largest number of other media activity. This study showed how media allows students to coordinate, stack, or shift their social interaction to suit their personal timetables. Even though everyone was busy during most of their day, every participant found a way to fit consuming media into their daily schedules.

Because this study focuses on social media, the study done by Botterill et al. (2015) put into perspective how people will still find a way to interact with social media and the Internet despite their busy schedules. The survey used in this study also aided in figuring out the methodology for surveying participants. Although this study will utilize the Likert scale, the questions in the article helped tailor the questions to the target audience. This study is also trying

to understand how individuals become comfortable enough with self-disclosure and trauma dumping on social media, so this article helped shed light on how much time the target audience is dedicating to using social media in their free time.

When people trauma dump on TikTok, they are making the conscious choice to self-disclose personal, traumatic information to an audience that they may or may not know. Self-disclosure can be defined as “verbally communicating personal information about the self to another person” (Schlosser, 2020). Self-disclosing online does not always involve verbal communication, and research about self-disclosure online has shed light on this method of communicating. The Internet-enhanced self-disclosure (IESD) hypothesis was one of the first theories to extend disclosure research to overall well-being, and it argues that online self-disclosure enhances relationship quality to a greater degree than face-to-face disclosures (Luo & Hancock, 2020). Self-disclosure plays an important role in building and maintaining intimate relationships, and on social media, it can also connect people depending on different aspects of their lives (Utz, 2015).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications (U&G) have always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium: newspapers, radio and television, and now the Internet (Ruggiero, 2000). With the focus shifting to the Internet, U&G theory can be used to explain why people use certain social media platforms and what they gain from doing so. The theory also proposes that media consumers are actively choosing specific social media platforms according to their needs, and in doing so, users are seen as active participants in the media consumption process (Matei, 2010).

Uses and Gratifications Theory and Therapeutic Effects

Research has proved that social media has the possibility of being used for therapeutic reasons. Social media can be a coping tool after stress has been evoked, and the effectiveness of social media use depends on how well this use and the chosen coping strategy fits situational circumstances (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). U&G theory is a media use paradigm from mass communications research that guides the assessment of consumer motivations for media usage and access (Stafford et al., 2004). Whiting and Williams' (2013) research about this approach demonstrates the importance of the uses and gratifications theory in relation to social media. Whiting and Williams explored and discussed the uses and gratifications that social media users receive from using various social media platforms. To carry out this study, the researchers conducted 25 in-depth interviews with individuals from 18 to 56 years old. The participants were asked why they use social media, why their friends use social media, what they enjoy about social media, and how often they use social media, and the responses to these various questions ranged from 150 words to 1,000+ words.

The comments from Whiting and Williams' study were analyzed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines. The researchers developed a list of uses and gratifications to use as they read and reviewed the responses. They sorted the uses and gratifications comments into groups and concluded on ten uses and gratifications for using social media: social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others.

This study offered insight as to why individuals use social media and what they seek when they are on different social media platforms. 88 percent of the participants said they used social media for social interaction and mentioned that "Facebook is a place to interact and

socialize with others,” that they “have more contact with people via social media than face to face,” and that “social media gives them a social life” (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Passing the time and entertainment came in second and third, respectively, with the latter including activities such as playing games, listening to music, and watching videos. Others also mentioned that social media was a source for comic relief and humor.

This information showed how the uses and gratifications theory has not had much prominence in the area of social media but should be further evaluated because of how much social media has changed since the article was published. Although these answers may still ring true almost ten years later, social media has continuously evolved and grown. As of 2021, 4.48 billion people currently use social media worldwide, and the average social media user engages with an average of 6.6 various social media platforms (University of Maine, 2021). The number of social media users and the platforms they use are constantly growing, and these articles solidified the foundation for the study of uses and gratifications for using social media. It also highlighted how an individual could bring themselves to trauma dump on TikTok in an effort to socialize with others on the app or possibly entertain an audience.

