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Revealing the Ecstasy of Communication upon Using Tik Tok: A Virtual Ethnography in Palopo City, Indonesia

Wahyuni Husain¹, Saifur Rahman², Intan Soliha Ibrahim³, Achmad Sulfikar⁴

¹Komunikasi dan Penyiaran Islam, IAIN Palopo

²Komunikasi dan Penyiaran Islam, IAIN Palopo

³Faculty of Social Science and Humanities. Universiti Malaysia Sabah

⁴Komunikasi dan Penyiaran Islam, IAIN Palopo

*Corresponding author, e-mail: wahyuni_husain@iainpalopo.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This research uses virtual ethnography to analyze TikTok usage patterns and the phenomenon of communication ecstasy among students in Palopo City. The qualitative field research method employed involves the use of questionnaires, interviews, observation, and documentation. A total of 53 students from universities in Palopo City participate in the questionnaire, and four were selected for further analysis through interviews. We analyze data using reduction techniques, presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results reveal that TikTok usage is prevalent among students, with daily use averaging over three hours per day. The purpose of use varies, including entertainment, information seeking, stress relief, hobby expression, and money-making. The phenomenon of communication ecstasy is evident in students' addiction to digital symbols like "like," "comment," "share," and "save." TikTok features enable students to immerse themselves in total simulation, blurring the lines between reality and virtuality, representation and reference, and facilitating the creation of simulacra and hyperreality. The implications suggest that TikTok is significantly altering communication patterns among students, leading to a shift



from in-depth, meaningful interactions to more superficial, symbolic exchanges. This shift fosters a pseudo-environment where students can meticulously curate and project an idealized version of themselves, further obscuring the boundaries between authenticity and performance. As a result, the emphasis on visual storytelling and viral trends can lead to a culture of comparison and validation, potentially affecting students' self-esteem and social skills in the long term.

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INTRODUCTION

TikTok has become a global platform with users and creators from diverse countries and cultures. Officially launched on the international market in 2017, TikTok rapidly gain popularity worldwide. The app provides a service for users to upload videos from their devices or record videos using the camera on their devices, and can immediately use the template feature. After uploading or recording, users can edit the video, including sound, effects, text, stickers, volume, trimming, and filters. The final step is to prepare the video for posting. Users can also write captions, add hashtags # and @, and mention other users (Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2021).

The duration of TikTok short videos ranges from 15 seconds to 10 minutes. In addition to short videos, it has now been updated with text features similar to those on Instagram. TikTok has created a space for users from different countries and cultures to exchange messages or communicate through short

videos. As a short video platform, TikTok interacts with a global audience (Kaye et al., 2021).

Furthermore, tik tok is popular due to the number of downloads it receives each year. This application became the most downloaded worldwide in 2022, reaching 672 million downloads. Even TikTok, which spanned consecutively from 2020 to 2022, became the most downloaded application in the world (Cindy Mutia Annur, 2023). Of course, this will force TikTok's competitors to innovate quickly.

For instance, innovation by Instagram, for example, with by the Reels feature in 2021, and YouTube also released Short in the same year. Not to be outdone, Twitter, now X, also released a "video for you" feature in 2022. Even marketplace applications like Shopee, release shopee video and finally, Shopee Video was released in 2022. The short video feature popularized by TikTok became a social media trend. TikTok is the pioneer. Eventually, TikTok became the new king of the social media universe.



Hence tiktok's popularity is also driven by the For You Page (FYP) algorithm, which allows content to go viral quickly without requiring a large number of followers. In fact, his platform differs from other platforms, such as Instagram, that rely on engagement (Kaye et al., 2021).

TikTok has become one of the most popular social media platforms globally, particularly among teenagers. Sandler notes that TikTok has shifted the dominance of other platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, among US teens (Sandler, 2023). This reflects a significant shift in teenagers' preferences for social media use, particularly with short video-based content that provides quick, visual, interactive, and easy-to-create entertainment.

