

Problematic Short-Video Use and Academic Procrastination: The Potential Role of Subjective Time Distance

Zihao Xie

*School of Humanities, Zhuhai College of Science and Technology, Zhuhai, China
xiezhao@stu.zcst.edu.cn*

Abstract. Short videos are a familiar part of students' daily lives, but some students find it difficult to stop watching when academic work is waiting. Problematic use concerns this loss of control and interference with other activities, rather than viewing time alone. Direct evidence concerning academic procrastination is limited. The most direct study reviewed reports a weak positive association between problematic short-video use and academic procrastination, but its cross-sectional design leaves the direction unclear. Difficulties with attentional control and the appeal of short-term mood relief offer possible explanations for why students turn away from academic work. This review also considers subjective time distance: how near or far away an academic deadline feels from the present. Research on construal level provides a reason to examine this experience alongside attention and mood, although no study reviewed here directly tests its role in the relationship between short-video use and academic procrastination. Clarifying these distinctions may help future studies separate difficulties in stopping viewing from the decision to postpone an intended academic task.

Keywords: Problematic short-video use, academic procrastination, subjective time distance, attentional control, emotion regulation

1. Introduction

Watching short videos has become an ordinary part of the day for many students, and TikTok shows why. The app opens straight into a feed that has already been chosen for the viewer. There is no menu to work through and no decision to make before the next clip begins. In a survey of 401 TikTok users, Zhao and Wagner found that perceived effortlessness, perceived recommendation accuracy, and perceived recommendation serendipity were associated with flow, an absorbed state while using the app. Prior experience changed how strong these associations were, while video length changed only the link between perceived effortlessness and flow [1]. Interviews with young adults point the same way, describing short videos as a way to relax and to step away from responsibilities for a while [2].

For a student, a video or two between classes is not much of a problem. The difficulty appears at the other end: stopping. Li et al. review this literature and describe problematic short-video use as an intense attachment to the app combined with a loss of control over how much it is used [3]. That formulation is the useful one here. Frequency alone does not tell whether use is problematic. For the

present discussion, the more useful question is whether a student can put the phone down when work is waiting.

Academic procrastination means delaying work people intend to do, in the knowledge that the delay will probably cost them. Steel treats it as a failure of self-regulation [4]. The pattern is familiar: the assignment matters to the student, and the student still does not start. Xie et al. surveyed 1,047 Chinese undergraduates and found a weak positive association between short-form video addiction scores and academic procrastination. Attentional control partially mediated it, and boredom proneness weakened the link between addiction scores and attentional control [5].

One study is thin ground for a whole explanation, and this one is cross-sectional, so the direction of the association is open. It does give people somewhere to start. What none of the work above addresses is time: not time spent watching, but how far away an academic deadline feels. Two students can look at the same due date and read it differently, and this study will argue that this difference deserves more attention. After clarifying problematic use and academic procrastination, this study will examine the evidence linking them, including the attention account, and consider the less studied question of how far away a deadline feels.

2. Problematic short-video use

Long viewing hours are not the issue by themselves. What defines the pattern is regulation: viewing that refuses to end when it should, and that takes space from other things. Li et al. borrow their vocabulary from behavioural addiction research and set out withdrawal, salience, conflict, and relapse, where relapse means failing to cut down the time spent watching [3]. Two of the four are worth keeping. Failure to cut down and conflict with other activities matter most for the question here: whether viewing interferes with intended academic work. This focus does not mean that salience and withdrawal are unimportant.

A note on words. Many of the studies cited below talk about short-video addiction, but neither the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) nor the International Classification of Diseases, Eleventh Revision (ICD-11) recognises it as a disorder [3]. The term "problematic use" is used throughout this review. Where a study reports an addiction score, that score is treated as a questionnaire measure rather than a clinical diagnosis. Calling it addiction would claim more than the measures can support.

