



Digital Discourse Analysis of the Spread of Disinformation on TikTok Social Media

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Abstract. The phenomenon of the spread of disinformation on social media, particularly on TikTok, has become increasingly prominent in the contemporary digital communication landscape, marked by the high intensity of visually based information consumption and the low level of verification practices among young users. This condition has serious implications for the formation of public perception, digital literacy, and social dynamics within society. This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how disinformation is constructed, experienced, and interpreted by TikTok users in their daily lives. This research employs a qualitative approach using digital discourse analysis based on a critical perspective, focusing on subjective experiences and social processes in digital interactions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation of TikTok content, and analysis of digital documents, involving 12–15 active TikTok users aged 18–30 years. Data analysis was conducted using reflective thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning emerging from participants' experiences. The findings reveal three main themes: instant trust shaped by visual and emotional resonance, delayed doubt due to the rapid rhythm of digital consumption, and the negotiation of meaning in online social interactions. These results indicate that disinformation operates not merely as a distortion of information but as a complex socio-affective experience. Theoretically, this study enriches the integration of critical discourse analysis, digital discourse, and audience reception theory. Practically, the findings provide implications for strengthening digital literacy, developing communication policies, and designing more contextual educational interventions. Furthermore, this research opens opportunities for further exploration of user experience dynamics within the ever-evolving social media ecosystem.

Keywords: Digital Discourse Analysis; Digital Literacy; Digital Social Interaction; TikTok; User Experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media particularly TikTok has become a highly massive yet problematic space for the production and distribution of information. On one hand, this platform provides opportunities for creative expression among younger generations; on the other hand, it also serves as a fertile medium for the spread of disinformation. This phenomenon is not only evident on a global scale but is also clearly present in the everyday lives of Indonesian society. For instance, based on preliminary observations of teenage and university student users, many of them admit to obtaining information related to health, politics, and education from TikTok without adequate verification processes. In limited exploratory interviews, several informants stated that they tend to trust content with appealing visuals and emotional narratives, even when its accuracy is questionable. This indicates that user experience is not merely consumptive but also involves complex processes of meaning-making toward circulating discourse.

Culturally, TikTok shapes a distinctive communication ecosystem through its algorithms, short video format, and the use of multimodal elements such as text, audio, and visuals. These characteristics allow disinformation to be packaged persuasively and spread virally with ease. In the context of education, this phenomenon poses serious challenges to digital literacy, particularly among young people who constitute the dominant user group on the platform. Field reports from various studies indicate that disinformation on TikTok is often associated with sensitive issues such as electoral politics, public health, and climate change, all of which have the potential to significantly influence public opinion. Therefore, understanding how disinformation discourse is produced, disseminated, and interpreted becomes critically important.

The urgency of this research is further reinforced by increasing global attention to the impact of digital disinformation. Gómez-Calderón et al. (2025) demonstrate that young people are the most vulnerable group to exposure to disinformation on TikTok, characterized by high consumption levels but limited verification abilities. Meanwhile, Liu and Kuru (2025), in their systematic review, emphasize that visualization in social media strengthens the persuasive effects of misleading information. In the Indonesian context, Wulandari et al. (2025) found that hoaxes circulating on TikTok have a significant impact on public perception, particularly in political issues. Another study by Daulay and Saragih (2025) reveals that linguistic strategies such as the use of hashtags and emotional narratives play an important role in shaping public misunderstanding. Furthermore, Mufidah and Haliq (2025), through a critical discourse analysis approach, show that TikTok content not only represents reality but also reproduces certain ideologies. At the global level, Angulo Moncayo and López-Paredes (2025) assert that discursive strategies in social media, including TikTok, are often used to build political legitimacy based on information that is not necessarily accurate.