U&G contends that people actively choose the media that they want to consume to satisfy their wants and needs. In the context of this study, individuals may also use social media for therapeutic effects. Although much of the efficacy of social media may be explicable via a closer examination of therapeutic affordances, there are particular areas that warrant attention including social media’s ability to filter and guide people to useful information, connect individuals, and share experiences (Merolli et al., 2014). Krutrök’s (2021) study looks at how mourning is expressed using the hashtag #grief on TikTok using content analysis. This study shows how grief was narrated on the social media platform, which sociotechnical templates (duets, stitches, and

audios on TikTok) were incorporated into these expressions, and how said expressions of grief challenged the societal norms that come with mourning. The researcher analyzed 100 videos that used the #grief on TikTok, and according to Krutrök, this hashtag had 276.8 million views, and when compared to other hashtags containing the word “grief,” this singular hashtag was the most visible in the category (2021). The researcher incorporated memes into the analysis such as “get ready with me” videos, make-up sessions, or lip-syncing. In addition to all of this, Krutrök explored specific user accounts to understand how the sampled videos related to their overall content on their page to see if follow-up videos or any other information could provide additional content for the original video analyzed.

The results from Krutrök’s study showed that of the top 100 videos using #grief, 77 videos were about death and dying, 6 videos were about other forms of loss (separation, injuries, or sickness), 10 videos talked about grief without specifying the cause of grieving, and 7 videos were about video gaming and were unrelated to grief in a traditional sense (Krutrök, 2021). Krutrök also found that most of the videos about death and dying concerned losing a child (27 videos), a parent (20 videos), or a spouse/partner (13 videos). Some TikTok accounts were also found to be fully dedicated to sharing stories of the deceased individuals or about their experiences with grief. In the GriefTok community, these users are able to express their emotions with others in a “safe space” for mourning where conventional displays of grief are allowed and encouraged as a community practice. Krutrök proposed that grieving communities on TikTok express a form of algorithmic closeness based on TikTok’s algorithm to bring grieving individuals together.

This was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic because people were anxious, highly uncertain, and depressed. In this time, TikTok was regarded as being good for mental

health, as creating and posting content can have a positive impact on mental well-being, especially if it is lighthearted and enjoyable (Situmorang, 2021). Through the workings of TikTok's algorithms, users on the platform can find connections within a community of griever and a sense of safety, where generally, unconventional forms of grief expressions are seen as valuable through the increased user engagements on the platform. They can also use CMC to connect with other users on TikTok and establish relationships by bonding over shared personal, traumatic experiences in a way that is similar to face-to-face (F2F) communication. One study shows that emotions are still abundant in CMC, and there is no indication that CMC is an impersonal medium, nor is it more difficult to communicate these emotions online (Derks et al., 2008). Having this outlet to facilitate CMC may allow individuals to gain an additional sense of community that can be therapeutic for some.

This connects the idea of TikTok being used as a therapeutic tool to those grieving or mourning to some capacity, and this expands past adult use as well. The enormous popularity of social media among children and adolescents led many educators to start utilizing the various social networks for online communication with students, and online communication has also been leveraged by educators for delivering emotional support to their students (Rosenberg et al., 2020).

Krutrök's study also involved studying content that is almost the exact opposite of the content being studied, and that is extremely valuable. Even though these TikTok videos feature triggering or traumatic information, it is tagged appropriately for people to know what the video is about. When videos feature someone trauma dumping, there is rarely a tag to preface this information for unsuspecting viewers. The content in the videos are the same, but this particular

study would like to investigate those untagged videos that give this sort of information without the receiver's permission to do so.

Based on prior research, the present study aims to find out:

RQ #2: How likely are social media users to post traumatic experiences on TikTok instead of talking about the experiences in-person?

Because of the sense of community associated with discussing traumatic, personal information within certain hashtags on TikTok, this study will see if people who trauma dump on social media will experience emotional release and find a sense of community from others who have experienced similar situations.

