

“SPILL LINK DONG KAK!”: A BYTE-SIZED SHOPPING EXPERIENCE IN YOUTH CONSUMPTION CULTURE IN SURAKARTA

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Abstract *The development of digital applications that can be accessed by the younger generation, both for entertainment and shopping, is rapid. The presence of the TikTok platform, which has succeeded in winning the hearts of the younger generation, makes this application a favorite. TikTok had become a mainstay for shopping some time ago, before it was closed due to regulatory changes. This research offers the reasons behind the TikTok addiction among society, especially Generation Z in Surakarta. This research uses an ethnographic approach involving eight primary informants, along with several people participating in accidental interviews. Data was collected using the in-depth interview method to understand the reasons for using TikTok and the shopping preferences of its users. Meanwhile, participant observation was carried out by observing shopping accounts and influencers, followed by informants. Apart from that, researchers also made purchases of products presented by informants. Apparently, TikTok not only offers entertainment but is also a space for its users to form their own tastes. Through short videos presented by the influencers they follow, users use them as references that can be imitated. Through this account, users also make purchasing decisions. Hence, TikTok users do not have the freedom to decide, though there is an invisible hand in shaping market preferences and tastes. This paper discusses how neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individual freedom and economic rationality, has given birth to a new configuration in the consumption patterns of society, especially Generation Y and Z. In this context, digital platforms such as TikTok not only act as a means of entertainment and information but also become a strategic arena for the practice of contemporary capitalism. Through its personalized, spontaneous, and algorithmic visual approach, TikTok has managed to shape the tastes, preferences, and consumption behaviour of its users.*

Keyword:

Digital culture, Generation Z, TikTok, Algorithmic culture, Digital consumption

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1. Introduction

The digital realm brought us to a new phase where almost everything that was impossible is doable. In this era, the invention of the computer has made manual work more effective and efficient. The innovation brought us convenience. As well as when we faced the pandemic era, where we were limited in our activity outside the home. On the other hand, the pandemic left us a lesson and brought a new model of interaction. The new model interaction that was left was trade activity in e-commerce. We don't need to go outside our place to get something that we want. We don't need to come to the store to buy our groceries or daily needs. All of them could be accessed on our palm. This shift in consumer behavior persisted throughout the two-year pandemic period and has since become ingrained in daily life. The dependence on e-commerce for essential goods has presented both opportunities and challenges for traditional retailers, inducing many to establish an online store. Major e-commerce platforms such as Tokopedia, Lazada, and Shopee showed their significant growth during this time. TikTok, originally developed as Douyin in China, entered the Indonesian market as a new competitor, actively seeking to expand its presence in the e-commerce sector.

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (as cited in Mou, 2015), social media is known as a group of applications based on the internet that builds on a foundation of ideology and Web 2.0 technology. This app enables the creation and exchange of content made by users. The use of social media continued to increase and develop, now being utilized as a form of product marketing that is faster, efficient, and effective. TikTok, as an app, has become one of the top ten applications in Google Play. Based on the report by We Are Social (2024), TikTok became the most popular app that was accessed and most used among other apps. The average time per month users spent using TikTok was 38 hours 26 minutes (We Are Social, 2004:62). This app captured the specific targeted audience, and Gen Z dominated as part of the audience. TikTok has become even more favored due to its ease of video editing and its wide range of filters, a dissimilar from Instagram. This service is particularly appealing to young people, as it allows them to edit directly from the palm of their hand without the need for additional apps.

The popularity of TikTok has transformed the application into a super app that offers entertainment, but also becomes a buying and selling space where users can use it as sellers or buyers. TikTok combined its function as social media, but at the same time also as an e-commerce platform. Other e-commerce sites facilitated their user to have a display space to simplify users' shopping experience. But on the other hand, TikTok proposes a different approach. The app offers an innovation, where not only the goods displayed on the showcase, but also users and sellers can post videos in their shops. A video clip was uploaded to their showcase to give a glimpse of the product to their consumers. Indeed, the model for uploading videos or photos on social media was already implemented by Facebook and Instagram. However, this is precisely what TikTok has captured by utilizing user posts as a marketing tool for a product. Therefore, its convenience, which is utilized by TikTok, is not only a medium for sharing a photo or video clip but also as a marketplace. Every user could immerse their shopping experience by consuming short videos of the items that are sold on the account.

TikTok also offers other ease for users, such as the freedom of choice and easy sharing of video links. TikTok offers unlimited short video choices, which accommodate user preferences. The history of their video search will bring another video, and it could be accessed on users' For Your Page (FYP). Then, the sharing video link facilitates users to share the videos they have watched with other users. This share link feature is also used by users and sellers to promote

their products. Users who became influencers on TikTok also use this link to share product endorsements with friends or broader TikTok users who have similar interests in the product.

