

Digital Communication Strategies of Homeless Accounts In Building Engagement on Tiktok Platform

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the digital communication strategies of "homeless accounts" informal, anonymously managed entities on TikTok in building substantial audience engagement within Indonesia's digital landscape. Addressing a significant gap in literature regarding non-traditional media actors, the research employed qualitative methods combining digital ethnography and content analysis of 10 purposively sampled accounts over three months. Findings demonstrate that these accounts strategically leverage trending content formats, emotional storytelling, and interactive platform features to foster engagement. Their content portfolio primarily consists of viral themes, local information, and inspirational narratives, consistently enhanced with trending audio-visual elements for optimal algorithmic visibility. Core communication strategies are built upon authenticity, emotional resonance, and dialogic community management, effectively cultivating digital empathy and co-creation among followers. The study reveals that effective digital communication can be successfully cultivated outside traditional media infrastructures through strategic application of platform-specific features and authentic narrative techniques. This represents a modern form of citizen journalism that thrives on relational trust rather than institutional credibility. However, this operational model presents significant challenges regarding accountability and potential misinformation spread, necessitating enhanced digital literacy initiatives and platform-supported verification mechanisms. This research contributes valuable insights into how informal digital actors cultivate influence and community trust beyond institutional boundaries, offering important implications for understanding evolving digital communication paradigms in platform societies.

Keywords: Digital Communication Strategy, Tiktok, Homeless Media, Engagement, Content Strategy.



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INTRODUCTION

TikTok's pervasive influence in Indonesia, with over 194 million users, provides a fertile ground for emergent forms of public communication and participatory culture (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2025). Within this vibrant ecosystem, the phenomenon of "homeless accounts" has gained prominence as a novel manifestation of citizen journalism (Apriliyanti et al., 2024). These accounts are characterized by their non-formal management, often anonymous operation, and lack of affiliation with any official institution or media organization, operating in the interstices of the

digital public sphere and leveraging platform affordances to build influence without traditional organizational support.

Empirical data from the Ministry of Communication and Digital Technology's media mapping report underscores the prevalence of this phenomenon. From a categorization of 83 identified TikTok accounts in Indonesia, 63 accounts (approximately 75.9%) were classified as homeless media, boasting follower counts ranging from thousands to hundreds of thousands (Puspitoningrum, 2025). Exemplary accounts such as @realmrbert, with over 617,500 followers, and @arisvaraa, with 951,400 followers, demonstrate significant reach and a remarkable ability to cultivate high levels of audience engagement despite the absence of clear management structures or institutional backing (Yuliani et al., 2025). This indicates a perceptible shift in influence from institution-based credibility to creator-based authenticity and relational trust, particularly resonating with Generation Z audiences who gravitate towards content perceived as authentic, dynamic, and visually engaging (Malawat & Hariyanto, 2024).

However, the operational model of homeless accounts is not without significant challenges. Their anonymity and lack of formal structure raise concerns regarding accountability, the potential for spreading misinformation, and the absence of stable resources or ethical guidelines governing traditional media entities. This presents a complex duality where high engagement coexists with potential risks to the information ecosystem, necessitating a balanced understanding of their operational dynamics.

Based on this comprehensive background, this research focuses intently on analyzing the digital communication strategies implemented by homeless accounts on TikTok. Understanding how these non-formal entities build audience influence and sustained engagement without organizational support is crucial for mapping the evolving contours of digital public discourse in Indonesia. Furthermore, the findings are expected to contribute valuable knowledge to developing more adaptive and resonant digital communication strategies for various actors in the digital age.

This study addresses two research questions: (1) What types of content are published by homeless accounts on the TikTok platform? (2) How are the digital communication strategies implemented by homeless accounts to build engagement on the TikTok platform? Consequently, the research objectives are: (1) To identify and categorize the types of content published by homeless accounts on TikTok. (2) To analyze the digital communication strategies used by these accounts to build and sustain engagement. This inquiry is vital for comprehending the shifting paradigms of media influence and audience interaction in a platform-dominated communication environment.

METHOD

Research Type

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a combination of digital ethnography and qualitative content analysis. This dual-method approach was selected for its capacity to capture

both the behavioral dimensions of community interaction and the symbolic meanings embedded within the content, providing a rich, in-depth understanding of the nuanced communication practices and operational logics of these non-formal accounts within the highly dynamic TikTok environment (Miles et al., 2014; Sugiyono, 2013). The integration of digital ethnography enabled the observation of natural user behaviors and interaction patterns, while qualitative content analysis facilitated the systematic examination of narrative structures and symbolic elements in the published content. This synergistic approach ensures a comprehensive investigation that accounts for both observable engagement behaviors and the underlying strategic communication intents of homeless accounts.

