

Informal Learning

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April 4, 2024

TikTok as a Tool for Informal Learning in the Digital Age

Through the technological era, variations in learning have evolved significantly. One emerging method of learning is informal learning, often facilitated by technology. TikTok, a popular social media app, has become a powerful platform for informal learning. Initially launched as Musical.ly by Zhang Yiming in September 2016, the app was rebranded as TikTok in November 2017 and transformed into a hub for sharing short-form videos (Herman, 2019). TikTok enables users to create and consume content on a wide range of topics. Creators on the platform use visual storytelling, narrative creativity, and online culture to attract viewers (Anderson, 2020). The app's navigation system allows users to swipe vertically through videos, which are selected based on an evolving algorithm that learns from user engagement (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). This personalized algorithm increases user retention by presenting content the viewer is likely to enjoy.

TikTok's high level of user engagement stems from its participatory culture. Users can follow trends, share creative content, or build large followings. The app supports the uses and gratifications theory, suggesting users engage with media to fulfill specific needs—such as entertainment, social connection, or self-expression. Many users are drawn to TikTok to relieve stress, expand social networks, seek fame, or creatively express themselves (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). Additionally, short video consumption requires minimal cognitive effort, making the platform highly appealing (Montag et al., 2021). Its content is also easily digestible and relatable, contributing to its widespread popularity (Putri, 2021).

Informal learning is defined as learner-directed education that occurs outside of traditional classrooms and is often spontaneous or self-initiated (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016).

Unlike formal education, it does not follow a strict curriculum or institutional structure, giving learners greater flexibility. Through platforms like TikTok, users can access information quickly and explore topics that interest them in engaging formats (Halliday-Wynes & Beddie, 2009). Informal learning through social media also enhances social learning, allowing users to interact with others and exchange ideas and knowledge (Callanan & Loomis, 2011).

Although TikTok is commonly perceived as an entertainment app, it is increasingly recognized as a platform for learning. Many users discover new skills and knowledge informally through the app. For instance, English language educators have begun creating videos that support both native and non-native speakers in learning English (Yang, 2020). These videos often receive high engagement through views and saves, suggesting that learners repeatedly reference them. Educators have also begun integrating TikTok and YouTube into lesson plans to provide visual examples of academic concepts (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022). Due to the short-form video structure, learners can absorb material quickly, aiding in retention and comprehension.

First-year education students also benefit from TikTok content. Educational creators often share teaching strategies, classroom management tips, and curriculum ideas. These videos help novice teachers understand what to expect in the classroom and how to prepare effectively (Andronico et al., 2023). The platform is not limited to academic subjects; physical education teachers in Indonesia have also utilized TikTok trends to design lessons and activities. In fact, one study found that 50.2% of physical education teachers in Indonesia use TikTok to develop engaging teaching content (Sari et al., 2022).

TikTok's effectiveness in informal learning can be linked to Richard Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, which proposes that people learn better from words and pictures than from words alone (Mayer, 1992, 1998). TikTok videos typically present segmented visual and verbal content, aligning with Mayer's principles. The app's format supports deeper understanding by breaking down complex information and connecting it with culturally relevant trends. These short, multimedia-rich videos appeal to learners' visual and auditory senses and reduce cognitive overload.

Conclusion

TikTok exemplifies how social media can foster informal learning in a highly engaging and personalized manner. By reducing the pressures often associated with formal education, it promotes self-determination and intrinsic motivation. Users learn at their own pace and revisit material as needed, making the platform a valuable resource for continuous learning. Whether through language acquisition, teaching strategies, or physical education, TikTok has become an innovative tool for educators and learners alike. It demonstrates how informal learning, powered by social media, can significantly enhance teaching and learning experiences in the digital age.

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