Share link phenomenon, or in the young set, it is called *spill link*, is already common knowledge and has become a part of their daily life. TikTok acts as a mediator that gives the opportunity to use short videos as a medium to promote products. Now, this app acted as an extension of capitalist practices. It became interesting for further study, considering the phenomenon of TikTok users rapidly increasing in recent times. TikTok users in 2021 reached 1,4 billion and rose to 1,6 billion in 2022 (Annur, 2022). In Indonesia itself, in 2024, active TikTok users will reach 157.6 million (We Are Social, 2024).

Research that focuses on discussing the TikTok phenomenon is easily found. Recent research shows that TikTok became a new form of space to spread information, especially in the pandemic era (Sidorenko-Bautista, et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Basch et al., 2022). Other research found that TikTok transforms into a medium where the young generation can utilize TikTok as a study space and also a new form of communication medium (Xiuwen dan Razali, 2021; Schellewald, 2021). A study that focuses on the Indonesian background was completed by Darmatama and Erdiansyah (2021). Their study traces the influence of advertisements on TikTok and the image of cosmetic products on consumers. The study finding shows that there is a significant influence of consumers in deciding to buy products online. This is because beauty products are promoted through ad videos on TikTok, which are enticing, creative, and packed with information, and also user experience stories. It made the video seem credible cause it contains a firsthand user story.

Other research by Purnamasari and Tutiasari (2021), using uses and gratification as the framework, explores that audiences have different understandings regarding advertising videos on TikTok. The video became a tool used by users to make decisions and support their decisions when buying goods in the marketplace or the TikTok Shop. Research by Nisa, dkk (2020) shows that the product review on the shopping platform was the main source for GenZ to extract product information before buying it. TikTok provides space for its users to explore products, see product reviews, and also observe products through videos made by other users.

But unfortunately, there is an absence of studies that uncover the narrative of pseudo-freedom within today's era of digital capitalism. This research aims to examine how TikTok, through its algorithmic steering, often presents an illusion of choice while subtly drive user behavior, leading young generations to become consumptive users. For instance, TikTok's 'For You' page may appear to offer personalized content, yet it is fundamentally shaped by algorithms prioritizing content that maximizes user consumption. This study also offers a new perspective on how video content on TikTok, as both an e-commerce and entertainment platform, influences shopping preferences among its users. This discussion is significant because the daily lives of the younger generation are dominated by phone activities, particularly engaging with online applications like Instagram, Discord, TikTok, and many more. Therefore, examining this issue provides insights into the phenomenon of social media user activity and consumption patterns among the digital generation as digital natives.

Drotner (2005) argues that the fast development of interactive media transforms the relationship between people and media. Mobile media potentially link individual users to any other point of digital communication, forming a dynamic relationship between public and private spaces. This reconfigures the formation of audiences and publics, shaping various forms of mediated textual practices. In this context, digital consumption cannot be separated from the

constitution of the audience itself, since both are intertwined in the processes of meaning-making within digital environments.

As Drotner (2005: 191) explains, "audiences are constituted through their mediated meaning-making processes, that can be individual as well as collective, and that can take place in the privacy of the home or on the job, as well as in public spaces." This notion positions the audience not merely as passive recipients but as active participants whose practices of consumption are embedded within social and cultural contexts. Yet, as Livingstone (2005: 168) giving reminder where audiences are "at times naively blind to the power of the media to position them subtly but firmly, according to consumerist pleasures, external cultural prescriptions and powerful interests." Hence, while digital consumption opens spaces for active engagement, it simultaneously subjects audiences to the invisible structures of consumerism and media power.

Within this framework, digital worlds emerge as attractive space for both consumers and marketers, where increasing audience engagement becomes a field of commodification. As Kedzior (2014: 12) notes, marketers capitalize on the growing participation in digital spaces through new forms of digital commerce that blur the boundaries between advertising and entertainment. These hybrid spaces—where commerce and pleasure coexist—reflect how digital consumption takes place within a fusion of physical and virtual realms (Kedzior, 2014: 78).

Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010) further argue that digital consumption enables the realization of consumer fantasy and experimentation, allowing individuals to perform and pursue their desires in mediated environments. Similarly, Lehdonvirta et al. (2009) observe that in virtual consumerism, the motivation to invest in digital objects mirrors the desire for material possessions, as digital commodities—like tangible ones—operate as markers of status, prestige, and existence. These perspectives presenting that digital consumption not only reshapes the ways audiences engage with media but also defines and construct identity, meaning, and social belonging in contemporary mediated culture.

