



# The Role of Social Media In The Formation of Gen Z Identity (Case Study at YP Unila High School, Bandar Lampung)

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**Abstract:** High exposure to diverse content on TikTok plays a significant role in shaping the identity of Generation Z students. Through continuous interaction with trends, challenges, and viral content, students are exposed to new values, norms, and communication styles that may influence how they perceive themselves and others. This process contributes to the formation of their mindset, interpersonal communication patterns, and ways of expressing emotions and opinions. As a result, TikTok becomes a social space where identity is constructed, negotiated, and displayed. However, this phenomenon also raises important concerns. The values and behaviors promoted on TikTok do not always align with the values instilled by family environments and educational institutions. Differences between online cultural trends and offline social norms may create tension in students' identity development. They are often required to negotiate between expectations from their digital communities and the norms upheld by parents, teachers, and schools. Therefore, the main issue addressed in this study is how Generation Z students absorb, interpret, and adapt the influence of TikTok in the process of personal identity formation, and how this process interacts with family and school values. Using a qualitative approach, this research aims to examine the role of TikTok in shaping Generation Z's identity in the context of interpersonal communication.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, Identity, Interpersonal Communication, Social Media

## Introduction

The development of the internet in Indonesia has shown a significant increase in recent years. The Internet (Inter-Network) refers to a collection of computer networks that connect academic, governmental, commercial, organizational, and individual systems (APJII, 2024). The Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) reported that the number of internet users in Indonesia in 2024 reached 221,563,479 out of a total population of 278,696,200 in 2023 (APJII, 2024). This rapid growth has encouraged the expansion of social media as a major space for interaction, content sharing, and digital entertainment. Social media is defined as a website-based feature that enables network formation and interaction within a community (Wlipurn, 2017). According to DataReportal, the most frequently used social media platforms in Indonesia are WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok (Simon Kemp, 2024). Each platform has distinct characteristics. WhatsApp functions primarily as a messaging service that supports the exchange of text, photos, videos, documents, locations, and voice calls (WhatsApp, 2025). Instagram is a platform for sharing photos and videos (Instagram, 2025), while Facebook facilitates the

sharing of personal content and interaction with groups and business pages (Maui, 2024). Among these platforms, TikTok stands out as a short-form video platform with the mission “to inspire creativity and bring happiness” (TikTok, 2024).

TikTok’s main feature, the For You Page (FYP), operates through an algorithm that tailors content based on users’ interests and usage patterns. This personalized system makes TikTok highly influential in shaping user preferences, habits, and self-presentation in digital spaces. User engagement on TikTok is notably high. DataReportal reports that the average time spent on TikTok reaches 38 hours and 26 minutes, indicating a high level of user involvement (Simon Kemp, 2024). In addition, the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) phenomenon encourages users to remain active in order to keep up with viral trends. This condition demonstrates that digital trends function not only as entertainment but also as factors that influence users’ mindsets and behaviors, particularly among younger generations. Generation Z, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents the most dominant group of social media users. As digital natives, they have grown up in close connection with technology and show a strong preference for video-based content. Social media is used not only for entertainment but also as a space for shaping and developing self-identity. Through social media, Generation Z explores lifestyles, social values, and worldviews, while also engaging in social comparison related to appearance, lifestyle, and achievements, all of which contribute to the formation of social identity. High school students, typically aged 15 to 18, constitute one of the most active groups in social media use and are in a critical phase of identity formation. At this stage, students tend to seek references for values, lifestyles, and life perspectives from their environment, including social media. Therefore, YP Unila Bandar Lampung High School was selected as the research site because it has an active digital environment and utilizes technology, including social media, for both academic and non-academic purposes. In this context, social media is not only used as a form of entertainment but also as a medium for learning and social interaction that has the potential to influence the process of students’ identity formation.

## **Literature Review**

### **Symbolic interaction**

The symbolic interactionism proposed by George Herbert Mead explains that humans have the ability to communicate with each other using symbols. Symbolic interactionism is a process of communication and interaction between individuals, and symbols and meanings play an important role in shaping their perceptions and actions (Octavina et al., 2024). In this theory, individuals assign meaning to symbols (e.g., language, gestures, or objects) based on their experiences and interpretations, which then influence how they behave and interact with others. Through this process, individuals do not merely receive messages passively, but also actively interpret the meaning of the symbols they encounter based on their experiences, values, and internalized social norms.

