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Living Between Screens: Rhodes College Students, Short-Form Media, and Mental Health in a
Digital Age

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Abstract

The widespread use of smartphones and algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts has raised significant concerns about their impact on mental health, especially among young people. Short-form media platforms offer highly personalized, rapidly changing content designed to maximize user engagement, which often results in extended and compulsive viewing. Research indicates strong connections between short-form media use and various mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, addictive behaviors, cognitive overload, and emotional exhaustion.¹ Oxford University's choice of "brain rot" as its 2024 Word of the Year² highlights the increasing awareness of the mental and emotional effects of constant media exposure. While studies from the Pew Research Center emphasize the broader implications of short-form media,³ less is known about how these effects develop within specific groups, particularly college students balancing academic demands, social pressures, and personal growth in an era of nonstop digital consumption.

This study, *"Living Between Screens: Rhodes College Students, Short-Form Media, and Mental Health in a Digital Age,"* addresses that gap through a mixed-methods approach, combining a campus-wide survey with seven semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal recurring patterns of time distortion, procrastination, attention fragmentation, emotional fatigue, and social comparison. Using behavioral addiction models, reinforcement theory, and flow

¹ Daniyal et al., "The Impact of Social Media and Technology on Mental Health.," Rainie & Anderson, "The Future of Well-Being in a Tech-Saturated World."

² Oxford University Press, "Brain Rot Named Oxford Word of the Year 2024."

³ Anderson, Monica, Michelle Faverio, and Eugenie Park. "How Teens and Parents Approach Screen Time.," Faverio, Michelle, and Olivia Sidoti "Teens, Social Media, and Technology 2024."

theory, the research explains how short-form content mimics variable-reward conditioning, changing perceptions of time and self-worth.

This study offers a localized, qualitative perspective that complements existing quantitative data and highlights the importance of more deliberate and mindful engagement with digital media. It also highlights the importance of developing both institutional and individual strategies to promote digital wellness in college settings.

KEYWORDS

short-form media, TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, smartphones, mental health, anxiety, depression, procrastination, intrusive thinking, social comparison, fear of missing out, FoMO, attention, time distortion, behavioral addiction, algorithms, flow theory, reinforcement theory, self-presentation theory, Rhodes College

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of technology and the internet has dramatically transformed how people spend their time, communicate, and engage with the world. One of the most significant developments in this shift has been the emergence of short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. These platforms are characterized by brief, context-changing videos that typically have durations ranging from 15 seconds to 3 minutes, with most lasting under 1 minute.⁴ Short-form videos are personalized through unique algorithms and presented through infinite scrolling mechanisms, allowing users to swipe or scroll up and down

⁴ Yang, Yi, Ru-De Liu, Yi Ding, Jingmin Lin, Zien Ding, and Xiantong Yang. "Time Distortion"; Xie, Jing, Xiaomei Xu, Yuzhou Zhang, Yifan Tan, Di Wu, Meng Shi, and Huiling Huang. "The Effect of Short-Form Video Addiction"

to navigate between videos. As users scroll through an endless feed, new videos are seamlessly loaded, offering intermittent rewards in the form of entertaining, emotionally satisfying, or socially relevant content. This design allows effortless and sustained engagement.

Although short-form videos existed as early as 2013 with Vine, the format was popularized by TikTok's launch in 2016 and has been adopted by nearly every major social media platform, including Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter).⁵ These platforms offer a range of potential benefits with the addition of short-form videos, including mental stimulation, creativity, self-expression, social connection, and even fame or monetization. However, beneath the surface lies a business model engineered to maximize attention and engagement. Facebook's founding president, Sean Parker, admitted that Facebook's goal was to answer one question: "How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?"⁶ This same logic drives short-form media platforms today, often with little regard for the psychological and emotional effects on their users.

While the effects of social media use on mental health have been widely studied over the past years,⁷ short-form video platforms may pose an even greater risk due to their unique design features. The brevity of content, infinite scrolling mechanisms, and algorithmic personalization enable users to consume extensive amounts of media in short periods, often without realizing

⁵ Al-Leimon, O., W. Pan, A.-R. Jaber, A. Al-Leimon, A. R. Jaber, M. Aljahalin, and L. A. Dardas. "Reels to Remembrance," 3.

⁶ Newport, Cal. *Digital Minimalism*, 19.

⁷ Braghieri, Luca, Ro'ee Levy, and Alexey Makarin.; Choudhury, Sourav, Nikita D'Cruz, Joy Deb, Samiul Biswas, Mahatma Gandhi, and Antarrashtriya Vishwavidyalaya. "Exploring the Association Between Social Media; "Social Media and Mental Health."; Daniyal et al., "The Impact of Social Media and Technology on Mental Health."; Islam, Md Mujahidul, Faysal Ahmed, Mohammad Anowarul Kabir, and Md. Raseel Ahmed. "The Impact of Short Video Content."; Rainie & Anderson, "The Future of Well-Being in a Tech-Saturated World."

how much time has passed.⁸ Additionally, platforms encourage engagement by promoting user participation in viral “challenges” centered around dances, trends, or memes. These forms of interaction increase time spent on the app and reinforce competitive and performative behaviors. As users seek validation or trending status, they are drawn into cycles of repeated engagement that mirror addictive behaviors. Over time, this can lead to compulsive usage patterns, withdrawal symptoms when not using the platforms, and pressure to stay visible and online.

Rather than framing short-form media as inherently harmful or beneficial, this study examines its nuanced psychological and behavioral effects, including anxiety, distraction, time distortion, social comparison, and procrastination, alongside emerging patterns of compulsive and habitual use. This research focuses specifically on Rhodes College students, whose developmental stage and lifestyle make them particularly vulnerable to the effects of short-form media. Flexible schedules, academic pressures, frequent internet use, and a deep integration of online life into campus culture make college students vulnerable to prolonged media exposure.⁹ For many students, maintaining an online presence is essential for self-expression, social connection, and participation in student life. The fear of missing out (FoMO) exacerbates these dynamics, prompting frequent checking of platforms to stay up-to-date with trends, friends’ activities, and conversations.¹⁰

This behavior often persists even when it yields little satisfaction and sometimes leads to emotional fatigue or distress. The widespread phenomenon of “doomscrolling,” where users

⁸ Al-Leimon, O., W. Pan, A.-R. Jaber, A. Al-Leimon, A. R. Jaber, M. Aljahalin, and L. A. Dardas. “Reels to Remembrance”, 8.

⁹ Choudhury, Sourav, Nikita D’Cruz, Joy Deb, Samiul Biswas, Mahatma Gandhi, and Antarrashtriya Vishwavidyalaya. “Exploring the Association Between Social Media,” 153.