2. Method

This research employs an anthropological approach combined with netnography to explore a phenomenon. This approach aims to explore the phenomenon in a holistic manner, fathoming its intricacies in every corner, particularly when tracing digital traces, such as social media. Netnography is used to gain a deep understanding of the social media practices that have become an integral part of our daily lives today. Netnography is an evolving approach to gaining cultural understanding that involves the systematic, immersive, and multimodal use of digital traces, elicitation, and observations (Kozinets, R. V., Cavusoglu, L., & Belk, R. W., 2024). This approach aims to derive deep cultural understandings of phenomena and offers guidelines on how to approach research that seeks to leverage data available online (Shao and Gretzel, 2017: 188). Netnography is based on the contextually determined combination of three data collection stages or movements: investigation, immersion, and interaction (Kozinets et al, 2024). This approach provided an in-depth understanding of the culture and activity on social media that couldn't be captured using traditional ethnography.

Furthermore, this research focuses on examining the impact of neoliberal practices on digital media platforms, specifically TikTok. The study was conducted in the city of Surakarta, located in Central Java, Indonesia. Surakarta is an emerging urban center that has demonstrated significant economic growth. Traditionally recognized as a tourist destination and a bastion of Javanese culture, the city is now evolving into a creative hub for youth engagement in music,

fashion, and the digital economy. These creative industries contribute to local economic development while reinforcing Surakarta's identity as a center for youth innovation. The city's burgeoning population of university students and its growing appeal as a tourist destination for younger demographics further underscore its transformation.

This research employed qualitative methodologies. Primary data were collected through interviews and participatory observation. Secondary data were sourced from various literature sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and mass media reports. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight young individuals, aged 19 to 25 years, residing in Surakarta. The selection criteria for informants included: a) active engagement with multiple social media platforms; b) autonomy in making purchasing decisions or expressing preferences; and c) possession of both material and cognitive resources relevant to consumer behaviour.

Data collection procedures carried out through interviews and participant observation. Interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the informants to ensure their comfort and facilitate open disclosure of experiences. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about data usage, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. All participants provided informed consent for the use of their interview data for research and academic purposes. Observational data were gathered from informants' shopping activities, both in-person and via digital platforms, with particular attention to TikTok usage. These observations constituted the primary data set, complemented by secondary data obtained from the analysis of social media accounts followed by informants, thereby supporting data triangulation. The research was conducted between June and September 2023.

The data analysis process began with the transcription of field notes, followed by interview transcripts and the organization of observational records. Secondary data were also systematically processed. All data were subsequently categorized according to emergent themes. A comparative analysis was undertaken by aligning the field findings with these themes. To ensure confidentiality, all informants' names and research sites were anonymized using pseudonyms. While the research locations are accessible, descriptions of these sites in the published manuscript do not correspond to specific, identifiable places.

3. Result and Discussion

Classic liberalism, as the idea of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, gave the absolute power to the nation. Nevertheless, this condition can't walk together with the ownership of private property, individual independence, and entrepreneurial freedom. If the nation has dominated intervention in the life of homo economicus society. It. Saw a limitation in individual freedom. The neoliberal idea believes that excessive state intervention could corrupt the existing global market order.

Meanwhile, neoliberalism is a concept that is believed to be the pathway to reach prosperity. This theory is rooted in the framework of individualism, where an individual possesses the freedom, rationality, and equality needed to participate as a key player in economic activity. By freedom, we mean the ability of individuals to make choices without undue restrictions; by rationality, we refer to the logical decision-making that guides their choices; and by equality, we imply the equal opportunity and level playing field for all participants in the market. The concept of individual freedom is emphasized by Harvey (2005:7), who explains how the market ensures that discretion is placed in the hands of the individual. They have the freedom to make decisions and choices based on their rationality, and this is supported by an equal

position alongside others. Individuals are thus able to engage in transactions directly in the market without excessive restrictions from the state.

The nation's role in this activity should not involve excessive intervention in the individual choices of society. However, the state employs subtle techniques, rather than overt measures, such as setting standards, utilizing statistics, and offering incentives to guide economic activities discreetly. These soft mechanisms ensure that the state's influence is present even in a seemingly hands-off approach, thereby supporting the framework of neoliberal operations. By amalgamating national power, the market, and related institutions, this approach brings stability to society, providing a foundation for individual freedom in economic activity (Harvey, 2005:10). The state's presence is crucial in maintaining this stability and facilitating individual engagement in the global market. This role designates individuals to be consumers who sustain the economy's momentum, ultimately fueling the rise of a new consumption culture in society.

