

Constructing Teenage Identity Through Language A Discourse Analysis of TikTok Content

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Abstract

This research was carried out to investigate the ways in which young people communicate on TikTok to form and share their social identities. The primary emphasis is on how various language elements like slang, tone, rhythm, and speaking style are utilized not merely to express meanings but also to reveal individual and collective identities within a digital community of youth. A qualitative descriptive methodology was adopted, applying a discourse analysis framework. The information was gathered from a TikTok video titled “How Language Shapes Identity and Development” shared by [@etymologynerd](#), which examines how a person’s accent, language background, and upbringing contribute to identity development. This video was chosen because of its significant resonance with teenage viewers and its incorporation of language features relevant to youth, such as uptalk, casual fillers, and vivid expression. The analysis involved looking at the linguistic style of the creator and the interactions within the comments section. The result indicate that the speaker blends educational content with language cues that resonate with teenagers, while the comments reflect how young people use language to express shared identity. These findings demonstrate that TikTok is an engaging platform where language and identity come together. It is anticipated that this research will enhance the understanding of how communication in digital platforms influences and mirrors the identity of teenagers in modern society.

Key words: *discourse analysis, TikTok, teenage identity, digital language, sociolinguistics.*

Introduction

In today's digital age, platforms like TikTok have fundamentally reshaped how language is utilized, communicated, and influenced—particularly among youth.

Teenagers, being one of the most engaged demographics on TikTok, actively participate in everyday language activities that extend past mere fun. Through their sophisticated use of language, they develop their identities, forge connections, and signal social inclusion in manners that are highly contextual and expressive. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in social constructionism, which, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued, posits that identity and reality are actively constructed through social interaction and language. The emergence of platforms like TikTok also demands an understanding through the lens of digital sociolinguistics, a field that has rapidly evolved to examine how new digital environments shape language use, including novel vocabularies, multimodal expressions, and informal registers (e.g., Tagliamonte & Denis, 2021). The incorporation of particular slang, speech patterns such as uptalk or vocal fry, and casual discourse markers has become a defining feature of this online dialect, showcasing the values, perspectives, and identities of their generation. This aligns with principles of sociolinguistics, where scholars like Pennycook (2007) emphasize how language practices are intrinsically linked to social identity and group affiliation, reflecting and influencing who individuals are within their community.

Furthermore, understanding language on TikTok requires a discourse analysis lens, drawing from Foucault's (1972) view of discourse not merely as communication but as a powerful system that constructs meaning and shapes perceptions of identity. In this fluid digital landscape, post-structuralist theories of identity, particularly those explored by Butler (1990), suggest that identity is performative and constantly negotiated through linguistic and semiotic practices. More recently, scholarship on digital self-presentation and platformization of communication highlights how individuals strategically perform and construct their identities through linguistic and visual cues on platforms like TikTok. These studies underscore how the unique affordances of the platform – such as its short-video format, algorithmic recommendations, and interactive features – profoundly influence the types of linguistic and social interactions that foster self-expression and community building (e.g., Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018).

This research seeks to investigate the crucial role of language in shaping teenage identities on TikTok. Utilizing discourse analysis, the study centres around a TikTok video named “How Language Shapes Identity and Development” shared by the

educational creator @etymologynerd. In this video, the creator discusses how elements like accent, surroundings, and upbringing affect an individual's language choices and self-image as they grow. Although the content is presented in an academic manner, the speaker's style is casual and engaging, featuring communication techniques typical of youth interactions, such as phrases like "you know," a quick speaking pace, and expressions that resonate with a younger audience.

In addition to examining the linguistic approaches of the speaker, this research also looks into the conversations happening in the comment area, where adolescent users express their thoughts on the subject through blended language styles, humor, and personal stories. These exchanges reveal that language on TikTok serves not only as a means to share information but also to fulfill social functions, confirm group identity, and navigate a sense of belonging within a rapidly changing online landscape.

By focusing on this particular video and how the audience engages with it, the research enhances our understanding of how communication in online spaces, especially on TikTok, acts as a venue for shaping and reinforcing teenage identity. Since language and identity are closely linked in social interactions, it is crucial to explore how they function within the digital culture of youth.

Methods

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive approach centered around discourse analysis to investigate how adolescents develop and articulate their identities through language on TikTok. The main aim was to comprehend how their word choices and conversational discourse—both in the videos and the comments—illustrate the way teenage identity is performed.

