



## FROM FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION TO DIGITAL INTERACTION: AN EXPLORATION OF THE GEN Z COMMUNITY IN NORTH SUMATRA

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### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received :

Revised :

Accepted :

Available online

<http://jurnal.uinsu.ac.id/index.php/analytica>

E-ISSN: 2541-5263

P-ISSN: 1411-4380



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### ABSTRACT

*The use of TikTok has encouraged a shift in Generation Z's communication patterns from face-to-face interaction to visual, brief, and symbolic digital interaction. This study aims to explore changes in communication practices and social relations among Generation Z in the use of TikTok within the local community context of Kota Matsum, North Sumatra. This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation involving six Generation Z informants who actively use TikTok, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that TikTok functions not only as an entertainment medium but also as a digital social space that shapes how Generation Z builds closeness, presents self-identity, and maintains social relationships. Social interaction increasingly depends on content exchange, audience responses, and platform algorithmic visibility. The novelty of this study lies in explaining the transformation of Generation Z's digital communication in the local context of North Sumatra, particularly how TikTok constructs more flexible, fluid, and digitally connected social relations. These findings contribute to digital communication studies by emphasizing the need to balance digital interaction and face-to-face communication.*

**Keywords:** Generation Z, TikTok, Digital Communication, Social Interaction, Social Relations.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of short video-based social media has transformed the social communication landscape for the younger generation, especially Generation Z, who grew up in a digital ecosystem. TikTok has become a prominent platform because it functions not only as a medium for entertainment but also as a space for interaction, self-expression, and social relationship building. Through short video features, comments, likes, shares, and recommendation algorithms, TikTok presents a more visual, fast, symbolic, and participatory communication pattern. In the context of digital communication, this shift demonstrates that social relationships are no longer entirely built through physical meetings, but rather through technological mediation processes that enable individuals to

build virtual connections. Digital media has become part of the construction of social reality because communication not only conveys messages but also shapes meaning, identity, and social relationships in everyday life (Couldry & Hepp, 2020; van Dijck et al., 2021).

Generation Z is the social group most closely exposed to the development of digital technology, having been accustomed from early life to the internet, social media, and screen-based communication culture. This generation's characteristics are characterized by a tendency to use digital media as the primary space for obtaining information, expressing themselves, making friends, and building social recognition. From a uses and gratifications perspective, Generation Z's use of social media can be understood as an effort to fulfill their needs for communication, entertainment, personal identity, social interaction, and self-validation (Ruggiero, 2000; Omar & Dequan, 2022). Therefore, TikTok cannot be understood solely as an entertainment app, but also as a communication medium that influences how Generation Z interprets closeness, presence, and social connections. Interaction through digital content, comments, and responses has become a new form of communication deemed sufficient to maintain social relationships in everyday life.

This change demonstrates a shift from face-to-face communication to digital interaction. Face-to-face communication, previously the primary basis for establishing social relationships, is now increasingly being replaced by communication based on visual content and digital symbols. Generation Z tends to convey messages, emotions, humor, criticism, and social experiences through short videos, memes, short comments, and other digital responses. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, social meaning is formed through the use of symbols exchanged in the interaction process (Blumer, 2021). Thus, the digital symbols on TikTok can be understood as a new form of Generation Z's social language. However, this shift also raises issues because the intensity of digital communication has the potential to diminish the quality of direct communication, especially when individuals remain connected to their device screens even in social situations that allow for face-to-face interaction (Turkle, 2022; Roberts & David, 2022).

TikTok also has characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of social media: the strong role of algorithms in shaping content visibility and the direction of social connections. Through the For You Page mechanism, users can connect with content and individuals outside their immediate social networks. This allows for broader, more flexible, and fluid social relationships. However, these social relationships do not occur entirely naturally, as they are influenced by the platform's system, which determines which content is seen, responded to, and shared more widely. In this context, algorithms are not merely technical mechanisms but also mediating actors that shape users' communication experiences (Bucher, 2022; Kaye et al., 2022). Generation Z's social relations are then not only determined by the intensity of interpersonal communication, but also by self-representation, audience response, and the level of digital visibility gained through platforms.

Several previous studies have discussed the influence of social media on communication patterns, identity formation, and social relations among the younger generation. International studies have shown that TikTok influences communication behavior, identity expression, and users' psychological experiences in digital spaces (Montag et al., 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). National research also indicates that social media

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plays a role in shaping social relations, self-expression, and communication patterns among digital natives (Himatul Aliah & Nurfazri, 2023; Saragih & Edria, 2024). However, most of these studies tend to address interaction patterns, digital identity, or social relations separately. Studies specifically integrating the shift from face-to-face communication to digital interaction, the meaning of social relations, and the role of TikTok algorithms within the context of local Generation Z communities are still relatively limited. This gap underscores the need for this research.

