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| **Research Article**

The Hyperreality of TikTok Live Streaming

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| ABSTRACT

The pseudo-reality within the TikTok social media platform leads its users to experience hyperreality. The utilization of TikTok as a social medium no longer serves merely as a communication or social interaction tool. Individuals become entranced by the presence of social media, choosing to exist within the virtual realm construction to the extent that they can no longer distinguish between simulated and genuine realities. This study employs a constructivism perspective through a case study approach to unveil the hyperreality encountered by creators when using TikTok's live feature, examined through Jean Baudrillard's Simulation Simulacr theory. The live broadcasts on TikTok represent a simulation of a life of popularity, ultimately propelling creators into experiencing hyperreality. This research subsequently underscores how social media functions as a simulacrum, influencing users' perceptions of both themselves and the world around them. Furthermore, it highlights the intricate complexities of cultural shifts and behavioral changes within the digital era.

1. Introduction

People are beginning to lose their ability to distinguish reality from fantasy when using social media. They seek happiness and satisfaction through the simulated reality represented by the media, avoiding interaction with the real world (Büyükkoç Sütlüoğlu, 2021). TikTok, being one of the widely used social media platforms, offers ease for users to become famous. TikTok users live in a world filled with fantasy, imagination, and pretense (Dwi Wijaya, 2020). Humans now spend more time interacting in virtual spaces.

Social media has become the primary choice for socializing due to its convenience, especially for those who grew up in the age of technological advancement (Utami, 2021). However, its usage has shifted away from focusing solely on interactive communication processes. In his study, (Büyükkoç Sütlüoğlu, 2021) explains that social media is seen as a simulacrum where humans can fill the gap of reality with memes or stories as simulations. Simulations, as replicas of reality, are displayed through various media and shape society's perspective of reality (Oktavianingtyas et al., 2021). Simulations result from decreased awareness of actual conditions due to the imaginations presented by the media (Widiyanti & Herwandito, 2018).

For example, a product using the slogan "Smart People" to represent buyers can lead to the belief that those who buy the product are indeed "Smart People." Such constructed simulations form an image and no longer refer to the actual object's description. The content on social media is like a simulation crafted to replace the true existence of human life. However, social media also includes other content variations that can serve as representations of users' realities, such as live broadcasts on TikTok. As humans use social media, reality gradually fades away.

In simulation, the reflection of reality is not in the represented reality itself, but in the model or sign displayed by the media. The distinction between reality and fantasy is very thin. The constructed fantasy realm then becomes a new life for humans

to actualize their existence (Hidayat, 2009). An individual's identity is no longer determined solely by themselves, but more by the interplay of signs, images, and codes that reflect their understanding of themselves in relation to others. Eno Bening, a social media expert, tweeted on December 9, 2022, that the use of live streaming on TikTok is increasingly becoming strange. In his tweet, Eno included a photo showing two men doing a live stream on TikTok, promising to perform certain activities based on the number of coins or gifts received from viewers. The level of difficulty or strangeness of the activities they perform depends on the number of coins they receive. For instance, if a viewer gives 300 coins, one of them will cover themselves in flour.

There was also a viral content trend in 2020 involving mud bath videos by the TM Mud Bath account. This content initially featured a man intentionally pouring mud over himself. Over time, an elderly woman appeared in the mud bath, pouring mud over herself whenever viewers gave coins (gifts). Eventually, TikTok removed this content due to exploitation concerns raised by the Ministry of Social Affairs (Bill Clinten, 2023). Despite the removal, many creators continue engaging in bizarre activities during TikTok live streams. The offered pseudo-popularity in the virtual space motivates TikTok users to showcase their existence and gain recognition from others. As a represented sign, TikTok content blends with reality to the point of being difficult to distinguish. Jean Baudrillard terms this phenomenon as simulacra or simulation. Baudrillard describes simulacra (Oktavianingtyas et al., 2021) as a world formed through the construction of values, facts, signs, images, and codes, where these signs overlap and form a unity, eventually blurring the line between the authentic (real) and the false (pseudo), referred to by Baudrillard as hyperreality.

The impact of hyperreality is that humans become more drawn to the constructed virtual world of social media (Damayanti & Hidayat, 2019). Baudrillard predicts that humans will become inseparable from technology in the future (Christanti et al., 2021). Humans will consistently rely on technology and will no longer be free from the process of digitization. Communication and interaction between individuals become effortlessly facilitated by technology and digitization. People no longer need to be in the same physical space or time to communicate and interact. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) offers communication without time and distance constraints, in new or familiar ways, with new or familiar connections (Carr, 2021).

