



MJ

Multidisciplinary Journals

Volume 3 Issue 1, 2026 (119-126)

ISSN (online) : **3047-8499**

Homepage : <https://jurnalunived.com/index.php/MJ>

Doi : <https://doi.org/10.37676/mj>

Self-Commodification Of University Students In Tiktok Content: A Visual And Verbal Semiotic Analysis

Eni Novita ¹, Irene Julianti ², Indah Pujiana ³, Martha Heriniazwi Dianthi ³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu

¹ e-mail: eninovita585@gmail.com

Received [19-01-2025]

Revised [26-02-2026]

Accepted [07-03-2026]

Abstract. This study examines the process of self commodification among Indonesian migrant university students through TikTok content using a visual and verbal semiotic analysis. As economic pressures increase, many students living away from their hometowns utilize TikTok as an alternative source of income by transforming personal identity, emotions, and everyday experiences into monetizable content. This research employs a qualitative approach grounded in Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, focusing on denotation, connotation, and myth to interpret meanings embedded in student generated TikTok videos. The findings indicate that self commodification is constructed through recurring visual and verbal signs that depict ordinary student life while simultaneously conveying struggle, authenticity, and perseverance. At the mythological level, these representations normalize digital labor and frame self commodification as a natural and acceptable strategy for economic survival. The study highlights how TikTok functions not only as a communication platform but also as a space where identity performance and economic necessity intersect. This research contributes to communication studies by providing a critical understanding of meaning making, digital labor, and identity construction among Indonesian migrant university students.

Keywords: *Self commodification, TikTok, University students, Semiotics, Digital labor.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, TikTok has emerged as an alternative income platform for Indonesian migrant university students who live in boarding houses while pursuing higher education in urban areas. These students, commonly referred to as mahasiswa perantauan, often experience economic pressure related to accommodation costs, daily living expenses, and educational needs. Limited access to conventional part time employment due to academic obligations has encouraged many of them to utilize TikTok as a source of income through live streaming, virtual gifting, and affiliate marketing features. Indonesian online media have reported the growing visibility of mahasiswa anak kos who create TikTok content from their rented rooms by sharing everyday activities, personal struggles, and interactive live sessions. In these contents, students present themselves directly to the audience, positioning their personal experiences and emotions as valuable material for engagement. This indicates that TikTok functions not only as a communication medium but also as a digital workspace where migrant students perform labor in exchange for economic compensation.

Within this digital environment, Indonesian migrant university students increasingly transform themselves into marketable subjects. Their physical appearance, emotional expressions, personal narratives, and academic identities are intentionally displayed to attract attention and interaction from viewers. This practice reflects a process of self commodification in

which aspects of personal identity are converted into commodities with exchange value within the platform's algorithmic system.

The construction of self commodification on TikTok operates through visual and verbal signs. Visual elements such as facial expressions, body language, clothing choices, and spatial settings inside boarding rooms are combined with verbal elements including captions, spoken narratives, and persuasive language. These signs communicate meanings related to economic struggle, perseverance, and productivity while simultaneously reinforcing popular narratives about digital success among Indonesian youth. Rather than serving purely as self expression, these representations function strategically to encourage audience engagement and financial contribution.

Although the economic activities of Indonesian students on TikTok have received attention in media discourse, academic research has primarily emphasized platform economics and user motivation. Limited attention has been given to the symbolic processes through which students construct meaning and identity in their content. There is a lack of studies that critically examine how Indonesian migrant university students semiotically represent themselves as commodities through visual and verbal signs on TikTok. Therefore, this study focuses on the self commodification of Indonesian migrant university students in TikTok content using a visual and verbal semiotic analysis. By examining the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings embedded in student generated content, this research aims to contribute to communication studies by revealing how identity, digital labor, and economic necessity intersect within the everyday media practices of mahasiswa perantauan in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self Commodification in Digital Media

The concept of commodification originates from critical political economy, particularly in the work of Mosco, who defines commodification as the process through which human activities, communication, and labor are transformed into commodities with exchange value. In the context of digital media, commodification increasingly involves the self, where identity, emotions, and personal experiences are mobilized as economic resources. Social media platforms encourage users to convert visibility, interaction, and affective labor into monetizable value, positioning users simultaneously as producers and commodities.