¹⁰ Åskaree, Nora, Nazish Zaman, and Saira Khan. “Time Distortion and Media Fatigue,” 999.; Braghieri, Luca, Ro’ee Levy, and Alexey Makarin. “Social Media and Mental Health,” 3685.

compulsively consume content even when it evokes anxiety, fatigue, or emotional distress, has been shown to undermine mental health significantly.¹¹ These dynamics place college students at heightened risk for anxiety, sleep disruption, reduced focus, and emotional and mental exhaustion, challenges that are often invisible but felt deeply.

Although this research focuses on the mental health of Rhodes College students, it raises broader questions about life in an always-connected, screen-mediated world. *Living Between Screens* refers to the dual reality in which many of us now live, one shaped by both physical presence and persistent digital engagement. We spend many of our waking hours immersed in the technological world rather than reality, where we can establish and build genuine connections with ourselves, others, and the world around us. There is a subtle promise that the more technology — TVs, phones, laptops, devices, and apps — we have and use, the more convenience, connection, and joy we will experience. The more we consume, the better we will feel. Is that really the case?

The central question guiding this research is: *How does short-form media consumption impact the mental health of Rhodes College students?* This question is both academically significant and personally meaningful, and it is also timely and socially relevant. As the findings will show, the impacts are real and deserve careful attention.

1.1 Significance of Study

While a growing body of national and international research has explored the psychological effects of short-form media, much of this work relies on quantitative data and generalized findings. These studies often fail to account for the nuanced ways in which specific populations, particularly college students, navigate and experience short-form media in their

¹¹ Åskaree, Nora, Nazish Zaman, and Saira Khan. "Time Distortion and Media Fatigue," 999.; Rodrigues, Elizabeth Victor. "Doomscrolling."

everyday lives. This study fills that gap by focusing on a single, localized population: students at Rhodes College, a liberal arts institution where academic pressures, social expectations, and digital saturation intersect in complex ways. By investigating how Rhodes students perceive and understand the emotional and psychological consequences of their engagement with platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, this study provides a qualitative lens that complements existing research. It explores themes such as time distortion, procrastination, anxiety, and digital fatigue. This research is vital, emerging in the context of growing public concern over algorithmic manipulation, attention fragmentation, and the erosion of offline social engagement. Platforms optimized for compulsive interaction have become embedded in students' academic routines, social interactions, and moments of rest, raising critical concerns about autonomy, well-being, and digital resilience. Ultimately, *Living Between Screens* contributes to the broader conversation on digital wellness by grounding it in lived experiences.

The study's findings may inform educators, mental health professionals, and campus administrators seeking to develop more responsive and empathetic support structures. It also aims to empower students by helping them better understand the psychological dynamics of their digital environments.

1.2 Why This Topic?

Growing up in the digital age meant screens were a natural part of my life. I began playing video games around the age of eight, and over time, what started as a hobby gradually consumed my attention, becoming something I emotionally depended on. By elementary and early high school, I found myself daydreaming about games during class, completing homework, and studying not out of motivation for satisfactory scores or learning, but as a means to earn

more time to play. Over time, this dependency evolved into a broader addiction, not just to gaming, but to entertainment, and eventually to short-form media platforms.

By high school and into college, my routines became increasingly shaped by these patterns. After completing classes and extracurriculars, I would spend hours scrolling through content, often feeling drained, unmotivated, and disconnected. Even basic daily tasks, such as showering or completing schoolwork, began to feel overwhelming. This experience sparked a desire not only to break free from these compulsive habits but also to understand them more deeply and find meaningful solutions for myself and others.

Throughout the research process, I grappled with many of the same issues explored in the study. I struggled with procrastination, often linked to the constant temptation of short-form media and dating apps. I found myself repeatedly deleting and reinstalling platforms like TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Tinder, Hinge, and Grindr, going through a cycle of hope, distraction, and disappointment. I experienced many of the same emotions described by the participants in this study: fatigue, stress, anxiety, guilt, and shame.

This research is therefore deeply personal. It is both a scholarly investigation and a reflection of my own lived experience, an attempt to make sense of the forces shaping our digital lives. It contributes to a broader conversation about how technology affects our well-being and how we may be drifting further from genuine connection with ourselves, others, and the world around us in a world of constant digital engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Short-form media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts have significantly altered the way young adults consume content. The launch of TikTok, popularizing short-form videos, has led to increased engagement and screen time among users. While these

short-form videos provide entertainment and social connection, they may also contribute to symptoms of anxiety and depression, intrusive and negative thinking, procrastination, fatigue, fogginess, time distortion, social comparison, decreased attention span, focus, productivity, and self-esteem, poor sleep quality and emotional regulation, and the inability to be in the present moment.

The literature review examines the interconnection between short-form media and smartphone usage within the context of mental health. This section synthesizes findings from recent research to identify trends, challenges, and opportunities that have emerged in the evolving digital media landscape. Through a critical appraisal of existing studies, this section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving the success of short-form video platforms and their impact on specific mental health concerns.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical frameworks to explore how short-form media affects the mental health of college students: Behavioral Addiction and Reinforcement Theory, Time Perception and Flow Theory, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Self-Presentation Theory. Together, these frameworks help illustrate the psychological mechanisms and sociocultural pressures that shape students' media habits and their emotional and behavioral outcomes.

2.1.1 Behavioral Addiction and Reinforcement Theory

Short-form media platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, are deliberately designed to capture and hold users' attention through behavioral reinforcement mechanisms. These platforms can be understood as modern-day Skinner boxes, as they replicate the core mechanisms of operant conditioning described by B.F. Skinner. B.F. Skinner was an

American psychologist who, in the 1930s, studied how behavior is shaped by rewards and punishments, developing a theory known as operant conditioning.¹² Put simply, operant conditioning is when a behavior is influenced by its consequences. If an action brings a reward, we are more likely to repeat it. If it brings no reward or punishment, we are less likely to repeat it.¹³

To illustrate, consider a simplified Skinner box experiment involving three mice. Mouse 1 is placed in a box with a button that reliably dispenses food upon being pressed. It quickly learns to press the button whenever it is hungry, knowing that a reward (food) will follow. Mouse 2 experiences the opposite condition; pressing the button never yields food, so it quickly stops engaging with the mechanism. Mouse 3, however, only receives food some of the time when pressing the button. This intermittent reinforcement, also known as a variable ratio schedule, produces the most persistent behavior. Mouse 3 continues pressing the button compulsively, driven by the possibility of a reward despite the lack of consistency. This behavioral model closely mirrors the user interaction with short-form media. Short-form media platforms operate on a similar variable ratio reinforcement structure where users continuously scroll in search of unpredictable and intermittent content “rewards” such as funny, emotionally resonating, or algorithmically tailored videos that offer momentary gratification.