One key aspect when discussing CMC is that it mediates communication, not just information or entertainment. Communication involves conveying information from a source to a recipient with a specific purpose to influence the recipient's behavior (Littlejohn, S. W., & Foss, 2021). According to (Candrasari, 2020)states that social media can facilitate interaction among users. Social media's easy accessibility encourages users to connect, interact, and establish good communication relationships. However, there are challenges and shortcomings when using social media for socialization. Communication tends to rely more on nonverbal cues in CMC, reducing feedback and sometimes influencing the interpretation process. Nancy Baym, as cited in (Littlejohn, S. W., & Foss, 2021), suggests that in CMC, individuals cannot see, hear, or feel each other. This eliminates the ability to use contextual cues, leading to a type of social presence distinct from face-to-face communication. Impersonal communication often occurs in CMC, lacking a relational context.

Messages conveyed through computer-mediated communication are believed to be impersonal and task-centered due to the prevalence of nonverbal communication via technology. One of the paradigms in impersonal communication is the inability of media to convey necessary cues or signals in interpersonal communication (Cues Filtered Out). Moreover, the presence of individuals as indicators of closeness in communication is not effectively conveyed (Social Presence Theory). The media's ability to reduce uncertainty and clarify information is also an indicator in CMC (Media Richness Theory). Finally, humans tend to interact with technology, not with others who apply technology (Computer as Social Actor). The use of live streaming on TikTok is believed to fall into the paradigm of impersonal communication. The freedom creators have in generating content means that the primary purpose of using social media is no longer purely communication or socialization. Creators employ various means to capture the audience's attention, signaling that social media users are entering a state of hyperreality (Swara, 2014). People become entranced by life in the virtual world, considering virtual reality as important as physical reality. People strive to be active and "alive" in the virtual realm.

While browsing social media, users can utilize features to interact despite being in different locations or time periods. Although not synchronized like direct communication, social media content can replace comments or immediate reality through editing. This function has shifted and is often misunderstood by users. The constructed pseudo-reality in TikTok usage, particularly in live streaming, ultimately causes users to become immersed in it, losing the ability to differentiate true reality. Continuous exposure to simulations from media, mixed with actual reality, blurs the line between them, obscuring reality. Baudrillard's perfect model to describe this simulation system, as cited by (Stellarosa, 2016), is Disneyland. As a world of imagination, Disneyland offers joy to visitors and relies on illusions and fantasies that successfully become applied simulations (Baudrillard in (Stellarosa, 2016)). Disneyland is not merely an amusement park but also a representation of America. In terms of simulation, Baudrillard notes that signs (facts and images) overlap and become one, rendering it difficult to distinguish between the authentic and the pseudo.

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interplay of signs, images, and codes that reflect their understanding of themselves in relation to others. Baudrillard concludes that simulation is presented so perfectly through media, such as television. Baudrillard, as cited in (Stellarosa, 2016), divides reality and simulation into four phases. The first phase is the representation or reflection of existing reality. In the second phase, reality is concealed and distorted. Ideology plays a role in this phase. The third phase involves the absence or concealment of reality. Finally, the fourth phase involves images having no connection to any reality. This is where simulacrum comes into play. Taking Disneyland as an example, its existence as a representation of America is part of the first phase representation.

Simulacrum (Saumantri & Zikrillah, 2020) is a stage in image formation that lacks correlation or relation to real reality. The mixture of reality and simulated signs is referred to as simulacra. Simulacra means a world formed from the blending of values, facts, signs, images, and codes (Baudrillard, as cited in (Christanti et al., 2021)). In other words, reality has been distorted and disconnected from its original reference. The consequence of simulacra, according to (Oktavianingtyas et al., 2021), is the loss of essence and meaning in everything. Simulacra successfully confound the boundaries between good and bad, beautiful and ugly, true and false. Real can become abstract, and vice versa. In hyperreality, the original objects of production are intertwined with hyperreal objects resulting from reproduction (Hidayat, 2009). The hyperreality in question involves online media like social media or television, which can appear more real than actual reality. This pseudo-reality can then control human thoughts and behaviors. The prevalence of creators experiencing hyperreality in TikTok live streaming forms the basis for this study. Many TikTok users become captivated by the imagination they create in the virtual space, making it challenging to distinguish true reality from the pseudo. Live streaming on TikTok is a feature that creators can use to interact with other users, showcase their creativity, and share moments directly with their audience (Arifia, 2023).