The wave of neoliberalism brought various styles and shapes of capitalism and also the effects that came with them. Indeed, neoliberalism offers the shapeless and patternless effect of capitalist practices that modified themselves into a form that is adapted to the model of the actors. Harvey argues, neoliberalism “*confers rights and freedoms on those whose income, leisure, and security need no enhancing*” (2005:38). The freedom that proposes giving spaces for the actors to have the right to use wealth to achieve personal satisfaction and security.

This is what capital owners have exploited to target Generations Y and Z to participate in consumerist activities. The shift towards a consumerist lifestyle is evident in Generations Y and Z, who are simultaneously experiencing the era in which digital technology is permeating all aspects of life. Now, consumerism has become a driving force and a principle in defining values and structures in global society (Fauzanafi, 2015). To borrow Foucault's concept, neoliberalism is not a form of regulation or mode of governing a country or economy. Rather, it has become a form of regulation or governmentality of individuals into a certain way of life. Individuals are deliberately shaped by a system to classify themselves into certain groups. They begin to build their identity based on the power given to them.

If we borrow the Marx framework, where capital is the ownership of the means of production. So, the means of production that are owned by GenZ is their knowledge. Ferguson's studies (2009) show the ownership of money actually gives the illusion of power to the owner. Therefore, the owner feels in complete control. The individual feels in complete control of their desire to spend their money. This is where the imaginary shadow begins: Generation Z then has power over their desires, wishes, and capital to use as they see fit. Comaroff and Comaroff argue that consumption is the main driver in the lives of millennials, where they consider material aspects to be capital in achieving stability and value production. Of course, this is in line with the millennial momentum where “*the shifting provenance of the nation-state and fetishes, the rise of new forms of enchantment, and the explosion of neoliberal discourses of civil society*” (2000:293). Moreover, millennials pursue a new form of fetishism where consumption or shopping behaviour has become one of them. It was not inseparable from the form of a new habit where Gen Z is actively consuming social media. They proffered various forms of social media applications that can be chosen and used at their pleasure. Whereas, TikTok became one of their social media platforms with high intensity of use.

3.1 Faith in the New Era

At 6 a.m., while the sun barely casts a glow over the horizon, a shopper comfortably nestled in bed effortlessly completes a purchase, her eyes barely open, with a few effortless thumb scrolls

as she swipes through her phone, the order completed. This singular ritual represents a sweeping transformation—an era where we could connect instantly across the globe, break the limitations of distance, space, or time. We easily access a universe of information and commerce on the palm of our hands. Whether it is chatting face-to-face in real-time or purchasing goods from any corner of the world, modern technology has dismantled old barriers, enabling seamless buying and selling transactions worldwide. Users now doing these transactions with ease, operating applications or websites from the comfort of their current location. With just their thumb and fingers, they summon desired items to their doorstep, an experience made possible by the rise of e-commerce, a digital marketplace reshaping global trade.

The rapid development of technology requires industry and actors in the market to keep up with the flow of new marketing opportunities. A survey in 2017 reports that around 46% American people check their phones first in the morning every day. Then 66% came from the millennial generation or the youngest, around 18-24 years old. Furthermore, 31% part of that population will start by checking their social media (Azpeitia, 2021). Meanwhile in Indonesia, the Indonesian Internet Service Provider Association (APJII) presents data that Indonesian people spend around 6 hours on average, using their phone, and accessing the internet three times an hour every day (Hepilita dan Gantas, 2018). Gen Z is a generation that is very close to social media, or we call them digital natives. Based on data from We Are Social (2004), the most accessed and frequently used application they use is TikTok. The large number of TikTok users allows businesses and brand owners to maximize their opportunities to attract their attention and pursue their interests.