Data Source: The primary material for this research was taken from a TikTok clip named "How Language Shapes Identity and Development," created by the educational account @etymologynerd. This video was chosen due to its relevant themes concerning language and identity, alongside its incorporation of language styles that resonate with teenagers, including uptalk, rapid speech, informal fillers, and a tone rich in emotional expression. Furthermore, the comments on the video served

as a supplementary data source, allowing for an examination of audience engagement, discourse techniques, and responses indicative of identity negotiation.

Data Collection: Gathering data involved observing without participation. The video was watched multiple times, and it was transcribed manually while carefully noting word choices, discourse markers, prosodic elements (like tone and rhythm), and storytelling structures. A selection of 50 audience comments was made intentionally, concentrating on those that featured explicit personal views, identity positioning, or prominent linguistic elements such as Gen Z slang, code-switching, or emotional reactions.

Data Analysis: The analysis employed discourse analysis as outlined by Johnstone and Andrus (2024), highlighting the role of language in social settings. Additionally, it integrated sociolinguistic theories, including Gee's identity framework (2014), Bucholtz and Hall's sociocultural language model (2005), Ochs' indexicality theory (1992), and Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies (1987). The transcribed discourse was thematically categorized, focusing on identity markers, relational techniques, emotional tone, and language innovation. Emphasis was placed on how both the speaker and audience enact identity through language, express solidarity and connection, and how online discourse mirrors a collective youth culture.

This organized method facilitated a comprehensive analysis of both the top-down (content creator) and bottom-up (audience) discourse strategies, providing insights into the interactive process of identity formation within digital youth communities.

The data collection approach involved watching the video without interacting and manually transcribing the spoken words, including nuances like tone, rhythm, and discourse markers. Additionally, the comments section was scrutinized to identify interaction patterns, language responses, and identity negotiations among teenage users. Comments were selectively chosen based on their linguistic significance, emotional nuances, and markers that indicated shared social meanings.

The analysis adopted the discourse analysis framework provided by Johnstone and Andrus (2024) and referenced theories on identity in language (Gee, 2014; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), indexicality (Ochs, 1992), and politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Each statement made in the video and significant user comments were analyzed for their roles in forming or supporting social identity. Special attention

was given to stylistic differences, pragmatic markers, and how language usage indicated levels of agreement, connection, or social distance.

Result & Discussion

The study uncovers various important language techniques and conversational trends that aid in forming teenage identities on TikTok. In the chosen video, the presenter mixes formal information with a casual style to connect with younger viewers. Features like uptalk, fillers such as "you know" and "like," a quick pace, and straightforward sentence forms were evident throughout the video. These elements help reduce the perceived gap between the speaker and the audience, presenting the speaker as both a knowledgeable figure and someone relatable.

The video explores the theme of how language growth and surroundings influence identity through storytelling. The speaker shares real-life instances, including parenting approaches, community standards, and variations in accents, to show how an early introduction to language shapes self-image. These narratives are punctuated with casual language, rhetorical questions, and a lively tone, enhancing the speaker's connection to youth language culture. This manner of speaking aligns with the typical style of TikTok content, where authority and approachability coexist.

Comments from viewers highlight the significance of language in forming identity. Among the 50 comments reviewed, many convey emotional involvement and a connection to the speaker's ideas. Remarks such as "This makes a lot of sense," "It explains how I communicate now," or "Wow, I hadn't thought about that before" demonstrate cognitive agreement. Users also recount their own experiences related to bilingualism, regional accents, or cultural backgrounds—often expressed using Gen Z slang, abbreviations, or emojis. This choice of language reflects both individual expressions of identity and a sense of community.

From a sociolinguistic viewpoint, these exchanges display how language functions indexically. As Ochs (1992) points out, linguistic styles can signify broader social implications such as age, education, or belonging. In this scenario, the speaker's approachable tone signifies youth-friendliness, whereas the commenters' blend of informal English and cultural slang reinforces their belonging to a digital community.

The dialogue becomes a platform where both the speaker and the audience collaboratively shape identity through shared language norms and social cues.

