

Constructing Identity on Social Media: A Discourse Analysis of Personal Branding on TikTok

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Abstract

This study explores how TikTok creators construct their identities through strategic language use and interaction with their audiences. Employing discourse analysis, the research examines the linguistic choices and politeness strategies creators utilize to shape personal branding and manage digital self-presentation. The findings reveal that identity on TikTok is a dynamic and co-constructed process, involving both the creator's intentional performance and active audience engagement through comments, likes, and duets. Creators balance authenticity with strategic branding, using a mix of speech acts and politeness techniques to appear relatable yet persuasive. This study highlights the complex interplay between language, identity, and social interaction in digital spaces, demonstrating that personal branding on TikTok is not merely self-promotion but a socially negotiated performance that continuously adapts to audience feedback and platform dynamics. The insights contribute to understanding the role of discourse in shaping online identities in contemporary social media environments.

Key words: tiktok, personal branding, a discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has significantly boosted the use of the internet and digital platforms for political communication, transforming how politicians interact with the public. Among the most influential platforms in recent years is TikTok, which has redefined the dynamics of political messaging, especially among younger generations. Unlike traditional platforms, TikTok emphasizes short, engaging video content that often goes viral through trends, challenges, and algorithmic promotion. Politicians have begun to recognize the platform's potential to reach a broader and more diverse audience, particularly digital-native voters who consume content rapidly and casually. In countries like Indonesia, TikTok has become a powerful tool for political branding, where leaders and candidates creatively blend political narratives with popular culture, humor, and personal storytelling. This shift marks a new era of political communication one that is faster, more visual, and deeply influenced by the language and behavior of social media communities (Azmi, 2018).

In discourse analysis, Speech Act Theory, initially proposed by Austin (1962) and later expanded by Searle (1969), highlights that every utterance functions not just

as a sequence of words but as a form of action with specific communicative purposes. Austin identified three key dimensions of speech acts: locutionary acts, which involve the actual act of producing meaningful utterances or saying something literally; illocutionary acts, which represent the speaker's intention or purpose behind the utterance, such as commanding, requesting, or offering; and perlocutionary acts, which refer to the effect or influence the utterance has on the listener, such as persuading, deterring, or inspiring. Building on Austin's foundation, Searle further refined the theory by categorizing speech acts into five primary types: assertive acts, where the speaker conveys information or states facts; directive acts, aimed at getting the listener to perform some action like invitations or commands; commissive acts, in which the speaker commits to some future course of action such as promises or offers; expressive acts, which express the speaker's feelings or attitudes; and declarative acts, which bring about a change in the social or institutional status or reality through the utterance itself, such as pronouncing someone married or resigning from a position. Understanding these classifications is crucial in discourse analysis as it allows deeper insight into how language operates in social interactions, revealing not just what is said but the underlying intentions and social functions of communication in various contexts (Muhammadiyah, 2023).

In early September 2022, the social media landscape was taken by surprise when a woman identified only by the initials TI uploaded a brief 10-second video featuring the message, "You are the one who is married, I am the one who is supported." This short clip quickly garnered a wave of comments and reactions, particularly from young mothers, and soon became a hotspot for internet trolls. Many viewers were deeply moved by the emotional weight of the message, highlighting how social media has evolved into a crucial aspect of modern human life. Beyond being a simple platform for social interaction, social media now plays a significant role in shaping opinions, fostering connections, and expanding personal and social networks. Among the diverse social media platforms available in Indonesia, TikTok has emerged as one of the most influential and widely used. Launched relatively recently, TikTok allows users to easily create and share captivating short videos, engaging their audience not only through video content but also via comments and private messaging. The app stands out due to its user-friendly interface and a variety of entertaining special effects that make video production accessible to people of all ages and skill

levels. This ease of use and creative freedom has helped TikTok rapidly gain popularity, as reflected in its impressive Play Store rating of 4.6 out of 5 stars and a global user base reaching approximately 27,827 million. TikTok's impact extends beyond entertainment, influencing social trends, marketing strategies, and even political communication in Indonesia and worldwide (Nurhabibah, 2023).

