COMMODIFIED SELVES IN THE TIKTOK ERA: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND INFLUENCER DYNAMICS

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Abstract

TikTok, a rising star in social media, gives its users the opportunity to create a new identity for self-presentation. Influencers use TikTok's tools to build narratives that align with trends and enhance their personal brands. They resonate with audiences and reinforce their image through interactions, likes, shares, and challenges. This study evaluates whether the practices of a real TikTok influencer reflect the theoretical literature about commodified online identity. This study generally confirms that the practices reflect the literature. It shows how users intentionally and strategically shape identities, merging digital and offline selves. Employing qualitative design, the informant's experiences highlight authenticity, unfiltered self-presentation, calibrated amateurism, and scripted context. The findings enrich the understanding of identity construction in the digital age. TikTok emerges as a canvas for self-expression and commodified identity. The study unveils strategies that bridge technology, identity, and self-representation. This research sheds light on the process of identity construction within the TikTok Generation, offering insights into how individuals strategically navigate digital self-presentation. The findings shed light on the evolving dynamics of social media engagement, influencer marketing strategies, and the multifaceted nature of digital identities among Generation Z.

Keywords: identity capital, commodification, virtual persona, endorsement

INTRODUCTION

TikTok, a rising star among social media platforms, owes its inception to the fusion of two distinct applications, Musical.ly and Douyin, a strategic move orchestrated by the influential Chinese tech giant ByteDance. Emerging on the scene in 2014, Musical.ly, with its strong US connections, offered users a platform to craft and share succinct lip-sync videos. These bite-sized clips, lasting from 15 seconds to a minute, showcased synchronized lip-syncing and chore-

ographed dance routines set to curated soundtracks with adjustable speeds. The resonance of the2 app was apparent as it quickly soared to the pinnacle of Apple Store downloads in 2015, a testament to its popularity (Anderson, 2020; Tidy & Galer, 2020).

ByteDance Technology, renowned for its diverse content platforms, built on this success by introducing Douyin in 2016. It was a Chinese social media application that paralleled some essential features of Musical.ly, allowing users to curate and disseminate concise video content. Douyin swiftly gathered momentum across China and Southeast Asia and, within a year, had accumulated a formidable user base of nearly 100 million. Acknowledging its rapid growth trajectory and global potential, ByteDance seamlessly transformed Douyin into TikTok. This involved the assimilation of Musical.ly and the integration of its short-video framework into TikTok by 2018 (Tidy & Galer, 2020; Montag et al., 2021). This change paved the way for TikTok's international debut, marked by its amalgamation with Musical.ly and its meteoric ascent to global prominence.

In the first quarter of 2022, TikTok achieved an unprecedented milestone, securing 3.5 billion international downloads across both Google Play and the App Store. This surpassed the download counts of venerable counterparts such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Shopee, Telegram, and Snapchat since 2018 (Has TikTok Burst, 2022). Equally astonishing, TikTok achieved the coveted billion-user mark in a mere five years, outpacing the trajectories of Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram. By comparison, Facebook took nearly nine years to reach this milestone, while YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp each took seven years (TikTok's Rapid Growth, 2021).

The magnetic allure extended beyond borders, with TikTok captivating the United States. A January 2022 Statista report unveiled that approximately 78.7 million Americans embraced TikTok in 2021, with projections of growth to about 84.9 million users in 2022 and 89.7 million users in 2023 (Ceci, 2022). This is similar to Pew Research's 2021 findings that about 21% of Americans embarked on their TikTok journey, a figure that grew to 48% within the age cohort of 18 to 29 and 55% within the age cohort of 18 to 24. In Indonesia, it emerged as a favored platform among Gen Z, and triumphed over YouTube and Instagram in short video popularity.

TikTok's transformative impact on social media interactions has led to the emergence of distinct "TikTok personas" crafted by young users as an alternative to traditional celebrity endorsements,fostering a sense of self-validation and financial success for influencers like Kekeyi, Elisa Boen, Sandy SS, Jerome Polin, and Stanley Hao. Through strategic use of editing tools, captivating captions, relevant hashtags, and capitalizing on trending events, these influencers artfully construct and enhance their personal branding, effectively positioning themselves for potential product endorsements across various domains, notably food and beauty products. The culture of commodified self within TikTok allows these virtual performances to communicate through interactions such as comments, likes, shares, and virtual challenges, which in turn reinforce the influencer's public image.

TikTok's rapid ascendancy owes much to its distinctive attributes, especially its seamlessly integrated and user-friendly advanced editing functionalities. An inherent strength of TikTok is its comprehensive suite of in-camera editing tools, encompassing velocity controls, facial tracking filters, split-screen capabilities, and text augmentation features. Coupled with TikTok's robust audiovisual effects, these embedded editing tools transform the platform into a virtual realm, akin to a digital playground, where recreational endeavors thrive and imaginative visuals come to life through augmented reality enhancements. Furthermore, the ease of use of TikTok's editing functions contributes to the communicative potency and widespread dissemination of user-generated content.

Research Question

The research question is, "Do the practices of a real TikTok influencer reflect the theoretical literature about commodified online identity?" Consequently, the primary focus of this study was to qualitatively investigate the practices of a real TikTok influencer who created an online identity and compare it with the theory of constructed commodified virtual identities.

