

Representation of TikTok Viral Trends on Generation Z Communication Behavior (Case Study of 2021 STISIPOL Candradimuka Palembang Students)

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the representation of TikTok's viral trends within the communication behavior of Generation Z students at STISIPOL Candradimuka Palembang. Previous studies have primarily emphasized aspects of consumption, psychological impact, or branding, consequently leaving the dimension of media representation and everyday communication practices among local students largely underexplored. The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing the theoretical framework of Media Representation (Hall, 1997) combined with Uses and Gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973). This combined perspective examines how students interpret viral trends, what specific motivations underlie their use of TikTok, and crucially, how these derived motives are translated into observable, concrete communication patterns. Five active students from the 2021 cohort served as key informants, selected based on their criteria as intensive users with experience participating in viral challenges or creative content creation within the TikTok ecosystem. Data were meticulously collected through semi-structured interviews exploring narratives of experience, alongside content observations on informants' TikTok accounts, and digital documentation (videos, comments, screenshots). Analysis using the Miles–Huberman interactive model revealed five salient dimensions of communication behavior representation: use goals (entertainment, social recognition), identity initiatives (content experimentation, self-branding), competitive arenas (personal branding, popularity metrics), self-awareness (social comparison, reflexivity), and value orientation (speed, visual dominance, orientation toward virality). The findings demonstrate that TikTok functions as a powerful representation space, shaping Gen Z communication behavior through social validation, and an algorithmic culture that directs relevance. TikTok's viral trends thus act as cultural codes organizing how students understand themselves and their digital public interactions.

Keywords: Representation, TikTok, Communication Behavior, Generation Z.



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INTRODUCTION

TikTok as a short video platform has changed digital communication patterns, especially among Generation Z. Short formats, For You Page-based algorithms, and participatory culture make

TikTok not only an entertainment medium, but an arena for identity formation and social interaction (Cho & Lee, 2020; Zuo & Jiang, 2022).

In Indonesia, TikTok is ranked second in the application with the most active users, which is more than 109 million (Datareportal, 2023; Kemp, 2023). Generation Z is the dominant group in this usage, due to their characteristics of being adaptive to technology, creative, and used to interacting online (Sun & Zhang, 2023).

(additional narrative) Research by Adawiyah (2020) found that the use of TikTok can increase adolescents' confidence, while Nahari (2024) showed the influence of promotional content on TikTok on purchasing decisions. This shows that these platforms not only shape entertainment behavior, but also psychological and consumer behavior. In addition, Thaib (2021) highlights the challenges of da'wah on social media, including TikTok, which shows how religious messages also adapt to viral culture.

However, academic studies on TikTok in Indonesia still mostly focus on the impact of consumption or certain aspects only, such as the cultural phenomenon of "TikTok poison" (Gratia et al., 2022), consumptive behavior due to *OOTD content* (Nugroho & Rummyeni, 2024), or brand communication strategies (Hassan & Omar, 2021). International studies have also highlighted more the implications of algorithmic culture (Zuo & Jiang, 2022) or digital identity (Zhang & Wang, 2022). Therefore, there is still room to examine the representation of TikTok in the context of student communication behavior, especially in local areas such as Palembang.

(additional narrative) By referring to the theory of innovation diffusion (Rogers, 2003), the viral trend of TikTok can be understood as a cultural innovation that quickly spreads through the process of imitation and participation. However, unlike previous media, the algorithm-based nature of TikTok accelerates the diffusion cycle, thus affecting the way students communicate and express themselves.

Literature Review

Social Media and Communication Patterns

Social media is a communication space based on digital technology that allows for two-way interaction, quick exchange of information, as well as audience involvement in message production (Baran & Davis, 2021). TikTok is one of the latest representations of social media that relies on *the For You Page algorithm* to regulate content distribution. This has give birth to a new communication pattern that emphasized speed, brief visualization, and potential virality (Zuo & Jiang, 2022). Research by Bulele & Wibowo (2020) confirms that social media, especially TikTok, functions not only as an entertainment medium, but also as a social arena that shapes the behavior of the younger generation.

(additional narrative). Rahardaya & Irwansyah (2021) shows that TikTok plays a role in increasing digital literacy, while the research of Yendra (2024) confirms its function as a popular literacy medium among students. This strengthens the relevance of TikTok as a non-formal education space.