Although these studies have made important contributions, most of them still focus on content analysis, quantifying the spread, or identifying types of disinformation. Such approaches tend not to deeply explore the dimension of user experience, the process of interpretation, and how meaning is constructed within social interactions in digital spaces. In other words, there remains a gap in the literature in understanding disinformation as a living discursive practice that is not only produced by content creators but also negotiated by audiences within specific social and cultural contexts. A qualitative approach based on digital discourse analysis is therefore relevant to fill this gap, as it is capable of tracing the relationships between text, context, and social practices more comprehensively.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze in depth how disinformation is constructed and disseminated within digital discourse on the TikTok platform, as well as how users interpret and respond to such content. The focus of the study is directed toward multimodal discourse analysis, encompassing linguistic, visual, and contextual aspects of TikTok content. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich digital discourse analysis studies by emphasizing the dimensions of experience and social processes. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of digital literacy strategies and communication policies that are more responsive to the challenges of disinformation in the social media era.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a digital discourse analysis design, enriched by the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach is chosen because the research topic does not merely focus on textual content but also encompasses the processes of production, distribution, and interpretation of disinformation within a digital social context. Through discourse analysis, researchers are able to examine the relationship between language, power, and ideology in social media content, particularly TikTok, which is multimodal and interactive in nature. Previous studies have shown that qualitative discourse analysis is effective in revealing how meaning and credibility are constructed in digital platforms through the combination of text, visuals, and audio (Stordy, 2026; Jones, 2025).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, taking into account the relevance of individuals' experiences to the phenomenon under study. The participants in this research are active TikTok users for at least one year, aged between 18 and 30 years as the dominant user group, have been exposed to or interacted with content indicating disinformation, and are willing to provide in-depth information. The number of participants ranges from 12 to 15 individuals, following the principle of data saturation, where data collection is stopped when no significant new information is found. In addition, to broaden the diversity of perspectives, snowball sampling was also used by asking initial participants to recommend additional participants.

This research was conducted within a digital (virtual) field, focusing on the interactions of TikTok users in Indonesia. Furthermore, the social context of participants, such as university students and young professionals in urban areas, is also considered as a background influencing how they access, interpret, and disseminate information. This approach aligns with

contemporary qualitative studies that view social media as a new social arena for the formation of public discourse (Carrillo-Cruz & Ramos-Garzón, 2025).

Data collection was carried out through several techniques, namely in-depth interviews, nonparticipant observation, and digital document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and meaningmaking processes regarding disinformation content on TikTok. The interviews were conducted online using platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet and were recorded with participants' consent. In addition, researchers conducted non-participant observation of TikTok content by observing and documenting videos, captions, comments, and hashtags that indicated disinformation. These data were collected in the form of screenshots and content transcripts as research documents. Digital document analysis was also carried out on archived viral TikTok content along with user interactions, such as comments and responses, to understand the discursive dynamics that occur. The research instruments used include interview guidelines, observation sheets, and digital documentation tools. All collected data were then transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Data analysis in this study uses thematic analysis based on qualitative coding combined with principles of Critical Discourse Analysis. The analysis process begins with data familiarization, which involves reading and understanding the entire dataset comprehensively. This is followed by open coding to identify initial units of meaning, then axial coding to group codes into broader categories. The next stage is selective coding to determine the main themes, which are then interpreted by relating the research findings to the social context, ideology, and underlying power relations. In this process, the researcher used NVivo software to manage data, conduct coding, and map relationships between themes. The use of NVivo helps enhance the systematization and transparency of analysis in qualitative digital media research (Rosenholm, 2022; Rostomyan, 2026).

To ensure data validity, this study applies several trustworthiness criteria. Credibility is achieved through triangulation of data sources by combining interviews, observations, and documents, as well as conducting member checking with participants. Transferability is ensured by providing detailed contextual descriptions so that findings can be understood and applied in other contexts. Dependability is maintained through auditing the research process with systematic documentation of all research stages, while confirmability is ensured by maintaining objectivity through researcher reflexivity and ensuring that interpretations are grounded in the collected data. This approach aligns with validity standards in contemporary qualitative research that emphasize transparency and reflexivity (Adeyinka-Ojo, 2025).