This involved an exploration of lived experiences underlying the digital persona creation on TikTok. In addition, a comprehensive understanding of the informant's perceptions shaping digital identities on TikTok was captured, shedding light on self-presentation strategies and the evolving landscape of social media engagement, particularly within the context of Generation Z's active participation in digital citizenship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review addresses two central topics, driven by TikTok's global ascendancy as a digital Mecca for both aspiring internet luminaries and individuals seeking unfettered self-expression. First, TikTok's multifaceted utility, from communication to entertainment, lifestyle, and commerce, opens new avenues of investigation into user dynamics, celebrity partnerships, and audience perceptions. Second, a focus on millennial TikTok users explores the phenomenon of embracing various personas without the fear of social rejection, providing an online refuge for self-reinvention. Consequently, this study aims to unravel the intricate interplay between TikTok influencers' commodified selves and their personas, investigating how digital expressions of self cater to cultural and esteem -based aspirations within the digital community.

Delving into the malleable nature of digital identities, especially prevalent in the interactions of Generation Z on social media platforms, this research explores the fluidity of projected personas, contrasting them with the relatively static identities in the offline world. Furthermore, this study seeks to illuminate the mechanics behind the creation of commodified identities on TikTok, as they redefine individuals' self-perception. By exploring these themes, this research provides novel insights into the dynamics of digital identity construction, resonating particularly with the social media landscape cultivated by Generation Z, and fostering a comprehensive understanding of the profound impact of TikTok influencers in shaping contemporary self-concepts in the digital milieu.

The Power of TikTok Influencers

From a marketing standpoint, TikTok is distinctive in the way it deliberately blurs the line between content and commerce. This originates in the activities of specific users known as Tik-Tok influencers, who actively create and publish content that is at once both entertaining and promotional (Yang et al., 2021). Employing a concept drawn from Keller and Berry (2003) and Uzunoglu and Kip (2014), the term "TikTok influencer" represents users with an exceptional ability to sway fellow TikTok users, as shown in their extensive networks and their role as influential content creators. TikTok influencers range from nano influencers to celebrities, differentiated by factors such as follower counts, perceived authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and cultural capital (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

TikTok emerged as an arena conducive to influencer marketing strategies, capitalizing on its ability to engage substantial numbers of youthful consumer segments while giving influencers a rich content format of images and videos (Haenlein et al., 2020). TikTok has been able to integrate diverse influencer-generated content with entertainment and brand promotion, rendering it a potent avenue for marketers who understand that digital consumers are inclined to eschew overt online advertising (Cho & Cheon, 2004). Isn't this a repetition?

Marketers and TikTok influencers have created a strategic alignment that benefits both parties. Marketers engage a highly participatory TikTok audience by exploiting the reach of TikTok influencers to receptive audiences without overtly advertising to them. This collaboration creates an opportune channel to amass popularity and attention from consumers, a feat often elusive for corporate entities operating under the aegis of brand identities. A case in point is the ability to scrutinize the attributes and activities of TikTok influencers' followers via the creator marketplace (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Furthermore, existing research indicates that influencers' product and brand endorsements attract more consumer attention than brand-based advertisements (Pereira et al., 2014). Moreover, influencers infuse authenticity and unscripted genuineness into their promotional narratives, in stark contrast to conventional advertising methods (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). This apparent authenticity offers marketers an effective countermeasure to the prevailing perception of digital advertising as inherently untrustworthy (Cho & Cheon, 2004).

Put together, these persuasive approaches encourage marketers and advertisers to leverage influencers to promote their products. TikTok influencers reciprocate by partnering with corporations for performance-based financial reward, often extended by collaborating companies or the platform itself. Payment includes distinct models such as in-platform monetization, paid partnerships, and sponsorships, each corresponding to a particular mode of collaboration (Bogliari, 2019; Wolny, 2022). For example, micro-influencers on TikTok received on average approximately $25 to $125 for a single sponsored video post in 2021, while mid-tier influencers received approximately $125 to $1,250 per post (Hoyt, 2022).

In this specialized marketplace, TikTok influencers are spotlighted through their profile attributes, encompassing elements such as age, follower count, audience demographics, content genres, and engagement metrics.

Interactions are orchestrated through two main approaches. First, marketers directly invite influencers. (Creator Marketplace, n.d.). The second approach involves influencers proactively exploring open application campaigns initiated by brands or companies. In this scenario, influencers scrutinize "open campaigns," identify compatible endeavors, and submit applications. Brands, in turn, scrutinize applicants and finalize partnerships with selected influencers (Creator Marketplace, n.d.).

Commodified Selves

TikTok exemplifies the concept of "commodified selves," where users actively curate their identities to cater to a specific audience and capture attention. In this sense "commodified" refers to a product that is intentionally created to address a population of consumers. Individuals consciously construct an idealized presentation of themselves, spotlighting particular facets of their identity that they believe will captivate and sustain the attention of their followers, and will contribute to the platform's attention economy.

This socially embedded nature of identity, as highlighted by Davis (2012) and Goffman (1959), emphasizes the self's origin in social interactions. Whether in the online or offline realm, one's identity takes on the form of a performance shaped by the prevailing social norms and expectations.

The concept of "commodified selves" involves impression management, that is, consciously crafting the identity that one wishes to project. This reflects the multifaceted nature of identities, extending to how individuals adeptly shift their performative displays while navigating diverse social contexts engaging in personal expression (Goffman, 1959; Maye-Banbury, 2021).

Goffman identifies two critical dimensions of dramaturgy: the front-stage and back-stage performances. The front-stage, often labeled 'face-work,' empowers individuals to set the tone for their projected identity, encompassing the environment (setting), visible traits (appearance), and their transient role within the social context (manner) (Goffman, 1959). In contrast, the back-stage refers to behaviors outside the scrutiny of observers, freeing them from societal or cultural norms (Goffman, 1959). Such back-stage behavior may entail using private profiles, sidestepping controversial topics, and more.