Besides the United States, TikTok is also experiencing rapid user growth in other countries. Armivilla reports that Indonesia ranks second, with 112 million users, just behind the United States, which has 116 million users. Brazil and Mexico ranked third and fourth with 84 million and 62 million users, respectively. Russia ranks fifth with 51 million users (Armivilla, 2023). This rapid growth demonstrates TikTok's ability to instantly attract young users with entertaining content that is easy to create and share.

The rapid growth of TikTok users illustrates a global trend and shift from text and image consumption to dynamic video content. Yao Qin notes that the TikTok app offers an immersive and addictive experience through

gamification and interest-based algorithms, which can encourage users to engage with the platform. Vaterlaus emphasized that TikTok features, such as viral challenges and creative collaboration, can sustain user engagement (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). The trend of increasing TikTok usage is expected to continue, particularly in countries with high internet penetration and large youth populations, such as Indonesia.

TikTok usage trends in Indonesia show significant growth. In Indonesia, TikTok is utilized for a wide range of purposes. For example, TikTok is used as an alternative media for science learning (Mufidah & Mufidah, 2021), a media for learning Indonesian language and literature (Wisnu, 2018), a media for campaigning for religious moderation (Pratiwi, 2021), a media for honing children's creativity (Buana & Maharani, 2020), and an effective media for culinary promotion (Dewa & Safitri, 2021). In addition, TikTok, like other social media, is used to shape the personal branding of its users (Putri & Azeharie, 2021). TikTok is now a new phenomenon in the social media industry.

The results of the research conducted by Dwi Prakoso Agis show that TikTok does not affect the religious behavior of youth in the Sukarame sub-district. However, TikTok does affect time management. He says it all depends on the user (Agis, 2021).

However, it turns out that TikTok can influence the expression of communication among students at UIN



Sunan Ampel Surabaya. However, the influence is still moderate (Pratama & Muchlis, 2020). This indicates that one of the influences of TikTok on students is the changes in their communication and expression on social media.

The use of TikTok has a significant impact, both positive and negative. The impact of its use among UIN Shulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi students is also the same. Among the positive impacts are adding many virtual friends, learning new things through liked accounts, and spreading good things. However, the negative impact is the loss of shyness (Sari & Mahendra, 2021). TikTok, a social media platform, has an impact on students. Any media, including TikTok, can influence and shape the consciousness of its users.

Students in Indonesia are the most dominant users of TikTok (Andrian et al., 2021). This is due to the average age range of students, which is 18-22 years old. According to the *We Are Social* report cited by katadata.co.id, the majority of TikTok users are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Annur, 2023). In other words, students are the most users in Indonesia. This is the first data and argument to explore the usage pattern of TikTok among students.

The phenomenon of TikTok use among students is quite different. For example, students at Pasundan University Bandung use TikTok primarily for entertainment, to fill their spare time, to follow their friends, as a medium to express themselves, and as a promotional tool (Rahmawati, 2018). The purpose of

using TikTok is reflected in its usage pattern.

TikTok can also be used as an advertising medium. Nur Abida Rahman and her friends, who are students at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Palopo, use TikTok to promote stunting prevention. They promote stunting prevention through the TikTok account @yorgilsmax17 with the title "Ayo, Cegah Stunting Bantu Indonesia Bangkit Lebih Kuat" (Humas IAIN Palopo, n.d.) The video was created to participate in the 2021 Independence Competition organized by the North Luwu Regency government. This is an example of using TikTok among students in Palopo City.

Palopo City has 15 universities: 14 under the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education with 19,401 students, and one under the Ministry of Religious Affairs with 10,264 students. In total, Palopo City has 29,665 students pursuing higher education. (BPS Kota Palopo, 2023). TikTok has great potential to develop Palopo City if managed well. It can serve as a platform for learning, promoting, business, and campaigning for religious moderation, paving the way for a multi-religious society. By and large, students in Palopo City are not contaminated by radicalism (Pirol & Husain, 2020).