### **Self-concept**

From a psychological and sociological perspective, self-concept is understood as an individual's cognitive and emotional representation of who they are, which is formed gradually through interaction with the social environment. Self-concept not only reflects an

individual's awareness of their existence, but is also the result of interpretations of social experiences, symbols, and responses from others received during the interaction process. In line with this, self-concept is defined as an individual's feelings about themselves as a whole person with unique characteristics, so that individuals are recognized as having certain distinctive traits (Hartini, 2018). From a symbolic interactionism perspective, George Herbert Mead asserts that self-concept is not something innate, but rather is formed through a dynamic social process. Individuals construct their view of themselves based on how they interact and how they are perceived by others, both through direct and indirect interactions, including through the media. Therefore, the importance of self-concept in a person's life is crucial because it can determine the direction of their development and survival in the future (Novita, 2021)

### **Interpersonal communication**

Interpersonal communication, as described by Joseph A. Devito, is the verbal and nonverbal transmission of messages between two or more people who influence each other (Devito, 2016). It is the process of sending and receiving messages between two or more people, either directly or through certain media. This process is not merely an exchange of information, but also includes the exchange of ideas, feelings, and meanings that can influence social and emotional relationships between interacting individuals. In academic, professional, and everyday contexts, interpersonal communication is a very important skill because it can determine effectiveness in building relationships, resolving conflicts, and working collaboratively with others. Interpersonal communication involves several key elements, namely the sender of the message (communicator), the receiver of the message (communicant), the medium or channel of communication, the content of the message, and feedback.

## **Methodology**

### **Type and Approach of**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Qualitative methodology is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from individuals or observable behavior (Koyan, 2026). In line with this, qualitative research is understood as an inquiry strategy that emphasizes the search for meaning, understanding, concepts, characteristics, symptoms, symbols, and descriptions of a phenomenon, with a flexible focus, the use of multiple methods, a natural and holistic nature, and prioritizing the quality of the data obtained and the presentation of results in a narrative form (Sidiq & Choiri, 2019) This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of how trends on TikTok influence the verbal and nonverbal communication patterns of students at SMA YP Unila Bandar Lampung. This study focuses on understanding students' subjective experiences in communication, rather than simply measuring or quantifying the phenomenon that occurs. Through the case study method, this study seeks to reveal the dynamics of social interaction that develop among students as a result of the influence of communication trends that emerge on TikTok.

## Research Location and Time

In a study, the location and time of the research are important aspects because they will affect the context, results, and smooth implementation of the research (Arief Nugroho et al., 2025). This study was conducted at YP Unila Bandar Lampung High School, located at Jl. Jend. Suprpto No. 88, Tanjung Karang, Enggal, Bandar Lampung City. The location was determined based on its relevance to the focus of the study, specifically in examining student communication patterns influenced by trends on TikTok. This study was conducted using interviews as the main data collection technique, with the research period adjusted to the established procedures. The study began in October 2024 and ended in June 2025. This time frame allowed the researcher to obtain adequate and in-depth data in accordance with the research objectives. In addition, the relatively close distance of the research location from Bandar Lampung University, which is about 4.8 km with an estimated travel time of 12-15 minutes, also supported the smooth running of the research process in the field.

## Required Data

Data is a collection of information or raw facts that can be in the form of symbols, numbers, words, or images (Isnaini, 2023). Data is processed and analyzed to gain a deeper understanding and to serve as a basis for research decision-making. In this study, primary data, secondary data, and digital documentation were used to examine the role of TikTok in student communication at YP Unila Bandar Lampung High School. Sugiyono states that primary data is data obtained directly from research subjects using measurement tools or data collection tools directly from the subjects as the source of the information sought. Primary data is collected through interviews and observations, so it is original and has a high level of relevance and validity. Meanwhile, secondary data is data collected by researchers from primary sources (Yusuf Abdhul Azis, 2023). Secondary data is obtained from journals, previous studies, and relevant publications to support the analysis, while still paying attention to its validity and suitability. Primary data was obtained from students, teachers, and educators through interviews to understand the influence of TikTok on communication patterns. In addition, observation data and digital documentation in the form of content analysis and TikTok trends were used to complement the research findings.