Internet evolution has blurred the line between front-stage and back-stage, enabling individuals to fluidly engage in both dimensions concurrently (Maye-Banbury, 2021). Squirrell further notes that self-presentation includes enacting one's desired image in social contexts. Once they have established this front, they maintain it by adjusting the performance's environment, appearance, and demeanor (Squirrell, n.d.).

Commodified identity is a way to conceptualize the self in the context of exhibitions, self-representation, demarcations of identity classifications, linkages between self and behavioral characteristics, and ways of approaching and understanding "being" in one's everyday life (Cover, 2015). This identity is often created from distinct categories shaped by cultural and social environments and influences surrounding the individual (Cover, 2015). Metcalfe (2019)

notes that individuals create their digital identities through the way they portray themselves online, managing it through their discourse, activities, and self-descriptions.

Thus, commodified identity represents the way in which the individual uses cultural and social environments and influences to shape his/her presence in a digital spaces (Cover, 2015). When considering the variety of definitions for the term "digital identity", Metcalfe (2019) describes it as a combination of characteristics associated with a uniquely identifiable individual, collected and confirmed in the digital sphere and used for intercommunications and representations online. The individual constructs their identity according to how they want to be perceived online. An issue with this is the subjective nature of how others perceive us (Butler, 1990), despite efforts to curate online identities.

Goffmans Dramaturgy

Goffman's theoretical framework of dramaturgy is useful as an interpretive processes. The earlier concept of Goffman's dramaturgy suggests that events taking place in a personal front can be classified into two types: actors' appearances and manner (ibid.). Either way, the audience must b able to identify these items as an enduring representation of the actor and his performance.

Goffman defined impression management as individuals' effort to manage the stage (setting), the script (narration), the body language, and the necessary props to enhance or simply create a certain image of themselves. This may also involve a highly calculated or unintentional attempt to project certain impressions to the audience. Therefore, someone could be described as highly strategic in constructing the desired image but also unaware that one was also making an impression (Wood & Smith, 2005).

Techno-Culture

Penley and Ross (1991) use the term 'techno-culture' to refer to relations between technology and culture. Shaw (2008) refers to techno-culture as "the relationship between technology and culture and the expression of that relationship in patterns of social life, economic structures, politics, art, literature 6and popular culture" (p. 4). Kozinets' (2019) has a similar definition as "the various identities, practices, values, rituals, hierarchies, and other sources and structures of meanings that are influenced, created by, or expressed through technology consumption" (p. 621).

In discussing techno-culture, Shaw (2008) emphasizes the transformations caused by technology, such as changes in work and social relations, and more fundamental assumptions like existing as a human in the digital age. Allmer (2014) posits the connection between society and technology by recognizing how society shapes and constructs technology and how technology then transforms and impacts society, a cycle that continuously repeats with the ubiquitous adoption of SNSs. Linturi (2000) acknowledges how technology is capable of affecting value systems, power structures, routines, and environments for individuals. As Goffman (1959) suggests, society is organized on the basis that individuals possess specific social characteristics, and that

they have the moral right to expect others to respect them and treat them according to those social characteristics.

Individuals who implicitly or explicitly signify their specific social characteristics through a performance of identity expect observers to honor and value that identity (Goffman, 1959). Consequently, "when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect" (Goffman, 1959, p. 6).

METHOD

A Research Subject

For effective representation of the TikTok Generation and to capture diverse experiences, a purposive sampling strategy was used. Potential informants were identified through systematic analysis of their TikTok feeds, considering their level of engagement, content creation, and potential influence within the platform. This process aimed to identify those actively shaping digital identities within the TikTok Generation's demographic characteristics.

To ensure informed consent, a video teleconference approach was employed. This interaction allowed for rapport building, explanation of research objectives, and seeking consent. Participants were given clear information about the study purpose, involvement nature, potential risks and benefits, voluntary participation, and confidentiality assurance. The video teleconference conducted on WhatsApp video call and Google Meet also offered insights into the informant's offline persona, contributing to a holistic understanding of identity construction on TikTok. The result of this video conference interview was then recorded, transcribed, and used to address the research questions.

We had one research subject in this study. To protect her privacy and anonymity, we have used the pseudonym 'Dewi' throughout this study, allowing us to present her experiences and insights while safeguarding her real identity and ensuring her confidentiality and the privacy of her personal information.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred between early October and late November 2021. This time-frame allowed observation and analysis of her engagement and self-presentation and a comprehensive snapshot of online activities, interactions, and content creation. This period allowed focused observations and interactions while minimizing the influence of external factors on digital behavior.

The method was iterative, involving repeated interactions and conversations with the same informant. Multiple touch-points were necessary to get a comprehensive picture of the multifaceted and dynamic nature of commodified identities on TikTok.

Data Analysis Method

Data analysis followed a rigorous process to extract meaningful insights addressing research questions. Transcribed audio from interviews was analyzed after familiarization with the data. An inductive coding process identified themes and patterns, grouped into categories representing different dimensions of identity construction and self-presentation. Thematic analysis identified key insights and narratives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Dewi: A young wife and mother

Dewi is a 20-year-old woman and her TikTok persona, "IMMUD," creatively combines Indonesian initials with the acronym for "Young Wives and Mothers," (*Istri dan Mama Muda*) offering a playful twist by incorporating the word "*imut*," meaning cute. With an impressive following of 23.8K followers as of November 2021, Dewi's journey into digital identity was influenced by her previous experience as a YouTuber, boasting over 1,000 subscribers.

A pivotal moment came when she decided to deactivate her YouTube account and transition to TikTok. The platform's range of options and features captivated her, providing a versatile canvas for her to create digital content. Her TikTok alter ego, "IMMUD," garnered an impressive following, indicating that her content and persona had struck a chord with viewers, and perhaps reflecting that she had successfully projected her intended identity.