Much like Mouse 3, users are conditioned to keep engaging despite not every swipe delivering satisfaction. This result creates a powerful cue-action-reward loop, where feelings like boredom or stress (cue) lead to opening the app and scrolling (action), which occasionally

¹² Skinner, B. F. *The Behavior of Organisms*

¹³ McLeod, Saul. "Operant Conditioning: What It Is."; McLeod, Saul. "Skinner Box: What Is An Operant Conditioning Chamber?"

delivers a dopamine-triggering post (reward). Over time, this conditioning can lead to habitual and even compulsive use, as the unpredictability of the reward triggers a dopaminergic state,¹⁴ reinforcing the habit of both continuous scrolling and returning to the platform. To think about it in another way, scrolling through short-form media feeds mimics pulling a lever on a slot machine. Every swipe brings the possibility of a jackpot, an engaging video, a viral meme, or a heartwarming and emotional story. This continuous scrolling is often accompanied by time distortion and a reduced sense of control over one's behavior. In this way, short-form media platforms function as digital Skinner boxes. They are designed environments for behavioral reinforcement optimized through algorithmically personalized techniques to maximize attention and engagement.¹⁵

2.1.2 Time Perception and Flow Theory

Short-form media is particularly effective at distorting users' perception of time. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory,¹⁶ immersive activities can lead individuals into a psychological state known as *flow*, where they become deeply engaged and lose track of time. This is often referred to as being "in the zone." While this state is typically associated with creative, athletic, or productive pursuits, short-form media can simulate similar experiences by offering a constant stream of stimulating, easy-to-consume content.

This immersive quality often causes users to underestimate the amount of time they spend on these platforms. What feels like a few minutes of scrolling can easily turn into hours.

¹⁴ Āskaree, Nora, Nazish Zaman, and Saira Khan. "Time Distortion and Media Fatigue," 999.

¹⁵ Āskaree, Nora, Nazish Zaman, and Saira Khan. "Time Distortion and Media Fatigue," 999, 1001, 1012.; Islam, Md Mujahidul, Faysal Ahmed, Mohammad Anowarul Kabir, and Md. Rasel Ahmed. "The Impact of Short Video Content," 1-2.

¹⁶ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.

This phenomenon, known as time distortion, is reflected in popular sayings such as “five minutes on TikTok, one hour in real life” or “time flies when you’re having fun.”¹⁷ Time distortion, which is the misjudgment of how long an activity lasts, leads to either underestimating or overestimating its duration.¹⁸ The short, fragmented nature of these videos keeps users in a loop of perceived productivity or relaxation, even as time slips away.

This time distortion can significantly impact college students, who often manage complex schedules and numerous academic responsibilities. Many participants in this study described feeling guilt, anxiety, shame, and regret after realizing how much time they had lost to scrolling. These emotional reactions were worsened by academic stress, missed deadlines, and the feeling of falling behind. In this way, short-form media consumes time and actively interferes with students’ time management, emotional regulation, and overall well-being.

2.1.3 Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and Self-Presentation Theory

The Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and Self-Presentation Theory help explain the social and emotional aspects of using short-form media. College students are in highly social settings where visibility, popularity, and participation in shared cultural trends are critical. Erving Goffman¹⁹ suggests that people constantly manage how others see them through performances in both public and private life. This performance is intensified on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, as users craft their digital identities and evaluate their worth based on likes, views, shares, and follower counts. At the same time, FoMO is described as the anxiety stemming from the worry that others are having rewarding experiences without them. This often results in

¹⁷ Yang, Yi, Ru-De Liu, Yi Ding, Jingmin Lin, Zien Ding, and Xiantong Yang. “Time Distortion,” 2.

¹⁸ Yang, Yi, Ru-De Liu, Yi Ding, Jingmin Lin, Zien Ding, and Xiantong Yang. “Time Distortion,” 2.

¹⁹ Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

frequent and compulsive scrolling as “users desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing” and wish to avoid being left out of popular trends and conversations.²⁰ For many students, the combined pressure of self-presentation and social comparison leads to increased emotional instability, including anxiety, stress, and lower self-esteem.

These theoretical lenses offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological and behavioral effects of short-form media use among college students. By examining how platform design, attention, social dynamics, and identity performance interact, this study aims to explore the complexity of digital life on campus and its implications for student well-being.

2.2 Short-Form Video Addiction (SFVA)

Short-form video addiction (SFVA) is a behavioral addiction characterized by the persistent and compulsive use of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts in ways that interfere with users’ daily functioning, emotional regulation, time management, and overall well-being. Defined as a subcategory of internet and social media addiction, SFVA involves continuous cravings, difficulty limiting use, and reliance on short-form content for emotional or psychological relief.²¹

Research has shown strong associations between SFVA and a range of negative outcomes, including academic procrastination, anxiety, poor sleep quality, social anxiety, and

²⁰ Przybylski, Andrew K., Kou Murayama, Cody R. DeHaan, and Valerie Gladwell. “Motivational, Emotional, and Behavioral Correlates of Fear of Missing Out.”

²¹ Caponnetto, Pasquale, Ines Lanzafame, Graziella Chiara Prezzavento, Shatha Rawashdeh, Mahmoud Ali Moussa, and Abdalnaser Fakhrou. “Understanding Problematic TikTok Use,”; Jiang, L., and Y. Yoo. “Adolescents’ Short-Form Video Addiction and Sleep,”; Xie, Jing, Xiaomei Xu, Yuzhou Zhang, Yifan Tan, Di Wu, Meng Shi, and Huiling Huang. “The Effect of Short-Form Video Addiction”

diminished cognitive control.²² College students are particularly vulnerable due to their high rates of technology use, flexible schedules, and frequent academic stressors. Many students turn to short-form video content for immediate gratification and stress relief, particularly when facing demanding tasks such as studying or writing assignments.

This compulsive engagement often manifests in habitual behaviors such as frequent checking of apps, doomscrolling between classes or during breaks, and using media during late-night hours before bed, times typically reserved for rest. These patterns contribute to sleep disturbances, increased emotional distress, and a disruption of academic focus.²³

Additionally, SFVA compounds the broader symptoms and effects of social media addiction, including increased depression, lower academic engagement, reduced self-esteem, and impaired interpersonal relationships.²⁴ Individuals with SFVA often prioritize online engagement over real-world interactions, experience body image concerns, and report decreased life satisfaction. These symptoms not only impact emotional health but also diminish motivation, increase self-criticism, and reduce the capacity to complete academic and personal goals.

Short-form video addiction presents a multidimensional risk to student mental health, driven by powerful behavioral reinforcement mechanisms and intensified by the accessibility of mobile technology.

²² Caponnetto, Pasquale, Ines Lanzafame, Graziella Chiara Prezzavento, Shatha Rawashdeh, Mahmoud Ali Moussa, and Abdalnaser Fakhrou. "Understanding Problematic TikTok Use," 12.; Xie, Jing, Xiaomei Xu, Yuzhou Zhang, Yifan Tan, Di Wu, Meng Shi, and Huiling Huang. "The Effect of Short-Form Video Addiction," 2.