Population and Sample/Informants

The population for this research comprised all identified homeless TikTok accounts operating in Indonesia, defined by their non-formal management, anonymity, and lack of institutional affiliation. The initial identification of these accounts was conducted through a multi-stage process that included: (1) analysis of previous datasets from the Ministry of Communication and Digital Technology's media monitoring program, (2) systematic tracking of accounts using relevant hashtags such as #mediahomeless and #jurnalismewarga, and (3) manual search and snowball sampling based on account recommendations within the TikTok platform's suggestion algorithm. Employing a purposive sampling technique, ten accounts were selected to ensure they were information-rich and representative of the phenomenon under investigation (Miles et al., 2014). The selection criteria were rigorously applied: accounts had to be previously categorized as homeless media, possess a minimum follower count of 10,000 to ensure a substantial audience base, demonstrate active posting within the three months preceding data collection, and maintain a calculated engagement rate of at least 2%. This engagement rate threshold was set to indicate a meaningful level of audience interaction beyond passive viewership. This comprehensive sampling strategy ensured the selected cases could provide profound and relevant insights into effective digital communication strategies employed by influential homeless accounts.

Research Location

The research was conducted within the Indonesian digital ecosystem, with a specific focus on the TikTok platform. This context was strategically selected to examine how homeless accounts operate within a specific socio-technical environment characterized by high platform penetration and distinct youth engagement patterns. The methodological approach was designed to capture both platform-specific dynamics and broader digital communication phenomena, allowing for an in-depth analysis of how non-formal media entities navigate algorithmic visibility and community building in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Instrumentation or Tools

The researcher served as the primary data collection instrument, supported by a meticulously designed structured coding sheet specifically tailored for analyzing TikTok content. The coding sheet was adapted from the robust social media analysis framework developed by Buchory and Sukmawati (2022), with significant modifications to capture the unique affordances and culture of the TikTok platform (Fadhilah & Nurjanah, 2024). The instrument included the following components to ensure comprehensive data capture: (1) basic quantitative metrics (follower count, likes, comments, shares), (2) content type and format (short videos, duets, stitches, live streams), (3) dominant content themes (viral information, entertainment, social trends), (4) utilization of native TikTok features (hashtags, visual effects, sound/music), and (5) qualitative patterns of audience interaction. To ensure reliability and validity, the coding sheet underwent content validity testing via expert judgment and inter-coder reliability testing using Krippendorff's Alpha, achieving a coefficient above the minimum target of 0.7.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection employed method triangulation through three primary approaches to enhance the credibility and robustness of findings:

1. Non-Participant Digital Observation: Systematic observation of the ten selected accounts was conducted without direct interaction, focusing on content evolution, posting patterns, and audience engagement metrics, including comment sentiment analysis.
2. Qualitative Content Analysis: A systematic analysis of messages, narratives, and implicit strategies within the sample accounts' content was performed, examining communication patterns, linguistic style, and strategic use of platform features (Krippendorff, 2018).
3. Literature Study: A comprehensive review of academic literature and industry reports established the theoretical framework and contextual understanding of digital communication paradigms and homeless media phenomena.

The triangulation of these methods allowed for cross-verification of data, significantly strengthening the validity and reliability of the findings through consistent pattern identification across different data sources.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the iterative interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which encompasses three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This model facilitated a structured yet flexible approach to handling the qualitative data. During data reduction, raw data from observations and content analysis were condensed and transformed through coding and categorization. Data display involved organizing the condensed information into matrices and networks to identify patterns and relationships. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification involved interpreting the displayed

data, checking its consistency, and validating findings against the original research questions. The qualitative content analysis was guided by the principles outlined by Krippendorff (2018), focusing intensively on decoding communication patterns, linguistic styles, visual and audio rhetorical strategies, the strategic optimization of platform features, and the timing of content dissemination. This systematic and cyclical analytical process ensured all findings were verifiable, grounded in empirical evidence, and theoretically informed, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the engagement-building mechanisms.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Content Types Published by Homeless Accounts on TikTok Platform

An in-depth analysis of the 10 sampled homeless accounts revealed a sophisticated understanding of TikTok's ecosystem, characterized by strategic content diversification and platform-specific optimization. These accounts demonstrate a distinctive approach compared to institutional media, prioritizing algorithmic compatibility and community resonance over production polish. Three primary content categories emerged as dominant strategies for engagement building.