This literature review found substantial evidence to support individuals' trauma dumping on TikTok as well as the theories to explain this phenomenon. Although there is still not a lot of information about trauma dumping, the research explains how people use social media and the uses and gratifications associated with self-disclosing on social media. This is applicable to this study because TikTok is a largely growing application with trends that propel videos onto an individual's "For You Page" based on the algorithm tailored to that particular person. With self-disclosure videos regarding personal, traumatic information following the trends on popular sounds, or songs/clips within TikTok, many can gain traction outside of the realm of the appropriate community (GriefTok, #death, #trauma, or any corresponding tags). It is when this information is untagged that it becomes trauma dumping seeing as the receiver did not consent to hearing traumatic information. Because social media is pervasive in today's society, this research serves to understand why an individual would trauma dump on TikTok as well as if this phenomenon is more common in the younger generation.

Methods

Data Collection

Before any research was conducted, all survey questions, research plans, procedures, and other materials were submitted to the Northern Arizona University Institutional Review Board in January 2023. The NAU Institutional Review Board approved all research materials for this project in February 2023.

To study the phenomenon of trauma dumping, a Google Form was created to gauge individuals' attitudes towards trauma dumping on TikTok as well as the uses and gratifications of participating in this behavior on the platform. The Google Form was semi-private meaning that participants had to have the link in order to access the survey. Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age. No other identifiable information was required. This survey utilized convenience sampling in order to find survey respondents. Participants were found through various social media networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit. These particular social media platforms were chosen because of the high activity across all five sites. For the social media platforms, a recruitment advertisement was posted on the investigator's personal accounts to find participants. On Facebook, this same recruitment advertisement was posted into the What's Up Flagstaff Facebook page, and the page currently allows Flagstaff residents to post about anything within the group. On Reddit, the recruitment advertisement was posted in two forums specifically made for recruiting survey participants: r/SampleSize and r/SurveyExchange. These forums were already established at the time of the recruitment post, and each forum's purpose is to find survey participants.

Individuals were also recruited throughout Northern Arizona University's Mountain Campus. Some were students of the PI while others were students from colleagues' courses

throughout the School of Communication. The PI asked current students to take the research survey in her classes, and she also presented the information in colleagues' courses as well throughout the School of Communication. Some colleagues did choose to send the recruitment information to their own students without the PI present. Before the screening questions, participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary through the recruitment advertisement. The two screening questions were asked prior to the start of the survey to determine if participants were eligible to participate. These questions were presented in a "yes" or "no" format and they are as follows:

1. Do you use TikTok?
2. Have you posted trauma dumping videos on TikTok? *Trauma dumping can be defined as the sharing of a traumatic experience "without asking permission" for the receiver's "capacity to hear or interact with that type of information"* (Colombo, 2021).

If participants qualified past the screening questions, they were taken to the consent form that detailed the sensitive nature of this survey. If not, the survey ended with no follow-up questions.

Data Analysis

The survey consisted of three sections: TikTok Usage, TikTok and Trauma Dumping, and Uses and Gratifications. Within each section, participants utilized the Likert scale to identify their attitudes towards each statement. The Google Form survey provided additional descriptive statistics for this study.

The first section, TikTok Usage, used the 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1-5 (never to frequently) and had some of the following questions:

1. How often do you use TikTok?
2. How often do you post video content on TikTok?
3. How often do you post personal, traumatic information on TikTok? *Traumatic events involve confrontation with war, violence, disasters, sudden loss, serious illness, and other overwhelming and disturbing events* (Kleber, 2019).

These questions were not based on any existing scales. They were created to gauge how often individuals use TikTok and participate in trauma dumping behaviors on the platform.

The second section, TikTok and Trauma Dumping, used the 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) and had some of the following statements:

1. I believe that trauma dumping videos on TikTok can bring happiness to people.
2. I post trauma dumping videos on TikTok as a form of self expression.
3. Trauma dumping on TikTok is a bad way to cope.
4. Trauma dumping is useful for when there is no one to talk to or be with.

