

Conference Paper

Exploring the Phenomenon of Racism on TikTok: A Descriptive Review from the Perspective of Digital Literacy and Mass Communication

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ABSTRACT

Based on the literature study related to the condition of TikTok social media users who often give bad comments to other people's uploads, it is very important to equip them with good digital literacy skills. Good digital literacy will certainly make them able to filter information scattered on social media and avoid racist behavior that will have a negative impact. This research method uses descriptive qualitative method. The main data source is social media content containing racist comments. Secondary data sources are literature studies obtained scientifically. This research aims to find out why there are still many TikTok social media users. Improving digital literacy in multicultural societies is very important in global efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aim to avoid gaps in access and understanding of technology or digital media. From several elements of digital literacy by Wheeler, it can be concluded that the lack of digital literacy skills at the filtering and selecting stage makes them unable to understand or realize that the act of commenting with race is a bad act. For example, people often give negative speech in the comments column when utilizing social media, especially TikTok social media. Their motives and goals for doing this are usually entertainment motives, which means that TikTok users feel entertained through the provision of these utterances. So that users, especially TikTok media viewers, get a personal satisfaction that aims only as entertainment. Therefore, improving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) program through the 16th pillar of the SDGs, namely, Justice, Peace and Strong Institutions. Reduced racism will certainly make the digital environment peaceful and all users feel justice because they are treated equally such as being given positive comments and supported to continue working regardless of race.

Keywords: Digital Literacy, Racism, TikTok, SDGs

Introduction

The rapid growth of information technology today has a significant impact on the flow of information from social media. One of the most popular social media is TikTok. TikTok is a social media platform that presents content in the form of videos with a short duration of about 15 to 30 seconds. TikTok, not only presents positive content trends but a package with various negative content trends. In addition, TikTok users are free to respond in the form of likes, comments, and shares to posts. However, many users cannot filter the comments written. The function of the comment column in the application should be used to give appreciation to the creator or as a means of discussion, but in reality, many social media users use the comment column feature as a means of using toxic language to hurt other people's feelings. Many comments do not refer to the content but instead target other things such as the physical condition or skin color of the content owner. Social media is a place where racism and discrimination are spread subtly and

How to cite:

Sabtiana, A. L., Azzahra, A., Rahmania, L. A., & Ansor, S. (2025). Exploring the phenomenon of racism on TikTok: A descriptive review from the perspective of digital literacy and mass communication. *9th International Seminar of Research Month 2024*. NST Proceedings. pages 786-794. doi: 10.11594/nstp.2025.47117

systematically and allows for the rapid and widespread dissemination of racist messages, the racism is also often packaged as humor (Ritonga et al., 2024).

Based on the problem formulation described above, this research aims to find out the reasons for TikTok social media users who make racist comments to content creators. Even though the application has a feature that can be used to filter content based on user interests.

Based on data released by IndexMundi, Indonesia ranks 14th as the most racist country with 4.99 points. Racism itself is an attitude or understanding that considers the existence of a race that has a higher position so that it feels able to discriminate against individuals or groups from races that are considered to have a lower position. Perpetrators of racism who feel they have a higher position also feel they have the right to regulate individuals or groups of other races that are considered inferior (Elika & Nurhayati, 2024).

According to Ritonga et al. (2024), the impact of racism not only creates social tension and conflict between groups but also hinders the development of an inclusive and just society. In its most extreme form, racist behavior can legitimize violence, exclusion, and even genocide against groups that are considered inferior, thus endangering humanitarian and democratic values.

Racist comments are currently very common on various social media platforms. According to (Syahputra, 2020) at this time, people as social media users are not capable enough to choose or filter the information they encounter and ignore many ethics in social media. The spread of content, racist comments, and discrimination against a party on social media by users who cannot filter the information received is caused by low literacy skills, especially digital literacy to understand information on social media.

Based on the literature study related to the condition of TikTok social media users who often give bad comments to other people's uploads, it is very important to equip them with good digital literacy skills. Good digital literacy will certainly make them able to filter information scattered on social media and avoid racist behavior that will have a negative impact. Those who have good digital literacy skills are able to filter information and can become educational agents for themselves and in the environment where they interact (Baijah et al., 2022).