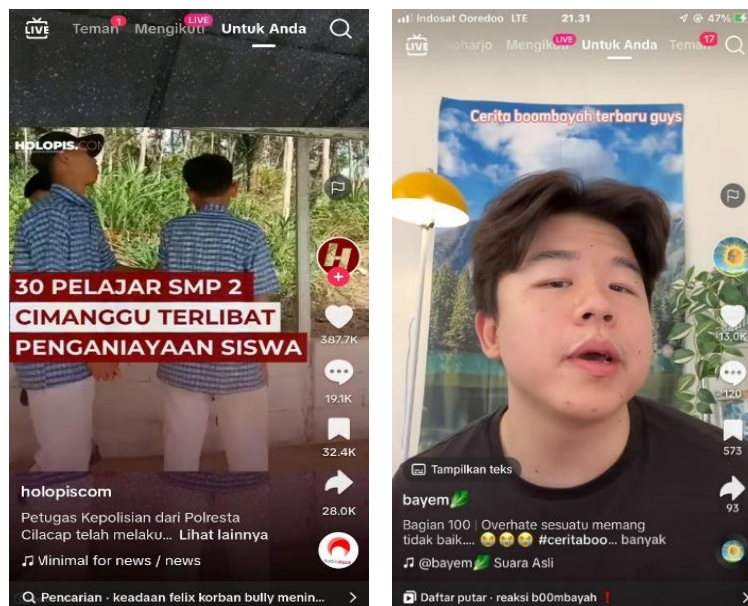


Figure 1. Influencer sharing the newest information to its
(Source: Research team documentation, 2023)

TikTok is an application that available in 154 countries and has developed into a hub for growing influencers on the platform. It disrupts traditional advertising models by offering a unique 'jobs-to-be-done' solution that focuses on engaging audiences with quick, innovative storytelling through its 15-second narrative format. This platform fulfills consumer need through compelling content that traditional ads often fail to address, especially given the short attention spans of modern users. TikTok is also the most downloaded free app on the Apple App Store in

the US and ranked number one on Google Play during October. However, it is not only in the world's largest economy where TikTok has proven popular. Counting Apple App Store and Google Play download statistics, TikTok ranked 1/3 in the world as of November 2018. It has been at the world's top number four since at least June 2018. TikTok is used as a virtual advertising marketing platform that can reach audiences from various countries (Choudhary et al, 2020).

Now, companies looking to reach buyers are turning to existing social media platforms. They then place various advertisements on all platforms, including TikTok. By early 2025, TikTok had reached 500 million total downloads from Google Play. While this figure is still far from Instagram's downloads, TikTok has its own dedicated user base. Besides content creators sharing their creativity with the public, they can also use TikTok as a source of income. One marketing model on the TikTok platform involves content from influencers, typically showcasing a product. The company then provides a code that viewers can use to receive a discount if they purchase the product through the influencer who posted the video.

A product's credibility can be built by partnering with influencers, positively impacting its value. TikTok allows its users to utilize the platform as both a showcase and an advertisement for a product. Therefore, influencers compete to improve the quality of their videos, both in terms of content and concept, to attract buyers. Some content creators package their content with positive energy, eliciting reactions that increase the video's virality. This aligns with the principles of Emotion and Practical Value from the STEPPS framework (Blum et al, 2017), where emotional engagement enhances viewer connection and practical value ensures the content remains memorable and shareable. These creators often package advertising videos with entertaining content, so potential buyers don't feel pressured to buy, blending humor and clear messaging. Users are more attracted to humorous and to-the-point marketing because consumers can usually form their own judgment (Pangemanan et al., 2023). For example, a TikTok creator might use Emotion by crafting a heartfelt story around a product, paired with Practical Value by demonstrating its real-world use in an engaging way, resulting in high shares and engagement.

The interpersonal relationships influencers form with their followers can significantly impact their followers' opinions. Using this information, businesses should consider incorporating influencer collaboration into their marketing strategies (Azpeitia, 2021). TikTok and Instagram, as marketing platforms, provide interactive information or content (Mou, 2015). Marketing campaign efforts that create viral product content require a marketing campaign objective, whether for branding, customer acquisition, or retention. If the goal of the marketing campaign is to enhance a product's branding by making it go viral on social media, the strategy used is to endorse top influencers or celebrities for the marketing campaign. Some endorsements focus on the number of followers, ranging from 300,000 to 10,000,000, to increase consumer engagement and trust. They should recruit influencers recognized by their target consumers as experts in the industry and utilize word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing campaigns to drive brand awareness, trust, and ultimately convert consumers.

3.2 The Power of TikTok Video

The circulation of information in the digital age provides social media users with easy access to information from various sources. Based on in-depth interviews with informants, TikTok has become a space for entertainment, exploring ideas, exploring the latest news, and even seeking inspiration. Unlike Instagram, TikTok is perceived as more welcoming due to the

diverse network of friends and even strangers. The concept of 'networked publics' is evident in how TikTok's environment allows users to interact with a broad audience without the pressure of being seen by close friends or relatives. This aspect of anonymity and separated audiences allows individuals to express themselves more freely, as they are less constrained by their immediate social circles. On their TikTok accounts, they don't follow friends or relatives, but rather influencers or other accounts they want to follow. This diversity in their network supports a liberating experience, where self-presentation is shaped by their interests rather than social expectations. The criteria for the TikTok accounts they follow are quite diverse.

