

GEN-Z SURABAYA COMMUNICATION STYLE ON TIKTOK PLATFORM: A CASE STUDY OF VISUAL AND NONVERBAL EXPRESSION

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Abstract

TikTok as a visual social media platform has become a new space for teenagers to express themselves and interact socially. This study aims to analyze changes in the communication styles of urban teenagers who actively use TikTok, particularly in terms of verbal, nonverbal, and visual expressions. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study involved ten teenage informants aged 20–23 years in Surabaya who actively use TikTok for at least one hour per day. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews and participatory observation, then analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The results show three main themes: adaptation of language and visual symbols, dominance of nonverbal communication, and the influence of trends on performative behavior. This study confirms that TikTok dynamically shapes youth communication styles and highlights the urgent need for digital media literacy.

Keywords: TikTok, communication styles, youth, phenomenology, social media, visual expression.

1. Introduction

The development of digital technology has changed the way teenagers communicate. TikTok, as a short video-based application, has become a very popular arena for self-expression. According to data from We Are Social (2023), TikTok users in Indonesia have reached more than 109 million, with the 16–24 age group dominating. This application is not only used for entertainment, but also as a medium for identity formation and social interaction. Previous studies such as Nasrullah (2019) and Hafiar (2021) discuss the impact of social media on the digital identity of teenagers, but have not specifically examined the dynamics of visual communication on TikTok. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the subjective experiences of teenagers in communicating through TikTok.

The phenomenon of communication on TikTok is no longer limited to the use of words or text messages, but has expanded to include visual and nonverbal forms of communication such as facial expressions, body movements, filter selection, visual effects, and the use of background music. This platform provides ample space for its users, especially Gen-Z, to create personal narratives packaged in an attractive and easily accessible visual format. This is where communication styles become increasingly complex, as they are influenced not only by the local cultural context, but also by global trends that spread rapidly through the TikTok algorithm. Teenagers in big cities such as Surabaya have distinctive social and cultural characteristics. They grow up in a technology-dense urban environment, are open to popular culture, and are highly responsive to developments in digital trends. This context makes their communication expressions on TikTok unique in terms of content, style, and communicative purpose. Social interactions through TikTok often involve performative elements, where users consciously curate content to gain social validation in the form of likes, views, and comments. This has led to the emergence of a new communication style that emphasizes visual impressions, gestures adapted to trends, and digital symbols as tools for self-representation.

However, to date, there have been few studies that specifically highlight how visual and nonverbal expressions on TikTok have become part of Gen-Z's communication style, especially in local contexts such as Surabaya. This research is important because it reveals how technology shapes the way teenagers communicate, build their identity, and interact with their environment visually. Using a phenomenological approach, this study attempts to capture the

direct experiences of users in understanding and shaping their communication style on TikTok, including how meanings of communication are formed, interpreted, and negotiated through this visual medium.

2. Literature Review

Nasrullah (2019) explains that social media creates a new communication space based on visuals and symbols. In the context of TikTok, this space becomes a place where teenagers can interact creatively through visual elements such as short videos, digital symbols, filters, and audio. Social media is no longer just a place to exchange information, but also an arena for the formation of visual self-narratives.

Hafiar (2021) emphasizes that teenagers' digital identities are formed through active participation in digital platforms. TikTok is a medium that allows users to display a curated version of themselves, while also conforming to the expectations of the online community. Teenagers are not only consumers of content, but also producers who consciously shape their self-image in the digital space. McQuail (2020) argues that media has a simultaneous influence on interpersonal communication, including how individuals present themselves and respond to others. In the context of TikTok, communication becomes indirect but still intense due to comments, content duplication (duets/stitches), and visual responses that form nonverbal dialogue between users.

Boyd (2018) also highlights how the lives of teenagers on social media are greatly influenced by peer pressure and the need to express themselves. Teenagers often tailor their content to current trends as a form of existence and recognition from their peers. Kaplan and Haenlein (2020) emphasize the importance of understanding the characteristics of social media in order to identify its impact on the psychological and cultural aspects of users. TikTok, with its fast, visual, and algorithmic characteristics, shapes unique consumption patterns and communication styles, where visuals and nonverbal cues are key to conveying messages.

