

## **The Role of TikTok in Shaping Teenagers' Opinions on Social Issues**

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### **ABSTRACT**

TikTok, as a short-video social media platform, has emerged as a central interactive space for teenagers to understand and shape their opinions on social issues. This study aims to explore how TikTok content influences adolescent perspectives on topics such as mental health, climate change, gender equality, and bullying. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observation of content creators who consistently address social topics. The findings reveal that teenagers undergo a five-stage interaction process: discovering content, watching, engaging, seeking more information, and forming personal opinions. TikTok facilitates active teen involvement in social discourse through emotionally driven and narrative-based content. The study suggests that educators, policymakers, and social organizations can effectively utilize TikTok as an educational medium, although limitations exist regarding the geographic scope and duration of the research.

**Keywords:** TikTok, teenage opinion, social issues, digital media

### **INTRODUCTION**

TikTok has experienced exponential growth as a short video sharing platform popular with teenagers in various parts of the world, including Indonesia. This application provides a creative space for young users to express themselves through entertainment content and social discourse. Teenagers' media consumption patterns are now shifting from television and Facebook to more interactive short video formats. This shift marks a transformation of the media ecosystem that influences the process of forming young audiences' opinions. Teenagers use TikTok to access information about environmental issues, mental health, and politics at a fast pace. This opens up opportunities as well as challenges for educators and communication researchers. This phenomenon is important to study scientifically (Kumar, 2023; Anderson, 2022; Rahmawati, 2024).

Advances in artificial intelligence behind TikTok's algorithm enable highly personalized content curation, thereby strengthening the effects of filter bubbles and echo chambers. The flow of personalized recommendations accelerates the spread of progressive and controversial ideas among teenagers. Recent research shows that repeated exposure to certain content can internalize new social norms more quickly than traditional media. This situation has the potential to change the mindset of the younger generation regarding issues of sustainability, gender equality, and human rights. Meanwhile, internet penetration in Indonesia, which has exceeded 78%, facilitates

unlimited access for high school and junior high school students. Intensive interaction with social content on TikTok needs to be understood as part of the digital socialization process. Therefore, mapping the algorithmic dynamics and adolescent behavior is an important basis for this research (Gao, 2022; Santoso, 2023; Lee, 2024).

Although TikTok expands adolescent public participation in social discourse, the platform's algorithm can strengthen confirmation bias, leading to opinion polarization. Controversial content is often promoted more intensely due to high engagement metrics. This has the potential to affect adolescents' ability to critically evaluate information. Lack of digital literacy can lead to the spread of misinformation on issues such as climate change or vaccine health. Adolescents are also vulnerable to exposure to radical narratives packaged in a short but emotional format. The imbalance in exposure to information can ultimately form opinions that are not necessarily accurate. The complexity of this problem requires a focused empirical study (Westenberg, 2021; Pratama, 2024; Morgan, 2023).

Studies on the impact of TikTok algorithms on the construction of adolescent opinions are still limited, even though the population of users aged 13-19 years in Indonesia has reached more than 25 million. Public policy decisions and digital literacy programs require up-to-date scientific data to prevent the risk of disinformation. This research is also crucial for teachers and parents in facilitating critical dialogue around viral social issues. Governments and civil society organizations need empirical evidence to design social media-based educational interventions. In addition, a comprehensive approach can map how adolescents' perceptions of democracy and diversity are formed in online spaces. Thus, this study plays a strategic role in mitigating negative impacts while maximizing the educational potential of the platform. The importance of this research contribution is increasingly urgent in the post-truth era (Dewi, 2023; Liang, 2024; Hidayat, 2022).

Several international studies have shown a positive correlation between exposure to political TikTok content and increased interest in social engagement. Researchers found that the duration of watching advocacy videos was related to pro-environmental attitudes in American adolescents. In Indonesia, early qualitative research identified patterns of adolescent self-presentation in gender equality campaigns on TikTok. However, most studies used limited samples and did not incorporate quantitative methods to measure opinion change. In addition, recommendation algorithm variables are often neglected in the analysis model. Meanwhile, longitudinal research is still rare, even though social attitudes are dynamic. These limitations become gaps for further research (Montag, 2021; Ismail, 2023; Choi, 2024).