Within platform based economies, self commodification is not merely an individual choice but a structural condition shaped by algorithms, monetization systems, and audience attention. For university students experiencing economic pressure, self commodification becomes a practical strategy to sustain daily life. This phenomenon is particularly evident among Indonesian migrant university students who rely on TikTok as an alternative income source while managing academic responsibilities.

Indonesian Migrant University Students and TikTok as Digital Labor Space

TikTok has developed into a prominent digital labor space where users generate income through live streaming, virtual gifts, and affiliate programs. For Indonesian migrant university students living in boarding houses, TikTok offers flexibility that conventional employment cannot provide. Their everyday environments, personal routines, and emotional experiences are incorporated into content production, transforming private spaces into sites of economic activity. Studies on digital labor among students often emphasize economic motivation and platform affordances.

However, these approaches tend to overlook how students symbolically construct their identities as laboring subjects. The transformation of students into marketable figures on TikTok is mediated through signs and representations that require deeper interpretive analysis.

Roland Barthes' Semiotics and Meaning Construction

Semiotics provides a critical framework for understanding how meaning is produced and circulated through signs. Roland Barthes expanded classical semiotics by proposing a model of signification that operates on three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal and descriptive meaning of a sign, while connotation involves the cultural and emotional associations attached to it. Myth represents a second order signification that naturalizes ideological meanings, making them appear normal or self evident within society.

Barthes' semiotic framework is particularly relevant for analyzing media content because it reveals how everyday representations carry ideological significance. Media texts do not simply reflect reality but actively construct meaning through repeated symbolic patterns. In digital media, these meanings are often embedded in visual imagery, language choices, and narrative structures that shape audience perception.

Visual and Verbal Semiotics in TikTok Content

TikTok content is inherently multimodal, combining visual, verbal, and auditory elements. Visual signs include facial expressions, body posture, clothing, spatial settings, and camera angles, while verbal signs consist of spoken language, captions, hashtags, and textual overlays. According to Barthes' framework, these elements operate simultaneously to produce layered meanings.

In the context of Indonesian migrant university students, visual representations such as smiling faces in modest boarding rooms may denote casual content creation, while connotatively suggesting perseverance and resilience. At the level of myth, these signs can reinforce dominant narratives about self reliance, digital entrepreneurship, and individual responsibility for economic survival. Verbal narratives that emphasize financial struggle or academic identity further legitimize monetization practices by appealing to audience empathy.

Barthes' semiotics allows researchers to uncover how such representations function ideologically, revealing how economic necessity is normalized and how self commodification is framed as a natural and acceptable practice.

Representation, Identity, and Self Commodification

Representation theory emphasizes that identity is constructed through symbolic processes rather than merely expressed. On TikTok, Indonesian migrant university students actively manage how they appear to audiences, selecting signs that align with expectations of authenticity, productivity, and relatability. These representational choices are not neutral but economically motivated, as they directly influence audience engagement and financial outcomes.

Through repeated visual and verbal patterns, students' identities are transformed into recognizable and consumable forms. Barthes' concept of myth is crucial in understanding how these representations contribute to broader cultural meanings, particularly the myth of digital success that obscures structural inequalities and platform dependency.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined digital labor and student participation in social media economies, limited attention has been given to how self commodification is constructed at the level of signs and meanings. Few studies apply Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to analyze the visual and verbal representations of Indonesian migrant university students on TikTok.