Thematic analysis of the data also revealed frequent identity strategies. The speaker portrays themselves as a knowledgeable yet approachable teacher—connecting expertise with youth culture. The audience, in response, uses language to agree, validate, and further the conversation. Strategies of positive politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987), including agreement, humor, and shared feelings, are common, fostering a sense of closeness even in an asynchronous setting. Laughter and affirmations are prevalent as well, creating an encouraging online space where identity exploration can occur safely.

In conclusion, the results indicate that TikTok serves as a platform where online discussions help teenagers negotiate their identities. Language is not just a way of expressing thoughts, but an active tool through which users build, demonstrate, and affirm their identities. This research shows how discourse features—such as rhythm, tone, interaction, and vocabulary—act as instruments for navigating the intricate nature of youth identity in a mediated and performative context.

In the comment area, young users frequently resonate with the ideas of self and language by recounting personal stories, supporting the speaker's viewpoint, or engaging in light-hearted banter with friends. Remarks like "this helps me understand so much about myself," "I truly feel acknowledged," or "it's no surprise I sound this way" reflect a shared exploration of identity via language. Such remarks reveal the use of positive politeness techniques, including group camaraderie, agreement, and mutual feelings as noted by Brown and Levinson in 1987.

From a linguistic perspective, those commenting mix generational slang, switching between codes, and phrases specific to their culture. This indicates that language serves as a means for expressing belonging and personal insight. Numerous replies showcase indexicality, which refers to the choice of particular language styles that indicate group affiliation, social status, or emotional viewpoint, as discussed by Ochs in 1992. The active role of both the original speaker and the respondents emphasizes how identity is formed collaboratively within digital interactions.

Moreover, the research supports the notion that TikTok functions not just as a source of entertainment but as a vibrant platform for dialogue where teenagers work through their identities. The interaction between the video content and its viewers

illustrates how discourse acts as a mechanism for shaping authenticity, conveying feelings, and nurturing a sense of community within the online culture of youth.

Conclusion

This research concludes that language plays an essential role in how teenagers form and express their identities on TikTok. By examining a video from @etymologynerd and the conversations in the comments, the study shows that identity is not just conveyed but actively acted out and negotiated through online interactions. The creator employs approachable and casual language to connect with young viewers, while the audience responds with slang, humor, personal stories, and emotional remarks to demonstrate their connection and camaraderie.

The relationship between the content creator and the audience highlights that language on digital platforms such as TikTok is a living, context-aware tool that influences how young individuals showcase themselves and interact with one another. Elements like uptalk, filler words, simple sentence structures, and storytelling styles are not random; they fulfill sociolinguistic roles that indicate group identity, feelings, and unity.

In addition, the results indicate that TikTok functions as a mixed communication setting where educational, personal, and social aspects merge. Both the speaker and viewers partake in a culture of collaboration, where identity is shaped together, challenged, and validated. The communication practices observed align with broader trends in youth sociolinguistics, emphasizing the importance of discourse analysis in comprehending language use in digital spaces.

In summary, this research adds to the field of digital sociolinguistics by showcasing how TikTok, as a platform predominantly used by youth, aids in constructing identity through language. It confirms that language on social media is dynamic and performative, closely linked to the social contexts and cultural norms of its users.

The results reinforce the idea that identity is constructed through discourse and is influenced by social settings. They also highlight that TikTok acts as a linguistic environment where performativity, language diversity, and digital culture overlap.

These findings contribute to the knowledge of digital sociolinguistics and illustrate how social media platforms are conducive to analyzing youth language behaviors.

Author Biography

Feriska Nofita Ramadhani is an undergraduate student in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Universitas Islam Kadiri (UNISKA), Kediri, Indonesia. She is currently in her fourth semester of study, with a focus on education and language teaching. She has a particular interest in communication and pedagogy, which has shaped her academic development and professional experiences.

Feriska has experience as an English instructor at a language course institution in Pare, an area widely known as the “English Village.” In this role, she developed skills in designing instructional materials, teaching learners from diverse backgrounds, and supporting students’ language proficiency.

In addition, she has worked as a Master of Ceremony (MC) for approximately three years, hosting various events such as seminars, training sessions, weddings, and student organization activities. Through these engagements, she has strengthened her public speaking, event management, and interpersonal communication skills.

Her combined expertise in education and communication enables her to create interactive learning environments and to engage effectively with audiences. She aspires to continue developing her abilities as an educator and communicator who contributes positively to society.

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