Her digital persona embodied a woman who could pursue aspirations, embrace her femininity, and shatter traditional confines. In her idea of "an ideal woman", women were free to pursue their dreams and plans, but could still fulfill their womanly nature without having to be bound to the home. When we inquired about the characteristics of IMMUD, she said that millennials such as herself found a stronger voice and female advocacy and empowerment through social media, where they showcased their skills and entrepreneurial flair. This enabled millennials like her to amplify their voices:

> *Q: Why are you interested in building such a self-image? Are you not afraid of being gossiped about by TikTok people who are the same age as you?*
>
> *A: Why are we afraid of getting married young? You can do whatever you want easily. Endorse here and there. You already get income. If it's clear, TikTok can earn us our income. In this TikTok world, girls are free to be whoever they want. Business women, wives, even men if they want too. In fact, if I only act according to my age, my followers think I am too wild, still not mature.*

Her statement is in contrast with millennial women who are too young since the IMMUD members, as she labeled herself, desire to exhibit themselves genuinely without cosmetic filters. This can be seen from the following dialogue:

Q: Then, why are you so bold to appear open like that without filters? Usually, girls who already play on social media use filters, don't they?

A: I used to be like that too. Anyway, just to look beautiful, you know it, we women are like most millennial girls when on social media. Filter here and there. Even the filter looks whiter than their powder. So, we need to confirm that we are not that ugly. It was like that long ago on IG (Instagram). But I just reflect that by exposing my body, I just submit my body for male's consumption. It automatically contradicts what I want to present on IG, namely as Dewi who is independent and superwoman.

Dewi used of different types of "before and after" videos to convey authenticity as quoted in her remarks:

Q: Why do you want to present such a self-image?

A: Why am I interested in being a housewife? Well, at this stage, the lives of these girls change, which used to be focused on themselves, now they need to pay attention to their families too, right? To be sure, they can rarely pamper themselves or even make themselves look at least "presentable" for their husband. Now this is what most housewives experience, especially of the millennial generation like me (During the time of interview, Dewi had already been married for two weeks). With us (Dewi and her fellow TikTokers) appearing as we really are, presenting reality on TikTok, we can form our own TikTok sisterhood. There is no such thing as a boundary or exclusive side. That's why followers increase automatically because other IMMUDs can relate to each other's reality and what I present on TikTok.

Dewi recorded her journey from "no makeup" to partial or full makeup. She brought her enthusiasm and sincerity to original material, blending product specifications with emotive narratives of her personal life and brand image with her TikTok persona. Thus, authenticity is carefully framed, resulting in effective self-presentation. As an influencer playing the "young wife" persona, she had to actively align her followers' expectations with those of the brand she was representing to avoid appearing too "scripted" and "filtered," even promising to take the audience behind the scenes. Consequently, she displayed snippets of her daily life to compliment her virtual performance. This presentation was intended to convey her as an amateur whose self-image was natural, honest, and accessible to her fans.

She added that the virtual image was meant as a joke about how female TikTokers have never changed their self-presentation on any social media platform, most of which depicted them being objectified for their pretty poses for male users' pleasure (Keller & Berry, 2003; Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). This is why most female users hide their physique flaws and other "womanly"

problems. Dewi stated that she started believing it when she edited her social media photos and saw a better version of herself. The beauty fillers in all their TikTok content have shown a new reality of society's appearance standards for female TikTokers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Dewi's strategy of unfiltered self-presentation marked a shift from the common practice of using beauty filters to enhance appearance. IMMUD users do not need to employ filtered faces and positions on TikTok to get recognized by their fans. Users should not be governed by how society passes down how they view themselves and act on social media to gain more recognition. Instead, they should control their virtual identities and whom others see. She aimed to present a genuine version of herself that resonated with followers seeking authenticity. By refusing to conform to cosmetic filters, she aimed to counteract the culture of idealized beauty, allowing her TikTok followers to relate to her reality more sincerely. In conclusion, this strategy led to a more approachable and relatable virtual persona, fostering a sense of camaraderie among TikTok users and creating a virtual sisterhood.

Dewi used another tactic to portray herself as a youthful, content housewife on TikTok, which is known as calibrated amateurism. This was demonstrated in later recordings where she engaged in more interaction with the supporting actor, namely her husband who took a center stage, playing a significant part in what Goffman named the "Shill" (Riccio, 2013). Shills are people who participate in the performance to assist the actor and strengthen the version of oneself the actor is portraying. They assist the actor by contributing to the overall performance and reinforcing the intended impression that the actor wants to convey. They employ various strategies and tactics to assist in their social performances, such as can include impression management, where people actively work to reinforce the performance and give it a more "meaningful" and "sincere" appearance.

In the case of Dewi, the actor and her husband, the shill, made a pretty good team since he helped her create a more convincing virtual persona of a "young housewife" than she could have done on her own. She took the center stage as a single performer after successfully creating her online identity, occasionally mentioning her husband while she gave product reviews. In Figure 1, for instance, she was seen almost completely without any makeup on. Her hair was deliberately set to look messy and that she was dressed casually in a green up-size T-shirt. She was spoon feeding a man using her hand (known as "muluk" in Javanese), who appeared to be her husband. The lack of dialog in the video was instead replaced by short captions describing all the affection that a young wife would give to her husband: "the game is making money for him, so I'm just supporting here."

