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"IT'S NOT ABOUT LAZINESS, IT'S ABOUT EFFICIENCY": YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON GENERATIVE AI IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS OF TIKTOK

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Introduction

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education has sparked intense debates about its implications for learning, academic integrity, and the future of work. As AI tools become increasingly sophisticated and accessible, college students find themselves at the forefront of navigating this technological shift. To support the responsible integration of generative AI into higher education, understanding student perceptions is vital—and social media platforms represent valuable spaces for capturing these perspectives in naturalistic ways (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Literat, 2021).

This study explores how youth on TikTok conceptualize and debate the use of AI in academic contexts. By examining videos and comments around AI and higher education, we address two questions: *How do youth on TikTok talk about generative AI in educational contexts? What does this discourse reveal about young people's*

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perspectives on the educational uses and misuses of AI? Through these questions, we aim to contribute to understanding how social media platforms function as spaces for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and community building around emerging technologies (Literat, 2021; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017; Wargo, 2017).

Research Design

Data was collected using the TikTok API in July 2024. We collected videos with "AI" and "college" in their hashtags or keywords, posted between July 2023 and June 2024, with the United States as their location. From 3,374 posts collected, we sampled down to 1,000 for in-depth qualitative analysis. Twenty videos later became inaccessible, resulting in 980 videos analyzed.

We conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of the videos and their associated comments. The coding procedure was organized into four categories: a narrative summary of each video, a description of its genre, open notes regarding important aspects in light of our research questions, and a brief description of the comments. While the posts analyzed were public, we implemented additional privacy safeguards (franzke et al., 2020), excluding any identifying features in examples or screenshots.

Findings

Selling AI on TikTok: Undetectability, Speed and Grade Improvement

A striking feature of the TikTok content analyzed is the prevalence of advertisements for AI tools. Almost half of the corpus consisted of videos promoting various AI tools geared toward college students—tools that promised to generate notes from lecture recordings, summarize readings, write essays, and generate citations. Most were promoted by young people who self-identified as college students, creating a sense of peer recommendation but blurring the line between genuine user experiences and sponsored content. Despite TikTok requiring proper disclosure of commercial content, the vast majority of these promotional videos lacked appropriate labeling.

Promotional videos typically emphasized three selling points: undetectability, speed, and grade improvement. The undetectability of the AI-generated output was perhaps the most touted feature (Figure 1). Speed was another frequently mentioned benefit, with advertisements promising to "replace hours of reading in seconds" and complete tasks "in the blink of an eye", so that students can use their time for leisure (Figure 2). Finally, advertisements also touted grade improvement, and many ads featured before-and-after screenshots of students' grades, implying a direct causal relationship between AI use and academic success.

Figure 1. A promotional video using videogame imagery to pitch an AI tool for students

Figure 2. A college student shows off activities he did with time saved by using AI

As most of these advertised tools were not free, TikTokers commenting on these promotional videos—some explicitly identifying as "broke" college students—expressed worry about the potential for AI tools to exacerbate existing educational inequalities.

Conflicting Views on the Ethics of AI

The integration of AI into higher education has sparked intense debates about academic integrity and ethics. Comment sections revealed conflicting views on whether AI use constitutes cheating or serves as a legitimate learning tool:

> So fucking what!!! Nothing wrong with using tools readily accessible to complete tasks.
>
> > *[in reply]* It's not about laziness, it's about efficiency. Why spend hours on something AI can do in minutes?
> >
> > *[in reply]* But isn't the whole point of education to actually learn and develop skills?

Figure 3. A student's endorsement of ChatGPT, filmed in a campus bathroom

These discussions extended to broader questions about the purpose and value proposition of higher education in the AI era. The exchanges revealed a fundamental rift between those who viewed education as an investment in human capital (skills

development, knowledge acquisition) and those who saw it as merely a transactional credential system that can be optimized through technological shortcuts.

Anxieties, Aspirations and Community-Building around AI

A prevalent concern among students was the fear of false accusations of AI use. The widespread fear of "false positives" in AI detection reflects a growing awareness of algorithmic governance and surveillance in institutional settings, where both human and automated systems of judgment can misread digital traces.

The potential impact of AI on future job markets was another significant concern, often expressed via memes and humorous content (Figure 4). Computer science majors seemed particularly worried about the viability of their field, with some videos arguing that AI will have a devastating impact on their career prospects.

Figure 4. A meme capturing students' anxieties about AI's impact on computer science careers

Alongside these career anxieties, some TikTokers used AI technology creatively to imagine themselves in their dream jobs or to experiment with different personas. For example, a nursing student used an AI filter app to depict herself as a nurse in various professional settings and “stay motivated” in school. These creative uses of AI reflect

how youth harness platform affordances for identity exploration and self-expression (Wargo, 2017; Stahl & Literat, 2022) and represent an intriguing area for future research.