The analyzed accounts predominantly featured content with high viral potential, organized around several key themes. Localized information snippets provided hyper-relevant community updates, while light-hearted entertainment content capitalized on trending humor formats. Particularly noteworthy was the significant presence of political and social commentary in accounts such as @oposan_62 and @banteng_genz, which strategically packaged complex issues using accessible language and informal presentation styles that resonated deeply with youth audiences. This thematic focus distinguishes homeless accounts from both institutional media's formal reporting and influencer content's commercial orientation, instead positioning them as authentic voices within digital public discourse.

A fundamental finding was these accounts' mastery of TikTok's technical affordances. Approximately 70% of published content incorporated trending music and popular visual effects, significantly exceeding the adoption rates observed in institutional media accounts. This strategic multimedia integration functioned as a critical hook for algorithmic visibility and immediate audience capture (Chandra, 2023). Furthermore, the accounts demonstrated sophisticated format utilization, regularly employing stitches, duets, and live streams not merely as features but as strategic tools for community interaction and content amplification. This technical proficiency enables homeless accounts to achieve substantial reach despite minimal production resources.

Beyond passive trend adoption, these accounts actively shape platform culture through innovative content creation. They frequently initiate unique formats, develop community-specific narratives, and create inside jokes that reinforce group identity and belonging. This active cultural participation aligns with theories of participatory culture and media democratization (Baron, 2013), demonstrating how non-formal actors can exert significant influence in digital spaces. Their creative adaptation and community co-creation practices represent a significant departure from

traditional content distribution models, highlighting their role not just as content disseminators but as cultural architects within the TikTok ecosystem (Simanjuntak & Shabrina, 2024).

Digital Communication Strategies Used by Homeless Accounts to Build Engagement on TikTok Platform

Within the realm of digital communication, homeless accounts on TikTok predominantly implement communication strategies that are deeply rooted in emotional appeal and personal connection. This is primarily achieved through personal storytelling that shares life experiences, subjective opinions, and firsthand perspectives (Yulistiani, 2025). The narratives frequently revolve around themes of personal struggle, pointed social criticism, or timely responses to current events, delivered in a raw, simple, and visually unfiltered style that cultivates an aura of authenticity. The paramount goal of this approach is to foster profound emotional engagement such as empathy, solidarity, shared outrage, or curiosity which in turn motivates audiences to actively interact through likes, comments, shares, and the virtual gifting features available during live streams (Limbong & Putra, 2023). Theoretically, this strategy is firmly anchored in the established concepts of emotional branding and narrative communication, where forging emotional closeness and identification forms the foundational basis for creating durable digital relationships between content creators and their audiences (Faustyna, 2024).

From a platform-specific strategy perspective, these accounts demonstrate an intelligent and tactical utilization of TikTok's algorithm and its suite of interactive features as powerful tools for message dissemination and audience growth. They maintain a consistent upload schedule, strategically employ popular and niche hashtags to enhance discoverability, use trending music to ride algorithmic waves, and craft short, punchy captions designed to trigger curiosity or evoke an emotional response from viewers (Febriyanti et al., 2024). The Live Streaming feature is leveraged not just as a broadcasting tool but as a vital two-way communication medium that facilitates direct, real-time interaction with the audience, fostering a strong sense of community. This interaction often translates into tangible support in the form of virtual gifts, which concurrently serves as a source of non-formal income for the account managers (Salma & Albab, 2023). Through these methods, they adeptly adopt participatory strategies that are characteristic of social media, wherein audiences are transformed from passive message recipients into active co-creators who collectively shape the communication dynamics and narrative direction (Nopianti & Triyono, 2025; Nursyamsi et al., 2022).

In contemporary digital communication theory, engagement is a multi-faceted construct measured not merely by the quantitative volume of interactions but equally by the qualitative depth of the digital relationships forged between creators and their audiences (Johnston & Taylor, 2022). Homeless accounts on TikTok consistently implement dialogic communication principles, such as personally responding to comments, publicly thanking followers for their support, or explicitly soliciting opinions, stories, and support from their community. Through this sustained and responsive communication pattern, they successfully construct what can be conceptualized as a "digital empathy community" a dedicated social interaction space where audience members feel a genuine sense of emotional and social investment in the shared narratives and the community itself.

(Place, 2019). This sophisticated strategy effectively transforms the communicative relationship from a purely transactional exchange (content for attention) into a deeply relational bond, emphasizing mutual connection, loyalty, and a sense of belonging.