²³ Jiang, L., and Y. Yoo. "Adolescents' Short-Form Video Addiction and Sleep,"; Xie, Jing, Xiaomei Xu, Yuzhou Zhang, Yifan Tan, Di Wu, Meng Shi, and Huiling Huang. "The Effect of Short-Form Video Addiction"

²⁴ Choudhury, Sourav, Nikita D'Cruz, Joy Deb, Samiul Biswas, Mahatma Gandhi, and Antarrashtriya Vishwavidyalaya. "Exploring the Association," 148.; Landa-Blanco, Miguel, Yarell Reyes García, Ana Lucía Landa-Blanco, Antonio Cortés-Ramos, and Eddy Paz-Maldonado. "Social Media Addiction," 1.

2.3 Procrastination

Procrastination plays a significant role in the use and impact of short-form media among college students. It is necessary to distinguish procrastination from strategic delay. Strategic delay refers to the intentional postponement of tasks for valid reasons, such as prioritizing more urgent responsibilities. Procrastination is defined as “the tendency to voluntarily and irrationally delay intended activities despite expecting negative consequences as a result of the delay.”²⁵ This form of delay is widely considered dysfunctional and is primarily attributed to self-regulatory failure, rather than conscious planning.²⁶

Procrastination is a common behavioral issue that can hinder academic, professional, and personal growth.²⁷ Existing research indicates that short-form media is a significant factor in this behavior.²⁸ Platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts are especially problematic because of their endless scrolling, algorithm-driven content, and highly engaging, bite-sized videos. These features can easily cause users to spend long periods avoiding work and losing focus.

Several psychological mediators further explain this relationship. Fatigue and intrusive thoughts hinder students’ ability to concentrate and participate in academic tasks. Students are more likely to postpone their responsibilities as their mental energy and cognitive resources

²⁵ Jochmann, Ann-Kathrin, Beate Gusy, Timo Lesener, and Renate Soellner. “Procrastination, Depression and Anxiety Symptoms in University Students,” 2.

²⁶ Jochmann, Ann-Kathrin, Beate Gusy, Timo Lesener, and Renate Soellner. “Procrastination, Depression and Anxiety Symptoms in University Students,” 2.

²⁷ Åskaree, Nora, Nazish Zaman, and Saira Khan. “Time Distortion and Media Fatigue,” 1013, 999.

²⁸ Åskaree, Nora, Nazish Zaman, and Saira Khan. “Time Distortion and Media Fatigue,” 1013.; Choudhury, Sourav, Nikita D’Cruz, Joy Deb, Samiul Biswas, Mahatma Gandhi, and Antarrashtriya Vishwavidyalaya. “Exploring the Association,” 158-9.; Jochmann, Ann-Kathrin, Beate Gusy, Timo Lesener, and Renate Soellner. “Procrastination, Depression and Anxiety Symptoms in University Students,” 8.

decline.²⁹ Additionally, boredom proneness has been identified as a mediator between short-form media addiction and decreased attentional control, which further contributes to academic procrastination (Xie et al., 2023, 7–8).³⁰

Short-form media use can also worsen existing mental health issues. High levels of stress, anxiety, and boredom increase vulnerability to short-form media addiction, which then reinforces procrastinatory behavior.³¹ In these situations, media use becomes a form of emotional avoidance or “emotional pacifier,” ultimately intensifying the original emotional distress.

To better understand these patterns, we can revisit reinforcement theory and the idea of behavioral addiction, as shown by Mouse 3 in the Skinner box example. Students often go through a cue-action-reward cycle: they feel emotional discomfort (cue), open TikTok or Instagram Reels and start scrolling (action), and get occasional positive reinforcement from funny, soothing, or stimulating content (reward). While this cycle temporarily eases discomfort, it strengthens harmful behaviors and delays engagement with meaningful or productive activities.

Short-form media platforms both cause and result from procrastination among college students. While they provide temporary relief from stress and academic pressures, they ultimately create a dependency that worsens time management, attention, and emotional resilience, exacerbating the very issues they attempted to escape.

²⁹ Choudhury, Sourav, Nikita D'Cruz, Joy Deb, Samiul Biswas, Mahatma Gandhi, and Antarrashtriya Vishwavidyalaya. “Exploring the Association,” 160.

³⁰ Xie, Jing, Xiaomei Xu, Yuzhou Zhang, Yifan Tan, Di Wu, Meng Shi, and Huiling Huang. “The Effect of Short-Form Video Addiction,” 7-8.

³¹ Jochmann, Ann-Kathrin, Beate Gusy, Timo Lesener, and Renate Soellner. “Procrastination, Depression and Anxiety Symptoms in University Students,” 8-9.; Landa-Blanco, Miguel, Yarell Reyes García, Ana Lucía Landa-Blanco, Antonio Cortés-Ramos, and Eddy Paz-Maldonado. “Social Media Addiction,” 5.

2.4 Ease of Use With Smartphones

The accessibility and portability of smartphones have fundamentally changed how people interact with digital content, especially short-form videos. Smartphones now account for over 80% of global social media traffic, enabling users to easily connect with platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts.³² This broad access allows users to consume content anytime and anywhere, whether between classes and work, before bed, during meals, or while commuting, thereby embedding media consumption into their daily routines.

The constant access to smartphones encourages habitual use, as users are just a few taps away from personalized, algorithm-driven content. This simple access fosters continuous engagement, raising the chances of overuse and increasing potential adverse psychological effects like distraction, dependency, and emotional exhaustion.³³ The portable nature of short-form media not only fuels its addictive design but also blurs the lines between leisure, work, and rest, making it harder for users, especially college students, to control their media habits and stay focused on non-digital activities.³⁴

2.5 Impact of Algorithms

The success of short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts mainly relies on their algorithmic personalization systems, which are

³² Braghieri, Luca, Ro'ee Levy, and Alexey Makarin. "Social Media and Mental Health," 3689.; Islam, Md Mujahidul, Faysal Ahmed, Mohammad Anowarul Kabir, and Md. Rasel Ahmed. "The Impact of Short Video Content," 4.

³³ Choudhury, Sourav, Nikita D'Cruz, Joy Deb, Samiul Biswas, Mahatma Gandhi, and Antarrashtriya Vishwavidyalaya. "Exploring the Association Between Social Media," 147.

³⁴ Islam, Md Mujahidul, Faysal Ahmed, Mohammad Anowarul Kabir, and Md. Rasel Ahmed. "The Impact of Short Video Content," 7-8.