This study addresses this gap by employing Barthes' semiotics as the primary analytical framework to examine how self commodification is visually and verbally constructed in TikTok content. By focusing on denotation, connotation, and myth, this research contributes to

communication studies by offering a critical understanding of identity construction, digital labor, and meaning making within the context of Indonesian migrant university students.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a semiotic approach to examine how self commodification is constructed in TikTok content created by Indonesian migrant university students. A qualitative design is appropriate because the research seeks to interpret meanings embedded in visual and verbal signs rather than to quantify variables or test causal relationships. The study is grounded in Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which enables an in depth interpretation of signs and representations related to identity, labor, and economic value within digital media content.

The research applies Barthes' model of signification, which consists of three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. This framework is used to analyze how visual and verbal elements operate simultaneously to produce layered meanings that normalize self commodification in TikTok content. Through this approach, the study examines how students' everyday appearances, emotional expressions, and personal narratives function as symbolic resources within the platform's monetization system.

The subjects of this research are Indonesian migrant university students who live away from their hometowns and actively produce TikTok content for income generating purposes. These students typically reside in boarding houses and use TikTok as an alternative economic strategy alongside their academic activities. The object of the research consists of TikTok videos produced by these students that contain explicit or implicit representations of economic activity, including live streaming sessions, promotional content, and narrative based videos that emphasize personal experiences, financial struggles, or productivity.

Data are selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus. TikTok videos are chosen based on criteria that include the creator's status as an Indonesian migrant university student, the presence of monetization related content, and the use of visual and verbal elements that represent self presentation within an economic context. Videos that demonstrate active audience engagement, such as high numbers of views, comments, or virtual gifts, are prioritized to capture clear instances of self commodification.

Data collection is conducted through non participatory observation and documentation. The researcher observes TikTok content without direct interaction with creators or audiences. Selected videos are documented by capturing key visual frames and transcribing all verbal elements, including spoken language, captions, on screen text, and hashtags. These data are systematically organized to facilitate detailed semiotic analysis.

Data analysis follows the stages of semiotic interpretation proposed by Roland Barthes. The first stage involves identifying denotative meanings by describing visual and verbal signs as they appear in the content. The second stage focuses on connotative meanings by interpreting the cultural and emotional associations attached to these signs. The final stage examines mythological meanings, which reveal broader ideological narratives that naturalize self commodification, such as the normalization of digital entrepreneurship and individual responsibility for economic survival among university students.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the analysis is conducted through repeated examination of the data to maintain interpretive consistency. Meanings are cross checked across multiple videos to identify recurring patterns of representation. Contextual information related to digital labor and student economic conditions in Indonesia is also considered to support analytical depth. Ethical considerations are maintained by analyzing only publicly accessible content, anonymizing creator identities, and focusing on representations rather than personal judgments.

RESULTS

The semiotic analysis reveals that self commodification among Indonesian migrant university students on TikTok is constructed through recurring visual and verbal patterns that consistently frame identity as an economic resource. Across the analyzed videos, students present themselves not only as content creators but also as commodities whose appearance, emotions, and personal narratives are mobilized to generate audience engagement and financial contribution. The findings are organized based on the three levels of meaning proposed by Roland Barthes: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, TikTok content produced by migrant university students commonly depicts everyday activities within boarding house environments. Students appear on screen wearing casual clothing, speaking directly to the camera, smiling during live streaming sessions, or engaging in promotional activities for affiliate products. Verbal elements include captions referencing daily expenses, spoken narratives about academic life, and textual overlays indicating financial goals such as paying rent or covering living costs. These elements function as literal representations of students' daily routines and content creation practices.

At the connotative level, these visual and verbal signs carry meanings associated with struggle, perseverance, and relatability. The modest boarding house setting connotes economic limitation, while friendly facial expressions and conversational language suggest sincerity and approachability. Narratives emphasizing effort and endurance position students as hardworking individuals striving for independence. Through these meanings, students symbolically invite empathy and emotional connection from audiences, which supports engagement and monetization. At the level of myth, the analyzed content reinforces broader ideological narratives that normalize self commodification in digital spaces. The repeated representation of students earning income through TikTok constructs the myth that economic survival and upward mobility can be achieved through personal effort and digital entrepreneurship. Structural factors such as platform dependency, algorithmic control, and economic inequality are obscured, while responsibility for success or failure is placed on individual performance and consistency. In this way, self commodification is presented as a natural and acceptable strategy for student survival in the digital economy.