These questions were not based on any existing scales. They were created to gauge how individuals may view the act of trauma dumping on TikTok and some of the attitudes associated with this online behavior because the phenomenon is still very recent.

The third section, Uses and Gratifications, used the 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) and had some of the following statements:

1. I trauma dump on TikTok because it is relaxing.
2. I trauma dump on TikTok because of its communicatory use.
3. I trauma dump on TikTok because of how convenient it is.

4. I trauma dump on TikTok because it is therapeutic to do so.

These questions were based on the uses and gratifications associated with social media use. All 10 uses and gratifications of social media were listed within the statements with the inclusion of therapy as a possible extension of U&G.

Results

Out of 231 total participants, almost 75% of individuals said they were TikTok users, but only 4.8% of participants (n=11) admitted to posting trauma dumping videos on TikTok. These individuals were college aged (18-30 years old), and this is due to participants primarily being found on Northern Arizona University's Mountain Campus.

RQ #1: Does content on TikTok regarding personal traumatic experiences serve as a coping mechanism to content creators?

The majority of participants answered that they do not often post their own content (72.8%), but there is an even split amongst participants believing that trauma dumping on TikTok is a negative way to cope. Outside of this split, 27.3% of participants were neutral in terms of TikTok serving as a coping mechanism to content creators who trauma dump. In the section regarding TikTok and Trauma Dumping, two questions reveal that participants view videos that are posted and tagged appropriately regarding traumatic, personal information about themselves and trauma dumping (posting the same information without tagging it) on TikTok are both done for therapeutic reasons. For the former, 54.6% agree with the statement in relation to sharing traumatic, personal information on TikTok with proper tags. For the latter, 45.5% agree with that statement when it comes to trauma dumping with the majority of participants indicating that they

“strongly agree” with this statement. Almost 73% of participants identified trauma dumping as being useful for when there is no one to talk to or be with, but on the other hand, 72.8% of participants did not believe that trauma dumping in itself was healthy.

RQ #2: How likely are social media users to post traumatic experiences on TikTok instead of talking about the experiences in-person?

The majority of participants said they would rather vent in-person than online (90.9%), so it can be determined that social media users may prefer to share this type of personal, traumatic information using face-to-face communication (F2F) rather than computer mediated communication (CMC). About 73% of participants also agreed that they think about the consequences of what they post online, so this could also be a determining factor for preferring to talk about these experiences in-person rather than on TikTok. Participants also identified people who trauma dump on TikTok as sharing too much information with 45.5% agreeing with the statement. Overall, 72.7% of participants agreed that trauma dumping makes them feel less lonely, but it was not specified whether this included posting trauma dumping videos or interacting with them online.

Uses and Gratifications

Within this category of the survey, participants were asked to identify 11 potential uses and gratifications associated with posting trauma dumping videos on TikTok. Participants’ responses using the Likert scale range from strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), neutral (N), agree (A), and strongly agree (SA). The responses for each uses and gratification are presented in the table below:

Uses and Gratifications of Trauma Dumping on TikTok

U&G	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Social interaction	27.3%	27.3%	18.2%	27.3%	0%
Seeking information	36.4%	18.2%	27.3%	18.2%	0%
Passing the time	36.4%	36.4%	9.1%	18.2%	0%
Entertainment	45.5%	18.2%	18.2%	18.2%	0%
Relaxing	54.5%	18.2%	27.3%	0%	0%
Communicatory use	18.2%	9.1%	27.3%	36.4%	9.1%
Convenience	27.3%	9.1%	18.2%	36.4%	9.1%
Express opinions	18.2%	9.1%	18.2%	54.5%	0%
Sharing information	18.2%	0%	54.5%	18.2%	9.1%
Virtual surveillance	63.6%	9.1%	9.1%	18.2%	0%
Therapeutic	27.3%	27.3%	18.2%	9.1%	18.2%

45.5% of respondents agreed to some extent that communicatory use and convenience were why they chose to trauma dump on TikTok, and 54.5% of respondents agreed that expressing opinions was another major reason why they participated in trauma dumping on the platform. 54.6% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement regarding therapeutic gratification. Over half (54.6%) of the respondents did not agree with trauma dumping on TikTok in relation to the social interaction gratification.

