

Using Tiktok as an Educational Tool for Health Students

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Abstract

TikTok, a widely used social media platform, enables users to record, edit and share short videos; this technology review examines its role as a teaching and learning tool in public health (PH) education. Having observed that both foundation year and undergraduate students often struggle to grasp complex PH concepts and their wider societal relevance, I sought to help them by creating short, focused videos that would scaffold learning and enhance engagement; via TikTok, they would deliver high-quality content on contemporary and historical PH issues. I applied TikTok videos in order to: 1) to provide rapid content summaries and assessment guidance; 2) to explain complex theories such as grief models; 3) to share insights from PH experts; 4) to encourage students to use the platform in their own PH practice. My current students' feedback suggests that the TikTok method both captures their interest and makes applying their knowledge easier; I conclude that it offers much of value to health education. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the wider context in which higher education operates and the current and future influence TikTok has on people's lives both inside and outside of the classroom.

Key Words: TikTok, education, public health, foundation year, undergraduate health students

The universally popular TikTok app allows users to record videos of themselves (and others) and to edit the footage to share on social networking sites (Adnan, Ramli and Ismail, 2021). New video content continuously appears on the TikTok platform, varying in length from ten seconds up to twelve minutes. University students constitute a significant proportion of TikTok consumers (Sun, 2021). As a principal lecturer in public health education (PH), I observed that some students may struggle both to comprehend new concepts and also to grasp the relevance of these to wider society and to their own acquisition of a deeper understanding of PH. For this pedagogical reason and drawing on the popularity of TikTok as a learning technology (Bossen and Kottasz, 2020; Hayes *et al.*, 2020), I sought to scaffold students' learning and embed their knowledge by means of brief – but arguably educationally effective – videos, which can deliver good-quality content and conceptual clarity on both contemporary and past PH issues.

Via my own TikTok account, I create and share educational videos for both my students and the general public. In my teaching, I have incorporated relevant videos into my lecture slides and embedded content appropriate to PH within the modules on Blackboard. On TikTok, you can choose with whom you share your content – be it with the general public, groups of people or individuals – and you can also set the time at which it is posted and decide how long it will

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be 'live'. You do not need a TikTok account to watch such videos. For my teaching, I have deployed them in order to:

1. create content for students quickly (e.g. a summary of what PH is; assignment assessment guidance);
2. provide an educational tool for explaining complex concepts (e.g. grief theory);
3. draw on the knowledge of experts;
4. encourage students to implement the tool into their own PH practice.

Rationale

TikTok aligns with modern pedagogical principles: the appeal of short-form, visual storytelling to engage learners; it supports active and peer-driven learning; it bridges formal instruction and the digital culture with which students are already at ease (Khlaif and Salha, 2021). When students ask for assessment guidance, I can then direct them to my own explanatory video which addresses such common student concerns as: how to write the essay; what should be in the essay; what 'reflection' and 'critical analysis' mean. Students can watch as many times as they like (so freeing up academic time for other supportive purposes). On TikTok, students may engage in deeper learning by exploring a range of videos on the same topic, thereby reinforcing that learning and their understanding. As an educator, I find TikTok to be a simple and efficient platform for creating videos, offering a smoother experience than traditional university software.

TikTok videos created by other users may also give students a brief overview of health topics (e.g. health inequalities and Maslow's Hierarchy of needs) and help them to contextualise their wider understanding.

Strengths

TikTok is an effective educational tool to “*facilitate and catalyse pedagogical innovations that provide new perspectives for educators*” (Caldwell, 2018, p.50), as its short-form videos enable educators to distil complex concepts into concise, digestible segments. I think TikTok encourages educators to reimagine assessment, engagement and reflection, shifting teaching from traditional, content-driven delivery towards more participatory and socially connected learning experiences. Furthermore, as this digital approach continues to be very popular among students, it offers new and exciting learning opportunities that assist teachers in reaching out to a wider population (Fiallos, Fiallos and Figueroa, 2021). I see TikTok as a means of meeting learners on a platform that is familiar and current to them and, helpfully, to the modern world which HE is trying to navigate).