Understanding TikTok use patterns among students, especially in Palopo City, is crucial. Media literacy correlates with healthy media consumption. For instance, social media users with high media literacy are 32% less likely to spread hoaxes. (Andrian et



al., 2021). Higher media literacy leads to healthier media use, including on TikTok. TikTok can be used for positive and productive purposes. It can also promote religious moderation and maintain harmony in multi-religious societies like Palopo City. The media can spread messages to the entire social body.

Each media type has its unique characteristics and goals, like TikTok, which differs from platforms like Instagram and Facebook. When the audience receives messages from media, they interpret them. People are often influenced by media content, even applying it in real life. For instance, TikTok's lifestyle content serves as a benchmark for real-life emulation. (Triananda et al., 2021). The distinction between reality and representation has vanished. Jean Baudrillard calls this the world of simulation. (Baudrillard, Foss, Patton, & Beitchman, 1983).

With its iconic FYP (*For You Page*) feature, TikTok has significantly encouraged mimetics. Mimitism is the desire to imitate something because others desire it (Haryatmoko, 2007). FYP content sparks the desire to create similar content, and TikTok users become trapped in reproducing content, disregarding its substance or message.

Content on TikTok often obscures the intended substance or message. Consequently, the techniques of presentation or content creation on TikTok overshadow the actual content or message. This phenomenon is what McLuhan, as cited by Jean Baudrillard, refers to as "The medium is the message"

(Haryatmoko, 2007). The medium itself becomes paramount, rather than the content or its message. TikTok primarily generates content that is abundant but devoid of meaning. Content production without meaning is what Baudrillard describes as "communication ecstasy." Communication ecstasy results in an overflow of messages, leading to superficial meanings (Ratri, 2018).

Baudrillard asserts that communication ecstasy is a state in which all functions are reduced to a single dimension: communication itself (Jean Baudrillard, 2006). He claims that the content of communication is entirely devoid of meaning; the only thing being communicated is the act of communication itself. TikTok users do not prioritize meaning in their content; what matters is the act of content creation itself.

The world of communication is evolving towards hyper-visibility and hyper-sensibility, where everything is poised to be displayed, showcased, broadcasted, and communicated through various media forms, creating a world of "total exposure" and "total obscene."

Therefore, it is important to conduct further research on TikTok usage patterns among students in Palopo City. It is also important to see the form of communication ecstasy among TikTok users, both those who actively create content (communicators) and those who passively watch videos (communicants).

METHODOLOGY



This type of research is field research. The approach used is qualitative. The method used is virtual ethnography, which Jorgen Sageby commonly refers to as online ethnography. Virtual ethnography is also often referred to as cyber-ethnography, a technique for researching virtual communities, including virtual consumer communities, as a means of gathering information from members of these communities, such as thoughts, experiences, products, and services (Akturan et al., 2009). In this study, the virtual community consists of students in Palopo City who use TikTok, including both active users (content creators) and passive users (content connoisseurs).

Cristian Hine states that virtual ethnography is a methodology used to investigate internet users and explore online entities (Hine, 2000). Netnography also reflects the implications of mediated communication on the internet (Carter, 2015). The virtual ethnography method is an appropriate approach for analyzing the behavior of virtual communities, including social media users (Postill & Pink, 2012). Researchers or ethnographers are vital instruments in this study. According to Sugiyono, instruments in qualitative research need to be validated by measuring their understanding of research methods, mastery of the relevant topic, and readiness to conduct research. The method is self-evaluation (Sugiyono, 2021). During this research, the chief researcher evaluated the research team members.

His study collected data from TikTok user students in Palopo City, specifically those studying at Universities in Palopo City, including IAIN Palopo, Cokroaminoto University Palopo, Andi Djemma University, Muhammadiyah University Palopo, and Kurnia Jaya Persada Health and Business Institute. The participants were categorized into three groups: web surfers, active participants, and lurkers.

The data analysis process begins with collecting, sorting, selecting, or reducing the data, presenting it, and drawing conclusions.