Interviews give a better sense of what the behaviour looks like from the inside. Schellewald spent a year with young adult TikTok users in the UK, and little of what they described was dramatic. They opened the app when they were bored, tired or stressed. Participants described TikTok as a temporary escape that could be difficult to end, with viewing sometimes continuing for hours without their noticing how much time had passed [2]. These accounts describe viewing for relief that could last longer than expected. Circumstances set the occasion; the difficulty lies in leaving, which is also where watching turns from relief into interference.

Rogowska and Cincio went further and tested a mediation model. In their sample of 448 young adults, problematic TikTok use correlated with general procrastination at $r = .42$, and it partially mediated the path from procrastination to depressive symptoms [6]. The design was cross-sectional, so the sequence is assumed rather than observed, and the authors say as much themselves. The correlation links problematic viewing with delay, although the general procrastination measure leaves its relevance to academic tasks uncertain.

3. Academic procrastination

Delay is common and mostly sensible. A student who postpones one assignment because another is due sooner is managing a schedule, not failing at one. Klingsieck draws the line between procrastination and strategic delay: the delay is voluntary, but it counts as procrastination when it is unnecessary and expected to leave the student worse off [7], and Steel places the same behaviour inside self-regulation [4]. A video break may look the same from the outside whether it is a deliberate pause or part of procrastination.

Self-regulated learning is one framework that can hold both sides of this. In a cross-sectional study of college students learning English as a foreign language in China, Tao et al. found that metacognitive strategies, effort regulation and time management were each negatively associated with academic procrastination [8]. Steel's meta-analysis adds the conditions that make regulation harder, including an aversive task and a tendency towards impulsiveness [4]. Impulsiveness seems especially relevant when a task becomes unpleasant, and a short video is immediately available.

Sirois and Pychyl offer a different angle. On their account, the student is managing a feeling: leaving the task behind ends the discomfort of facing it, at least for now [9]. The relief is short, and the work is still there afterwards, which is why they treat the behaviour as emotion regulation gone wrong. This account may help explain why students turn to short videos when a task feels unpleasant. They need no preparation, can be started or stopped at any moment, and offer something to look at immediately.

Other screens do the same job. Jin et al. surveyed 474 university students and found smartphone distraction correlated with academic procrastination, which in turn sat on the path between distraction and academic anxiety [10]. Their model cannot establish which came first, so the findings should not be interpreted as evidence of causation. It does suggest that whatever students reach for when they leave their work deserves study in its own right. Short videos are one candidate worth examining.

4. Short-video use and academic procrastination

Two studies give something to work with, and neither is strong enough to settle the question. Xie et al.'s survey of 1,047 undergraduates is the more direct of the two. In their model, addiction scores were associated with lower attentional control ($\beta = -.23$). Higher attentional control was associated with less procrastination ($\beta = -.34$), while a smaller direct path from addiction scores to procrastination remained ($\beta = .09$) [5]. That is a partial mediation, and a modest one; the zero-order association is weak. Rogowska and Cincio also found an association between problematic use and procrastination, though their mediation model concerned depressive symptoms [6]. Both studies measured their variables at a single time point without manipulating them, so neither establishes whether viewing preceded delay.

Their measures also differ in what they capture. Xie et al. asked about academic tasks [5]. Rogowska and Cincio asked about procrastination in general [6]. A meta-analysis of problematic smartphone use reports a moderate positive association with procrastination among students, but it pools different measures and different student groups, so it works better as background than as evidence about short videos specifically [11].

Two explanations are relevant here. Temporal motivation theory suggests that a reward becomes less motivating when it is further away. An immediately available activity may therefore be more appealing than work whose payoff is weeks off [4]. On the mood account, turning to another activity can provide relief from an unpleasant feeling [9]. For short videos, the mood account offers a more

convincing explanation of turning away from an unpleasant task. Discounting helps explain why the phone wins at the instant the student pauses; mood regulation speaks more directly to the relief described by Schellewald's interviewees [2]. The explanations can work together.