The interaction between visual and verbal signs is central to this process. Visual displays of friendliness and accessibility are strengthened by verbal narratives of struggle and motivation, producing a coherent representation of the student as both authentic and economically productive. These findings indicate that self commodification among Indonesian migrant university students is not incidental but systematically constructed through symbolic practices embedded in TikTok content. There is no fixed recipe for presenting the findings of a study. We will, therefore, first consider general guidelines and then turn our attention to options for reporting descriptive statistics and the results of the hypothesis test.

Visual and Verbal Signs	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Mythological Meaning
Student smiling during live streaming in a boarding room	A student interacts with viewers in a casual indoor setting	Friendliness, sincerity, emotional accessibility	Digital labor framed as enjoyable and voluntary
Caption stating "saving for rent" or "to support daily needs"	Text describing financial goals	Economic struggle and responsibility	Individual responsibility for survival normalized

Casual clothing and informal language	Everyday student appearance	Authenticity and relatability	Authentic self as marketable commodity
Repeated interaction with viewers and thanking for gifts	Acknowledgment of audience contribution	Gratitude and emotional labor	Monetization of emotion perceived as natural
Narrative about balancing study and content creation	Student explains daily routine	Hard work and perseverance	Myth of productivity and self reliance in digital economy

The findings summarized in Table 1 indicate that self commodification among Indonesian migrant university students is constructed through the repeated interaction of visual and verbal signs. At the denotative level, these signs depict ordinary student life, while at the connotative level they convey struggle, authenticity, and perseverance. At the level of myth, these representations normalize digital labor and frame self commodification as a natural strategy for economic survival within TikTok's platform economy.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that self commodification among Indonesian migrant university students on TikTok is a structured symbolic process rather than a spontaneous form of self expression. Through the use of recurring visual and verbal signs, students actively construct identities that are economically valuable within the platform. This supports Barthes' argument that media representations operate beyond literal meaning and function to produce ideological narratives through denotation, connotation, and myth.

At the denotative level, the content presents ordinary student activities and environments that appear natural and relatable. However, at the connotative level, these representations communicate emotional availability, economic struggle, and perseverance, which are strategically mobilized to generate audience engagement. This finding aligns with previous studies on digital labor that emphasize the role of affective performance in sustaining platform based economies.

At the level of myth, the analyzed content reinforces dominant narratives that normalize self commodification as an acceptable and necessary strategy for economic survival. The repeated portrayal of students earning income through TikTok constructs the belief that digital success is primarily the result of individual effort and visibility, while structural conditions such as algorithmic control and economic inequality remain obscured. This process reflects Mosco's concept of commodification, in which human labor and identity are transformed into marketable resources within capitalist media systems.

By applying Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, this study reveals how visual and verbal signs function ideologically to legitimize the transformation of student identity into a commodity. The discussion highlights the intersection of identity, digital labor, and economic necessity in the everyday media practices of Indonesian migrant university students, contributing to a critical understanding of self commodification in contemporary social media environments.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that self commodification among Indonesian migrant university students on TikTok is constructed through a systematic use of visual and verbal signs that transform personal identity into an economic resource. By applying Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the analysis reveals that ordinary representations of student life operate at multiple

levels of meaning, producing denotative depictions of daily activities, connotative meanings of struggle and authenticity, and mythological narratives that normalize digital labor.

The findings indicate that TikTok functions not only as a communication platform but also as a space where economic necessity and identity performance intersect. Through repeated symbolic patterns, students' appearances, emotions, and personal narratives are commodified and presented as natural strategies for economic survival. This process reinforces dominant ideologies that emphasize individual responsibility and digital entrepreneurship while obscuring structural constraints within platform based economies.