TikTok made its debut in Indonesia in 2018, quickly amassing more than 10 million downloads (Hasiholan et al., 2020). It gained significant popularity among Generation Z, who enjoyed producing brief 15-second videos during that period (Hasiholan et al., 2020). The app's integrated music feature aids users in efficiently crafting content by allowing them to pick songs and enhance their videos with improvisation, visual effects, and simple dance routines to make the videos more captivating (Hasiholan et al., 2020). However, in mid-2018, TikTok encountered controversy due to concerns about inappropriate content accessible to minors, resulting in a temporary ban by Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Information in July 2018 (Hasiholan et al., 2020). Following this, TikTok introduced new policies, including an age restriction that set the minimum user age at 11 years (Hasiholan et al., 2020). Despite these hurdles, TikTok remains the top app favored by Generation Z. According to data from tekno.kompas.com, downloads increased by 1.6% compared to the previous year, with Indonesia contributing to 11% of global TikTok downloads (accessed January 10, 2021; tekno.kompas.com, September 11, 2020). Furthermore, TikTok provides content creators with access to specialized business accounts that offer analytics on viewer counts and followers, as well as product promotion opportunities. Users can generate income through audience engagement and sponsorship deals with companies looking to advertise on their platforms (Yang et al., 2021).

Personal branding on TikTok is a significant phenomenon in which users deliberately craft their online personas to reflect particular values, lifestyles, or talents. This form of identity construction goes beyond mere self-presentation; it involves strategic communication choices that shape how others perceive and interact with the individual. Users employ language, visuals, music, and popular cultural references to create a cohesive and appealing image that resonates with their target audience. Consequently, TikTok serves not only as a social networking tool but also as a space for identity performance and social negotiation. Discourse analysis offers a valuable

framework to explore how language and other semiotic resources are used to construct personal brands on TikTok. By analyzing the verbal and visual elements within TikTok videos and the accompanying comments and interactions, this study aims to uncover the underlying social meanings, power relations, and identity constructions that occur on this platform. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as personal branding on social media increasingly influences social relationships, career opportunities, and cultural trends (Parameswari, 2023).

This research focuses on examining the discursive strategies TikTok users employ to build their identities and the ways in which these strategies reflect broader social and cultural contexts. Through this analysis, the study contributes to the growing field of digital discourse and social media studies by shedding light on the complexities of identity formation in contemporary online environments.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a primary focus on discourse analysis. The aim is to identify and describe in detail the various linguistic actions (or speech acts) and politeness strategies used in the process of identity construction and personal branding on the social media platform TikTok. This approach enables the researcher to understand how language and interaction are functionally utilized in online communication to shape social identity and achieve personal branding goals.

The primary data source for this study consists of selected TikTok videos created by individual content creators who are actively engaged in personal branding. These videos were purposefully chosen based on their high engagement (likes, comments, shares), clear self-presentation strategies, and consistency in conveying a particular persona or identity. TikTok, as a platform rich in visual, verbal, and textual modes of communication, provides authentic and spontaneous discourse that reflects how users construct and perform their identities in real time. The selection also focuses on diverse creators to capture variations in branding strategies across different demographics and content genres.

The data collection process was conducted through video-based observation of selected TikTok videos. The method used was non-participant observation, where the researcher acted as a passive observer, focusing on recording and analyzing the

creators' verbal and non-verbal communication without direct interaction. Specifically, the researcher transcribed and examined the creators' spoken language, captions, comments, and use of discourse markers (such as "like," "you know," "so"), as well as paralinguistic features like tone, facial expressions, and gestures relevant to identity construction and personal branding. By concentrating on these elements, the study aims to explore how TikTok users actively construct and perform their identities, manage audience engagement, and convey their personal brand through language and multimodal communication. The transcribed data is then analyzed using two main theoretical frameworks to gain a deeper understanding of how TikTok creators construct their identities through language and communication.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Drawing on the concepts introduced by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), Speech Act Theory is applied to categorize each of Jimmy Fallon's utterances based on its intended function or communicative purpose. The classifications generally fall into the following categories: To analyze how TikTok creators construct and perform their identities, this study applies two complementary theoretical frameworks.

Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory.

Locutionary act: The actual words spoken or written, representing the literal meaning of the message. For instance, a creator saying "I love doing this every day" directly presents a personal claim.

Illocutionary act: The speaker's intention behind the utterance—such as to assert identity, encourage audience engagement, share emotions, or persuade viewers. In TikTok content, this might include encouraging likes or follows, showcasing confidence, or expressing relatability.

Perlocutionary act: The actual effect the utterance has on the audience, such as inspiring trust, evoking empathy, or prompting social interaction.

By analyzing these speech acts in TikTok videos, the study investigates how creators use everyday language to perform identity, promote authenticity, and reinforce

their brand narratives. The spontaneous and often unscripted nature of TikTok discourse makes it an ideal space to observe these functions at work in real-time and informal digital settings.

In addition, Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) is used to further understand the interpersonal dynamics embedded in TikTok discourse. This theory helps identify how creators manage their public image (face) and maintain social harmony with their audiences through strategic language choices.

Positive Politeness: Tactics that show friendliness, solidarity, and appreciation for the audience's presence or opinions. This includes using humor, compliments, inclusive language ("we," "guys"), or responding warmly to comments. These strategies foster a sense of community and make the creator seem more approachable.