This data collection originates from two sources: First, the results of filling out the Google Form questionnaire (<https://forms.gle/U1LabP4wftrGaviY7>), which was distributed via scrolling messages on the WhatsApp application, and second, the results of the questionnaire. 53 students filled out the questionnaire. Second, direct communication or interviews with members of the virtual community or TikTok users are also needed. Four students were interviewed. Third, data was obtained from observations and documentation collected by researchers, such as content, emoticons, or comments.

Reduce the existing data, then separate the important data and record it in detail. General information is then summarized into basic data by separating important aspects and adjusting them to the research theme, specifically the form of use and communication ecstasy among TikTok user students in Palopo City.



Presenting data after reduction. The goal is to gain understanding. Data presentation involves briefly describing, creating a flow, connecting, and organizing data obtained through questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documentation, which are then displayed in categories.

Concluding to answer the formulation of the problem proposed in this study, namely how the pattern of use and form of communication ecstasy among TikTok user students in Palopo City. Conclusions can take the form of new findings or novel insights in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study presents two primary findings. The first investigation focuses on the prevalence and patterns of TikTok usage among students in Palopo City. The variables of interest are the frequency of usage, the length of usage, and the reasons for using TikTok among students. The second area of interest is the phenomenon of communication ecstasy among TikTok users. The variables of communication ecstasy include consumer society and changes in communication patterns, as well as the concepts of simulacra and self-image, hyperreality, and the emptiness of meaning. These two aspects will be elucidated through the incorporation of pertinent theoretical frameworks, critical analysis, and illustrative case studies.

1. TikTok Usage Among Students in Palopo City

a. Frequency of Use

The frequency of TikTok usage refers to the number of times students access the platform, whether for viewing content or creating their own. This data is crucial for understanding the extent to which TikTok shapes the daily lives of students. Based on the interviews with several informants, it was found that students use TikTok daily (Dandi, Nurhidayah, & Thariq, 2023). However, the informant did not provide specific details regarding the timing of TikTok usage, specifically whether it occurred before, after, or during bedtime or free time. This suggests that TikTok has become an integral part of student's daily routines and indirectly influences their overall activity patterns. TikTok has become a central aspect of their lives.

The tenets of Critical Media Theory posit that the media exerts a significant influence on the formation of public awareness. To illustrate, the film *Penumpasan Pengkhiatan G30S/PKI*, produced during the New Order era, was used as a means of fostering public consciousness regarding PKI as a national adversary. A parallel can be drawn between this and the role that TikTok, as a contemporary form of media, plays in shaping its users' awareness of content and trends on the platform.

However, the frequency of content creation is not a daily occurrence and is relatively uncommon, with some individuals abstaining from content creation entirely. Some creators are driven by mood or the desire to capitalize



on viral trends. Nevertheless, some individuals create one or two videos per day. A questionnaire completed by 53 students revealed that 32% were engaged in content creation, while 68% were passive or merely observed (Questionnaire Respondent, 2023). The data indicate that students in Palopo City engage with TikTok content more frequently than they create their content. The precise reasons behind students' preference for consuming content rather than creating it remain unclear.

In terms of content creation, 52 students indicated that they had created the content themselves, while one student reported receiving assistance from a friend. This indicates that the majority of individuals are capable of creating their content. The time required for the creation process is estimated to be between 30 seconds and one hour (Questionnaire Respondent, 2023). The time spent creating content varies considerably.

Although the frequency of viewing TikTok videos is more prevalent than content creation, this phenomenon illustrates a shift in media consumption patterns among students in Palopo City, characterized by a proclivity for consuming short videos.

This finding supports the conclusions of Kaye et al. that younger individuals are more likely to use video-based social media platforms, particularly TikTok, compared to other platforms due to their interactive and visual nature (Kaye et al., 2021). Frequent engagement with TikTok

facilitates enhanced social interaction, such as following viral challenges or trends.

b. Duration of Use

The term "usage duration" refers to the amount of time students spend using the TikTok platform daily. A total of 53 students completed a questionnaire, and the results indicated that 35% of students spend one hour, 29% spend two hours, and 37% spend three hours or more on TikTok per day (Questionnaire Respondent, 2023). Even Thariq, one of the respondents, reported spending between five and eight hours per day viewing TikTok videos (Thariq, 2023). Thus, students spend a minimum of one hour utilizing the TikTok platform.