In its implementation, this research also strictly applies ethical research principles. Participants were provided with informed consent in the form of a complete explanation of the research objectives and processes before participating. Data confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants' identities using codes or pseudonyms. In addition, all collected data, including recordings and documentation, were used solely for academic purposes. Participants were also given full rights to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The phenomenon of the spread of disinformation on TikTok cannot be understood merely as an issue of false information, but rather as a social practice involving the production of meaning, power relations, and users' subjective experiences in digital spaces. Therefore, this study employs three main theoretical approaches: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), digital discourse theory, and audience reception/interpretation theory in digital media. These three approaches complement one another in explaining how disinformation is not only disseminated, but also trusted, negotiated, and reproduced by users.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Discourse as a Practice of Power

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) views language as a social practice that is not neutral, but rather embedded with ideological interests and power relations. In the context of social media, CDA helps uncover how disinformation is constructed through linguistic, visual, and symbolic strategies to influence public perception. Recent studies show that TikTok content often uses emotional narratives, simplified messaging, and visual symbols to build legitimacy for information that is *למעשה* problematic (Dinihari et al., 2025; Mukhtar & Astini, 2025). In analyses of digital hoaxes, it has been found that the language used tends to create impressions of closeness, urgency, and pseudo-authority, making users feel that the information is relevant and trustworthy. Furthermore, research by Gjerazi and Tomja (2025) in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development* emphasizes that disinformation in digital media contributes to shaping public distrust toward institutions, as a result of systematically constructed discourse. Thus, CDA does not merely read texts, but also traces how social structures and power operate through digital language. However, this approach is often criticized for focusing more on text production and giving less attention to the subjective experiences of audiences in interpreting discourse.

Digital Discourse Theory: Multimodality and Algorithms as Social Agents

In contrast to classical CDA, digital discourse theory positions social media as a complex communication ecosystem, where meaning is constructed through interactions

between text, visuals, algorithms, and user practices. In the context of TikTok, discourse is not only present in verbal language, but also through music, gestures, video editing, and algorithmic features that determine content visibility. Zappavigna and Ross (2024), in *Innovations and Challenges in Social Media Discourse Analysis*, emphasize that digital discourse analysis must consider multimodality and platform logic, as both play crucial roles in shaping how messages are produced and consumed. This is supported by Nilsson (2024), who shows that issue framing on TikTok is heavily influenced by the combination of visuals and short persuasive narratives. In another study, Kulsum et al. (2025) reveal that social media functions as a new public space where disinformation spreads not only linearly but also through virality mechanisms driven by algorithms. This means that meaning is no longer fully controlled by content creators, but also by platform systems that determine what users see. This approach extends CDA by incorporating technological dimensions, although it still has limitations in explaining how individuals personally interpret their experiences.

Audience Reception Theory: Experience, Emotion, and Meaning Negotiation

To understand how disinformation is received and interpreted, audience reception theory becomes essential. This approach views users as active subjects who do not simply receive information, but also interpret, question, or even reproduce discourse based on their experiences and social contexts. Research by Nabila et al. (2025) shows that social media users often engage in decoding processes influenced by social background, emotions, and personal beliefs. In the context of TikTok, users tend to trust content that “feels real” or aligns with their experiences, even if it is factually inaccurate. This aligns with findings by Chasanah and Rofiq (2026), which show that linguistic and visual manipulation in digital content can create an illusion of truth, especially when audiences lack adequate critical literacy. Thus, disinformation operates not only at the textual level, but also at the emotional and lived-experience level of users. While this approach provides depth in analyzing participant experiences, it often pays less attention to broader power structures.

Based on these considerations, this study positions Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the main framework integrated with digital discourse and audience reception perspectives. This integration allows the researcher not only to uncover structures of power and ideology in disinformation, but also to understand the role of digital platforms in shaping discourse and to capture users’ subjective experiences in interpreting content. Therefore, this study does not only focus on what is said in TikTok content, but also on how the content is shaped by digital systems and how it is interpreted in users’ everyday lives.