Representation in the Media

The concept of representation describes how the media presents reality through certain symbols, languages, and visuals that shape people's perceptions (Hall, 1997; Storey, 2024). Viral trends on TikTok are not just entertainment content, but cultural symbols that convey new values, lifestyles, and norms among the younger generation. Research by Gratia et al. (2022) on the phenomenon of "TikTok poison" shows that the representation of viral content has an effect on student consumption patterns. Meanwhile, Zhang & Wang (2022) research shows how Generation Z's social identity is constructed through digital practices on TikTok.

(additional narrative) Alifah (2020) emphasized that the intensity of other social media use such as Instagram also affects the aspect of religiosity, which suggests that digital platforms have an important role in value formation. This finding parallels TikTok as a space for representation of popular culture as well as a space for value negotiation.

Generation Z and Digital Identity

Generation Z is often called *digital natives* because they have been used to digital technology since birth. Their identity is built not only through direct interaction, but also through online activities (Mondry, 2008; Sun & Zhang, 2023). Studies by Cho & Lee (2020) and Chen & Li (2021) confirm that TikTok is the main space for Gen Z to express themselves, develop creativity, and form their self-image. This makes the communication behavior of the younger generation even more performative, where existence is measured through the number of *likes*, comments, and *followers*.

Theory Uses and Gratifications

The *Uses and Gratifications* theory views the audience as an active party who chooses the media to meet its needs (Katz et al., 1973). In the context of TikTok, the motivation for use can be in the form of entertainment, seeking social recognition, identity formation, and self-promotion (Adawiyah, 2020; Hasugian & Nurbani, 2025). Research by Hassan & Omar (2021) shows that TikTok is not only used for entertainment, but also for brand communication strategies. The relevance of this theory lies in its ability to explain why students actively choose TikTok as the most effective communication medium compared to other platforms.

METHOD

This study uses a **descriptive qualitative** approach. This method was chosen based on the purpose of research that wants to understand the meaning and representation of TikTok viral trends in the communication behavior of Generation Z students. As Creswell & Poth (2018) affirm, this approach is effective for examining complex and contextual social phenomena, where reality is seen as something socially constructed.

The research was conducted at STISIPOL Candradimuka Palembang, a university that has a Communication Science major with a high level of involvement in the use of social media, especially TikTok. The choice of this location provides a unique context because Palembang as a big city in Sumatra has different socio-cultural characteristics from metropolitan cities such as Jakarta, thus allowing the exploration of local representations of global phenomena.

The research informants were five Communication Science students of the class of 2021 who actively use TikTok. Informants were selected with the following criteria:

1. Students are active and registered in the Communication Studies study program.
2. Have been active in using TikTok for at least the past year.
3. Have followed viral trends or produced creative content that received public interaction.

The number of five informants is considered adequate for qualitative research because it emphasizes more on the depth of data than on the quantity of respondents (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The technique used is purposive sampling, which is the determination of informants based on certain considerations according to research needs. Purposive selection is seen as appropriate because the phenomenon studied can only be explained by individuals who actually have direct experience regarding TikTok use and involvement in viral trends (Littlejohn et al., 2021).

The main instrument in this study is the researcher as a key instrument (*human instrument*). To support, the researchers used:

1. Semi-structured interview guidelines for digging into the narrative of the student experience.
2. Observation sheets to record interaction patterns and the use of TikTok features such as duets, stitches, and hashtags.
3. Documentation in the form of screenshots or video links produced and consumed by informants as supporting data.

Data is collected through three techniques:

1. In-depth interviews lasting 30–60 minutes per informant to explore their motivations, experiences, and views on TikTok.
2. Participatory observation, i.e. researchers observe informants' activities on TikTok, including how they create and interact with viral content.
3. Digital documentation, in the form of a collection of relevant content (videos, comments, screenshots) to reinforce the analysis.

Data analysis was carried out using the interactive model of Miles & Huberman (1994) which includes:

1. Data reduction: sorting, simplifying, and categorizing interview, observation, and documentation data.
2. Data presentation: organizing data into the form of thematic narratives based on emerging dimensions (goals, identity, competition, self-awareness, and value orientation).

3. Drawing conclusions: interpreting the meaning of findings within the framework of representation theory (Hall, 1997) and *Uses and Gratifications theory* (Katz et al., 1973).