According to Anggraeni et al. (2024), digital literacy is the most important key to social, economic, and cultural progress. Racial and cultural diversity presents unique challenges and new opportunities to improve digital literacy awareness and skills. Improving digital literacy in multicultural societies is essential in the global effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aim to eliminate disparities in access and understanding of technology or digital media. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an agenda that aims to realize sustainable development globally in the form of action plans for society, environment, welfare, and world peace (Fadilah et al., 2024). One of the supporters of the successful achievement of these SDGs is literacy, especially quality and responsible digital literacy.

Digital literacy enables individuals to evaluate and use information effectively, supporting them in making sustainable decisions in life (Aqiilah et al., 2030). Digital literacy is important to protect them from threats and risks arising from the use of technology. They can learn about online safety and understand how to manage information safely in digital media (Husain A et al., 2024).

Digital literacy refers to the ability to find, evaluate, and record information clearly through writing and other media on various digital platforms. Digital literacy is assessed based on a person's grammar, composition, and writing skills, as well as their ability to use technology to create text, images, sound, and design (Syah et al., 2019). The initial use of digital literacy at that time only focused on digital skills which started with computer proficiency. Then when the Internet began to emerge and the use of social media shifted the focus of digital literacy to mobile devices. Meanwhile, Montoya, (2018) provides a more comprehensive definition of digital literacy, namely an ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and calculate using print and written materials related to various fields. These activities will be assisted by a series of

learning so that people can gain knowledge, and then develop so that new knowledge emerges that can be shared widely with the community.

According to Wheeler (2012), there are nine important elements that exist in digital literacy, which consist of: the first element Social Networking, is the ability to utilize the features in social media. One of the functions of social media is as a medium of information. However, according to Fitriani et al. (2022), information obtained from social media must be selected or sorted first. So that each individual can carry out social networking activities properly. The second element, Transliteracy, transliteration can be interpreted as an effort to utilize various platforms to create, share, and communicate digital content. This element emphasizes the ability to communicate through various social media, discussion groups, or other online services. The third element, Maintaining Privacy, means that users must be able to maintain privacy from cybercrime. Cybercrime involves illegal activities using computers, digital devices, or computer networks.

Next is the fourth element of Managing Digital Identity, this element is how platform users use identity appropriately in various social media owned, so that they can still create digital content healthily and wisely. The fifth element Creating Content, this element is an activity that consists of the ability of platform users to create digital content, such as using the PowToon platform, Blogspot, WordPress, and others. The sixth element Organizing and Sharing content, this element explains how platform users organize and share the information content obtained so that it is easier to disseminate to the public or general public.

Furthermore, the seventh element of Reusing/Repurposing content, in this element emphasizes how platform users create or reprocess existing content so that it can be reused as needed. The eighth element of Filtering and Selecting content, in this element, contains the ability to search, filter, and select information appropriately according to the information needs of each individual. For example, through various search engines on the Internet. Finally, the ninth element, Self Broadcasting, aims to enable Internet users to provide interesting ideas and multimedia content through various platforms, such as blogs or online forums. Self-broadcasting can be an effort for young online/digital natives to play an active role in digital literacy activities.

Based on this phenomenon, digital literacy activities are related to the uses and gratification communication theory or the theory of use and satisfaction coined by Elihu Katz, Jay G Blumer, and Michael Gurevitch which is commonly used for mass communication research. The purpose of the study on uses and gratifications theory is to find out why someone uses or avoids mass media, the benefits of using mass media, and what things they like among various choices of mass media (Saputra, 2019). This theory explains when and how individuals, as media consumers, become more or less active in media use. The use and gratification theory considers an individual or a person as an active participant in the communication process. The use and gratification theory sees audiences as "smart" individuals. Smart in the sense that they only consume media that can fulfill their needs. This usability and satisfaction theory emphasizes that a person can selectively select and consume media according to the needs of each individual (Hasny et al., 2021).