As an illustration, users' trust in certain information on TikTok may be influenced by the way it is presented appearing convincing and using simple language. Within the CDA framework, this is understood as a strategy of legitimation; within the digital discourse perspective, as a result of multimodality and algorithmic power; and within reception theory, as part of personal experience and individual belief.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Data analysis was conducted using a reflective thematic approach, exploring participants' experiences in interacting with disinformation content on TikTok. Through layered coding and interpretation, three main themes were identified, illustrating the dynamics of user experiences. These themes do not stand independently; rather, they are interconnected and form complex, often ambiguous and even contradictory experiences.

Theme 1: Instant Trust Built through Visuals and Emotion

Most participants described their initial experience when exposed to TikTok content as something that "immediately feels true." This situation typically arises when they encounter videos that appear convincing—for example, someone speaking confidently, using professional attributes, or presenting information with appealing visuals.

One participant (P3) stated:

"If the video looks neat, has text, and the person speaks fluently... I immediately think it must be true. I don't even think about checking it again."

This experience shows that trust is not always built through rational verification, but through emotional resonance and visual aesthetics. Participants often associate visual quality with credibility, as if a "professional" appearance is an indicator of truth.

However, behind this instant trust lies an unnoticed vulnerability. Another participant (P7) stated:

"Sometimes when I think about it again, it feels strange... but when I first saw it, it made perfect sense."

Here, a paradox emerges: what feels true is not necessarily true, yet it is accepted because it meets users' emotional expectations. Trust becomes something that forms quickly but is fragile when subjected to further reflection.

Theme 2: Delayed Doubt in the Flow of Rapid Consumption

In contrast to instant trust, doubt tends to emerge slowly and is often delayed. TikTok's shortvideo format and algorithm-driven *For You Page* keep participants moving from one piece of content to another without sufficient time for deep reflection.

One participant (P1) explained:

"I just keep scrolling... there's no time to think. Sometimes I only realize it's a hoax after seeing clarification elsewhere."

In this situation, doubt is not absent but postponed by the fast rhythm of consumption. Information is received, stored, and sometimes even shared before being questioned.

Another participant (P9) added:

"I once shared a video, and it turned out to be false. But at that time, I didn't think to check... because everyone else was sharing it too."

This experience reveals implicit social pressure when many people believe something, individuals tend to follow without questioning it. Doubt becomes something that comes "later," often after the impact has already occurred.

Here, a tension is evident between critical awareness and digital habits. Participants actually have the ability to doubt, but they do not always have the space or time to exercise it.

Theme 3: Negotiation of Meaning in Digital Social Spaces

The third theme reveals that users are not entirely passive. They actively negotiate meaning through social interactions whether through comments, discussions, or personal reflection.

One participant (P5) explained:

"Sometimes I read the comments first. If many people say it's a hoax, I start to doubt it. But if the comments support it, I tend to believe it."

Comments become an important arena in shaping meaning. Various perspectives meet there—some reinforce, some question, and others further complicate the situation.

However, this negotiation process does not always produce clarity. Participant (P11) stated: *"The comments actually make it more confusing. Some say it's true, some say it's false... in the end, I choose to believe what makes the most sense to me."*

This shows that meaning is not discovered but chosen—often based on personal preferences, experiences, or prior beliefs. Thus, disinformation spreads not only as information but also as a site of meaning contestation.

On the other hand, some participants begin to develop a more reflective attitude. Participant (P2) stated:

“Now I’m more careful. But I still get tricked sometimes... because the videos are very convincing.”

This indicates a growing awareness, though it is not yet strong enough to fully protect users from disinformation. There is a kind of fragile awareness—users recognize the risks but remain exposed.

Table 1. Thematic Summary.