Integratively, the digital communication strategies employed by these accounts can be systematically deconstructed into three cohesive stages, mirroring a production cycle: pre-production, involving continuous trend monitoring, audience sentiment analysis, and strategic content scheduling; production, focusing on the creation of content that balances authenticity with strategic interactivity; and post-production, characterized by rapid response to audience feedback and meticulous analysis of engagement metrics to inform future strategy (Miles et al., 2014). This holistic, cyclical, and highly adaptive approach has proven exceptionally effective in not only building but also maintaining high levels of audience engagement. It clearly demonstrates that success in digital communication within the platform era is heavily dependent on the capacity to deeply understand, grow with, and actively nurture a digital community (Hanifah et al., 2022; Permadani & Nurudin, 2023).

This study reveals that homeless accounts on TikTok have developed sophisticated communication strategies that challenge conventional digital engagement paradigms. Their approach represents a significant departure from both algorithmic marketing and influencer branding, establishing a new model of digital communication rooted in authentic connection rather than commercial optimization (Mahesh, 2025; Pranata et al., 2024).

The pronounced effectiveness of emotional storytelling and personal narratives employed by these accounts aligns strongly with established theories of emotional branding and narrative communication (Chakti, 2019), yet operates fundamentally differently from mainstream digital strategies. Unlike algorithmic marketing that prioritizes data-driven optimization or influencer branding that maintains commercial boundaries, homeless accounts build engagement through raw, unfiltered authenticity that fosters genuine emotional connections. This approach successfully cultivates "digital empathy communities" where Generation Z audiences demonstrate a clear preference for genuineness and perceived truthfulness over high-gloss production quality (Azzahra & Masitoh, 2025).

The strategic mastery of TikTok's algorithmic features displayed by homeless accounts represents an intuitive yet sophisticated understanding of platform-specific communication. Their ability to systematically leverage trends, hashtags, and interactive features like duets and live streams (Chandra, 2023) demonstrates how non-institutional actors can effectively appropriate platform functionalities to achieve influence rivaling formal entities. This finding extends our understanding of digital literacy beyond technical competence to encompass what might be termed "algorithmic intimacy" - the ability to intuitively understand and work within platform logics to build community (Angelin & Paramita, 2024).

Conceptually, this research contributes to digital communication theory by identifying a distinct engagement paradigm that operates outside traditional institutional frameworks. The success of homeless accounts suggests that in the evolving digital landscape, communication effectiveness may be shifting from structural credibility to relational authenticity (Robbani et al., 2025; Sklar, 2021). This represents a significant development in how we understand influence construction in

platform societies, where community trust and emotional connection can potentially outweigh institutional authority.

However, the operational success and influence of these accounts also bring to the fore critical questions concerning media accountability, information verification, and the potential fragility of a digital public sphere reliant on anonymous sources. The inherent lack of formal oversight mechanisms and editorial processes creates a tangible risk for the rapid spread of misinformation, whether intentional or unintentional (Marler, 2022). This highlights an urgent need for balanced interventions such as platform-led creator education and digital literacy programs that can preserve authentic engagement while promoting more responsible information practices (Mahesh, 2025).

When contrasted with formal media strategies, this research reveals that high audience engagement can be achieved through fundamentally different trust architectures. Traditional media institutions typically rely on established institutional credibility as primary trust signals (Johnston & Taylor, 2022), while homeless accounts build trust through personal connection and community building. This suggests a paradigm shift in digital communication effectiveness, where relational and affective aspects may be becoming more crucial than traditional structural foundations.

CONCLUSION

This study elucidates the sophisticated digital communication ecology cultivated by homeless accounts on TikTok, revealing how non-institutional actors effectively build and sustain engagement through platform-specific strategies. The findings advance our understanding of digital communication by demonstrating that influence in platform societies is increasingly constructed through relational trust and algorithmic intimacy rather than traditional institutional credibility.

The integrated strategy implemented by these accounts combining emotional storytelling, platform feature optimization, and dialogic community management proves highly effective in generating and maintaining high audience engagement outside formal media structures. This approach highlights a paradigm shift in digital communication effectiveness, where success becomes contingent upon dynamic adaptation to platform characteristics, deep understanding of user behavior, and responsive engagement with trend dynamics. These accounts exemplify a new form of media actor that thrives on co-created value and community loyalty rather than organizational authority or production quality.

While providing valuable insights into non-formal digital communication, this study acknowledges limitations in its platform-specific focus and sample size. Future research should pursue several promising directions: longitudinal studies to track strategy evolution across platform algorithm changes; comparative analysis between homeless accounts and formal media entities on the same platform; investigation of cross-platform identity management and content consistency; and critical examination of the ethical implications surrounding algorithmic manipulation and digital accountability. Such research would significantly enhance our understanding of the evolving digital communication landscape and inform the development of more nuanced platform governance

frameworks and digital literacy initiatives that acknowledge the growing influence of non-institutional media actors.

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