“specifically designed to maximize user engagement.”³⁵ These algorithms analyze user behavior, including likes, shares, watch time, and search history, to create highly tailored content feeds.³⁶ Incorporating short-form video into digital marketing highlights a brand's ability to “engage audiences, enhance brand visibility, and foster consumer trust.”³⁷ Cal Newport’s *Digital Minimalism* resonates with growing worries about the persuasive power of this design. Newport mentions Sean Parker, Facebook’s founding president, who revealed the platform’s core goal: “How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?”³⁸ This question highlights the fundamental design of social media and short-form media platforms, as algorithms and content are fine-tuned to exploit user vulnerabilities for maximum engagement and profit. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube enhance user interaction through features that boost emotional appeal and human relatability.³⁹ Engagement metrics, such as likes and shares, demonstrate user connection, with shares indicating a deeper level of connection by actively promoting content to one’s social network. These strategies are particularly effective on platforms designed for quick and continuous scrolling, where content must immediately capture attention.⁴⁰ This design contributes to the addictive nature of these platforms, particularly during

³⁵ Al-Leimon, O., W. Pan, A.-R. Jaber, A. Al-Leimon, A. R. Jaber, M. Aljahalin, and L. A. Dardas. “Reels to Remembrance,” 2.

³⁶ Islam, Md Mujahidul, Faysal Ahmed, Mohammad Anowarul Kabir, and Md. Rasel Ahmed. “The Impact of Short Video Content,” 2, 8.

³⁷ Islam, Md Mujahidul, Faysal Ahmed, Mohammad Anowarul Kabir, and Md. Rasel Ahmed. “The Impact of Short Video Content,” 1.

³⁸ Newport, Cal. *Digital Minimalism*, 19.

³⁹ Islam, Md Mujahidul, Faysal Ahmed, Mohammad Anowarul Kabir, and Md. Rasel Ahmed. “The Impact of Short Video Content,”.; Xie, Jing, Xiaomei Xu, Yuzhou Zhang, Yifan Tan, Di Wu, Meng Shi, and Huiling Huang. “The Effect of Short-Form Video Addiction,” 2.

⁴⁰ Islam, Md Mujahidul, Faysal Ahmed, Mohammad Anowarul Kabir, and Md. Rasel Ahmed. “The Impact of Short Video Content,” 6.

peak times such as commuting, lunch breaks, and late nights, when users are most susceptible to distraction.⁴¹ The intrusion of short-form media into these daily moments, meant for rest and social connection, reflects a broader cultural shift toward continuous digital consumption. This shift has been linked to negative mental health effects, including stress, fatigue, and social disconnection. Additionally, algorithms utilize sensitive user data, such as location, browsing history, and interaction patterns, which raises serious ethical and privacy concerns.⁴²

3. METHOD

This study began with a review of existing literature to establish a foundation in the current academic discourse surrounding digital media, behavioral addiction, and mental health. To gain deeper insight into the lived experiences of students, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted. These interviews encouraged participants to reflect on their personal relationships with short-form media, offering a qualitative and more intimate perspective that compliments and extends existing research. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, initially contacted by personal contacts, and additional participants were identified through snowball sampling as interviewees referred their peers.

A campus-wide survey was developed and distributed to capture a broader range of student perspectives. The survey combined both quantitative items and open-ended qualitative questions, allowing respondents to express their thoughts, behaviors, and emotional responses in their own words. These mixed methods provided a more comprehensive and nuanced

⁴¹ Islam, Md Mujahidul, Faysal Ahmed, Mohammad Anowarul Kabir, and Md. Rasel Ahmed. "The Impact of Short Video Content," 6.

⁴² Islam, Md Mujahidul, Faysal Ahmed, Mohammad Anowarul Kabir, and Md. Rasel Ahmed. "The Impact of Short Video Content," 8.

understanding of how short-form media consumption is shaping the mental health and daily experiences of Rhodes College students.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Interview participants were guided through a series of open-ended questions designed to explore the psychological, cognitive, behavioral, and social aspects of short-form media (SFM) use. The qualitative design focused on drawing out personal narratives and lived experiences to reveal underlying patterns, perceptions, and emotional outcomes. The following categories emerged from the semi-structured interviews:

- 1) **Media Use Habits:** Daily engagement patterns, platform preferences (TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts), duration of use, and situational contexts (e.g., before bed, during study breaks).
- 2) **Time Perception and Distortion:** Reports of unintentional extended use, perceived time loss, and reduced awareness during scrolling sessions.
- 3) **Academic Behavior and Procrastination:** Effects on motivation, task initiation, deadline avoidance, and the use of SFM as an academic distraction or reward.
- 4) **Cognitive Function:** Self-reported effects on attention span, mental fatigue, overstimulation, and difficulty shifting from highly engaging media to more demanding academic tasks.
- 5) **Emotional and Psychological States:** Feelings of anxiety, depression symptoms, shame, guilt, emotional numbness, and overall fatigue associated with prolonged SFM use.
- 6) **Self-Perception and Social Comparison:** Changes in self-esteem and identity influenced by exposure to idealized online personas and highlight reels.

- 7) Fear of Missing Out (FoMO): Social pressure to stay constantly updated and engaged, combined with compulsive checking behaviors driven by fear of exclusion.
- 8) Addiction and Control: Patterns of compulsive use, unsuccessful reduction attempts, timer bypassing, and the influence of algorithmic reinforcement and platform design in sustaining user engagement.
- 9) Social Connection and Community: The role of SFM in maintaining relationships, fostering group interactions, and the paradox of feeling both connected and isolated.
- 10) Coping and Emotional Regulation: Using SFM as a main way to distract, escape, or avoid emotions, often instead of healthier coping skills.
- 11) Resilience and Intentionality: User-driven strategies for managing consumption, such as app deletion, time limits, content curation, and deliberate usage habits.
- 12) Positive Feelings and Fulfillment: Moments of true joy, emotional impact, or inspiration, especially from motivational, wholesome, or educational content.
- 13) Campus Culture and Peer Norms: Perceptions of how SFM use aligns with or diverges from broader student behaviors, norms, and expectations within the Rhodes College community.

This comprehensive scope allowed for a more detailed understanding of SFM's impact on students' daily lives, capturing both harmful and positive aspects. The analysis uncovered interconnected emotional, academic, and social effects, emphasizing the complexity of students' relationships with short-form media.

To supplement the qualitative findings, a brief mixed-methods survey was distributed through Microsoft Forms, featuring multiple-choice, ranking, and open-ended questions designed to reflect the themes explored in the interviews. A total of 11 students responded. While the

survey responses provided valid supporting data, they lacked the depth and narrative richness of the semi-structured interviews.

5. RESULTS

The findings from interviews and survey responses reveal a complex and often conflicting relationship between students and short-form media. Most participants reported daily usage of 2 to 4 hours, with some exceeding 10 hours, especially during free time. Students often turned to short-form media as a form of emotional comfort, using it to avoid boredom, stress, and complicated emotions or tasks. This coping strategy often backfired, leading to time distortion, where short breaks turned into hours of scrolling, increasing procrastination, emotional confusion, and higher stress levels.