Theoretically, this study is based on the visual communication approach and Erving Goffman's theory of performativity, which views social interaction as a "stage" where individuals play certain roles. In the context of TikTok, users perform visually as part of their communication and self-image strategies. In addition, the digital identity construction approach is used to analyze how Gen-Z uses nonverbal and visual expressions to build and maintain their identities in the digital space. By examining these studies, this research attempts to fill the gap in studies by focusing on Gen-Z's nonverbal and visual communication practices on TikTok, particularly in the local context of urban youth in Surabaya.

3. Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to understand the subjective experiences of adolescents in using TikTok as a communication medium. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meanings formed by individuals through their interactions with digital media, particularly in the context of visual and nonverbal expression. The study was conducted in Surabaya, involving ten informants aged 20–23 years who were active TikTok users for at least one hour per day. Informants were selected purposively based on criteria of active involvement, understanding of TikTok trends, and the ability to reflect on their communication experiences on the platform.

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews and participatory observation of the informants' digital activities, both directly and through the content they uploaded. The data obtained was analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which allowed researchers to interpret the informants' personal experiences and map the main themes that emerged. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking, in which the researchers confirmed the initial interpretations with the informants. This method is expected to reveal the dynamics of Gen-Z communication in depth, especially in shaping visual and nonverbal communication styles in the digital era.

4. Results and Discussion

Based on in-depth interviews and participatory observation of ten Gen-Z teenagers in Surabaya, three main themes were found that reflect their communication style on TikTok: (1) adaptation of language and visual symbols, (2) dominance of nonverbal communication, and (3) the influence of trends on performative behavior. These three themes are interrelated and form a distinctive communication pattern that reflects the identity and self-expression strategies of the younger generation in the digital age.

4.1 Results

Adaptation of Language and Visual Symbols

Informants showed a strong tendency to use contextual and visual language. For example, the use of slang terms such as “gas,” “bestie,” “ceunah,” or “panik gak sih?” (aren't you panicking?) are not just words, but part of online community expressions that strengthen a sense of togetherness. They also frequently use emojis, filters, and text overlays in videos to reinforce the non-verbal messages being conveyed. Visual symbols such as exaggerated facial expressions, dramatic effects, or viral background music become a visual language that is easily understood by fellow TikTok users. This shows that communication is no longer just verbal, but is full of meaning embedded in popular visual symbols.

Gen-Z teenagers in Surabaya demonstrate adaptive skills in using language and symbols that have developed in the digital environment. The language used is not only verbal, but also supplemented with visual elements such as emojis, overlay text, effects, and filters that reinforce the meaning of the message. The use of these visual symbols is contextual and often serves as a marker of affiliation with certain online trends or groups. One informant, A (22 years old), stated: “On TikTok, sometimes one expression or filter is enough to say something. Like using the crying filter, even though we're not really sad, but people already understand what it means.” This phenomenon reinforces Nasrullah's (2019) view that social media creates a space for visual and symbolic communication. Language no longer functions only literally, but also as an element of aesthetics and identity. The adaptation of visual symbols also indicates a collective meaning-making process, where symbols only have meaning if they are understood collectively by the online community.

The Dominance of Nonverbal Communication

One important finding is the dominance of nonverbal communication in the content uploaded by informants. Body movements such as hand gestures, dance challenges, facial expressions, and eye contact are used as the main tools to convey messages, even without words. Content that relies on expressions such as “pretending to be indifferent but hopeful” or the trend of lip-syncing without sound shows that nonverbal expressions have very high communicative power.