To draw on videos of experts in the field (e.g. the voices and visual representation of such key figures in health as Sir Michael Marmot and Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus) is important, because what they say may stimulate students, challenge their thoughts and make them aware of gaps in their knowledge (Tucker, 2020). These videos make learning more interesting (Scott and Stanway, 2015) and extend exploration of the topic (Marr and DeWaele, 2015); students make their own decisions as to how many times they want to watch a video or use it

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as a means of finding out more for themselves (Manning et al., 2017) and so take control over their own professional development (López-Carril, Anagnostopoulos and Parganas, 2020).

TikTok may offer pedagogical advantages over YouTube, as its videos are typically shorter, more concise and currently free from advertisements. Research suggests that short-form video formats enhance learner engagement and retention (Guo, Kim and Rubin, 2014; Li, 2021), microlearning approaches being particularly useful for sustaining attention and promoting active learning (Giannakas et al., 2018). By contrast, YouTube's longer videos and frequent advertisements interrupt viewing flow and increase cognitive load, potentially diminishing learning effectiveness (Zhou *et al.*, 2020; Wang, 2022).

Weaknesses

Despite its potential, TikTok has several limitations. Concerns include: students' attention spans may become shorter (Jargon, 2022); false or manipulative content may proliferate; the quality of information shared on the platform may vary (Khlaif and Salha, 2021). That some universities have implemented a ban on TikTok seems to reflect their institutional apprehensions about its adverse effects. As the digital literacy skills of staff – just how good are they at making videos and integrating relevant tools? – are also variable, the need for targeted training in creation of digital content, for integrating it and for devising relevant teaching strategies is obvious. Another challenge is that every student must have an electronic device with internet access and the ability to use it in order to view these videos – is this indeed the case?

Nevertheless, I argue that teaching students to engage critically with TikTok may enhance their digital literacy (as an essential graduate attribute) and may foster alignment with the key competencies outlined in the 'Public Health Skills and Knowledge Framework' (2016). Students develop these skills by actively viewing and interacting with content and some may extend their learning by producing original videos as educational tools. Generally, part of the health curriculum content is to teach students how to communicate PH information and raise awareness; TikTok can therefore be used to fulfil this current objective as these videos can reach a wide audience in a short space of time (Hayes *et al.*, 2020). Supporting students to generate content also allows them to develop their own interests and present what they are passionate about in a positive way (Shrivastava and Shrivastava, 2023). It is a means of addressing and discussing health misinformation, as in the case of unhealthy diets and products possibly harmful to health.

Student feedback

To evaluate the effectiveness of TikTok videos in this context, I conducted secondary pedagogical research by analysing comments on my TikTok posts, reviewing relevant literature and gathering in-class feedback from students. To highlight reported benefits, here are some comments on the videos I created:

"I loved the examples you used to illustrate public health initiatives – they really helped me grasp the concept. Keep up the great work!";

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“This is one of the most important and interesting topics in Public Health.”;

“Excellent explanation and an amazing profession.”

Many students also requested additional content:

“Please add more.” and “Keep them coming.”

[These comments have been summarised for confidentiality purposes. As they are drawn from the public domain, ethical approval was not necessary.]

It is important to acknowledge that much of the feedback appears to convey students' appreciation of the pedagogical approach and instructional content, rather than constituting a direct evaluation of TikTok's efficacy as a teaching instrument. Nevertheless, since I incorporated these videos within the broader design of my methodology, they are thus integral to the learning experience. The end-of-module evaluations have been similarly very positive about them.

Summary

Although more research is needed, it is evident that to provide students with innovative, creative and accessible resources might well help meet a diverse range of learning needs. Despite the limitations, there are many strengths to the application of appropriate TikTok videos, especially for explaining complex concepts and developing ideas presented by the experts. Going forward, it is important to acknowledge the wider context in which higher education operates and the current and future influence TikTok has on people's lives both inside and outside of the classroom. In short, TikTok is not just entertainment; it can be a catalyst for reimagining how we teach and learn both locally and globally.

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