Bald on Record: Direct communication that lacks any mitigating devices, typically used for clarity, authority, or emphasis. For example, saying "Follow me now!" or "Let me show you how to do this" without hedging.

Off Record: Indirect or ambiguous utterances that leave room for interpretation, often used in storytelling or humor. This allows creators to build intrigue or invite engagement without explicitly stating their intentions.

Integrating Both Frameworks

By applying these two frameworks together, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how identity is linguistically and socially constructed on TikTok. Speech Act Theory captures the functional purpose of utterances in shaping persona and message delivery, while Politeness Theory uncovers the relational strategies used to manage audience perception and maintain positive interaction.

This dual approach enables a layered analysis of TikTok content, revealing that personal branding is not only a visual and stylistic endeavor, but also a deeply discursive process. where identity is continuously performed, negotiated, and co-constructed in the interplay between speaker and audience. The findings highlight how

creators strategically balance authenticity, authority, humor, and relatability through language in order to appeal to their target audience and sustain their online presence.

Identity as a Discursive Process

Personal branding is the strategic process of presenting an individual's skills, personality, and character as a distinct and valuable identity, setting them apart from others. Similar to corporate branding managed by public relations professionals, personal branding seeks to influence how others perceive a person. In 2024, it has become increasingly important for building a positive reputation, enhancing self-confidence, expanding professional networks, and managing one's digital presence (Yunizha Vindiasari, 2023). Social media plays a crucial role in this process, offering an effective platform for individuals to strengthen their personal image, credibility, and career prospects (Edra Rabia, 2024). Within professional contexts, personal branding facilitates the development of trust, opens new opportunities, and allows individuals to actively shape their public identity (Finneman, 2019). It also supports broader goals such as increasing social interaction, refining online presence, and influencing others. On TikTok, identity is fluid and dynamic, continuously shaped and reshaped through ongoing interaction with audiences. Unlike traditional media, where personas may appear more static, TikTok provides a participatory platform where users actively construct their identities in real-time. Creators often curate specific versions of themselves that resonate with the expectations, values, and interests of their target audience (Sultansyah, 2024). This process of self-presentation is highly strategic, blending linguistic choices, visual aesthetics, and interactive features like comments, duets, and stitches. For instance, an educational content creator may construct an identity as an expert or mentor by employing clear instructional language, well-organized explanations, and a tone that is both professional and approachable. This persona is reinforced through the use of structured speech acts such as assertive (stating facts), directives (encouraging learning behaviors), and expressive (showing enthusiasm or support). Their choice of visuals such as tidy backgrounds or on-screen text also contributes to the perception of credibility and authority.

In contrast, a comedic content creator may build a persona that is informal, entertaining, and emotionally engaging. This identity is performed through humor, exaggeration, playful language, and the use of relatable themes or trending audio.

Speech acts in this context often include expressive forms (e.g., sharing frustration or joy), performative declarations (e.g., acting out personas), and off-record strategies (e.g., indirect jokes or sarcasm) that encourage emotional connection and community interaction. Across these examples, the use of speech acts such as giving opinions (assertive), offering advice (directives), expressing feelings (expressive), or making self-claims (commissive or declarations) does more than just deliver content. It actively shapes how the audience interprets the creator's persona. Each utterance, visual cue, or stylistic decision becomes part of a larger narrative that defines who the creator is or who they want to be seen as—on the platform. Ultimately, identity on TikTok is not merely shown; it is performed, negotiated, and co-constructed in the space between creator and audience.

Politeness Strategies to Build Connection and Professionalism

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory reveals that TikTok creators are not only aware of what they say but also how they say it in order to maintain positive social relationships. Positive politeness strategies such as using friendly greetings ("hi guys," "hey fam"), humor, compliments, or sharing personal stories help create emotional closeness with the audience (Arianaa, 2025).

On the other hand, negative politeness strategies are employed by TikTok creators to demonstrate respect for their audience's personal space, autonomy, and freedom of choice. These strategies are often evident in the use of humble, indirect, or softened language that avoids imposing on the viewer. Phrases such as "if you don't mind, please follow," or "sorry if this video isn't perfect" illustrate a deliberate effort to minimize imposition, showing modesty and deference. By framing requests gently or acknowledging potential imperfections, creators present themselves as considerate and self-aware. This approach fosters a sense of trust and empathy, especially in audiences who may be sensitive to overly assertive communication.