Based on this description, this study aims to explore the shift in Generation Z communication practices from face-to-face to digital interaction through the use of TikTok within the Generation Z community in Kota Matsum Village, North Sumatra. The research focuses on how TikTok shapes social interaction patterns, how Generation Z interprets social relations in the digital space, and how digital platforms influence the quality of social relations in local community life. The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to understand TikTok not merely as social media, but as a digital social space that reshapes the communication practices and social relations of Generation Z in a local context. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the development of digital communication studies, particularly in understanding the transformation of social relations of the younger generation amidst the dominance of algorithm-based platforms.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply understand the shift in communication practices from face-to-face to digital interactions in the social lives of Generation Z in Kota Matsum Village. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to contextually explore the meanings, experiences, and social constructions of research subjects within the digital communication space (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moleong, 2021). Informants were selected through purposive sampling, with the criteria being that Generation Z members had actively used TikTok for at least the past year, had a high level of usage, and were engaged in social interaction activities through the platform (Sugiyono, 2022). This study involved six Generation Z informants who met the research criteria. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which occurs when the data obtained shows recurring patterns and no longer yields new findings (Guest et al., 2012).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and non-participatory observation of informants' social interaction behavior while using TikTok (Yin, 2018). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques through the stages of data reduction, coding, category grouping, and drawing out main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Data validity was maintained through method triangulation by comparing and confirming interview and observation findings, thereby enhancing the credibility of the research (Miles et al., 2020). Therefore, the research results are expected to have a high level of credibility and comprehensively describe changes in Generation Z communication practices in the context of using TikTok as a digital social space in North Sumatra.

### 3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

#### **Generation Z's Shift from Face-to-Face Communication to Digital Interaction**

The development of short-form video-based social media platforms, such as TikTok, has triggered a significant transformation in communication practices among Generation Z. Communication patterns previously dominated by face-to-face interactions have now shifted to digital forms of communication mediated by technology. Generation Z tends to utilize social media as a primary platform for interaction due to its flexible nature, which is not limited by space and time. In this context, TikTok serves not only as a means of entertainment but also as a communication medium that allows for rapid and contextual exchange of messages. This phenomenon indicates that digital media plays a significant role in shaping new, more dynamic communication patterns among the younger generation (Krisdanu & Sumantri, 2023; Kaye et al., 2022).

Research findings indicate that informants tend to communicate more frequently through sending digital content than through face-to-face conversations. This shift indicates that communication no longer relies on face-to-face verbal interactions, but rather through more concise and expressive visual representations.

*"Now, I send TikTok videos more often than I chat in person." (Informant 1)*

This statement indicates that video content is being used as a medium to convey messages, emotions, and social experiences indirectly. Digital communication then forms new interaction patterns based on visual and symbolic elements, where social meaning is constructed through the exchange of digital content and responses (Ramadhani et al., 2023; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Furthermore, efficiency is a major factor driving this shift in communication practices. Informants stated that communication via TikTok is considered more practical because it eliminates the need for in-person meetings. Expressions such as "More practical, no need to meet" (Informant 2) indicate that speed and convenience are important considerations in the communication process. Generation Z tends to choose media that can meet communication needs quickly and effectively. This finding aligns with research showing that TikTok use is influenced by the need for efficiency and ease of interaction (Avicenna et al., 2024; Omar & Dequan, 2022).

Changes in communication practices are also evident in the forms of interaction taking place on TikTok, such as liking, commenting, and sharing content. These activities are viewed by informants as adequate forms of communication for building social interaction. Communication is no longer dominated by lengthy conversations, but rather is manifested through digital symbols that convey specific meaning. One informant also stated that interaction through commenting and content sharing features is considered sufficient for maintaining communication with peers.

*"Sometimes just liking or commenting on each other is enough to feel like we're still interacting." (Informant 3)*

This statement indicates that digital communication is increasingly shifting toward short, symbolic interactions, interpreted as a form of social connectedness. This condition

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indicates that the communication process is being simplified into more efficient symbolic forms. Consistently, research shows that digital interaction is increasingly dominated by the use of symbols and short responses as a means of social communication (Tampubolon et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, this shift in communication practices also has implications for the quality of face-to-face social interactions. Several informants admitted that they continue to use TikTok when in social situations with others. This condition indicates a decline in attention levels in face-to-face communication as a result of the dominance of digital media. Individuals tend to focus more on digital devices than on the social interactions taking place around them, resulting in a decline in the quality of face-to-face communication. This phenomenon aligns with research findings showing that digital media use has the potential to disrupt the quality of interpersonal relationships and face-to-face interactions (Rahmawati, 2021; Roberts & David, 2022).