Figure 1. Dewi and her shill
Source: TikTok @rachellbeey

In other words, she was suggesting that her husband earned his income from playing video games and that her duty like all the other good wives was to be supportive of what her husband did. Occasionally she also stared back at the camera as though she was directly addressing the captions to the viewers. Near the end of the video, she also added "Don't expect to be treated as a queen if you don't treat him like a king", a gesture signifying a mutual respect derived from her act of service. Dewi had managed to make this 60-second video somewhat grander than its visual packaging by optimizing the use of narration and the POV (point of view) from which the story was narrated. The virtual image of "IMMUD" in this video was further enhanced by the choice of activities she performed with another "supporting actor" in the front stage which struck a contrast to the traditional portrayal of housewives. As a millennial wife, she was not entirely housebound. She could still find time to escape her busy, wifely routines by creating TikTok contents of her domestic life.

In the video, the audience can quickly feel an air of familiarity and warmth of domestic routines from Dewi's choice of setting, which is mostly within her house. For example, in the first series of videos that she made before her wedding, the routines were shot in a more private, secluded space like bedrooms. However, upon her marriage, the settings became more open, such as the kitchen, the study, and the living and dining rooms, hinting at her new status as a millennial housewife. In the case of Dewi, the audiences are expected to notice her gradual transformation from a single woman who was typically concerned with her personal well-being (with her review of skin care products) to that of her family's.

However, in Figure 2, she was more elegantly dressed, adopting a style that exuded elegance and sophistication. This shift in her fashion choice was not subtle; it caught the attention of those around her. Her clothing and overall appearance projected an unmistakable aura of refinement and sophistication, suggesting a deliberate effort on her part to enhance her public image. This change in her appearance was part of her strategy to convey a particular image or persona, possibly aligning with her online presence and the role she played as a young housewife.

Figure 2. Dewi's Elegant Dress and Natural Makeup.
Source: TikTok @rachellbeey

As seen in Figure 2, her feminine appearance was further accentuated with some natural, dewy makeup signifying just how much she intended to stay "unfiltered" and true to her age despite her status as a young housewife. Her makeup enhanced her feminine features and made her skin look a fresh and glowing.

The next strategy Dewi applied to present herself as a young and happy housewife is scripting. Goffman explained scripting as a set of directions that defined the scene, the actor, and the outline of one's behavior (Benford & Hare, 2015). Traditionally, actors had to follow what had already been scripted and rehearsed rigidly. However, actors are now free to improvise on the script, allowing a more natural delivery of the performed character. On TikTok, scripting was used as captions instead of dialogue. In Dewi's case, most of her videos are almost void of dialog, which is substituted with engaging and comedic pop-up captions that Dewi lip-synced. As Dewi rephrased, "It's true indeed, a picture is worth a thousand words, but the caption is useful to sharpen what is already in the picture, to make it livelier and engaging." In other words, she implied that captions can add context to the images and videos that users share and help viewers understand the information that may not be included in the photos. Unlike the conventional means of scripting, where it was rehearsed and crafted numerous times before performances or postings, Dewi explained that users could pick from pre-made captions by other users that could be flexibly adjusted to the narration or personae that the user intended to project.

In the accompanying screenshots, she once openly described the change she went through after becoming a young housewife. Figure 3 showed her merely wearing her comfortable, 'homely' clothes, and her hair was messy. Her portrayal in IMMUD was masterfully caught in a sequence of montages that showed her going about her daily chores as a young housewife, including cleaning the house, doing the laundry, and cooking for her husband. "What do you do

now?", "*Well, I'm just IRT (short for a housewife). My job is like this every day. I take care of my husband at home, doing the household chores. Isn't it boring?*"

Figure 3. Dewi Doing Household Chores
Source: TikTok @rachellbeey

She initially attempted to demonstrate how repetitious her daily routines could be and how her husband and her home had come to dominate her life. However, in the final montage, she made a sudden allusion to the benefits of being a housewife. She encouraged her fellow IM-MUDs to view it as a privilege rather than a duty, where she hinted at her other identity as a Tik-Tok influencer. Later, she added a different caption defending her status as a young housewife, which was now often denigrated by most millennials. "From Blazer to *Daster* (house dress)," as she proudly expressed in her caption, "You still have the opportunity to have a career even at home. Cheer up young mothers who must be IRT because of family" helps to portray the reali-

ties that currently face most millennial housewives. Although she was a housewife, she could still show her independence by supporting the family's finances as a TikTok influencer, so they were not entirely confined to their home

Through the four strategies Dewi applied in constructing her digital persona on TikTok, she could successfully manage to make it into cultural capital which garnered opportunities to make income through product endorsements. She amassed many followers online through visual or textual narration of her daily routines and leveraged the presentation of online persona for capital gain in a practice more commonly known as self-branding. Dewi fits neatly into the criteria of modern influencers whose "star" or "celebrity status" lies in the way she connected the product presentation with her self-image and narration of her daily routines as IMMUD. In one of the interviews, she explained:

> *Q: What types of endorsement did you present using your IMMUD character?*
>
> *A: Mostly I prefer to endorse household appliances such as oil containers, kitchen appliances because I also like cooking, then home decorations. Actually, I also get other endorsement requests like skin care or food reviews, but they aren't as much liked as when I did household appliances.*