Overall, this research contributes to communication studies by providing a critical understanding of how self commodification is semiotically constructed in social media content created by Indonesian migrant university students. Future research may expand this analysis by examining audience reception or comparing similar practices across different social media platforms.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research adopts a qualitative semiotic approach that focuses on the interpretation of visual and verbal signs within TikTok content created by Indonesian migrant university students.

As a result, the findings are interpretative in nature and do not aim to provide generalizable conclusions applicable to all university students or digital content creators. The meanings identified in this study are shaped by the researcher's analytical perspective and theoretical framework, which may differ from interpretations made by audiences or content creators themselves.

Second, the scope of the data is limited to publicly available TikTok videos that explicitly or implicitly reflect income generating activities. The analysis does not include private interactions, algorithmic data, or behind the scenes production processes that may significantly influence content visibility and monetization outcomes. Consequently, the study cannot fully account for the role of platform algorithms or economic structures that shape self commodification beyond representational practices.

Third, this research focuses exclusively on visual and verbal elements within the content and does not examine audience reception or creators' subjective motivations through interviews or surveys. Understanding how audiences interpret these signs or how students consciously negotiate their identities for economic purposes could provide a more comprehensive understanding of self commodification. The absence of these perspectives limits the depth of analysis regarding the social impact and reception of the representations identified.

Additionally, the temporal scope of the study is limited to a specific period of content production. TikTok content and trends evolve rapidly, and representations of self commodification may change over time in response to shifting algorithms, monetization policies, or economic conditions. Therefore, the findings should be understood as reflective of a particular moment within the broader development of digital labor practices among Indonesian migrant university students.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into how self commodification is symbolically constructed through visual and verbal signs. The limitations identified also provide opportunities for future research to expand the analytical scope by incorporating longitudinal approaches, audience studies, or comparative analyses across different digital platforms.

REFERENCES

- Abidin, C. (2021). Mapping internet celebrity on TikTok: Exploring attention economies and visibility labours. *Cultural Science Journal*, 12(1), 77–104.
- Achmad, & Rusadi, U. (2025). Komodifikasi berita di media sosial tentang pemanfaatan akun TikTok Kompas TV. *Jurnal Komunikasi Universitas Garut: Hasil Pemikiran dan Penelitian*, 11(1), 36–53.
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1957)
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Elements of semiology* (A. Lavers & C. Smith, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1964)
- Cakrawala, J. B., & Permatasari, A. R. (2024). Komodifikasi empati: Eksplorasi fenomena “ngemis dan nyawer” online di media sosial TikTok. *Jurnal IPTEK-KOM (Jurnal Ilmu Pengetahuan dan Teknologi Komunikasi)*.
- Duffy, B. E. (2017). *Not getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. SAGE Publications.
- Kamaruddin, S. A., Adam, A., & Chakti, A. G. R. (2024). Komodifikasi media sosial dalam perspektif teori Jean Baudrillard: Studi kasus TikTok Indonesia. *Bosowa Journal of Education*, 5(1), 177–180. <https://doi.org/10.35965/bje.v5i1.5462>
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, micro-celebrity, and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>
- Mosco, V. (2009). *The political economy of communication* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Subandi, Z. E., & Sadono, T. P. (2018). Komodifikasi, spasialisasi, dan strukturasi dalam media baru di Indonesia: Ekonomi politik komunikasi Vincent Mosco pada LINE Webtoon. *Proceedings of the National Conference of Creative Industry*. Universitas Bunda Mulia.
- Yusro, N., & Sanjayani, N. S. (2025). Dinamika tanda dalam rebranding TikTok: Analisis semiotika Roland Barthes pada evolusi logo musik. *HUMANITIS: Jurnal Humaniora, Sosial dan Bisnis*, 3(3), 525–529.