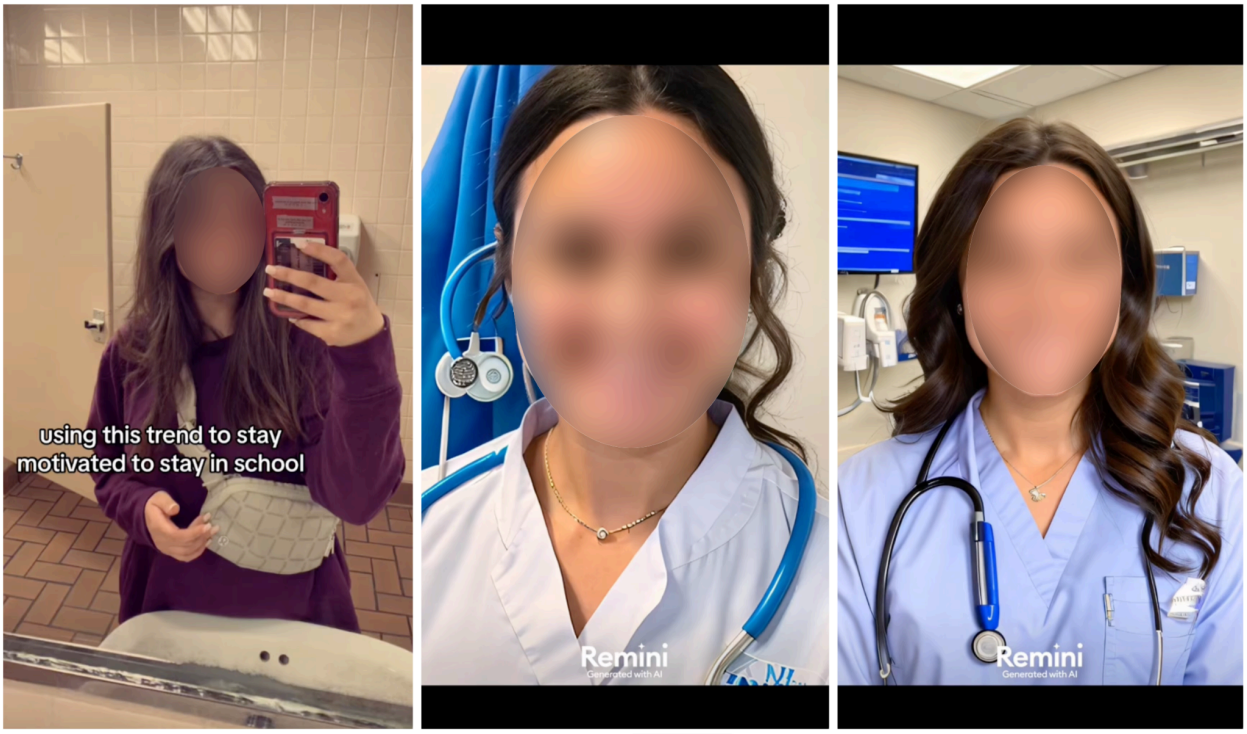

Figure 5. A nursing student uses AI for career visioning and self-motivation

Discussion

Our findings highlight several implications for internet researchers. First, the urgent need to examine how platforms like TikTok serve as sites for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing around emerging technologies. As demonstrated here, TikTok provides spaces for students to share strategies, express concerns, and form communities around AI use; here, technological expertise becomes interwoven with self-presentation and peer recognition.

Second, the equity implications of AI in education emerged as a crucial theme, with concerns about AI detection systems potentially discriminating against neurodivergent students' writing styles and frustration about the cost of AI tools echoing broader concerns about digital inequality. This highlights the importance of examining what Stornaiuolo and Thomas (2017) term "digital stratification"—the ways technological systems can reinforce existing social hierarchies while purporting to democratize access to resources and opportunities.

Third, our study reinforces that youth expression on social media, including around educational experiences, is increasingly commodified, with platform economies monetizing youth interactions and further blurring the line between genuine knowledge

sharing and commercial promotion (Lombana-Bermudez et al., 2020; Ørmen & Gregersen, 2023).

Despite limitations related to our focus on public TikTok posts from U.S. users, this approach offered a valuable window into how young people perceive and engage with generative AI. As AI continues to evolve, social media platforms will likely remain crucial spaces for discussion, debate, and community-building among youth grappling with these technological changes (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Literat, 2021). Future research might productively explore how these platform-specific discourses around AI translate into actual practices, and how they vary across different social media environments with distinct affordances and user demographics.

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