Dewi's statement demonstrated how she was trying to stay consistent with the role she was assigned to in her persona even though she received offers to endorse different types of products. The selling point was heavily anchored on the IMMUD persona she was portraying, not on the product. Without the narration, the concept, and especially the IMMUD personality, the product would not sell well to the audience. Since the products were endorsed on TikTok, the attention was first given to the persona modeling the products. On that note, the persona was now the product because the audience were persuaded successfully to buy the story she was narrating in her video. In other words, all the brand images associated with the products were replaced, channeled, and voiced through her persona as IMMUD. It has been suggested by Giddens that the increasing partnership between social media users and business owners reflects that identity is now expressed commercially by companies to generate revenue (as cited in Tucker, 1999, pp. 206-208).
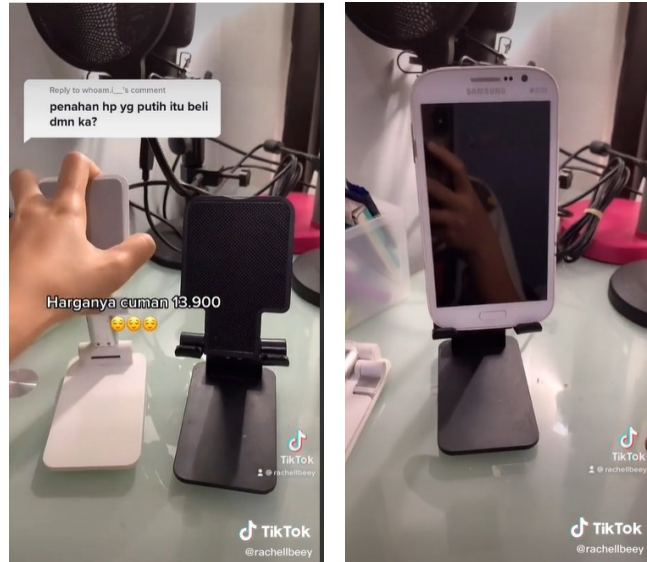
Figure 4. Dewi Endorsing a Gadget Accessory
Source: TikTok @rachellbeey

Dewi endorsed a flexible phone holder that she could bend to different angles and adjust to variation of heights (Figure 4). She elaborated, "this really suits my need for making reviews, stories, or watching soap operas in the midst of doing household chores. This holder is so flexible that it makes me addicted to making more contents [*sic*]." This quotation suggests that the product was purposely designed to address the needs of millennial TikTokers such as herself in the middle of their busy routines as a young and happy housewife. This was especially shown by the remark "makes me addicted to making more contents [*sic*]" and "this really suits my need for making reviews, stories …." All that she did with the product in the video was simply portraying her character as an independent, vocal, highly active housewife. The number of likes and product inquiries she received indicated how she successfully promoted the image of IMMUD into the product. When the viewers began to associate themselves with the narration and the self-presentation of IMMUD and finally purchased the phone holder to do what IMMUD did with the product, the virtual persona became commodified and increased in value.
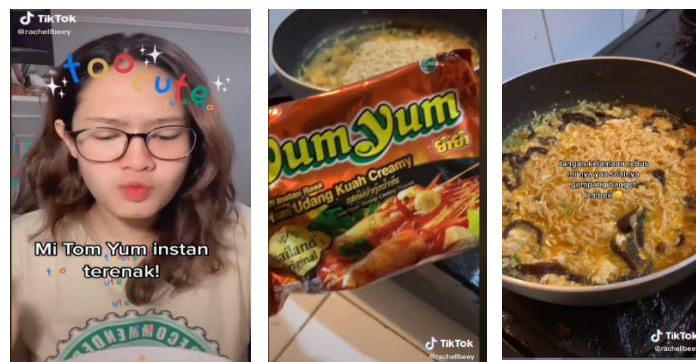

Figure 5. Dewi Endorsing An Instant Noodle Brand

As another example, Dewi endorsed a product applying the IMMUD persona to an instant noodle brand (See Figure 5). In the video, she demonstrated to her fellow TikTokers how to channel their creativity through cooking, even when they only had a humble ingredient like instant noodles. She mentioned, "I swear, this is the easiest hack even for you young wives who cannot cook. You must try it." She was, in other words, suggesting that the instant noodle was linked to the reality the newlyweds were facing where mostly the wives were not so proficient in managing the household, including the kitchen. The young housewives usually relied on household assistants or housekeepers to do laborious tasks for them. However, the part where she mentioned "the easiest hack even for you young wives who cannot cook" was the selling point of the product in which the IMMUD character was instilled into the product presentation and eventually attracted other TikTokers who sympathized with the situation she was addressing.

Analysis: The digital persona

Her choice of the TikTok persona suggests a deliberate effort to craft a distinct and attention-catching online identity. This points to the idea of performative self-presentation, where individuals strategically design their online personas to align with specific themes, sentiments, or trends that resonate with their target audience. The IMMUD persona reflects the merging of contemporary aspirations with traditional gender roles, representing a digital version of the "young wives and mothers" archetype. Her role challenges conventional gender norms while showcasing aspirations for entrepreneurship and self-expression (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Yang et al., 2021). This performative aspect of her identity is tailored to her digital audience, allowing her to present an idealized version of herself that resonates with others who share similar values and aspirations. She found a potent avenue for self-expression and female advocacy through social media platforms such as TikTok (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). In addition, this persona encapsulated a balance between pursuing dreams and embracing womanhood, fostering a sense of empowerment and autonomy (Deering & Williams, 2018).

Before the digital era, young women feared marriage due to potential constraints linked to marital responsibilities. Nevertheless, due to the inclusive and unrestricted nature of the digital world, particularly platforms like TikTok, women can shape their identities as they see fit, even after entering the institution of marriage (Avdeeff, 2021). Individuals can get income through their activities as TikTok influencers. The inclusive and unrestricted nature of digital platforms, particularly TikTok, empowers women to shape their identities beyond conventional norms, even after marriage. This paradigm shift in the digital world has provided women with the opportunity to redefine themselves and earn income through influencer activities on platforms like TikTok (Merga, 2021). Thus, digital platforms like TikTok serve as the stage where individuals perform their identity. In a similar way, the informant used TikTok to create and share her IMMUD persona. TikTok becomes the platform where she can enact her role and engage with her audience, leveraging the platform features to visually communicate her ideas and ideals (Minadeo & Pope, 2022). As actors seek validation and reactions from their audience, the informant's engagement

on TikTok allows her to receive feedback and affirmation for her performative identity (Merga, 2021).