TikTok offers a wide range of entertainment, providing users with various types of content, from cooking recipes to silly videos of people sharing their own foolish moments. All sources admit that they find the random entertainment offered by TikTok quite helpful. They even feel more relaxed and comfortable using TikTok because it is not a platform for showing off. Meanwhile, on other platforms, such as Instagram, followers are friends within a circle of friends, which leads them to show off their wealth, personal achievements, and other things. This often causes people to compare themselves with the achievements of others. At the same time, this affects one's mentality, ultimately leading to a decline in self-confidence. Meanwhile, TikTok offers a wide variety of content tailored to the algorithms of its users' accounts. This is what makes users feel more comfortable because they are presented with videos based on their preferences.

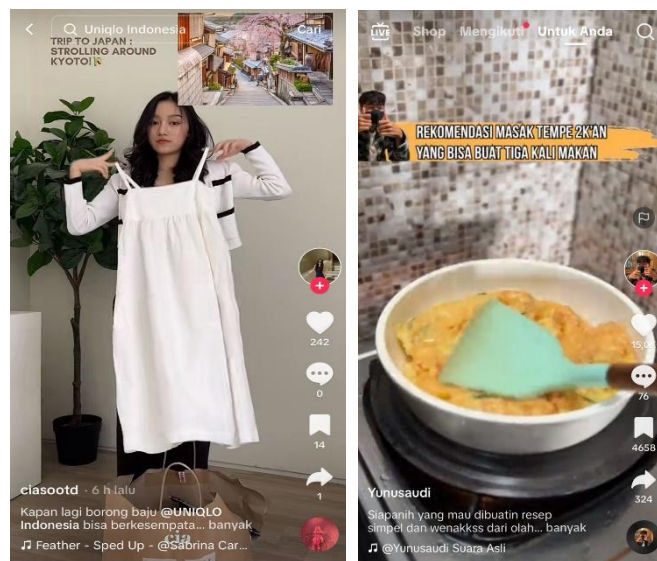


Figure 2. TikTok became the source of inspiration and information
(Source: Research team documentation, 2023)

On the other hand, the TikTok application also offers a space for users to gain knowledge by watching short videos. For example, searching for references, summarising literature from journals, quickly creating bibliographies, searching for journal articles, writing scientific articles, and so on. Generation Z is essentially a visual generation, so the visual content and explanations in videos make it easier for them to understand and apply this knowledge in their daily lives. Therefore, TikTok has become one of the platforms where they can gain knowledge.

Meanwhile, as a shopping platform, TikTok gives its users the freedom to choose what they want to buy. The biggest draw for users to stick with TikTok is the many discounts and free shipping they get when they buy items live. This live streaming activity is used by informants to

shop for their desired items because they get significant discounts. 'I even bought crackers on TikTok because they were cheap and I was too lazy to go out,' said one of our sources (Nania, interview on 12 July 2023). TikTok does offer easy access and low prices, so its users are spoiled for choice. In addition, the sensory experience during live streams enhances the shopping appeal. Bright visuals, catchy musical tunes, and charismatic presenters maintain viewer interest and create a lively atmosphere that makes it easier for viewers to decide on impulse purchases. The hosts' excited tones and persuasive language—such as limited-time offers and countdown timers—further heighten the buying urgency, compelling viewers to add items to their carts swiftly.

Based on observations at several shops mentioned by informants, many discounts are offered by shops selling their products on TikTok. These shops dare to slash prices far below those of other e-commerce sites, and even further below the prices charged by offline shops. However, buyers must monitor their favorite shops directly and in real time because the timing of discounts can change at any time. While waiting for discounts to appear, users browse videos related to the products they wish to purchase. For them, this is part of researching the product before actually buying it. Generally, they will listen to accounts affiliated with the product until they are confident in their decision. Through videos from these affiliate accounts, users then begin to construct their own preferences.

While buyers are often drawn to the idea of scoring a great deal, the continuous search for limited-time offers can also lead to overwhelming choices and even post-purchase regret. The bombardment of discounts and promotions may provoke audiences to make hasty decisions. This tension between the allure of affordability and the potential for decision creates both excitement and anxiety for users. It challenges them to maintain a balance between seizing a good deal and ensuring that their buying decisions are well-considered.

These videos, which are watched by users, provide references on how to dress, choose beauty products, daily accessory preferences, and even daily consumption choices. These short videos will direct them to use and purchase similar products on certain shopping platforms. Consciously or unconsciously, these users follow the advice and recommendations from accounts they trust. This, in turn, influences their preferences and plays a role in their purchasing decisions. Additionally, buyers on the TikTok platform are presented with tempting discounts during live streams by sellers. This creates an environment where buyers are tempted to make purchases of their desired items in their shopping carts. This is what makes TikTok a highly strategic choice for its users when it comes to making purchases. A memorable term for this consumer pathway could be described as the 'Scroll, Scan, and Shop' cycle, capturing the process from discovering to purchasing products. This catchy label reflects how TikTok seamlessly integrates entertainment and e-commerce, making it an influential platform in shaping consumer behavior.