## Data Collection Techniques

The data collection methods in this study were carried out using three main techniques, namely observation, interviews, and documentation, in order to obtain comprehensive data related to the influence of communication trends on TikTok on the communication patterns of YP Unila high school students in their daily lives, both verbally and nonverbally. Observation is essentially an activity that uses the five senses, such as sight, smell, and hearing, to obtain the information needed to answer research questions (Harliansyah, 2017). Through observation, researchers directly observe the use of terms, expressions, and gestures originating from TikTok in students' daily interactions. In addition, interviews were used as a data collection technique to explore information in greater depth, where interviews are defined as discussions between two or more people with specific objectives involving the interviewer and the interviewee (Sarosa, 2021). Documentation techniques were also used to complement the research data, considering

that each object collected could produce various forms of data, such as verbal, numerical, graphic, and image data (Waruwu, 2024). The combination of these three techniques enabled researchers to obtain more valid, in-depth, and complementary data in accordance with the research objectives.

### **Data Validity**

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### **Data Processing and Analysis**

In qualitative research, data processing and analysis aim to transform raw data into meaningful information through the processes of organizing, interpreting, and presenting data. The data in this study were obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation, then analyzed qualitatively and inductively to find patterns relevant to the research objectives. The analysis process refers to Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction is the process of selecting, focusing on simplification, abstracting, and transforming raw data that emerges from written notes in the field (Rijali, 2018). This stage is carried out by selecting data that is relevant to the research focus. Data presentation is the activity of organizing a set of information so that it is possible to draw conclusions and take action (Fatma, 2022). The data is presented in the form of descriptive narratives grouped according to the research theme. Drawing research conclusions is the process of interpreting and analyzing verified data to create meaning and answer research questions (Yunitasari, 2021). Conclusions are obtained through data verification and triangulation to ensure the validity of the research findings.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Understanding and the Process of Identity Formation among YP Unila High School Students**

Students' understanding of self-identity shows diverse but interrelated meanings. In general, self-identity is understood as one's true self, characteristics, and an image of who one really is. Self-identity is not only related to physical aspects or outward appearance, but more emphasizes internal aspects such as personality, values, principles, and how individuals understand and assess themselves. For students, self-identity is seen as something personal, profound, and not always openly displayed in social life. The process of forming self-identity in students is gradual and dynamic. Students are in a phase of self-discovery, characterized by trying various things, exploring interests, and adjusting to the social environment. In this process, students often experience confusion and doubt, but this is seen as a natural part of self-development. The social environment, such as peers and family, plays an important role in influencing how students view themselves, whether through support, responses, or social comparisons that occur in daily interactions. Self-identity is also understood as the values and direction in life that guide students in their attitudes, decision-making, and life choices. Social media platform TikTok has become one of the spaces utilized by students in the process of forming their identity. Through the content they consume, students can identify their interests, values, and things that they feel suit them. For most students, TikTok serves more as a means of self-reflection and self-discovery than as a platform for open expression. Nevertheless, TikTok still provides a space for students to showcase themselves and receive social feedback. Thus, the use of TikTok supports the process of identity formation among students through the experiences, reflections, and social interactions they encounter.

### **TikTok as a Means of Self-Expression and Exploration**

The use of TikTok shows differences in students' attitudes in responding to trends developing on social media. These differences can be seen in the level of student activity, the way they select trends, and the meaning they give to these trends. Some students choose to actively follow trends as a form of self-expression and an effort to maintain connections with their friends, while other students are more selective, only following trends that suit their personal interests and comfort levels. In fact, there are also students who choose to simply be aware of trends without getting directly involved. This shows that TikTok trends are not understood as a social obligation, but rather as a choice that can be tailored to each individual's identity. In addition, student involvement in TikTok trends cannot be separated from the influence of social interactions with peers. The responses that arise vary, ranging from support and appreciation, light banter, to neutral attitudes. Positive responses tend to strengthen students' self-confidence and encourage them to express themselves boldly, while casual responses do not always have a negative impact as long as students are aware of and comfortable with their choices. These findings confirm that students are not passive in responding to TikTok trends, but rather have control in interpreting and choosing trends as part of the process of social communication and identity formation.