The time spent on TikTok is correlated with the number of videos viewed. If it is assumed that the average duration of a video is 15 seconds, then students can view four videos in a single minute. In a single hour, the number of videos viewed can reach 240, calculated as four videos per minute over 60 minutes. This figure indicates that students tend to prefer short videos, as they enable the consumption of more video content in a relatively short amount of time. Nevertheless, further investigation is required to determine whether this can be used as evidence that short videos are indeed preferred over longer videos.

A survey conducted by APJII revealed that online video represents the most frequently visited form of internet entertainment, with a 55.06% penetration rate. Subsequently, the time spent on



social media was found to be less than one hour in 12.41% of cases, between one and two hours in 46.16% of cases, between two and three hours in 25.14% of cases, between three and four hours in 8.46% of cases, and over four hours in 7.84% of cases. The data indicate that the duration of social media use is significantly distributed among users who engage with the platform for more extended periods.

The infinite scroll feature on the TikTok platform enables users to continue viewing multiple videos within a single session. This is corroborated by the TikTok algorithm, which displays content aligned with its users' preferences. This phenomenon encourages users to continue watching videos that are relevant to their lives, thereby increasing the overall time spent on the platform (Qin et al., 2022). Students who perceive the content as relevant to their lives are more likely to continue scrolling and watching additional videos, which ultimately extends the overall duration of TikTok usage.

The findings suggest that TikTok plays a significant role in the daily lives of students in Palopo City. Further investigation is required to determine the long-term impact of usage.

This phenomenon results in a shift in digital content consumption patterns, with a preference for short video content over long video content, which is perceived as less engaging. This raises the question of whether TikTok users are

more likely to engage with short-form content than with long-form content.

c. Purpose of Use

The data obtained from the questionnaire indicates that the reasons for using TikTok vary considerably. A significant proportion of students (72%) utilize TikTok for entertainment purposes. In comparison, 11% employ it to obtain information, 8% to manage stress and anxiety, 6% to express their hobbies, and 4% to generate income (Questionnaire Respondent, 2023). TikTok has become a popular medium for students seeking entertainment. A minority of users employ the platform for information-seeking purposes. It is noteworthy that a minority of TikTok users are engaged in monetization strategies. The aforementioned goals illustrate that TikTok is a highly versatile platform.

To illustrate, the content that student Thariq favors is content uploaded by the Pandawara group account, an environmental activism group. As Thariq himself has stated:

Content picking up trash from Pandawara. Where a group of men continue to motivate other young men to keep the environment clean. As of today, the real action of Pandawara has successfully cleaned several beaches in Indonesia and also managed to gather as many as 10,800 volunteers to clean a beach (Thariq, 2023)



The TikTok account Pandawara Group has amassed a considerable following of 12 million users and has garnered 218.8 million likes as of 2024. The account features five young people who encourage the public to engage in environmental stewardship by cleaning beaches, rivers, and even gutters.

Nurhidayah offered a contrasting perspective. She stated, "TikTok video content with sad words related to my life is of particular interest to me, and I even save it in my saved list." (Dandi et al., 2023). The creation of this kind of video is not the exclusive domain of a single account. Instead, it is a phenomenon that is observed across a multitude of accounts, many of which feature videos accompanied by words that elicit a certain degree of emotional resonance.

It is noteworthy that only 4% of students rely on TikTok for financial gain. However, there is a discernible inclination towards utilizing the platform for personal benefit. However, the content created by students lacks a discernible message.