There are 5 core elements described by Elihu Katz, Jay G Blumer, and Michael Gurevitch, namely:

1. Media use should have a specific purpose. This assumes that the audience knows where to find information that meets their needs. Audiences know exactly where to find the information they need. Audiences also understand what type of media they are looking for.
2. The media does not seek the audience but instead, the audience should decide what type of media to use.
3. Media compete with other sources to fulfill audience needs in various ways
4. Modern media competes with more traditional media
5. Audiences are aware of their motives and needs so that they can become active media users.

Based on Wheeler's fifth element, namely, the motives and needs that people realize to be active media users. Based on Phillip Palmgreen's research in (Setiyani et al., 2023) there are

motives or purposes for using communication media, namely: 1) Information motives, 2) Personal identity motives, 3) Behavioral motives and social interactions, and 4) Entertainment motives.

Material and Methods

The research method uses a descriptive qualitative method. The main data source is social media content containing racist comments. Secondary data sources are literature studies obtained scientifically. The use of qualitative research methods aims to explain phenomena through in-depth exploration of an object (Rusandi & Rusli, 2021). Qualitative research is descriptive and analytical research. Descriptive means describing events, phenomena, and social conditions under study while analysis includes analyzing, evaluating, and comparing research findings (Waruwu, 2023).

Results and Discussion

Technological developments make it easier for people to keep up with information. Social media is an information media that is currently widely used by the public to fulfill their information needs. Social media is familiar to us as the digital generation of this era. Social media is an online media that helps users to share, search for information, and communicate indirectly without being limited by time and space (Triananda et al., 2021). Social media is very helpful, making it easier and faster to complete a job so that it does not need to take too much time. In addition, social media can be used to release fatigue or as an alternative entertainment media in spare time. One of the latest social media being loved by the public is an application that combines social media and short video sharing, namely the TikTok platform (Damayanti & Gemiharto, 2019).

It's just that quite a lot of TikTok users do not utilize the platform properly so technological development is considered to be one of the scourges that is quite terrible when not balanced with the development of the mindset of its users. The racism expressed by the following netizens is an example that not all social users can use social media wisely.

Racist comments in the comment column of @fritzalorboy's TikTok Account Upload

A video uploaded on February 6, 2024, on the TikTok social media platform discusses the free lunch policy of the elected president and vice president pair number 2. In the video upload, there are many racist comments by insulting the account owner's physique. The following is a screenshot of the comments on the TikTok social media account.



Figure 1. Screenshot of post and comment section @fritzalorboy

Racist comments in the comment column of @insanemt TikTok Account Upload (Ratu Namira)

The video uploaded on the TikTok social media account on March 12, 2024, shows the account owner **@insanemt** uploading a dance cover with his friend, there is no discussion whatsoever in the video. However, if you look at the commentary section of the post there are several netizens who make comments regarding the color of his skin.



Figure 2. Screenshots of posts and comments section **@insanemt**

The TikTok application has been widely discussed by the public since the covid-19 pandemic as a means of expression, seeking entertainment, or exchanging information. However, one of the features of the application, namely the comment column, is often not used properly or properly (Alika et al., 2022). In fact, many people also use the comment field feature for negative comments using toxic language which can hurt other people's feelings. Based (Siahaan, 2022) said that language culture mistakes often occur in the world of education, especially when learning is carried out online so that students are free to interact online through social media, for example, interaction through comment columns without paying attention to language ethics. For example in the case above, many people leave racist comments about religion, ethnicity, and skin color to content creators.

Based on Figure 1, the content is about criticism of the free lunch program aimed at candidate pair no. 2. In the comments column of the **@fritzalorboy** account, many negative comments are smelling of racism which is not in line with what the **@fritzalorboy** account wants to convey. The content of the comments on the account's posts criticizes the physicality of the content creator. Examples of critical words in the comments column of the post such as "*program makan siang buat anak sekolah bukan buat hewan ternak*", "*makan siang gratis buat anak sekolah, bukan untuk kerbau parit*", "*untuk anak sekolah, bukan untuk sapi*", "*makan gratis untuk anak manusia, bukan anak iblis*". The sentences above reflect the feeling of disagreement with the content of the related content because the commentators think that the creator is not their neighbor but another living being. The statement "*he means he doesn't want to eat for free, he wants free skincare*" reveals that TikTok users assess the creator's physical need for skincare or skincare because the creator's physique is like a living creature other than humans. However, in addition to the many negative comments, there are also positive comments that support, encourage, or agree with the content of the creator's content. Examples such as "*semangat bg.. maaf atas kata-kata kasar dari saudara kita fans 02*", "*semangat ka, makasih ya ka udah bersuara. Semoga sehat-sehat selalu kaa*", "*padahal yang harusnya dibenerin yaa kebutuhan dasarnya, bukan cuma makan gratis ... mantapp bang!!!*"