These accounts may also matter during a longer delay. Attentional control is associated with academic procrastination [5]; whether it helps explain difficulty returning to study remains to be tested. Consider a student who sits down, opens the document, and still does not begin while the deadline feels comfortably far away. The attention account does not rule out that experience. Nothing reviewed so far measures that feeling. This review focuses on this more specific question, despite the difficulty of testing it.

5. Subjective temporal distance

Felt distance is not calendar distance. In this review, subjective time distance, also termed subjective temporal distance, refers to how near or far away an academic deadline feels from the present. Construal-level theory is the obvious place to start, though its terms need care. In this theory, psychological distance refers to subjective separation between the self and people or events, and the theory recognises four kinds: time, space, social distance, and hypotheticality [12]. Only the temporal kind is at stake below, with academic deadlines as the focus.

The theory's central claim is that distance and abstraction move together. Events far off tend to be represented in general, schematic terms; events close by tend to be represented in detail [12]. An assignment can be "doing well in this course", or it can be "picking a topic, finding four sources, writing eight hundred words". Both descriptions are of the same task. The theory describes the pairing as running in both directions: psychological distance affects the level of abstraction, and the level of abstraction can also affect psychological distance [12].

McCrea et al. tested whether construal level affected how soon a task was completed. Participants were led into either an abstract or a concrete construal of a task and then asked to return a questionnaire within three weeks. In three experiments, those in the concrete condition generally returned it sooner, and how attractive, important or difficult they found the task did not explain the pattern [13]. In Study 3, the continuous measure of completion time reached significance only after adjusting for pre-task interest. The experimental design is useful here because it supports a causal claim about construal level and task completion. It does not follow that watching short videos makes a deadline feel further away.

One relevant line of work concerns time perception, and it should be handled carefully. Turel and Cavagnaro asked participants to abstain from Facebook and measured how long they thought a survey had taken. After abstinence, the increase in time-estimation bias was greater in at-risk users than in low-risk users [14]. Elapsed time is not deadline distance. The same caution applies to the interviews discussed earlier: losing track of an hour says nothing directly about whether the due date feels near.

The studies leave a gap between absorption in viewing and the experience of an approaching deadline. The flow research describes viewers' absorption in the feed [1]. The abstinence study concerns elapsed-time estimates among Facebook users at different levels of risk [14], while one interviewee describes a temporary sense of detachment from the passage of time during TikTok use [2]. These are different experiences of time. The construal-level experiment adds evidence about task representation and completion time [13], without directly establishing a role for felt deadline distance. This study suggests that short-video use might change how far away a deadline feels, which could matter for when a student begins. This makes subjective time distance a candidate

mechanism, but none of the studies reviewed here directly tests the full pathway to academic procrastination.

6. Conclusion

Problematic short-video use is associated with procrastination in the two main studies reviewed, but both are cross-sectional, and only one measures academic procrastination. They leave the direction of the relationship unresolved. Short-term mood relief offers a plausible account of why a student turns to videos when work feels unpleasant. Attentional control has more direct support as a correlate of academic procrastination, though this association alone cannot explain how a viewing break becomes a longer delay.

The question of felt deadline distance concerns the work still waiting after the student turns away from the screen. It asks whether a deadline that feels distant is associated with postponing the start of that work. Construal-level research gives this question a theoretical basis, but neither the task-completion experiments nor the studies of elapsed-time perception establish that short videos alter this feeling. Subjective time distance therefore remains a question for further study, rather than an established explanation of academic procrastination.

A useful test would measure felt distance to the same academic deadline before and after viewing and record when students actually begin their intended work. It would need a comparison condition without short videos; a before-and-after change alone would not establish causation. Problematic use should also be assessed separately from viewing time, since long viewing hours do not by themselves show a loss of control. Such a study could examine whether changes in felt deadline distance are related to starting work, and whether this adds to the attention and mood accounts discussed here. Measuring attention and mood alongside felt deadline distance would help assess whether this proposed mechanism offers a distinct contribution to understanding delay.

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