In conclusion, this persona symbolized a fusion of traditional gender roles with contemporary aspirations of independence and self-expression. IMMUD was created to respond to societal pressures related to marriage and motherhood. For Dewi, TikTok was a platform for young women to redefine and reclaim their identities beyond conventional norms. IMMUD's authenticity was reinforced by contrasting it with the filtered and perfected images on platforms like Instagram, highlighting a departure from superficial self-presentation.

Authenticity through Unfiltered Self-Presentation

The second characteristic of IMMUD is the authenticity of self-presentation. In the first two years of TikTok, most women used photos to portray an idealized self. The next-generation TikTok application was video-based, and beautifying filters allowed users to build and show off their body-centric digital identities as an idealized self. TikTok millennials are trying to present a romanticized reality where their hobbies are viewed through rose-colored glasses (Attrill, 2015). Controlling aspects let users change, update, or delete items they do not want to share (pp. 7-8), which improves impression management.

Most TikTok users choose to show their physical identities through beauty shots and selfies to feel better about themselves. Szymanski et al. (2011) also says that body image has a big impact on a person's sense of physical attractiveness and self-worth (p. 28). As a result, women are seen as objects based on how they look. Because of this, women stick to their sense of identity and worth (ibid.). The main reason they use social media is to create the image of a perfect woman that they cannot project in real life; they hide behind the digital masks to present themselves in the "best possible light." Because of this, pictures or video feeds are pre-staged, premade, and scripted, and they are edited many times before they are finally put online (Attrill, 2015). Followers rarely get to see a close-up view of the private space because it is always off-limits to the public. Dewi worked hard to counter this kind of digital self-making through filters. Digital space may give everyone the chance to become anything they want, but it also pulls people further away from reality because they become "just as artificial" as the digital world they live in (Zhao, 2005).

TikTokers attempt to appear as real as possible and more approachable to their audience (Lie & Bailey, 2017). This sense of authenticity is what they want to manufacture and nurture in their virtual personas by sharing and selecting "intimate" and personal bits from their everyday life (ibid.). She authentically presented herself on TikTok by focusing on family life, household operations, and cultural norms and practices. Dewi, a TikTok influencer, might "reject" a superstar status, distance, and exclusivity to emphasize her "ordinariness" and bond with netizens (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Influencers can achieve this by carefully balancing her "professional looking" online persona with images of domestic and everyday life, a strategy Abidin (2018) developed from Goffman's dramaturgical approach, which he later called "calibrated amateurism" and emphasizes spontaneity and naturalness. Dewi coined the term IMMUD to describe a virtual metaphor of a more mature, feminine, independent, and professional-looking fe-

male TikToker who dedicates their virtual self-portrayals to domestic life. They also want to feel more "self" through their virtual 21st-century wives and mothers.

Calibrated Amateurism: Balancing Professionalism and Authenticity

This makeup choice symbolized her commitment to maintaining an 'unfiltered' and authentic image, one that aligned with her actual age (Davis, 2014). She intentionally avoided heavy or artificial makeup that might mask her true self. Instead, she opted for a makeup style that enhanced her natural beauty and, in doing so, underscored her dedication to presenting an honest and genuine image to her audience. These changes in her appearance were deliberate choices meant to enhance her online persona. In essence, she aimed to maintain a meaningful and sincere image that resonated with her audience, even within the context of a curated online platform (Cover, 2015; Metcalfe, 2019).

Dewi strategically balanced her online persona by incorporating "calibrated amateurism." This concept, derived from Goffman's dramaturgical approach, focused on portraying naturalness and spontaneity. Through a combination of carefully selected content and glimpses into her daily life, she aligned her digital identity with her offline persona. This alignment aimed to counteract the perception of being overly scripted and polished, a common concern among influencers. By sharing her domestic and professional life, she sought to humanize her online identity and foster a deeper connection with her audience.

About female empowerment

Her statement "Why are we afraid of getting married young?" represents the front stage of societal norms and expectations around early marriage and motherhood. This is the public face individuals show to the world, conforming to conventional roles. However, her response also reveals the backstage, where she discusses the inclusive and unrestricted nature of the digital world, particularly platforms like TikTok (Stokoe, & Sikveland, 2020). Here, she is free to challenge these norms, redefine their identities, and pursue their aspirations, even after marriage. This backstage perspective offers insight into the informant's authentic thoughts and motivations that may not be immediately visible on the front stage (Gilmore, 2020).

Scripting through captions: Contextualizing digital content

Dewi could demonstrate her financial independence by working as a TikTok influencer, which provided her with a level of economic autonomy. This highlighted a sense of empowerment and independence, and allowed her to break away from the stereotype of a housewife being solely confined to a domestic role and it responsibilities.

Dewi's choice to become a TikTok influencer was not only a means of financial support but also a reflection of broader trends in the influencer industry. Her choice to become an influencer was not uncommon, and it shed light on the financial opportunities available to content creators on platforms like TikTok. It also highlighted the evolving nature of work and income generation, where digital platforms offered new avenues for individuals, including housewives,

to contribute to their family's finances while pursuing their interests and passions online (Wolny, 2022).

Dewi used captions as a form of scripting to enhance the context and engagement of her TikTok content. Captions complemented the visuals, offering additional information and emotional resonance. This strategic use of captions provided a flexible means of delivering messages, allowing users to adapt and personalize existing caption templates to suit their narratives. This approach allowed for a more natural and dynamic delivery of her digital persona, making her content more relatable.