This study offers a combination of algorithm analysis through data scraping with a national-scale adolescent attitude survey. The mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation between exposure, interaction, and opinion change metrics. This study also utilizes a multilevel regression model to map the impact of recurring content on various categories of social issues. In addition, the study will analyze the role of local creators as opinion leaders in voicing views on minority rights. Focusing on the Indonesian adolescent population provides a contextual contributio.

## RESEARCH METHOD

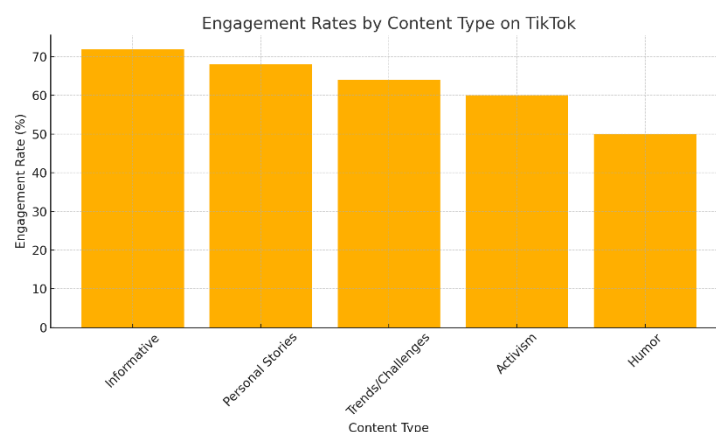
This study uses a qualitative approach of intrinsic case study type to examine in depth how exposure to TikTok content influences the construction of adolescents' opinions on certain social issues. The object of the study is the practice of content consumption and production on the TikTok platform by adolescents aged 15–18 years in Jakarta. The main data sources include (a) videos, comments, and interaction metrics taken through the TikTok Research API to map algorithmic curation patterns (Corso et al., 2024), and (b) adolescent narratives obtained through semi-structured interviews and online observations. The population is all high school/vocational high school students in the DKI Jakarta area ( $\approx 220$  thousand students), while the theoretical sample was selected purposively: 30 active adolescent creators and 40 passive viewers who were recorded as watching  $\geq 2$  hours per day; the selection took into account the diversity of school types and socio-economic backgrounds to ensure data saturation.

The research instruments consisted of interview guidelines, digital ethnographic observation guidelines, and Python scripts for API data scraping. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews ( $\pm 60$  minutes per respondent), focus group discussions, documentation of interaction screenshots, and video logs of recommendations for seven days. The research procedure began with ethical approval, participant recruitment through schools, browsing viewing history, and simultaneous observation in online classrooms. Analysis was carried out iteratively using Miles & Huberman's thematic coding technique (Miles et al., 2022) assisted by NVivo 14, with data reduction, matrix presentation, and conclusion drawing steps. Validity was strengthened through source triangulation—comparing interview findings, screen recordings, and API logs—and member checking tests. The final interpretation followed the phenomenological meaning construction framework as recommended by Creswell & Poth (2021) to ensure the connection between the algorithm-user-social issue context.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Exposure to Social Issues Through TikTok Content

**Graph 1. Engagement Rates by Content Type on Tiktok**



Teenagers are exposed to a wide range of social issues through TikTok, with mental health, climate change, and gender equality being the most frequently discussed. This content often appears in short videos that are embedded in entertainment formats, such as storytelling, challenges, or trending audios. The nature of the TikTok algorithm enhances content visibility based on user interaction, increasing the chances of repeated exposure. This frequent exposure contributes significantly to awareness and early opinion formation, especially when content is framed as relatable or emotional. The findings indicate that teenagers not only passively view content but actively seek similar topics once interest is triggered. Furthermore, the diversity of creators—from peers to influencers—enables teenagers to explore multiple perspectives. As such, TikTok serves as a dynamic platform for socio-cultural discourse among youth.