Discussion

The findings from these participants indicate that trauma dumping, in general, may have a positive impact on individuals who feel lonely and are practicing self-expression. Participants also identified trauma dumping as a behavior that individuals do for therapeutic reasons. Overall, the findings contribute to the uses and gratification theory in terms of trauma dumping. This particular research is fairly novel because there is a lack of research regarding trauma dumping on TikTok despite the behavior becoming more prominent on social media over the last few years. Although some previous studies investigated the phenomenon of trauma dumping, there have not been many studies that focus on this behavior on specific platforms. This study also contributes to the U&G theory because 45.5% of participants were able to identify trauma dumping, in general, as a therapeutic behavior on TikTok. Moreover, U&G theory contends that social media users are attempting to satisfy a need when it comes to choosing the platform of their choice to use, and respondents identified communicatory use, convenience, and expressing opinions as the top reasons for participating in trauma dumping on TikTok. There has not been any additional study regarding U&G that lists therapeutic effects as a reason why individuals choose to use social media and what needs may be satisfied.

It is interesting to note that, as previously mentioned, participants view videos that are posted and tagged appropriately regarding traumatic, personal information about themselves and trauma dumping (posting the same information without tagging it) on TikTok as both being done for therapeutic reasons. Although participants did not personally identify with trauma dumping for therapeutic reasons under the uses and gratification section of the survey, they answered that other people may be doing it for those reasons. Based on the percentages in regards to trauma dumping and sharing personal, traumatic experiences with appropriate tags, it appears that

tagging the same information may lead to different perceptions of sharing personal, traumatic information. Even if the respondents do not believe that their trauma dumping is therapeutic for themselves, they can identify that this may be the goal for others participating in the behavior. In relation to RQ #1, 54.6% of participants agreed that the sharing of personal, traumatic experiences on TikTok with the proper tags served therapeutic purposes for the sender, and the same information without tags (trauma dumping) garnered the same result with 45.5% of participants agreeing. Additional research suggests that trauma dumping is seen in a negative light with one source describing the phenomenon as “hazardous to your friendships and mental health,” so this could explain why respondents prefer sharing these experiences offline (Rutledge, 2021). Future research should focus more on this aspect to determine if there is a stigma surrounding the term “trauma dumping” even though both statements came to the same conclusion.

This study also stresses the importance of general communicatory use of trauma dumping on TikTok with participants identifying with this use positively. About 46% of participants agreed to some extent that they trauma dump on TikTok because of its communicatory use, and the same percentage agreed that they partake in trauma dumping on TikTok because of its convenience. Living in a technologically savvy world can highlight how useful it is to communicate with others online, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok was one of the social media platforms that brought individuals together in a time of uncertainty. This ties into RQ #2 because even though 90.9% of participants said that they would rather vent in-person as opposed to online, the participants are still disclosing this personal, traumatic information on a social media platform. Participating in trauma dumping behavior on TikTok may allow individuals to have an additional medium to talk about their experiences even if it is not their

preferred method of communication. Furthermore, additional research may serve to understand the difference in information sharing in-person versus online to understand why individuals would prefer to discuss such experiences in a F2F conversation.