Dewi employed various strategies that to construct and present her TikTok identity. Through a combination of authentic self-presentation, calibrated amateurism, and strategic scripting, she successfully crafted a virtual persona that resonated with her audience, fostering a sense of community and connection among TikTok users. These themes collectively underscore the dynamic and complex process of identity construction within the digital realm.

Self-commodification through digital identity construction

In the digital culture where almost everything is promoted by advanced networked global communication, the process of commodification can convert any abstract or concrete phenomenon into saleable goods. The rapid development of information and technology in the 4.0 era has, indeed, shifted the paradigm around society's search for income that then leads to the sudden emergence of various social media platforms. Their functions have also shifted from connecting people to creating a new "community" marketplace in instances like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok (Algharabat et al., 2020). In this sense, oneself becomes a "virtually marketable commodity" in a whole new dimension which considers some factors like social skills, communication ability, and emotional intelligence. Many companies have recognized the need to take part in existing social media conversations to safeguard the reputation of their company and brands and boost their product sales online by means of customer's active engagement and electronic "word of mouth" (e-WOM) (Algharabat et al., 2020). Companies are thus competing to use marketing techniques to attract a greater number of potential consumers and among those tools, an SMI (Social Media Influencer) has become one of the most effective ways for promoting corporate brands.

Internet users, some of whom become SMIs tend to be more interested in visual language than texts, and this subsequently turned social media into a very effective promotional medium to attract their followers' attention to any products they endorse. To impose such influence on fellow TikTokers, TikTok influencers create and enhance their self-branding by using various editing features and strategies like posting a catchy caption and using hashtags. They also take advantage of popular occasions that would increase their chance of being noticed by business owners and later offered with chains of product endorsements, the most common being food and beauty products. Their virtual identities set a benchmark for other virtual crowds to follow.

From these instances, it is evident that Dewi actively began to commodify the IMMUD persona when she strategically presented herself to "sell" her virtual persona to potential cus-

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tomers (cf. Davis, 2012). Given that identity is marked through consumption, it is not surprising that the brand she was endorsing also becomes the identity signifier. The goal of this type of self-presentation, as quoted from Hearn (2008) involves the creation of marketable visuals or stories which circulate meanings and material profit. Consequently, individuals become absorbed with the performance of the virtual persona through strategic self-presentation.

This is aligned with the theoretical proposition of identity capital proposed by Côté (2016) which denotes what individuals invest in their sense of selfhood to reap profits from the identity market (Côté, 2016). Drawing on Côté's thesis of identity capital in a more contemporary setting, the power of TikTok algorithms and platform are strategically used by influencers to tap into capital gain. In the case of Dewi, her virtual persona was prominently derived from her authentic self-presentation in which she demonstrated passionate authenticity in sharing the product information to other TikTokers. In this sense, the authenticity leaves off the invisible boundary separating influencers and users in general, giving the impression that they also reflect the daily routine of their fellow TikTokers through the product presentation (endorsement) and influencers find ways to be authentic enough in selling the products. When Dewi decided to choose what to share, she opted to be open with her followers, displaying certain aspects of her life to be natural by performing her true self as a young and happy housewife. She used words like "real", "organic", or "true" to describe her online performance as IMMUD. Similarly, on another occasion she reported that authenticity was an asset she had been investing in the choice of brand endorsement (Cho & Cheon, 2004; Pereira et al., 2014; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the actual practices of a real TikTok influencer reflect the theoretical literature about commodified online identity. The exploration of the subject's digital identity formation on TikTok reveals several significant insights. Her TikTok persona, IMMUD, showcases the deliberate crafting of a distinct online identity, pointing to the concept of performative self-presentation. This practice involves individuals strategically tailoring their digital personas to align with audience preferences and platform features, as evidenced by her successful engagement and following. The fusion of traditional gender roles with contemporary aspirations is evident in the IMMUD persona. It embodies a "young and happy housewives" archetype, challenging conventional norms and allowing women to embrace both professional pursuits and their womanly identity. A unique aspect of her approach is her rejection of beauty filters, which aims to foster authenticity. In a landscape where idealized images are common, her unfiltered self-presentation cultivates relatability and forms a virtual sisterhood among TikTok users. The concept of "calibrated amateurism" shines through as Dewi strikes a balance between a polished online persona and a relatable one. This approach emphasizes naturalness and spontaneity while sharing personal aspects of her life, thereby humanizing her digital identity.

Another strategic element in her identity crafting is the use of scripted captions. These captions enhance the context and engagement of her TikTok content, offering flexibility to adapt and personalize existing templates to suit her narratives. Altogether, these findings underscore the dynamic and multifaceted nature of digital identity construction. Her strategies exemplify the

delicate interplay between performance and authenticity, traditional and contemporary roles, as well as scripted and unscripted elements. Through her experiences, the intricate process of shaping and presenting digital identities in the online realm becomes apparent. In all the strategies that the research subject applied, it does not only end in self-presentation per se, but it relates to why she presents it on digital platforms, namely the commodification of identity for financial gains.

This study, however, the study has limitations. It draws from one informant's TikTok experiences, potentially limiting diversity representation. The focus on a specific age group and context hinders broader applicability. Reliance on self-reporting and social desirability bias could affect accuracy. Digital platforms' rapid evolution could affect the study's relevance over time. Despite these limitations, however, the study provides valuable insights into the interplay of identity construction and commodification on social media.

For further research, it would be valuable to compare other cases to the theoretical literature, especially if they represent a different demographic type and different platforms. It would be valuable to know the extent to which all characteristics were present in other cases, or if new characteristics were emerging. As the influencer role has the capacity to change rapidly, it would also be valuable to track changes as they occur.

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