2. Method

This research was conducted under the constructivist paradigm to explain how the researcher views the research problem. The constructivist paradigm emphasizes that observation and objectivity are crucial in discovering a single reality in science (Sugiyono, 2011). This study also utilized a case study approach to comprehend an event or issue by gathering a substantial amount of diverse information. This information is then processed to find a solution to the problem raised. The objective of employing the case study approach is to gain a better understanding of the individual in question along with the issues they face. Within this paradigm, knowledge is considered a result of interpretation built by individuals based on their perception, experience, and understanding of the world. According to (Sugiyono, 2011) further ontologically explains that this paradigm perceives reality as a subjective construction shaped by individuals through their experiences and human understanding. Reality is constructed through interactions with the surrounding world. This viewpoint serves as a reference in examining the reality of TikTok social media use, specifically the live streaming feature, which is a construction resulting from human experiences and understanding. The world created by social media has become a reality that overlaps with the genuine reality of its users. The data source in this research comprises TikTok creators who use the platform, particularly the live streaming feature. The criteria for the research subjects are as follows: (1) active male/female TikTok users who regularly engage in live streaming at least once a day, (2) have over 10,000 followers, (3) engage in challenging and extreme activities during live streams. Based on these criteria, three creators were identified as the primary informants who would provide information and insights into the hyperreality experienced while using the live streaming feature on TikTok. To obtain the necessary materials for this research, the data collection technique employed by the researcher was in-depth interviews.

3. Results and discussion
3.1 Live Streaming as a Popularities Simulacra

TikTok, a video and audio-based social media platform, emerged as a medium capable of providing entertainment to its users. It didn't take long for TikTok to capture public attention. In fact, Indonesia ranked second in terms of the highest number of TikTok users in 2022 (Monavia Ayu Rizaty, 2022). With 99.1 million people, or 63.1% of the Indonesian population, using TikTok more frequently than other social media platforms. Beyond just enjoying videos, TikTok users can also become creators by uploading content in the form of photos or videos. TikTok offers a range of appealing features for its users. The simplest is the ability to upload short videos or collections of photos. There are also features like stories, video filters, and live streaming. The live streaming feature provides users (creators) with the opportunity to interact with their audience in real-time. Within this feature, users can also receive gifts from their audience, making it a widely used feature among creators.

However, the interactions within these live streams are not the same as direct communication in the real world. SAH, in their interview, also experienced similar challenges but still found the live streaming feature to be the most enjoyable. SA mentioned that although they initially felt awkward and unsure about what to talk about, they eventually got the hang of it and started speaking naturally.

> *"Actually, it's more enjoyable to go live, even though at first I was really stiff and didn't know what to say. But as time goes on, you know how to do it. Just talk to yourself. The important thing is how we can make the viewers enjoy watching us."* – *SAH*

NSR shared a similar sentiment. For them, the live streaming feature attracts more viewers compared to just uploading a video. As a housewife who feels their daily routine is limited, TikTok offers a platform for them to be recognized by a larger audience. JNI also expressed a greater interest in using the live streaming feature on TikTok compared to other features because it quickly and easily helps them go viral. This desire to go viral on social media arose from observing others' content that made it to the "For You Page" (FYP) or went viral. After trying the feature, JNI found it enjoyable and easy to become popular in the virtual reality of TikTok.

The live streaming feature acts as a medium for users to achieve a certain level of popularity. They become like public figures eagerly awaited to appear on television. TikTok's live streaming feature creates a virtual space where symbols and signs intermingle to simulate reality. The ease of achieving popularity on TikTok causes users to become submerged in this hyperreality. TikTok becomes a realm where the simulation of popularity takes place. As stated by Baudrillard, simulacra are mechanisms where simulations occur, a place where individuals explore various realities. The simulation of popularity through live streaming occurs in several stages. First, there's the stage where the simulation reflects reality, followed by the second stage of masking and altering the nature of reality, then the stage of masking the disappearance of reality, culminating in the stage with no connection to reality. This stage is referred to as simulacra.

In TikTok, the first stage is the condition where the reality of using the live streaming feature is present for real-time interaction. Those who use TikTok initially see it as a means of communication and virtual connection with others. The second stage is when creators feel the need to present unique and engaging actions to keep their live streams lively and engaging for viewers. This happens when they start brainstorming content ideas and evaluating which content garners the most attention from viewers. Eventually, the direct communication reality fades, and users of this feature start utilizing live streaming solely for the purpose of achieving popularity. The primary purpose of its use has shifted from communication to the pursuit of fame and the accumulation of coins. There has been a transformation in the use of TikTok. The use of TikTok as a simulacrum engenders a detachment from authentic reality among its users. The initial purpose of TikTok was to facilitate user communication and social interaction; nevertheless, its use has undergone a transformation. TikTok is seen as a social media network whereby individuals harbor the anticipation of attaining fame. Simulacra represents a realm whereby individuals have difficulties in discerning the authentic world from its simulated counterpart.