Based on Figure 2, **@insanemt**'s account contains general content that often appears on the FYP hashtag feature. The content is just an ordinary video accompanied by a trendy song that aims

to entertain, promote, or just introduce themselves to the wider community. However, again the comments column witnessed that many of them wrote blasphemous words or sentences related to physicality, especially skin color, which were not worth saying. For example, in some of these sentences "*erica calina, marion jola... maksudnya kulit coklat terawat gitu*", "*kak gw tau eksotis, tp gw liat tara basro itemnya tu terawatt, glow gitu, ngerti kan maksud gw*", "*inimah maghrib bukan eksotis bjir*", "*et mandi napa*", and so on. These sentences show that they criticize the creator's skin color because his dark skin color is considered unkempt like big artists who also have dark skin. So there is a statement that the creator should equalize his skin with the artist. There are comments that make statements that the creator should take a shower first, and others. There are positive comments that support or provide interesting and positive facts about the **@insanemtf** account. Examples such as "*tapi temen gue pernah foto dipeluk sm dia trs kata temen gue dia tuh wangi bgt loh*", "*perasaan ini terawat deh ... kenapa komennya pada gitu sih*", "*komennya knp si? Pdhl cantik bgt anjir*", "*the real cantik itu ga harus putih*", "*bingung yang pada ngomenin ttg kulit dia, mnurutku dia udh rawat kulitnya kok tp emg kalo udh gen gabisa d rubah kan. dia cantik krn pede meski ga putih*".

Based on the findings of these data, digital literacy skills are needed for social media users. Good digital literacy skills can be used by social media users to limit and filter the actions they take on social media. Based on digital literacy theory (Wheeler, 2012) social media users must be able to apply 9 elements of digital literacy. The first element is social networking, based on the first and second data, TikTok social media users are still unable to utilize the comment features provided wisely. These users make comments related to the physique and skin color of the content owner, however, not a few TikTok users have been able to filter the comments to be given and provide positive comments. Second, in the transliteracy element, based on the two data obtained, TikTok users can create and share the content they want.

Third, the element of maintaining privacy, TikTok users who make racist comments on the two accounts do not show where they come from or who they are and some choose to make their accounts private, this aims to maintain their privacy. The fourth element of managing digital identity, based on the data, all accounts that show racist behavior through comments do not use real identities. All of these accounts use pseudonyms to protect their real identities. Furthermore, in the fifth element of creating content, based on observations on these accounts they can create content and upload it. The content that has been uploaded by the account is very diverse, one of which is game content. In the sixth element of organizing and sharing content, the account owners have understood how to search and disseminate content such as the use of hashtags in post captions.

The seventh element is reusing/repurposing content, based on the analysis of the two data they cannot process content properly. Furthermore, in the eighth element of filtering and sharing, this element shows that good digital literacy must be able to filter out the flow of information received. By mastering this ability, users can filter which content is appropriate to share, comment on, follow, or avoid. Based on the data above, many TikTok social media users do not have good information filtering skills. When they find an upload that does not match what they think is right or does not match the standards they have built, they cannot ignore the upload, instead, they make racist comments by bringing up the skin color or race of the content owner. This lack of digital literacy skills at the filtering and sharing stage makes them unable to understand or realize that commenting on race is a bad action.

Last, the ninth element of self broadcasting, in this element TikTok social media users should also channel interesting and positive information as a form of contribution to the dissemination of information. However, if you look at the forms of comments based on the first and second data, they cannot fulfill the self-broadcasting element, because what they show is negative things such as racist speech against others.

From some of the elements of digital literacy, it can be concluded that people are still not implementing digital literacy activities because they do not apply the eighth element, namely the

filtering and selecting content element. For example, people often give negative speech in the comments column when using social media, especially TikTok social media.