Another important aspect of this study was the participants' reinforcement of self expression through trauma dumping on TikTok. Around 46% of participants agreed to some extent that they partake in posting trauma dumping videos on TikTok as a form of self expression, and this demonstrates how useful these types of videos can be to the sender if only to express their own views on a particular topic. The U.S. Supreme Court has even recognized that one of the most important places to exchange views is in cyberspace, and particularly on social media, so it is important to note that sharing trauma dumping videos on TikTok may offer senders a chance to utilize their First Amendment right while also practicing self expression. (Aswad, 2018). This study directly relates to self-disclosure and how relationships may be strengthened because of this online self expression. As previously mentioned, the Internet-enhanced self-disclosure (IESD) hypothesis argues that online self-disclosure enhances relationship quality to a greater degree than F2F disclosures and enhances the impact that self-disclosure has on well-being in CMC relative to F2F communication (Luo & Hancock, 2020). Self-disclosing these personal, traumatic experiences may serve as a way for people to express themselves and can also aid in relationship strengthening on and offline. Many people self-disclose this information on TikTok in a very public manner, but because the sender's followers can still be real life friends, it has the possibility to contribute to relationships regardless of the social media platform.

Practical Implications

Though trauma dumping videos are hard to detect on TikTok due to their untagged nature, this study can contribute to understanding how some of these videos may end up on a user's For You Page in the first place. These trauma dumping videos oftentimes follow popular trends that boost the video because of the algorithm's tendency to propel this type of content. TikTok can try to identify these videos within popular trends to maybe issue a sensitivity warning, and this may be done through random sampling. If content users take a short survey after every hundredth video asking to quickly categorize the video that they just watched, TikTok may be able to establish some sort of warning based on the original sender's content. Conversely, the same thing can easily be done with videos that share personal, traumatic information but are tagged on TikTok and other platforms. This would aid individuals in finding an online community through these tagged videos and can help the sender feel less alone in their experience. TikTok, as a platform, is unique in its user experience because the user experience is obviously, unambiguously, and explicitly driven by what is commonly called the "For You" algorithm (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). This algorithm tailors content specifically to what the user interacts with on TikTok, and the platform can use this algorithm to identify possible suicidal ideation, self harm, or any other worrying behavior. TikTok can then suggest self-help sources such as providing online resources, hotlines, or any other information that may help the user who is participating in trauma dumping behaviors.

Limitations

One of the study's limitations that slightly affected the overall outcome of the survey was due to the low number of participants qualifying for the survey. Because of this, the data

collected is sparse. Another limitation that could have affected the low sample size is the word “trauma dumping.” This term may appear to be off putting to individuals, so seeing it in the screening question may have deterred potential participants. People may have also lied in the survey because they did not want to share that they participate in the behavior of trauma dumping on TikTok, so that could have also affected the low amount of participants. In the future, a study of this nature should account for other social networking sites that may feature trauma dumping to allow for more responses. A study of this nature should also be aware of the stigma surrounding certain words and terms (i.e. trauma dumping) because it may affect the overall results.

Future studies can focus on other reasons for trauma dumping on TikTok outside of the realm of questions presented for this survey to determine if trauma dumping, generally, is a coping mechanism for its senders. Respondents for this study believe that trauma dumping is not a good way to cope, but it leaves room to wonder if it is a coping mechanism nonetheless. Future studies can also analyze possible trauma dumping in the comments section on TikTok videos because this tends to happen as well. Focusing on the content within the comments can also detail that people often participate in this behavior even if it is not in video form. Furthermore, studies may also choose to focus on the trauma dumping that happens on pictures within the platform. Instead of creating a video, TikTok users can post pictures in a slideshow format with text overlaying the images, and individuals may also trauma dump through that method.

Reference List

- Bhandari, A., & Bimo, S. (2022). Why's Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1), 1–11.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221086241>
- Botterill, J., Bredin, M., & Dun, T. (2015). Millennials' Media Use: It Is a Matter of Time. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 40(3), 537–551.
<https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2015v40n3a2884>
- CDC. (n.d.). *Coping with a Traumatic Event What Is a Traumatic Event?*
<https://www.cdc.gov/masstrauma/factsheets/public/coping.pdf>
- Colombo, C. (2021, October 2). 'Trauma dumping' is huge on TikTok, but unsolicited over-sharing can hurt everyone involved. Insider. Retrieved May 1, 2022, from <https://www.insider.com/trauma-dumping-tiktok-mental-health-experts-creators-2021-9>
- Derks, D., Fischer, A. H., & Bos, A. E. R. (2008). The role of emotion in computer-mediated communication: A review. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(3), 766–785.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2007.04.004>
- Kennedy, M. (2020). “If the rise of the TikTok dance and e-girl aesthetic has taught us anything, it's that teenage girls rule the internet right now”: TikTok celebrity, girls and the Coronavirus crisis. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(6), 136754942094534.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420945341>

- Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241–251. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.005>
- Kruök, M. E. (2021). *Algorithmic closeness in mourning: Vernaculars of the hashtag #grief on TikTok*. Retrieved April 30, 2022, from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/20563051211042396>
- Luo, M., & Hancock, J. T. (2020). Self-disclosure and social media: motivations, mechanisms and psychological well-being. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 31, 110–115. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.08.019>
- Matei, S.A. (2010) What can uses and gratifications theory tell us about social media? <http://matei.org/ithink/2010/07/29/what-can-uses-and-gratifications-theory-tell-us-about-social-media/>
- Merolli, M., Gray, K., & Martin-Sanchez, F. (2014). Therapeutic Affordances of Social Media: Emergent Themes From a Global Online Survey of People With Chronic Pain. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 16(12), e284. <https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.3494>
- Rosenberg, H., Ophir, Y., & Billig, M. (2020). OMG, R U OK? : Using Social Media to Form Therapeutic Relationships with Youth at Risk. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 105365. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105365>
- Ruggiero, T. E. (2000). Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century. *Mass Communication and Society*, 3(1), 3–37. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327825mcs0301_02

Rutledge, P. (2021). *How to Stop Trauma Dumping and Protect Your Mental Health*. Fielding Graduate University.

<https://www.fielding.edu/how-to-stop-trauma-dumping-and-protect-your-mental-health/>

Schlosser, A. E. (2020). Self-disclosure versus self-presentation on social media. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 31, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.06.025>

Singh, S., Dixit, A., & Joshi, G. (2020). “Is compulsive social media use amid COVID-19 pandemic addictive behavior or coping mechanism? *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 54, 102290. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102290>

Situmorang, D. D. B. (2021). Using TikTok App for Therapy and Sharing Happiness in COVID-19 Outbreak. *Addictive Disorders & Their Treatment, Publish Ahead of Print*. <https://doi.org/10.1097/adt.0000000000000255>

Southwick, L., Guntuku, S. C., Klinger, E. V., Seltzer, E., McCalpin, H. J., & Merchant, R. M. (2021). Characterizing COVID-19 Content Posted to TikTok: Public Sentiment and Response During the First Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 69(2), 234–241. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.05.010>

Stafford, T. F., Stafford, M. R., & Schkade, L. L. (2004). Determining Uses and Gratifications for the Internet. *Decision Sciences*, 35(2), 259–288. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.00117315.2004.02524.x>

Sujon, Z. (2018). The Triumph of Social Privacy: Understanding the Privacy Logics of Sharing Behaviors Across Social Media. *International Journal of Communication*, 3751–3771.

University of Maine. (2021, September 2). *Social Media Statistics Details - Undiscovered Maine* - University of Maine. Undiscovered Maine; University of Maine.

<https://umaine.edu/undiscoveredmaine/small-business/resources/marketing-for-small-business/social-media-tools/social-media-statistics-details/>

Unni, Z., & Weinstein, E. (2021). Shelter in Place, Connect Online: Trending TikTok Content During the Early Days of the U.S. COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 68*(5). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.02.012>

Utz, S. (2015). The function of self-disclosure on social network sites: Not only intimate, but also positive and entertaining self-disclosures increase the feeling of connection. *Computers in Human Behavior, 45*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.076>

Whiting, A., & Williams, D. (2013). *Why people use social media: A uses and gratifications approach*. Retrieved April 30, 2022, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237566776_Why_people_use_social_media_A_uses_and_gratifications_approach

Wolfers, L. N., & Utz, S. (2022). Social Media Use, Stress, and Coping. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 45*, 101305. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101305>