Participants described the fragmented, fast-paced nature of short-form media as mentally exhausting, causing emotional numbness, social comparison, and cognitive fatigue. The algorithmic design of these platforms, with infinite scrolling and personalized content, strengthened compulsive usage patterns. Even though students recognized its harmful effects, they often struggled to control their behavior, often ignoring screen time limits or reinstalling deleted apps.

While short-form media helps maintain social ties through shared content, most students acknowledged that these interactions lacked depth. Despite this, many felt intense pressure to stay engaged with trends, peer activities, and online culture, which reinforced a sense of obligation to remain constantly connected; consequently, this increased engagement worsened negative emotional and psychological effects.

5.1 Time Distortion and Loss of Awareness

A key theme across interview and survey responses was how short-form media distorts users' perception of time. Almost all participants found it hard to keep track of time while scrolling and often described entering a trance-like state where short breaks turned into longer, intentional sessions. What started as a quick five-minute distraction frequently grew into 30 minutes, an hour, or even several hours of continuous scrolling without realizing it. Participants expressed feeling “pulled in,” with one saying they felt trapped in a rabbit hole and kept scrolling because they had lost track of time.

“I just scroll for a little bit, then a little bit becomes a little more than I would expect. I’ve already got into this rabbit hole, [so] I might as well keep falling in it. So I keep scrolling. Yeah, time definitely passes way more quickly than I would like it to whenever I use short-form media.” - Paul

“I’m taking a break, and I go on short-form media like TikTok or Instagram, and I can’t believe 30 minutes just passed.” - Georgia

“It feels like my time is slipping away, in a way that I feel helpless to stop.” - Student

Several students expressed disbelief and frustration at how quickly time passed. Some revealed that they only realized this after long sessions of passive consumption. These extended sessions often led to self-critical reflection, intrusive thoughts, guilt, shame, and regret, with students questioning their time management or feeling disoriented by how easily time slipped away unnoticed.

“I would just watch, then I would be on my phone, and I look at the clock, and four hours had passed by, and it feels like I just wasted so much time...then I feel bummed out about it and still repeat the cycle [scroll].” - Maxie

Time distortion led to emotional and behavioral effects. Many reported feelings of guilt, shame, and regret after long scrolling sessions, especially when lost time disrupted studying, sleep, or other responsibilities. Participants often mentioned fatigue and mental exhaustion as side effects of extended use, worsening their sense of losing control. They frequently realized they had wasted valuable time only after encountering low-quality or meaningless content, which prompted a moment of clarity and usually caused them to stop.

“It reminds me that I need to manage my time better. Most long scrolling sessions will end when I watch a video that is so stupid that I think to myself, “what am I doing with my life?” and put the phone down.” - Student

Participants linked this pattern to disruptions in their daily routines and academic responsibilities. Time distortion not only decreased the time available for studying or completing tasks but also caused emotional distress, making it harder to shift back into productive states. Despite knowing these effects, participants found it challenging to disengage at the moment, citing the immersive and addictive design of short-form media platforms as a significant factor in their compulsive use.

This persistent sense of time distortion highlights a key psychological cost of short-form media: the loss of intentionality and self-regulation. The interviews suggest that although students may perceive short-form media as a temporary escape or form of entertainment, the platform’s design encourages extended engagement that users often only recognize when negative consequences arise.

“The reason I tell myself I’m getting on social media is connection...but then what keeps me on there is the [Instagram] reels. So I think I’m really there for the reels.” - Johnson

5.2 Procrastination and Worsening of Mental Health Challenges

Across all seven interviews, participants described short-form media use as a way to procrastinate, but this often led to increased emotional and psychological distress. Instead of providing relief, participants reported that scrolling caused guilt, shame, anxiety, hopelessness, and fatigue, especially when academic responsibilities were ignored or time was lost without realization. Johnson described this cycle, saying, “[short-form media] causes new mental health problems as much as it worsens the ones I might already have.” Georgia also noted that “procrastinating just makes me more anxious and feel more depressed.” Instead of reducing stress, participants reported that excessive scrolling mentally and emotionally drained them, leading to increased cognitive fatigue and a reduced ability to focus and switch to other tasks.

Participants noted that their academic performance declined due to unintentional time loss, with some expressing frustration at their inability to break this habitual cycle. Even when students recognized the negative effects of their avoidance, they often continued scrolling because of the platform’s ease, emotional numbness, and low-effort engagement.

“I don't often consider why I engage with short-form content so frequently, but as I consider it now, I believe a large part of it has to do with avoiding troubling thoughts, my feelings about the state of the world, and my feelings regarding my place in the world and how I am using my time here. It seems very cyclical- I feel bad about the world and myself, so I drown these things out with a drought of quick-fix dopamine, which, in turn, makes me feel bad about the world and myself. New-wave alcoholism.” - Student

“I use them to avoid stressful situations, but [it] does not help in actuality. It serves as a mere distraction to forget about, but engaging in short-form media makes me lose more motivation and personal strength to face the stressful situation at hand.” - Student

As a result, many experienced compounded stress first from academic procrastination and later from the emotional fallout of delayed work and wasted time. This cycle seemed to worsen underlying symptoms of anxiety and depression, especially when combined with exposure to overstimulating or negative content. Participants reported increased emotional sensitivity, diminished self-esteem, and a lack of control over their daily routines.

“TikTok is a fun thing...[so] I don’t want to go back to doing the boring, hard thing.” - Georgia

“It’s hard for me to slow my mind down to do the kind of work that academics require of me generally.” - Georgia

This also triggered intrusive thoughts and self-criticism for some. The feedback loop of procrastination, guilt, emotional fatigue, and further avoidance was identified as one of the most harmful effects of short-form media use on their well-being. Short-form media was initially used as a coping mechanism, but it often exacerbated the emotional challenges students wanted to escape.

5.3 Compulsive Use, Control, and Platform Design

Many participants described difficulty in managing their use of short-form media, despite being aware of its negative effects. Strategies such as app timers, screen-time limits, or deleting apps were often perceived as ineffective. Students pointed out that these methods could easily be bypassed, especially during moments of boredom, stress, or procrastination. The compulsive use of short-form media was linked to both personal habits and the intentional design of the platforms themselves.

Participants identified specific design features such as infinite scrolling, algorithmically personalized content, and quick, context-changing entertainment as major factors in their loss of

control. The constant novelty of the feed, along with its lack of a clear endpoint, promoted mindless and prolonged engagement. Interviews described “robotic” behaviors, where individuals would instinctively reach for their phones without intending to do so during class, while studying, or when trying to focus on more important tasks.