3.3 Trapped in the Influencer Web

The practice of shopping through the TikTok platform can be seen as a new form of capitalism that has become the daily lives of the younger generation. The impact of marketing strategies using social media is that advertisements can be enjoyed at any time. Goods are no longer displayed through large banners but are packaged in short video clips presented by influential figures. In one-minute short videos, the younger generation is bombarded with dream images that spark their interest in searching for and even making purchases. Influencers, followed by TikTok users, are usually those who already have a blue tick and more than 2,000

followers. They are considered trustworthy users, so the content they create is considered representative of the audience. Influencers with more than 2,000 followers are usually also part of the TikTok affiliate programme, so they can embed shopping basket links in each video they create. Influencers generally package their sales content with a specific concept that becomes their trademark, making it easier for their followers to recognise their content. Video content with high traffic will be read by TikTok to reach a wider audience, resulting in more potential buyers for the items being sold.

Through these broadcasts, viewers will be presented with information about limited-time discounts. Additional discounts will appear when users process their shopping items, but these discounts can only be used for a few seconds. In addition, large discounts will be offered when sellers conduct live product demonstrations. These live discounts are often eagerly awaited by users to purchase their desired items. The limited time to use these discounts causes buyers to make purchases impulsively.

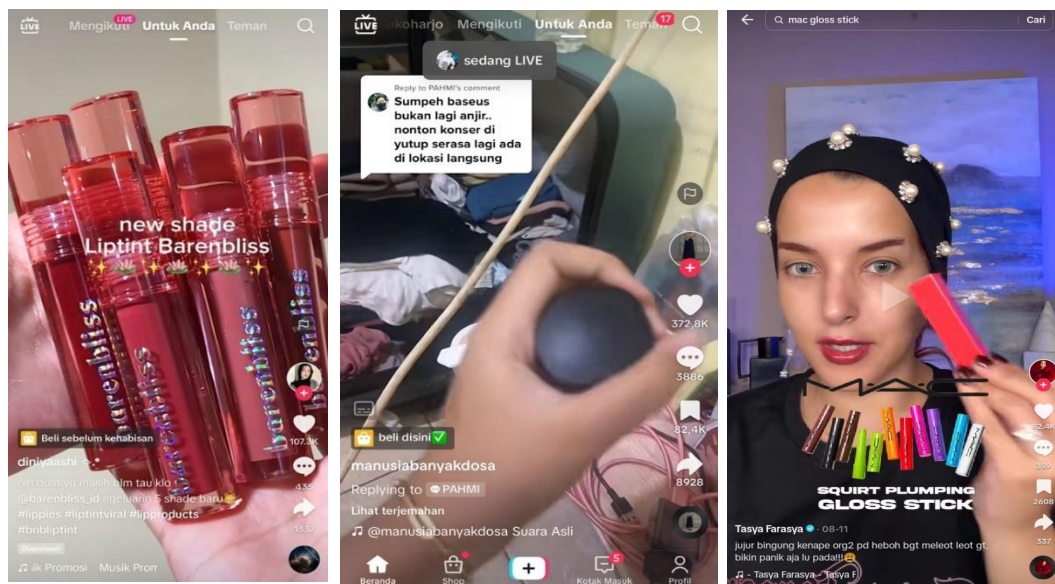


Figure 3. Influencer as a bridge for brand voice
(Source: Research team documentation, 2023)

The media industry giants create conditions that make us feel like we are in control of our choices. This is clearly a form of new neoliberalism, where consumers are given the illusion of freedom of choice. A specific example of this can be seen in platform business models that leverage data-driven price discrimination. These models dynamically adjust prices based on the user's profile and past behavior, which is facilitated by algorithmic curation. Consumers are presented with a variety of videos containing different types of content, making them feel empowered by their choices. However, in reality, the application uses algorithms to present consumers with types of content based on their search results. Unwittingly, they become bound by the app's rules, which ultimately lead to repeated purchases.