Main Theme	Subthemes	Core Meaning
Instant Trust	Credible visuals, strong emotion	Truth is felt, not verified
Delayed Doubt	Rapid consumption, social pressure	Reflection is overtaken by digital rhythm
Meaning Negotiation	Comments, personal experience	Meaning is debated and selectively chosen

These three themes form a continuous experiential flow. Users initially develop instant trust, then under certain conditions experience delayed doubt, and eventually enter a process of negotiating meaning within digital communities. However, this process is not always linear. In some cases, users return to trusting new information without learning from previous experiences. This creates a recurring cycle in which disinformation continues to live and adapt within users’ everyday practices.

These findings show that disinformation on TikTok is not merely a matter of true or false, but involves:

- a) how users *feel* truth,
- b) how they delay doubt, and
- c) how they negotiate meaning in uncertainty.

Participants’ experiences demonstrate that digital reality is not a stable space, but a fluid one— where meaning is constantly shifting, sometimes convincing, sometimes doubtful, and often somewhere in between.

Discussion

This study reveals three interrelated findings: (1) instant trust built through visuals and emotions, (2) delayed doubt within the rhythm of digital consumption, and (3) the negotiation of meaning in TikTok’s social space. These findings indicate that the spread of disinformation is not merely a matter of content, but a complex social process in which meaning is constructed through the interaction between text, technology, and user experience.

Instant Trust: When Discourse Operates through Emotion and Aesthetics

The first finding shows that users' trust in information on TikTok is often formed rapidly, even before verification takes place. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this phenomenon suggests that discourse operates not only through rational arguments but also through symbolic legitimation strategies, such as the use of professional visuals, persuasive narratives, and convincing communication styles.

These results align with the findings of Daulay and Saragih (2025), who argue that linguistic elements such as hashtags and emotional narratives play a significant role in shaping public perception of hoaxes on TikTok. In addition, Nilsson (2024) demonstrates that multimodality combining visuals, text, and audio can create strong framing effects, making information appear credible even without verification.

Furthermore, this study extends previous research by highlighting the dimension of user experience. Trust is not only constructed through text but also through a "feeling of truth" experienced by individuals. In this context, disinformation operates affectively by engaging emotions and intuition rather than logic alone. This finding suggests that digital literacy approaches that overly emphasize rationality may be insufficient to address emotionally driven disinformation.

Delayed Doubt: Tension between Critical Awareness and Digital Rhythm

The second finding reveals a paradox in user experience. Although participants possess the potential for critical thinking, their doubt is often delayed due to the characteristics of TikTok, which encourages rapid consumption. Within the framework of digital discourse theory, this condition can be understood as an effect of algorithms and platform design that facilitate continuous information flow.

Wulandari et al. (2025) show that TikTok plays a significant role in accelerating the spread of disinformation, particularly in political contexts. Meanwhile, Zaimi et al. (2025) emphasize that TikTok functions not only as a medium but also as a new moral ecosystem, where emotions, algorithms, and social values interact in shaping public perception.

This study adds an important dimension by showing that doubt does not disappear but is structurally delayed. Users do not necessarily fail to think critically; rather, they often lack sufficient temporal space to do so. In this situation, disinformation exploits the gap between "seeing" and "reflecting."

Thus, there is a tension between individuals' awareness to verify information and the platform logic that encourages rapid consumption. This tension creates an experience situated between rationality and irrationality, forming a dynamic space of interpretation.

Negotiation of Meaning: Disinformation as a Social Arena

The third finding shows that users are not entirely passive; instead, they actively negotiate meaning through comments, discussions, and personal reflection. From the perspective of audience reception theory, this confirms that meaning is not fixed within the text but is constructed through social interaction.

These findings are consistent with Mufidah and Haliq (2025), who state that discourse on TikTok is the result of both construction and consumption involving multiple actors. Additionally, Ramadhan and Siboro (2024) show that certain actors exploit these social dynamics to influence public opinion through disinformation.