You can numb yourself and get lost in it. It becomes robotic. I was telling my friends that since deleting it, I open up my phone and immediately scroll over two times and click where TikTok was, even though it's not there.” - Alice

Many compared their compulsive checking to an addiction, with one participant likening their urge to engage with short-form media to a nicotine craving.

“Yes, especially when I'm studying. I've never had a nicotine addiction, but that's what I imagine what it's like for people who are like, 'God, I need to hit my vape.' Sometimes my phone is on the table and I just want to look at it.” - Georgia

This behavior often followed a cycle, starting with curiosity or a desire for a break, evolving into long scrolling sessions, and ending with feelings of regret and decreased productivity. Several students noted that even content intended to be motivational or uplifting could backfire due to the unpredictable nature of algorithmically generated content. Students frequently found themselves quickly pulled from inspiring videos into unrelated entertainment, gossip, or trends. This randomness created a feedback loop that made it difficult to stop, as users continued to scroll in search of something meaningful but often encountered empty or distracting content.

“It feels very temporary...even the good [videos] don't really stick with you.” - Julie

“[Short-form media] was also kind of helpful because there was other content of the same form that was more positive. I could watch and think, wait, things aren't so bad. Then I

would watch someone say they cannot get a job after graduating and think, 'Oh my God, things are looking terrible. What will I even do with my life?'" - Paul

The portable and mobile nature of short-form media adds an extra layer to this compulsiveness. Students highlighted the convenience and accessibility of smartphones as a major reason for their excessive use. The ability to instantly open apps, switch between platforms, and access endless new videos increased the chances of habitual consumption. One participant mentioned that simply taking the phone out of the room significantly improved their ability to stay focused.

"I think the convenience of the phone is a big part of what makes social media so addictive for me personally. When my phone isn't in the room, it's way easier to just stay off it."
- Johnson

Overall, the combination of persuasive platform design and users' psychological vulnerability, especially during times of academic or emotional stress, creates an environment where control can easily be lost. This results in a cycle of overuse, guilt, and ongoing dependency, driven by features built to maximize attention and engagement.

5.4 Social Comparison and FoMO

Social comparison and the fear of missing out (FoMO) became key psychological effects of short-form media for nearly all participants. Students described increased insecurities about body image, lifestyle, academic or career success, and social inclusion, especially when viewing curated influencer content or fitness posts. These comparisons often led participants to doubt their worth, trigger negative self-talk and self-criticism, and lower their self-esteem.

"Whether it is with body image, with career, [or] with personal life. And then I will look in the mirror again and I will see a totally different person, a totally different image." - Paul

Many participants still use short-form media to connect socially, often sharing videos with friends or following peers on Instagram or TikTok. However, this type of connection is often viewed as superficial, as participants recognize that digital interactions cannot replace genuine, in-person relationships. Instead of building meaningful community, this digital engagement often exacerbates feelings of loneliness or alienation, especially when students see content they cannot relate to or have not experienced.

The fear of missing out (FoMO) played a critical role in maintaining compulsive behaviors. Several students expressed feeling pressure to stay updated on trends, inside jokes, or cultural references circulating on platforms. This sense of obligation often led to prolonged usage, difficulty deleting apps, or reinstalling them after trying to abstain temporarily. Some felt that missing content would cause disconnection from peer groups, social conversations, or campus culture. This social anxiety drove continuous engagement, even when students were aware of the emotional toll it took.

“When I’m not doing my work, I have this push and pull between doing my work or scrolling and like checking up on trends and stuff like that. I can feel like I’m missing out on everything.” - Julie

“I feel like I would genuinely miss out on things that are happening to my friends or things that are happening in my community. There are also expectations of how you’re supposed to interact on Instagram, too, if you’ve committed to being active on Instagram.” - Georgia

While FoMO varied in intensity, some students who felt more independent or detached from trends said that staying in the loop was essential for feeling socially included or part of a group. For many, short-form media act both as a connection and a barrier, offering fleeting bonds while also increasing insecurities and encouraging compulsive use.

“I think seeing people on social media that I see around campus makes me feel more connected. But I think there are definitely times when it could be isolating too.” - Georgia

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show a multi-faceted effect of short-form media use on the mental health and daily life of Rhodes College students. Four dominant themes emerged: time distortion, procrastination and mental health, compulsive use, and social comparison and FoMO. Each theme reflects the psychological costs associated with habitual engagement on platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts.

6.1 Behavioral Addiction and Reinforcement Theory

The compulsive and often involuntary use of short-form media platforms by participants aligns with Behavioral Addiction Theory, especially B.F. Skinner’s model of operant conditioning and the Skinner box analogy. Just like Mouse 3 would repeatedly press a lever for unpredictable rewards, students described unconsciously opening TikTok or Instagram as if they had been programmed to do so, driven by the hope of encountering exciting content. Short-form media platforms act as digital Skinner boxes, reinforcing user engagement through variable-ratio reinforcement schedules, where likes, shares, comments, funny clips, emotional content, or viral trends appear unpredictably, encouraging users to keep scrolling endlessly.

Many participants reported reaching for their phones and scrolling when bored, stressed, or even while studying, a behavior that resembles addiction patterns rather than conscious decision-making. Features such as infinite scrolling, algorithmic personalization, and quick dopamine feedback loops provide immediate, sporadic rewards that reinforce habitual use. Attempts to self-regulate, such as deleting apps and setting timers, were often described as

ineffective and easily ignored due to the overwhelming reinforcement structure built into the platform design.

The compulsive urge to check devices, described by participants as “robotic,” “new wave alcoholism,” and like a “nicotine addiction,” supports the idea that short-form media platforms create a digital dependence cycle of cue, action, and reward. These behaviors are reinforced despite being aware of their negative effects, such as wasted time, guilt, or decreased academic focus.

6.2 Time Perception and Flow Theory

The distorted sense of time reported by nearly all participants can be explained through the concepts of Time Perception and Flow Theory. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s idea of *flow*, when people become deeply involved in an activity, they lose self-awareness and their sense of time.⁴³ In the case of short-form media, this flow state is passive, low-effort, and fragmented, making time pass unnoticed.

Students described intending to scroll for quick five-minute breaks, only to realize that an hour or even hours had passed. This phenomenon indicates not just distraction, but an altered perception of time, worsened by the design of endless, personalized content feeds. Unlike traditional flow experiences in creative activities or sports, short-form media flow is shown to leave students feeling mentally foggy, emotionally drained, guilty, and regretful.

This contradictory state, where time feels both immersive and yet wasted and empty, highlights the cognitive dissonance that participants expressed. It also explains why they struggle

⁴³ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.

to disengage, as these platforms hijack attention while undermining the deep focus and restoration typically associated with genuine flow experiences.