The occurrence of negative speech is due to one's inability to filter and select data/content. In addition, commenting is satisfying for TikTok users. Based on the theory of use and satisfaction coined by Elihu Katz, Jay G Blumer, and Michael Gurevitch which is commonly used for mass communication research. The theory of use and satisfaction sees audiences as "smart" individuals. Smart in the sense that they only consume media that can fulfill their needs. This use and satisfaction theory emphasizes that a person can selectively select and consume media according to the needs of each individual (Hasny et al., 2021). In the theory of use and satisfaction, there is a concept of satisfaction to fulfill needs called Gratification Sought. Gratification Sought (GS) is the fulfillment of needs that are sought to achieve the satisfaction desired by individuals when using certain mass media. Gratification sought is a person's motive that encourages using a medium (Kriyantono, 2014). Based on research conducted by Phillip Palmgreen in (Setiyani et al., 2023), there are motives or purposes for using communication media, namely, information motives, personal identity motives, behavioral motives and social interactions, and entertainment motives.

These motives are the types of reasons that users use to surf TikTok media. In accordance with core element number 5 which contains "Audiences are aware of their motives and needs so that they can become active media users". This shows that the motive or reason users use social media, especially TikTok, is themselves so that users are aware of it. According to Triananda et al. (2021), TikTok social media can make those who use it chuckle with joy because, through this media, they can see different recordings with various and diverse melodic articulations. However, this statement has the opposite effect, where TikTok media has become a home for someone to provide negative speech through the comments column in the TikTok feature. Supposedly, the comment feature on TikTok can be utilized properly, which is intended as a sign of appreciation to content creators so that there is good communication between creators and other TikTok users.

According to Juliana and Arifin (2019), the most common causes of criminal activity on social media include internal conditions of a person's psychological and mental state as well as the external environment, lack of social control, public interest, public ignorance, and technical advances. Criminal activity in social media can be in the form of hate speech, which means actions by someone to harass or demean another person based on race, skin color, gender, religion, or other factors. There are various kinds of negative speech acts, one of which is negative speech that refers to racism, especially the color of a person's skin. Hate speech can be done by any social media account user. The habit of social media users who often express hateful comments is to use fake accounts whose identity is unknown to anyone. Thus, it is difficult to know who the perpetrator behind the action is (Iskandar et al., 2024).

According to (Putri et al. (2024) TikTok can be used as a means to improve digital literacy skills by focusing on the utilization of available information. TikTok not only presents short videos containing entertainment, but many TikTok users share various educational content. Later, this utilization can be used to improve the digital literacy skills of social media users such as awareness of the importance of filtering the information received, critical thinking, and increasing vigilance in disseminating unverified information related to its truth. If these abilities can be applied well in daily social media usage activities, surely problems such as racist speech in social media comment sections can be reduced. Therefore, improving these skills can be one of the efforts in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) program by the 16th pillar of the SDGs, namely, Justice, Peace, and Strong Institutions. Reduced racism will certainly make the digital environment peaceful and all users feel justice because they are treated equally such as being given positive comments and supported to continue working regardless of race.

Conclusion

Based on the research above, it can be concluded that digital literacy is still not carried out optimally by Indonesian people. It was found that there are 9 elements related to digital literacy,

but the average community cannot cover all nine elements. For example, in the phenomenon above, where many people are the perpetrators of racism cases in TikTok social media. This is due to the gap of TikTok users in filtering and selecting content in the media. Examples of racism cases that often occur on TikTok social media are found in the comment column feature which allows users to provide various types of comments. Both in the form of appreciation or support for content creators and disapproval of the content provided by them. However, in reality, most TikTok users comment on content creators with negative comments and even insult the content creators physically. In the data above, there are examples of negative speech given. Many of these negative remarks contain elements of racism that insult skin color because it does not match the standards in Indonesia. There are many factors related to this, one of which is due to psychological factors and a person's mental state. Their motives and goals for doing this are because there is an entertainment motive, which means that TikTok users feel entertained through the provision of these utterances. So that users, especially TikTok media viewers, get a personal satisfaction that aims only as entertainment.

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