Such linguistic politeness also helps maintain a balanced relationship between creators and followers, reinforcing the notion that participation (liking, commenting, following) is voluntary rather than demanded. In digital spaces where attention is a scarce resource, this non-coercive tone can be particularly effective in building loyalty and encouraging engagement without triggering resistance. In contrast, bald on record strategies involve direct, unfiltered communication that omits polite mitigation. These

are typically used when clarity and urgency are prioritized such as in calls to action like “click the link now!” or “don’t scroll without liking!” While these expressions are bold and attention-grabbing, their effectiveness heavily depends on context. If used too frequently or without sufficient rapport, they risk being perceived as aggressive, demanding, or overly commercial.

Balancing Authenticity and Strategic Branding

One of the major challenges in identity construction on social media is balancing authenticity with strategic branding. On platforms like TikTok, where content is often perceived as casual and spontaneous, creators are under increasing pressure to appear “natural” and relatable, while simultaneously managing a curated online persona. This tension lies at the heart of personal branding presenting oneself in a favorable light without seeming overly manufactured or insincere. Creators must carefully orchestrate their speech, tone, gestures, visual aesthetics, and content structure to tell a consistent story about who they are, what they represent, and what value they offer to their audience.

Through discourse analysis, it becomes clear that this process is far from accidental. The identities projected by creators are shaped by a series of intentional linguistic and discursive decisions, such as using informal language to signal approachability, inserting humor to foster relatability, or using affirmations and expertise to position themselves as credible and trustworthy. Each word choice, pause, gesture, or even silence contributes to the construction of a persona that is not only reflective of the creator’s self-image, but also strategically tailored to meet the expectations of their followers and the broader platform culture.

Therefore, personal branding on TikTok is not merely an act of self-promotion it is a socially negotiated performance that involves both the creator and their audience. This performance is strategic because it responds to the algorithmic logic of the platform (e.g., trends, visibility, engagement), and negotiated because it is influenced by the reactions, feedback, and interpretations of viewers. A creator’s identity is continually re-shaped based on likes, comments, shares, and the creator’s own evolving goals.

Moreover, creators must remain adaptable. The notion of authenticity itself is fluid and can vary across different contexts and audience demographics. What

appears genuine in one community may come across as performative or inauthentic in another. As such, TikTok creators constantly engage in reflexive identity management, adjusting their discursive strategies to maintain credibility while maximizing reach and engagement.

Audience Participation in Identity Construction

Identity on TikTok is not created in isolation; rather, it is co-constructed through an ongoing dialogue between creators and their audiences. Unlike traditional media where the audience plays a more passive role, TikTok's interactive features empower viewers to actively participate in shaping a creator's digital persona. Through comments, likes, shares, and especially duets and stitches, audiences engage directly with content, offering real-time feedback that can affirm, question, or reshape the identity presented. This participatory culture encourages creators to be responsive and adaptive, as the reception of their content influences how they present themselves in future videos. For example, a creator might highlight certain personality traits or themes that resonate well with followers, or adjust their tone and style based on viewer preferences and criticisms. This iterative process underscores that identity on TikTok is dynamic and relational, emerging from the continuous interaction between creator and community.

Moreover, this interactive feedback loop makes audience engagement an essential component of identity performance on the platform. Creators often address comments or respond to questions through follow-up videos, demonstrating that they value their audience's input and are invested in maintaining a dialogic relationship. This responsiveness not only humanizes creators but also strengthens the sense of connection and loyalty among followers. At the same time, the audience acts as a form of social regulator validating certain behaviors and linguistic choices while challenging others. When viewers endorse a persona by liking or positively commenting, they reinforce that identity; conversely, criticism or disagreement can pressure creators to reconsider and refine how they portray themselves. In this way, TikTok becomes a vibrant social space where identity is continuously negotiated, contested, and co-

created, reflecting the complex interplay between individual expression and collective validation.

CONCLUSION

Constructing identity on TikTok is a complex process that involves language strategies, social interaction, and an awareness of audience perception. By applying Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, this study shows that every utterance by a TikTok creator functions as a meaningful social action, not merely a piece of casual communication. Therefore, personal branding on social media can be understood as a discursive practice rooted in strategic and relational language use.

Author Biography

Sarahdiba Khairunisa, commonly known as Sarah, is a fourth-semester student at the Islamic University of Kadiri, born in November 2004 in Jakarta, Indonesia. In addition to her academic pursuits, Sarahdiba is an experienced professional in the field of communication. With over two years of experience as a Master of Ceremony (MC) and moderator for various formal and informal events, she has demonstrated exceptional public speaking skills and an ability to engage diverse audiences. Her presence is known to bring a well-structured and conducive atmosphere to every occasion she leads.

Sarah is currently focusing her efforts on preparing for her participation in ICELS 2025 (International Conference on English Language and Society), reflecting her dedication to both academic and professional growth. She continues to hone her skills

in communication, presentation, and leadership—building a strong foundation for her future in the global arena.

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