The informants mentioned that they often feel more comfortable expressing themselves without having to speak directly. The gestures used in trends such as lip-sync, reaction videos, or dance challenges become a language of their own that can be interpreted by other users. According to B (21 years old): “I don't have to say anything, just express myself with my eyes or follow the trend, and people will understand what I mean. So, we connect not through words, but through movements.” This finding is closely related to McQuail's (2020) theory of interpersonal communication, which states that social media changes the way individuals form relationships and convey messages. Nonverbal communication on TikTok allows for emotional connection without the need for physical closeness, while also demonstrating the effectiveness of body symbols as a visual communication tool.

The Influence of Trends on Performative Behavior

TikTok as an algorithmic platform shapes performative behavior among teenagers. Informants admitted that they often adjust their communication style to viral trends in order to gain attention (engagement). This performative behavior includes choosing popular songs, participating in challenges, and adjusting clothing styles or video tones to suit the target audience. Communication style becomes strategic, rather than spontaneous.

Informants admitted that they often feel “compelled” to create certain content in order to remain relevant and accepted in the digital community. This causes them to consciously perform certain actions designed to gain social engagement in the form of likes, comments, and followers. Informant C (20 years old) said: “Sometimes I make videos not because I want to, but because they are trending on FYP. So it's like, ‘if I don't join in, I'm afraid I'll be left behind’.” This phenomenon illustrates the peer pressure described by Boyd (2018), where participation in social media is shaped by the need to exist and not be left behind by the community. Furthermore, this behavior is also in line with Goffman's theory of performativity, where individuals present a certain “self” as part of a social role that is adapted to the situation—in this case, the trends that are popular on TikTok.

Teenagers play a temporary yet strategic social role, adapting to the expectations of digital audiences. They build their digital identities through curated visual performances, rather than spontaneous ones. These identities are

dynamic and reflective of social media logic, as emphasized by Kaplan & Haenlein (2020) regarding the importance of understanding the characteristics of digital media in the psychosocial development of individuals.

Overall, these three themes illustrate that Gen-Z's communication style on TikTok is not only expressive but also strategic and responsive to the dynamics of digital society. Visual and nonverbal expressions serve as the primary means of conveying messages, reinforcing identity, and fostering social connections within an ever-evolving media landscape.

4.2 Discussion

Based on in-depth interviews and participatory observations of ten Gen-Z informants in Surabaya, three primary themes emerged reflecting their communication style on TikTok: (1) adaptation of language and visual symbols, (2) dominance of nonverbal communication, and (3) influence of trends on performative behavior. Informants showcased an inclination toward contextual and visual language, using slang and popular visual symbols—like emojis and exaggerated facial expressions—to reinforce meaning and foster community. They indicated that communication transcends mere verbal exchanges, becoming a collective process of meaning-making where visuals convey significant cultural references. Additionally, nonverbal communication, characterized by body movements and gestures, proved essential for expressing emotions and messages without spoken words, aligning with McQuail's theory on social relationships in new media. Lastly, the algorithmic nature of TikTok incentivizes users to align their content with viral trends to gain social engagement, revealing a strategic approach to communication driven by peer pressure and the desire for relevancy. This phenomenon showcases how teens curate dynamic digital identities that resonate with audience expectations, emphasizing the interplay between self-presentation and social media logic. Together, these themes illustrate that Gen-Z communication on TikTok is not only expressive but also reflective of broader digital societal dynamics.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that TikTok has shaped a new style of communication among Gen-Z teenagers in Surabaya, characterized by the dominance of visual and nonverbal expressions. Through a phenomenological approach, it was found that communication on TikTok no longer relies on words directly, but is constructed through visual symbols, body gestures, facial expressions, filters, and musical elements. Communication has become multimodal and highly contextual, reflecting the new ways in which teenagers construct and negotiate their identities in the digital space.

The three main themes that emerged, adaptation of language and visual symbols, dominance of nonverbal communication, and the influence of trends on performative behavior, illustrate that this communication style is dynamic, flexible, and highly influenced by the digital social environment. TikTok functions as a digital stage where teenagers play social roles that are adapted to the trends and expectations of the community. These findings align with Goffman's theory of performativity and the concept of digital identity, highlighting the importance of media literacy in understanding the meaning and impact of communication on visual platforms like TikTok.

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