To maintain credibility, the researcher triangulated sources and methods by comparing interview, observation, and documentation data. In addition, the researcher used *the member check technique* by asking the informant for reconfirmation regarding the interpretation of the data obtained, so that the results presented were completely in accordance with the participants' original experience.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this research were obtained from in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and digital documentation of five Communication Science students of the 2021 class of STISIPOL Candradimuka Palembang. Data analysis shows that the representation of TikTok's viral trends on student communication behavior can be seen through five main dimensions, namely: usage purpose, identity initiative, competition arena, self-awareness, and value orientation.

Goal-Oriented Use

People use TikTok not only as an entertainment medium, but also as a means to gain social recognition (Pratama Yendra et al., 2024). Most informants stated that they use TikTok to relieve stress after college activities, keep up with the latest music and dance trends, and gain validation from the number of *likes* and comments. This shows that the purpose of use is not only recreational, but also closely related to the needs of digital existence. As expressed by one of the informants, "*If many of my videos are watched, I feel satisfied, like someone acknowledged my existence in cyberspace.*"

Identity Initiative

The findings on the *identity initiatives* dimension reveal patterns that go beyond passive imitation of trends — they reflect strategic, iterative practices performed by the informants. Prior to posting, many participants reported conducting intensive observation of prominent creators: attending to camera angles, types of transitions, music selection, framing, and caption style. One informant described their creative process as, "I watch 3–5 videos that are rising, note the prominent elements, then modify those elements so they fit the persona I want to present." This practice indicates a form of *structured improvisation*: students use observations as prototypes, upload an initial version, and then treat feedback (comments, likes, views) as evaluation material for subsequent iterations.

These identity experiments appear in several concrete strategies: (1) selecting a visual aesthetic (filters, wardrobe, lighting) to craft an aesthetic identity; (2) adopting concise, consistent narrative formulas (e.g., "15-second storytelling" or "quick tips") to perform an informative persona; (3) repeating certain humorous elements or gestures to build a comedic persona. In addition, students frequently adapt language and local cultural references so that messages resonate more strongly

with campus audiences and nearby communities. The combination of external observation and local adaptation underscores that identity performance on TikTok is deliberate — intentionally designed to achieve specific communicative goals such as establishing a digital presence, gaining social recognition, or strengthening personal branding. Theoretically, this practice supports the idea of *identity performativity* within an algorithmic context: identity is not merely “who I am,” but the outcome of production decisions shaped by the platform’s visibility logic.

Competitive Arena

The *competitive arena* dimension demonstrates how digital metrics (views, likes, followers) function as variables that shape students’ communication strategies. Several informants leverage features such as duet, stitch, or hashtag challenges to broaden reach and boost interaction; others intentionally post during peak hours to increase exposure. These activities are not solely motivated by a desire for popularity but are also tied to micro-economic opportunities — for example, promoting small products or collaborating on services. Thus, TikTok simultaneously operates as a social competition space and a creative marketplace: choices about style and posting frequency are guided by strategic calculations balancing the pursuit of recognition and potential economic benefit. This condition highlights how Uses & Gratifications motives (e.g., social recognition, instrumental use) interact closely with the dynamics of platform-based micro-markets.

Self-Awareness

Students admitted that they experienced a process of self-reflection due to social comparisons with popular figures on TikTok. They often compare their appearance, lifestyle, and content creativity with accounts that have gone viral. This has a double effect: on the one hand it encourages students to be more creative, but on the other hand it creates psychological pressure when their content does not receive significant attention. This phenomenon shows how TikTok is not only an entertainment medium, but also an instrument for shaping student self-awareness in the context of digital communication.

Value Orientation

TikTok is preferred over other social media because it presents short, visual, and easy-to-understand content. Informants emphasized that a video length of 15–60 seconds is more effective in conveying a message than long text or long-form content. Viral trends are seen as a mechanism that makes it easier for students to follow the flow of popular communication. The orientation of the communication value of the younger generation is increasingly shifting towards efficiency, speed, and the ability of messages to go viral in a short time.

Overall, the results of this study show that TikTok functions as a representation space where students shape their communication behavior. Viral trends are not only followed as a form of entertainment, but are interpreted as social symbols that reflect their identity, status, and

connection to the digital community. Thus, Generation Z's communication behavior on TikTok cannot be seen simply as a consumptive activity, but also as a cultural practice loaded with representational meaning.

The results of the study show that TikTok is not just an entertainment medium, but has become a cultural representation space that influences the communication behavior of Generation Z students.