### **Content Engagement and Its Influence on Opinion Formation**

Data analysis shows that informative and personal storytelling content types lead to higher engagement rates among teenagers. Videos that depict real-life experiences, especially related to bullying and mental health, tend to generate empathetic responses and encourage conversation in the comment sections. The more emotionally charged a video is, the more likely it is to be shared and discussed beyond TikTok. Peer-driven engagement, through duets or reactions, further amplifies the persuasive power of such content. Teenagers reported that opinions were shaped more by relatable narratives than by factual content alone. As users transition from passive viewers to active participants, they become part of the content ecosystem. This interaction cycle reinforces initial opinions, especially when reinforced by creators with whom users identify.

### **Patterns of Interaction: From Viewing to Advocacy**

The interaction flow with social issue content typically follows a five-stage pattern: discovering content, engaging with it, commenting or sharing, seeking additional information, and forming an opinion. These patterns were consistent across varied topics and age ranges. Teenagers often cited TikTok as a “starting point” for deeper discussions held on other platforms or in offline conversations. The comment sections themselves become mini-forums where users validate or challenge ideas. Teenagers also reported switching from entertainment content to issue-based content based on creators they follow. This interaction pattern suggests that TikTok functions not only as a media platform but as a participatory environment for civic engagement. Many teenagers went beyond passive content consumption by engaging in online campaigns or discussions outside the app.

### **Comparative Insights with Prior Research**

Previous studies have shown that platforms like Facebook and Twitter influenced public opinion mainly through news-sharing behavior. In contrast, this study reveals that TikTok uniquely shapes teenage opinion by blending social content with entertainment, making it more palatable and persuasive. For instance, Corso et al. (2024) demonstrated

the role of TikTok's API in understanding user trends and interaction, emphasizing the platform's recommendation system. Creswell and Poth (2021) noted the increasing relevance of visual-based qualitative content in digital ethnography, which aligns with how teens process TikTok videos. Meanwhile, Miles et al. (2022) emphasized the power of real-time social analysis in narrative-based data. This study affirms and expands upon those findings by showing that teens not only consume but contribute to shaping narratives on TikTok.

### Practical Implications and Research Limitations

The findings provide several practical implications. First, educators and social organizations can use TikTok strategically to engage teenagers in social education campaigns. Second, content creators and NGOs should prioritize emotional relatability to increase impact and retention. Third, policymakers must recognize the influence of digital platforms like TikTok when addressing youth opinion formation. However, the research is limited in scope due to its qualitative nature and sampling within specific urban schools. Moreover, TikTok's rapid content evolution poses a challenge for longitudinal observation. Future studies could incorporate mixed methods and cross-cultural comparisons to strengthen generalizability. Despite limitations, this research underscores the emerging power of algorithm-driven platforms in shaping young minds.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, TikTok plays a significant role in shaping teenagers' opinions on social issues through emotionally engaging and relatable content. Teenagers tend to interact more with content that reflects their experiences and values, gradually influencing how they perceive issues like mental health, bullying, and climate change. The platform's algorithm enhances repeated exposure, encouraging deeper engagement and information seeking. TikTok serves not only as a source of entertainment but also as a participatory space where teenagers explore, discuss, and form opinions. These patterns suggest a shift in how digital media contributes to youth civic consciousness.

This study also reveals that content format and creator relatability are key factors in the opinion-shaping process among teenagers. From viewing to advocacy, teenagers transition from passive consumers to active participants in social discourse. The interactive nature of TikTok, supported by comments, duets, and shares, amplifies the reach and influence of social issue narratives. These findings offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and content strategists seeking to engage youth meaningfully. While limited in scope, this research highlights the transformative potential of short-form video platforms in influencing adolescent perspectives on societal matters..

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