A total of 32 students indicated that they had no specific message they wished to convey through the content. Some respondents indicated that they had no specific message they wished to convey through the content. "The crucial objective is to be able to complete a final year project (FYP)." Others indicated that the content includes "motivational messages," "preserving nature," "always respecting people," and "offering good things to the audience." In general, the majority of students did not have a

specific message to convey to their audience. However, only a small number have specific messages (Questionnaire Respondent, 2023). The data above explores the various purposes for which students use TikTok, including entertainment, seeking information, creating personal branding, providing motivation, and even earning money.

A review of the duration, frequency, and purpose of TikTok usage among students in Palopo City reveals a notable shift in media consumption patterns. In general, advances in information and communication technology facilitate communication and influence a person's lifestyle. Furthermore, consumption patterns that were previously based on necessity have now shifted to patterns based on the consumption of symbols and signs (Mughtar, Nurhasanah, & Fakhruroji, 2024). Consequently, the act of consuming media assumes greater significance than the medium's intrinsic function. This is the defining characteristic of a consumer society.

2. Communication Ecstasy of TikTok Users among College Students

a. The Consumer Society and Changes in Communication Patterns

The contemporary manifestation of capitalism is distinguished by a transition from a focus on production to one on consumption. In a consumer society, consumption is the primary objective. The act of consumption is not driven by the item's intrinsic utility but rather by the



prestige or symbols associated with it. The act of consuming is a means of attaining a certain status. (Baudrillard, 2004). In a consumer society, symbols are consumed. An exchange of symbols occurs, accompanied by a shift in the subject-object to the object-object relationship.

On TikTok, this phenomenon is reflected in how content created by creators no longer focuses on substance or meaning but instead on symbols such as likes, comments, shares, saves, and the For You Page (FYP). Students are pleased if their content reaches FYP, receives many likes, and generates many comments until they become addicted to creating more content. As expressed by Dandi: "At first, it was just for fun to create content and then for FYP; in the end, I got addicted, and I still am." (Dandy, 2023). This phenomenon demonstrates that the primary objective is not to convey meaning but rather to ensure that the TikTok algorithm accepts the content. As Baudrillard theorizes, consumers become integrated into the object system, wherein they are no longer the agents of consumption but rather become objects controlled by a system of signs and symbols.

This evidence demonstrates the manipulation of signs. The signifier is of greater significance than the signified. The significance of features such as "like," "comment," "share," "save," and "FYP" extends beyond their literal meaning. The symbol is of greater significance than its meaning. The significance of the message is

overshadowed by its visual presentation. The production of content becomes a surplus, abundant, and overlapping phenomenon, yet it lacks meaningful substance. The communicative patterns that emerge in this context lack meaningful content.

The act of communicating, defined as the conveyance of messages, has been reduced to a single dimension, designated as the communication dimension. The act of communicating is, in and of itself, meaningless. Communication is regarded as an end in itself. Communication is preoccupied with the act of presenting. A review of the usage patterns on TikTok among students in Palopo City reveals a clear focus on content creation. However, the majority of the content created by students lacks a discernible message, as exemplified by Thariq's remarks. "Nothing, because I simply create videos" (Thariq, 2023). This phenomenon can be illustrated by the following expression: "The important thing is the content itself, not the important content." This is where the change in communication patterns occurs. This communication pattern involves the use of symbols without any discernible meaning or message.

In a consumer society, consumers should be subjects, but in reality, they become objects. The relationships that are built are objects. So, TikTok users, as subjects who operate the TikTok application, also become objects of the TikTok algorithm through the For You Page (FYP) feature.



The content provided by FYP is customized to align with the interests of individual users. TikTok users are the target of FYP content. In other words, FYP is a system that surpasses human capabilities and, through a process of evolution, has successfully maintained user engagement on the TikTok platform. Additionally, TikTok users generate content that is subsequently categorized as "For You Page" (FYP). As articulated by account owner *lita_547* in her questionnaire response, "Creating Content According to FYP" (Questionnaire Respondent, 2023). Furthermore, FYP content frequently results in the objectification and exploitation of women's bodies (Rully, Isbandi, Utomo, Khairiyah, & Apriani, 2021).