Representation of Viral Trends as Cultural Codes

The findings of the research are in line with the theory of representation by Stuart Hall (1997) who views the media as a space for the production of meaning. Viral content on TikTok serves as a symbolic code that how students present themselves, interact, and communicate their identities. For example, the use of popular music, visual filters, and participation in *viral challenges* are representational practices that are not neutral, but full of cultural meaning (Li & Xu, 2021). This phenomenon supports the research of Zhang & Wang (2022) which shows how Generation Z's social identity on TikTok is shaped by digital symbols.

Communication Behavior and *Uses and Gratifications*

In the perspective of *Uses and Gratifications* (Katz et al., 1973), college students are active users who choose TikTok to meet certain needs. The results of the study found that the main motivations are entertainment, social recognition, and the formation of digital identity. This is consistent with the findings of Cho & Lee (2020) that TikTok users seek satisfaction through entertainment and social interaction. Furthermore, the need for social validation can be seen from how informants emphasize the importance of the number of *likes* and *followers*. Thus, student communication behavior can be understood as a result of the interaction between personal needs and social gratification.

Competition and Self-Branding

The dimensions of the competition arena found show that TikTok also functions as a space to build personal branding. Some informants use TikTok as a means of promoting small business products, which shows that the platform has expanded from just entertainment to a means of the creative economy. These findings reinforce the study of Hassan & Omar (2021) which highlighted the role of TikTok as a brand communication medium. Thus, student communication behavior is not only personal, but also strategic, because it is related to self-image and potential economic benefits.

Self-Awareness and Social Comparison

The phenomenon of social comparison experienced by students when judging their content compared to popular creators shows how TikTok has helped shape digital self-awareness. This condition is in line with the findings of Mumtaz et al. (2022) and Kim & Park (2023) who link intensive use of TikTok to psychological distress and addiction tendencies. However, in contrast to the study, this study emphasizes that social comparisons can also spark creativity and encourage students to be more productive in creating content. In other words, TikTok produces a double effect: both motivating and suppressing.

Value Orientation of Generation Z

Findings on value orientation that prioritize speed, brief visualization, and potential virality show a shift in the communication norms of the younger generation. College students prefer to convey messages in short video format rather than long text. This supports Zuo & Jiang (2022) study of algorithmic culture, where forms of communication that are more in line with platform logic have a greater chance of getting attention. Thus, the value of Generation Z's communication is increasingly colored by the demands of efficiency, speed, and visual appeal.

Synthesis

The discussion of these findings clarifies the relationship between user motivations and the forms of representation produced, and situates them within broader theoretical debates. Uses & Gratifications accounts explain how needs for recognition, entertainment, and information drive media selection, while Representation theory (Hall, 1997) emphasizes how visual and symbolic practices on TikTok generate collective meanings circulating within digital communities. The present results show a synergy between these perspectives: personal motivations prompt experimentation in content production, yet the meanings that emerge are mediated by cultural codes and the algorithmic logics that determine visibility. Compared with international studies on *algorithmic culture* (e.g., Zuo & Jiang, 2022) and digital identity (e.g., Zhang & Wang (2022), this study confirms the pattern of users' strategic adaptation to platform parameters. However, the key contribution here is the emphasis on local context — the Palembang campus environment mediates topic choice and stylistic decisions, so viral representations simultaneously carry local cultural nuances while conforming to global platform norms. Consequently, this study not only corroborates existing literature but also supplies empirical evidence of how student communities navigate visibility pressures and digital economic opportunities in tandem.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that TikTok functions as a representation space that significantly shapes the communication behavior of Generation Z students, especially Communication Science students of the 2021 class of STISIPOL Candradimuka Palembang. The representation of TikTok viral

trends is not only interpreted as entertainment, but also as a means to build identity, gain social recognition, compete, and negotiate new communication values.

The five dimensions of communication behavior were found, namely purpose of use, identity initiative, arena of competition, self-awareness, and value orientation and showed that TikTok affects students both personally and socially. The communication behavior of students on this platform is greatly influenced by algorithmic logic that encourages them to keep up with trends, produce short content that easily goes viral, and interact through digital symbols that have representational meaning.

Theoretically, this research contributes by integrating the theory of *Uses and Gratifications* (Katz et al., 1973) and the theory of Representation (Hall, 1997) to understand the dynamics of digital communication of Generation Z. Practically, this study provides insight into the importance of digital literacy in dealing with psychological pressures due to social comparisons and in utilizing TikTok as a creative and economic communication medium.

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