However, this study expands this understanding by showing that the negotiation of meaning does not always lead to clarity but often generates uncertainty. The diversity of comments does not always help users find the truth; instead, it can create further confusion. In such conditions, users tend to choose information that aligns most closely with their personal experiences and beliefs.

This phenomenon demonstrates that disinformation should not only be understood as “false information,” but also as a space of meaning contestation, where truth becomes relative and socially negotiated.

Theoretical Synthesis: Disinformation as a Dynamic Discursive Practice

When connected to the theoretical framework, the findings of this study indicate that:

- a) CDA explains how disinformation is constructed as discourse that appears legitimate and convincing
- b) Digital discourse theory explains how platforms (algorithms, formats) accelerate and expand its spread
- c) Reception theory explains how users interpret, doubt, and reproduce information

The main contribution of this study is the integration of these three perspectives into a single experiential framework. Disinformation is no longer seen as a static object but as a living process embedded in users' everyday experiences.

Researcher's Reflection

During the analysis process, the researcher realized that the interpretation of data cannot be separated from their position as part of a digital society. Personal experiences in using social media influenced the sensitivity in understanding how trust is formed instantly.

Additionally, the social background of participants as a generation that has grown up within a digital ecosystem also shapes how they perceive information. Information is not

always treated as something that must be strictly verified; rather, it is often considered “reasonable enough” to be temporarily believed.

This reflection highlights that qualitative research does not merely produce findings but also opens a broader understanding of the relationship between the researcher, participants, and the phenomenon under study.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the spread of disinformation on TikTok cannot be understood merely as a matter of whether information is true or false, but rather as a complex and layered social process. The three main patterns of meaning identified instant trust, delayed doubt, and negotiation of meaning illustrate how users not only consume information, but also feel, postpone, and interpret truth within a fast-paced digital environment. Trust often emerges from emotional resonance and visual aesthetics rather than rational verification. Doubt exists, but is held back by a consumption rhythm that leaves little room for reflection. Meanwhile, meaning continues to be negotiated through social interaction, which often produces new ambiguities.

From these findings, it can be understood that disinformation operates as a socio-affective experience, where the boundary between fact and perception becomes fluid. Users are neither fully passive nor entirely critical; rather, they occupy a shifting position between believing, doubting, and reinterpreting information. This perspective expands discourse analysis by positioning subjective experience as an integral part of meaning-making processes, while also enriching the integration of CDA, digital discourse, and audience reception theory. Conceptually, this study contributes by emphasizing that disinformation should be understood as a living discursive practice embedded in everyday experience, not merely as textual products or algorithmic outputs.

Practically, these findings carry several important implications. For policymakers, regulatory approaches should not only target content but also consider algorithmic mechanisms and user consumption patterns. In the context of education and curriculum development, digital literacy should be directed not only toward the ability to verify information but also toward awareness of the influence of emotions, visuals, and social pressure in shaping trust. Meanwhile, for social intervention efforts, community-based approaches such as strengthening critical discussions in digital spaces can serve as strategies to reduce the impact of disinformation.

However, this study also has limitations that must be critically acknowledged. Its focus on young users in urban contexts means that the findings may not fully represent experiences from more diverse social backgrounds. Additionally, time constraints limited the depth of exploration of long-term dynamics, particularly regarding how user experiences evolve over time. The complexity of TikTok's algorithm also remains only partially explored due to limited access to platform system data. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand contexts and populations, including different age groups, regions, and social backgrounds. Alternative methodological approaches, such as long-term digital ethnography or mixed methods, may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between users and platform systems. Furthermore, deeper exploration of psychological dimensions such as information fatigue or digital anxiety could enrich understanding of the broader impacts of disinformation.

In conclusion, this study affirms that addressing disinformation is not simply about providing "correct information," but requires a deeper understanding of how people experience, feel, and interpret information in their digital lives. This is where both the challenge and the opportunity lie for future research and practice.

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