In turn, student content creators become part of the spectacle society. As Guy Debord posited, spectacle society displays its daily life on the screen (Debord, 2021). In a society of spectacle, social life is increasingly reduced to short videos on platforms like TikTok. The content on such platforms is not a reflection of reality but rather a result of the application of effects and filters, which can be described as a form of simulacra.

b. Simulacra and Pseudo Space

The term "simulacra" is used to describe an imaginary representation of reality that does not present reality itself in its essential form. Simulacra is a device that can transform abstract concepts into concrete ones and vice versa. The simulation process begins with the

representation of reality, whereby reality is enveloped and distorted into a different sign, resulting in the loss of reality and its complete disappearance (Fahrudin Faiz, 2020). Simulation can be defined as a process of representing something that subsequently transforms to become a replacement for that original entity (Haryatmoko, 2016, p. 80). In the context of TikTok, short video content serves as a conduit to simulate aspects of the tangible world. The concept of simulation demonstrates how digital representation can potentially supplant or even negate the tangible reality.

The content created on the TikTok platform was initially designed to imitate reality, to present content that could be considered representative of real life. The features on TikTok, including those related to beauty, filters, and music, serve to obfuscate and distort reality, creating a representation that is starkly different from the actual reality. The result of this process is the dissolution of the original reality and the emergence of a new, simulated, and aesthetically distinct reality.

The content created by Dandi about the challenges faced by final-year students in completing their theses became a popular topic on the platform, receiving hundreds of thousands of likes, thousands of comments, and tens of thousands of saves. This content prompted numerous inquiries from his peers and even from strangers about his thesis and the optimal allocation of time between thesis work and content creation.



In an interview conducted via WhatsApp, Dandi stated:

"If the one who greeted me was my usual sister at work. "Hey, we are the ones who make thesis content, bro." the one who asked was usually my friend. Usually, at hangouts, they just asked, "How is your thesis, are you working, even though Miko is busy making content", or other questions like "didn't you go to the defense or are you busy making content, Mi and Mukerja" questions like that, Sis (Dandy, 2023)

This shows how simulation in TikTok content has created a new world. The content, although representing real experiences, ultimately becomes more important in the digital world than the experience itself.

The above phenomenon confirms the loss of the referential world. Simulation becomes real on TikTok because it has lost its referential world. Ultimately, TikTok users inhabit a simulated world that they create through their content. The simulated world begins to create a pseudospace; there is no boundary between the representational and the referential. Here, there is also a blurring of the distinction between the private and the public.

Jean Baudrillard has asserted that private space disappears along with the disappearance of public space. The two cannot be separated, which is the spectacle and which is the secret. The distinction between interior and exterior becomes blurred. The most private aspects of one's life become merely a

backdrop in the media (Jean Baudrillard, 2006).

Simulacra and pseudospace demonstrate how TikTok alters the way users perceive and engage with reality. The process of simulation blurs the line between representation and reality, creating a simulated world that replaces real experiences with polished and manipulated ones. TikTok content has also created a new reality that often influences users' perceptions compared to the original reality. This leads to a state of hyperreality.

c. Hyper-reality and Self-Image

In the domain of simulation, the concept of reference has become obsolete. The referential position is supplanted by representation. Consequently, the representation assumes the status of reality. When a representation becomes a reality, arguably a more tangible one than the actual thing, it is defined as hyperreality.

The concept of hyperreality is evident in the content produced on the social media platform TikTok. The user-generated content is created to establish a self-image for the audience. To illustrate, Dandi's self-image is that of a "thesis fighter," whereas Alda presents herself as a "hijaber" (Dandy, 2023). Dandi creates content that illustrates a final-year student. At the same time, Alda creates content that depicts a pious woman. The self-image displayed by Dandi and Alda reduces and even replaces their actual reality. Their identities are more widely known through their representation on TikTok than in real life.