Furthermore, this shift in communication practices not only reflects changes in the media used but also signifies a transformation in how individuals construct social meaning. Generation Z has developed communication patterns that tend to be concise, visual-based, and instantaneous, making interactions more flexible but potentially losing depth. These changes indicate that communication in the digital era is undergoing a process of redefinition, where technology functions not only as a means of conveying messages but also plays a role in shaping the structure of social interaction itself (Andriani et al., 2024; Bucher, 2022). Based on field observations, several informants continued to use TikTok when in peer-to-peer situations, reducing their focus on direct interactions.

### **Transformation of Generation Z's Social Relations in the Digital Interaction Space**

The use of TikTok has not only impacted changes in communication practices but also driven a transformation in Generation Z's social relations. Social relations previously formed through face-to-face interactions are now shifting toward relationships mediated by digital technology. Generation Z builds social connections through various activities on social media, such as sharing content and responding to posts. In this context, TikTok serves as a digital social space that allows individuals to stay connected without the need for physical proximity. This situation indicates that social relations are shifting toward more flexible forms based on digital connectivity (Krisdanu & Sumantri, 2023; van Dijck et al., 2021).

The research findings indicate that informants still feel close to others even though they have never met in person. Interactions through comments, messages, and responses to content can foster this sense of connection. This indicates that the meaning of social closeness has shifted from physical proximity to symbolic proximity in the digital space.

*“Even though we’ve never met in person, I still feel close because we often interact on TikTok.” (Informant 2)*

This statement demonstrates that social relationships are no longer formed through in-person presence, but rather through the intensity of repeated digital interactions. Social closeness is built through ongoing virtual communication in the digital space (Ramadhani et al., 2023; Turkle, 2022).

Furthermore, social relationships in the digital space are heavily influenced by audience responses, such as likes, comments, and views. These responses serve as indicators of attention and recognition in social relationships. Informants stated that they feel valued when they receive a lot of responses, and conversely, they feel ignored when they receive none. This situation suggests that social relationships in digital media tend to rely on social validation. Similarly, research shows that interactions on TikTok are heavily influenced by the dynamics of audience responses, which contribute to the formation of social connectedness (Tampubolon et al., 2024; Kaye et al., 2022).

However, social relationships formed in digital spaces tend to be flexible and unstable. Informants stated that relationships formed through TikTok are susceptible to change, depending on the intensity of interactions. When the frequency of interactions decreases, the relationships tend to weaken. This situation indicates that social relationships in digital spaces are fluid and temporary. This finding aligns with research showing that social relationships in digital media generally lack depth compared to relationships built through face-to-face interactions (Sari & Nugroho, 2022; Montag et al., 2021).

On the other hand, TikTok's algorithm plays a significant role in shaping social relationship patterns among its users. Content displayed through the For You Page feature allows individuals to connect with other users outside their pre-existing social circles. This situation not only opens up opportunities for new, broader relationships but also accelerates the process of establishing digital social connections. However, this situation also demonstrates that social interactions in digital spaces are not entirely natural, but are influenced by mechanisms regulated by the platform's system. Thus, algorithms indirectly play a role in determining the level of content visibility, the intensity of interactions, and the direction of social connections between users (Avicenna et al., 2024; Bucher, 2022).

Furthermore, this transformation in social relations indicates a shift in how Generation Z understands and interprets social relationships. Relationships are no longer determined by the frequency of physical encounters, but rather by the intensity of interactions taking place in digital spaces. Social closeness is built through engagement with content and responses to those activities. This situation demonstrates that social relations in the digital era are more dynamic, flexible, and based on virtual connectivity. Therefore, TikTok functions not only as a communication medium but also as a social space that shapes how individuals build and maintain social relationships (Andriani et al., 2024; Couldry & Hepp, 2020).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This research reveals that the use of TikTok has triggered fundamental changes in communication practices and social relationships among Generation Z. Communication patterns previously dominated by face-to-face interactions have now shifted to digital communication characterized by visual, concise, and symbolic elements. Generation Z tends to use TikTok as their primary means of interaction due to its efficiency, speed, and ease of message delivery. Interactions no longer center on face-to-face conversations, but rather through the exchange of content, short responses, and digital symbols that represent social meaning.

On the other hand, social relationships have also shifted from closeness based on physical presence to connectedness mediated by digital interactions. Social closeness is

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built through the level of engagement with content, audience response, and the continuity of interactions in the digital space. The relationships formed tend to be more flexible, dynamic, and dependent on the intensity of communication occurring within the platform. Furthermore, TikTok's algorithm influences the direction of social connections through mechanisms that regulate content visibility, so that social relationships are not solely personal but also influenced by the platform's systems.

These findings confirm that TikTok serves not only as a communication medium but also as a digital social space that is reshaping how Generation Z builds, interprets, and maintains social relationships. However, the dominance of digital interactions has the potential to diminish the quality of face-to-face communication and the depth of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, communication adaptation strategies are needed that balance the use of digital media with in-person interactions, ensuring the quality of social relationships in the lives of Generation Z in the digital age.

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