## **Social Behavior Adaptation through TikTok**

TikTok content has a diverse influence on students' self-awareness, in terms of appearance, emotions, motivation, way of thinking, and attitudes in everyday life. TikTok is not only used as a medium of entertainment, but also as a space for communication that presents various values, styles, and messages that are then interpreted by students. Through the content they view and follow, students gain new references that encourage them to recognize themselves better, try new things, and adapt to their social environment. However, this influence is not accepted directly, but is filtered according to each student's preferences and comfort level. In addition to its impact on individuals, TikTok also influences communication patterns and social interactions in the school environment. Teachers have observed changes in students' communication styles, which tend to be more relaxed and expressive, influenced by the language and expressions that are trending on TikTok. This media also plays a role in shaping students' identities and self-image, both through increased self-confidence and social acceptance, as well as through the desire to gain recognition from peers. Therefore, the use of TikTok needs to be accompanied by self-awareness and guidance so that the influence it has can support students' positive development.

## **Perceptions of Inactive Students and the Role of Schools in Student Identity Formation**

Students have diverse views on their friends who actively use TikTok. Some view TikTok use as an acceptable personal choice as long as the content displayed is positive, while others see it as a form of entertainment that is normal among teenagers. Activities on TikTok not only influence how students enjoy entertainment, but also have an impact on visual trends, communication styles, and patterns of social interaction in the school environment. Students' enthusiasm for following TikTok trends encourages them to participate directly, either by creating content or imitating viral styles. This shows that TikTok functions as a space for collective meaning-making, where certain trends and styles are used to fit in and gain social acceptance. On the other hand, intensive use of TikTok can also affect daily behavior, such as focus on studying and the tendency to be overly concerned with other people's opinions. Students who are not active on TikTok sometimes feel less involved in social interactions when digital trends become the main topic of conversation. However, these feelings are situational and do not always lead to social rejection. Teachers have observed a tendency for students to adapt themselves through social media in order to be accepted into certain groups. Therefore, schools play an active role in providing guidance through discussion, education, and character building so that students are able to use TikTok wisely while maintaining their identity amid the influence of social media.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the established research objectives, this study concludes that the use of TikTok social media influences the process of self-identity formation among students in the school environment. TikTok not only functions as a medium of entertainment, but also as a

space for students to express themselves, channel their interests, and build their self-image in interactions with their peers. Student involvement in viewing and creating content encourages the formation of mindsets, attitudes, and ways of presenting themselves in social life. The results of the study show that students are active in determining the TikTok content they consume. Shifts in interest in certain types of content over time reflect changes in how students understand themselves and their environment. This condition shows that students' self-identity is not formed statically, but develops along with personal experiences and social relationships. This study also shows that responses from friends play an important role in strengthening students' self-identity. The acceptance, support, and involvement of friends in activities related to TikTok can foster self-confidence and increase feelings of acceptance within social groups. However, excessive dependence on social recognition has the potential to encourage students to imitate excessively, thereby reducing their authenticity. Therefore, the use of TikTok needs to be accompanied by self-awareness and the ability to control social media behavior. The main findings of this study reveal a gradual pattern of self-identity formation among students through TikTok, beginning with content introduction, followed by a process of self-adjustment, and reinforced through social responses. This pattern shows that TikTok's influence on students' self-identity does not occur directly, but rather through a process of interaction between individuals and their social environment. These findings contribute to explaining the role of social media in shaping students' self-identity in an educational context. In addition, this study emphasizes that teachers and schools have an important role in guiding students to use TikTok appropriately. Guidance provided through open and continuous communication helps students distinguish between following trends and maintaining their identity. With adequate guidance, TikTok can be used as a medium that supports the positive development of students' self-identity.

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