Alda produced a 15-second video segment. The background music is Opick's track, entitled "Di Bawah Langitmu." The narrative within the video comprises the following text: "Busy seeking peace, while peace is found in prayer." The caption reads, "Bersujud." In the video, Alda displays a smiling face. Alda conceptualizes her spiritual journey as a series of prostrations.

The content above presents a self-image that aligns with the principles of obedience to God as a means of achieving peace. The caption "sujud" is an example of obedience. The act of prostration is regarded as an illustration of one's obedience to fulfilling divine commands, as exemplified by prayer (prostration). This indicates that Alda presents herself as a devout Muslim woman. Alda effectively uses simulation to present her self-image as someone religious, although it is unclear whether this self-image aligns with her actual beliefs and practices. In the context of communication ethics, content must reflect the truth (Prasanti & Indriani, 2017), not a fabricated image. Here, the distinction between the real and the fake, the manifestation and the reference, the private and the public, is blurred. TikTok has facilitated this fusion.

This phenomenon ultimately results in a lack of depth. To be perceived as pious Muslim women or thesis writers, Alda and Dandi need only create content that reflects these images without necessarily embodying these roles in their daily lives. This phenomenon is a

consequence of the banality of digital era communication, whereby profound values are supplanted by superficial appearances packaged in TikTok content. In general, social media has transformed the paradigm of communication in society (Sanityastuti, Virga, & Zahra, 2024). One of the changes is the reduction in the scope of digital-era communication.

Communication in the digital era has become a process devoid of meaning. According to Baudrillard, in a world dominated by simulation, communication becomes an end in itself, where what is important is the presentation or communication itself rather than the message conveyed. Communication has been reduced to a single dimension, the communication dimension. This can be observed on the TikTok platform, which enables users to create a large amount of content in a short time, but often without substance.

Communication becomes fast, piled up, overflowing, but empty of meaning. The meaning that is to be conveyed can no longer be captured due to the overflow of messages. Communication no longer prioritizes meaning because it is preoccupied with presenting itself. Ultimately, it creates a pile of visual clutter, where content on TikTok continues to be produced without considering whether the message conveyed has a profound or meaningful significance. At its peak, the function of communication has shrunk to communication itself. Content becomes the goal rather than the meaning to be



conveyed. The term "what is important is content, not content that is important" describes what Baudrillard calls the ecstasy of communication.

CONCLUSION

The frequency of TikTok usage among students in Palopo City is very high. TikTok is utilized by students daily. The duration of use varies considerably, with some users accessing the platform for more than three hours per day. The motivations for using TikTok are diverse, encompassing a range of purposes, including entertainment, information seeking, stress and anxiety management, hobby expression, and financial gain.

The phenomenon of communication ecstasy can be traced back to students' addiction to digital symbols such as the "like," "comment," "share," and "save" functions. The majority of content created by students lacks meaningful content and instead merely follows trends or achieves popularity. In the subsequent phase, students find themselves immersed in a completely simulated world. The distinction between the real and the unreal, between representation and reference, is no longer evident. This phenomenon results in the emergence of hyperreality, where imitation begins to replace reality. Consequently, this leads to students developing a shallow self-image and reproducing meaningless messages. A considerable amount of virtual content, often described as "garbage," is now present in the social media space.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing an analysis of how students, particularly in Palopo City, utilize TikTok as a communication medium that prioritizes superficial symbols over meaningful content. Furthermore, TikTok has become a virtual space where students can enter a simulated world that blurs the distinction between reality and fiction, creating a form of hyperreality. The contribution of this study lies in its combination of virtual ethnographic methods with communication theory and its disclosure of the process of shifting from meaning-based communication to symbol-based communication.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP

CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Wahyuni Husain: Leading the research, developing the theoretical framework, and designing the methodology.

Saifur Rahman: Contributed to data collection through interviews and virtual ethnography and assisted in writing the results and discussing sections.

Intan Soliha Ibrahim: Reviewed the manuscript and provided feedback for improvements and revisions.

Achmad Sulfikar: Provided feedback for improvements and revisions.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST



We certify that we have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could be perceived as influencing the work reported in this paper.

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