This is what traps Generations Y and Z in a space that appears to offer freedom but is actually bound by rules imposed by capital owners. Freedom of choice is an important weapon for this generation, making them feel that they are in control. Meanwhile, the lack of awareness of being under the control of capital owners who offer a variety of choices is not felt. The applications in their hands become an arena for shaping preferences, choices, and decisions,

thereby increasing consumption. In addition to freedom of choice, consumers are also presented with images of identity displayed in these short videos. . Many users actively creating their own unique content that challenges or subverts commercial messages. This participatory culture reflects a more nuanced platform dynamic, where users are not only influenced but also influence and reshape trends. Thus, freedom of choice and the space to build identity are used as capital to build stability.

As Foucault suggested, the power of capital owners has an invisible hand to manipulate. Control over individual activities is no longer limited to physical spaces but extends far beyond into the rhythm of daily life. From the moment they open their eyes, they are accustomed to opening social media until they close their eyes to rest. In this case, TikTok has the power to shape the habits of its users to consume the content in their device's gallery. Users are accustomed to returning to TikTok with the aim of consuming videos whose patterns have been read by the TikTok algorithm system. Thus, habits are formed, which are unconsciously internalised by their users. This creates space for building personal preferences that have been constructed by the consumption practice itself. Capital owners then prepare their products to be marketed in this social media space. The ultimate goal is to increase profits and keep the wheels of capital turning endlessly.

4. Conclusion

When it first appeared, TikTok was not immediately accepted by the public. This was due to the negative stigma attached to TikTok, which was seen as a platform for the lower classes. At that time, the videos featured were mostly entertainment videos dominated by dance and lip-sync content. However, TikTok has now shifted to become a favourite medium for all groups. The content on TikTok is quite diverse and has become a space for various activities, including education, social campaigns, preaching, journalism, and shopping. As a shopping platform, TikTok has become one of the most attractive options for its users. In addition to offering low prices and abundant discounts compared to other e-commerce platforms, TikTok also provides a space for potential buyers to view reviews from previous buyers and influencers about the items being sold. They package these reviews in the form of short videos, including hashtags and shopping carts for easy access to the items they wish to purchase.

Apparently, these short videos play a crucial role in shaping the shopping preferences of the younger generation. In fact, TikTok is able to utilise these short videos to package advertisements in a different way. Ultimately, these videos can stimulate desire, thereby boosting consumption of a particular product. This video-sharing platform is used by investors to mobilise their capital, thereby creating space for capital movement. Packaging advertisements in the form of entertainment or recommendations means that potential buyers do not feel pressured to make a purchase. This platform also encourages consumption as a space for capital circulation among Generations Y and Z.

This research presents new findings in the political economy landscape in the digital age. Neoliberalism, no longer merely an economic system, but also become a regime of knowledge and power that permeates the daily practices of the younger generation. The TikTok platform, as a digital space, has transformed into a dominant medium that distributes values, shapes preferences, and creates narratives of identity based on algorithm-driven visual mechanisms. Content that seems to be a personal expression has become a tool for producing capitalist value by instilling patterns of consumption and representations of identity in accordance with market logic. This algorithm not only customizes content based on user preferences but also subtly

influences those preferences, guiding users toward specific consumption patterns.

This study shows that digital platforms are no longer merely spaces for communication. Instead, they have transformed into arenas for contesting power over neoliberal values that are constructed, internalized, and disseminated. At first glance, the communication model on TikTok may appear resemble Habermas's egalitarian, inclusive, intersubjective, and participatory model of deliberative communication. However, upon closer inspection, Habermas' deliberative communication framework actually clashes with TikTok. It's true that TikTok provides a public space that is accessible to all levels of society, regardless of social, political, or cultural background. TikTok can also be a medium for massive interactive participation, allowing users to use it freely. Unfortunately, Habermas' framework is difficult to apply when considering the power asymmetry that exists on TikTok. On TikTok, noise and disinformation often arise as a result of the short format of the content presented. Therefore, manipulative information controlled by algorithms becomes difficult to view using Habermas' framework. It can be said that TikTok is not an ideal deliberative arena in the Habermasian sense.

Meanwhile, Harvey's neoliberalism theory and Foucault's governmentality provide a framework that can be used to understand the new forms of power at how TikTok work. Today, power is no longer exercised through direct coercion by the state, but through regulations that operate via digital platforms, algorithms, and affiliate economies. In this context, users are no longer merely passive consumers, but rather active consumers who participate in producing value that is mobilised to maintain the stability of capital circulation on TikTok. This application represents neoliberal power, which works covertly but effectively shapes consumptive habits behind the mask of individual freedom. Moving forward, research related to the development of the digital era, especially on the TikTok platform, is worth exploring further. For example, in-depth studies on influencers who act as agents in the commodification of public taste. Additionally, studies on visual ethnography where TikTok plays a role as a space for representing aesthetics and self-image.

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