3.2 Creativity Becomes a Gem

When using the live streaming functionality, content producers have the ability to collect monetary contributions in the form of gifts from their audience members. These gifts come in the form of coins or gifts that can later be converted into cash. Coin gifts are a way viewers express appreciation for the live streams. In this situation, creators are free to showcase their creativity. The more viewers there are for a live stream, the greater the chance of receiving more coins. As a result, creators strive to produce unique content that captures the audience's attention. Their goal is to encourage viewers to give them coins.

Upon receiving coins for the first time, SAH felt incredibly happy knowing that the coins earned from their live stream, featuring the raw food mukbang, could be converted into money. JNI and NSR shared similar sentiments when they received their first coins. This became a trigger for them to start consistently doing live streams. To attract a large audience, a variety of unique performance actions from creators are needed. When doing live streams, JNI focused on activities like eating raw herbs and Cayenne pepper. NSR's main activity during live streams was consuming raw foods like cactus and aloe vera. In contrast, SAH had tried a range of activities, from dancing and pond diving pranks to raw food mukbang and eating Cayenne pepper.

> *"In the early days of fasting in 2023, I regularly went live eating cayenne from 10 PM to midnight. Initially, I thought no one would be interested, but it turned out to be quite popular. Alhamdulillah, I earned a lot of coins at that time. If converted to cash, I wonder how much it would be, maybe millions." – JNI*

In the interviews conducted, JNI admitted they weren't sure if their cayenne eating act would attract many viewers, but to their surprise, they had a large number of viewers in a single night. SAH also felt the same way. They were initially skeptical when they transitioned from the raw food mukbang to eating cayenne. Different from them, NSR, as a pioneer in eating raw cactus and aloe vera, managed to earn a minimum of RP 500,000 (Indonesian Rupiah) during a live stream lasting about two hours.

The stranger and more extreme the content, the greater the opportunity for creators to earn coins from their viewers. Their creativity is tested during TikTok live streams. They strive to attract and retain viewers. Additionally, many of them are willing to engage in activities that could potentially harm them. This was also evident in the interviews with all three informants. SAH shared how after the cayenne mukbang, they felt an uncontrollable burning sensation in their stomach.

> *"During Ramadan, after doing a live cayenne eating session for two hours, my stomach felt really hot. I couldn't sleep because of the discomfort. It hurt a lot. Even lying down or sitting was painful." – SAH*

During live streams, NSR also experienced unpleasant sensations, such as a bitter taste and sliminess from eating raw aloe vera. JNI explained how they managed the potential pain from their extreme activity, which involved vomiting what he had eaten.

"As for me, to reduce the stomach pain from the cayenne, I secretly prepared fried snacks behind the plate, so I'd sneakily eat the snacks. Also, after the live stream, I'd poke my throat with my finger to make myself vomit the cayenne. So, my stomach wouldn't feel hot." – JNI

Their inability to distinguish between the pseudo and real space makes them complacent and leads to a state of hyperreality. They believe that the life they're living is a simulation constructed from symbols and conflicting signs. As creators, they're willing to do whatever it takes to gain popularity and earn coins from their viewers. Social media is no longer just a space for human socialization and communication. Now, there's an economic activity within social media. The exchange that occurs within social media is no longer just information exchange; it goes beyond that. TikTok users upload content, which is then exchanged for likes, comments, or even for their own physical well-being when performing challenging activities, in exchange for coins from viewers.

4.Conclusion

The results of this research show that TikTok users, especially creators, experience hyperreality in their efforts to gain popularity and coins from viewers. The simulations occurring within the live streaming feature blur their ability to distinguish between what is real and what is pseudo. TikTok becomes a stage of hyperreality for its users. The live streaming feature opens an economic realm within social media, where popularity is measured in the form of coins. This adds complexity to social interactions in the virtual space. The creativity of creators is tested in their endeavors to capture viewers' attention, even from the extreme content that poses risks to their health, exchanged for coins from the audience. This research underscores how social media can influence users' perceptions of themselves and the world around them, illustrating hyperreality and the complexity of cultural shifts and changes in social media usage behavior in the digital era.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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