6.3 Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and Self-Presentation Theory

The fear of missing out (FoMO) and Self-Presentation Theory help explain students' emotional reliance on short-form media. Many participants mentioned a widespread sense of social duty to stay current on popular trends, memes, community events, and friends' activities, worried about being excluded from conversations, jokes, or group interactions if they fell behind.

This persistent unease and feelings of anxiety reflect FoMO, a psychological trigger for compulsive checking and extended engagement. Even those who acknowledged that short-form media didn't offer meaningful connections still felt pressure to keep up with popular culture and trends, to avoid being left out, and to stay aware of certain global events, thereby reinforcing compulsive behaviors driven by fear rather than happiness.

Additionally, Self-Presentation Theory, which suggests that people manage their perceived image by shaping their digital persona,⁴⁴ was evident in students' concerns about their Instagram presence and the unspoken expectations of engagement. For some, this meant remaining digitally visible to affirm their relevance or social belonging, even if it compromised authenticity or emotional health. Short-form media platforms are used for both connecting and performing, but often do not provide either in a meaningful or lasting way.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

This study raises broader questions about life in an always-connected, screen-mediated world. In an age where short-form media and digital technology mediate much of our daily experiences, it is essential to reflect on what we want these tools to *do* for us and what they

⁴⁴ Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

might be doing *to* us. If our interactions with digital platforms repeatedly lead to anxiety, frustration, or numbness, the solution is not to suppress these feelings but to reconsider the frameworks and habits through which we engage with them.⁴⁵

The findings of this research indicate that our connection with short-form media often favors quick, fragmented experiences over depth, purpose, or emotional healing. This trade-off between quantity and quality reflects a broader cultural shift in how we approach time, focus, and meaning in life. As philosopher Byung-Chul Han notes in *The Scent of Time*:

*“It is not the total number of events, but the experience of duration which makes life more fulfilling. Where one event follows close on the heels of another, nothing enduring comes about. Fulfilment and meaning cannot be explained on quantitative grounds. A life that is lived quickly, without anything lasting long and without anything slow, a life that is characterized by quick, short-term and short-lived experiences is itself a short life, no matter how high the ‘rate of experience’ may be.”*⁴⁶

*“The acceleration of life in general robs the human being of the capacity for contemplation. Thus, those things which only reveal themselves in contemplative lingering remain hidden.”*⁴⁷

In the rush to stay digitally connected and socially relevant, we risk losing access to slower, more reflective types of fulfillment. This research critiques the often-overlooked ways in which short-form media and technology are integrated into our daily routines, relationships, and emotional coping mechanisms. The findings reveal a form of digital addiction or dependency

⁴⁵ Clark, Billy. *DEEP DIVE: The Research Experiment That Saved Me*.

⁴⁶ Han, Byung-Chul. *The Scent of Time*, 34.

⁴⁷ Han, Byung-Chul. *The Scent of Time*, 69.

driven by comparison, overstimulation, avoidance, and algorithmic reinforcement, conditions often disguised as connection or entertainment.

As students and digital citizens, we might wonder: “Do we find joy in these quick bursts of distraction, or in the stillness and contemplation that modern life increasingly pushes aside?” The process of developing a more intentional and balanced relationship with technology won't happen overnight. It requires awareness, self-compassion, and the willingness to experiment with boundaries. What matters most is that the choice to change, if one chooses to do so, remains conscious, reflective, and self-directed.

Future research should further explore the philosophical implications of living in a world of constant connectivity and algorithmically personalized content. What does it mean always to be connected to short-form media and digital platforms, and how does this influence our sense of self, time, and attention? While this study provides a focused look at Rhodes College students in Memphis, TN, broader research across multiple campuses, regions, and populations would offer a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

Additionally, future research should examine how short-form media influences young populations, including adolescents and children raised in environments filled with digital technology from birth (also known as sticky-iPad kids). Understanding how early exposure affects cognitive, emotional, and social development is crucial, as platforms continue to evolve and aim at increasingly younger audiences.

Finally, future research should investigate how individuals can cultivate healthier relationships with digital media. Instead of only emphasizing negative impacts, studies should also examine strategies for mindful use, setting digital boundaries, and creating meaningful solutions that support well-being. By enhancing our understanding of our connection with

technology, we can learn to use it intentionally, promoting mental health and human growth instead of harming them.

8. LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted as part of a 9-week summer research fellowship at the Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies at Rhodes College. It faced several limitations related to time, participant diversity, and the project's overall scope.

The limited timeframe constrained both the scope and depth of data collection and analysis. With only a brief research period, there was limited opportunity to expand the sample size or capture the full range of experiences from students with various academic backgrounds, mental health conditions, or cultural background perspectives.

This study primarily relied on self-reported data gathered through semi-structured interviews and surveys. As with all self-reported data, this may be affected by recall bias, social desirability bias, and individual interpretation. The qualitative approach offered depth and nuance but also limited the ability to quantify results or establish causality.

Although the study explored several key theoretical frameworks, it was unable to fully test or compare these frameworks in a controlled environment.

While this research provides valuable initial insights into the emotional and psychological effects of short-form media among college students, further studies with longer durations, larger and more diverse samples, and mixed-methods approaches are necessary to expand and confirm these findings.

9. CONCLUSION

This study examined the complex and often contradictory role that short-form media plays in the lives of college students. Using a mix of qualitative interviews and survey data, it

showed that short-form media functions as both a source of entertainment and social connection, as well as a means for emotional escape, compulsive behavior, time distortion, and psychological distress.

Despite students' awareness of the negative effects of short-form media, many reported difficulty in managing their usage. Features such as infinite scrolling, personalized algorithms, and constant variable rewards are identified as key design elements that encourage compulsive engagement. These findings align with behavioral addiction, reinforcement theory, and the Skinner box phenomenon, where users, like Mouse 3 in the experiment, keep seeking unpredictable rewards despite negative consequences.

This study highlights how short-form media distorts time perception and weakens focus and motivation, as brief moments of intended use often turn into hours, fueling cycles of avoidance and guilt. Flow theory suggests that digital environments can foster immersive yet unproductive engagement, which initially feels effortless but ultimately leads to fatigue and dissatisfaction. The findings are also supported by the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and self-presentation theory, as students described feeling pressured to stay constantly connected, relevant, and visible online, even when their well-being suffers as a result.

In a broader sense, this research raises questions about what it means to live in a world of constant digital engagement. It invites us to reflect not only on how we use digital technologies but also on why we use them and what we might be sacrificing in the process. As short-form media becomes more integrated into our daily lives and routines, there is an urgent need to reevaluate our relationship with it, both individually and culturally.

This study does not advocate for the rejection of technology, but instead urges a more intentional and mindful approach that emphasizes mental health, meaningful connections, and a

stronger sense of presence. The findings highlight a growing disconnect between the promise of digital convenience and the reality of emotional and cognitive overload. Ultimately, learning to navigate this space with awareness might be one of the most urgent challenges of the digital age.

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