Motives and self-branding strategies of UPN Veteran Jawa Timur communication science students in building virality on TikTok

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of self-branding on social media represents a contemporary form of self-representation in which individuals construct and manage their personal identity according to the logic of algorithms and public attention. TikTok, as a participatory and highly visual platform, provides a communicative space for students to practice measurable strategies of digital communication and identity formation. This study aims to explore the motives and analyze the self-branding strategies of Communication Science students at UPN "Veteran" Jawa Timur in constructing viral content on TikTok. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach within a constructivist paradigm, seeking to understand the subjective meaning of students' digital communication behavior. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, virtual observations, and content analyses of five TikTok accounts owned by students actively engaged in personal branding. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which encompasses data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. Theoretically, this research draws on Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory and self-branding frameworks (Peters & Khamis) as the primary analytical foundation, supplemented by the uses and gratifications theory to explain the motives behind the use of social media. The findings reveal that students' motives for performing self-branding include digital self-existence, professional development in creative communication fields, and social validation through audience engagement. The strategies employed involve consistent digital persona creation, algorithmic trend-based content curation, personal storytelling and interactive audience collaboration. Virality is achieved not merely through superficial popularity but through authentic digital identity construction that aligns with the audience's values and cultural contexts. The study concludes that TikTok serves as a performative arena for communication students to articulate self-competence, test personal narratives and build social capital in the digital sphere. These findings have theoretical implications for the study of digital communication, identity construction, and self-branding strategies in the algorithm-driven era of social media.

Keywords: motives, self-branding strategies, virality, self-presentation theory, social media

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought about major changes in the way humans communicate and express themselves. Social media has become an inseparable part of the lives of the younger generation, especially students who have grown up in the digital era. Among various social media platforms, TikTok has emerged as one of the most dominant media in shaping the communication style, creativity, and self-identity construction of the younger generation. With its short video format, adaptive algorithm, and ability to disseminate content quickly and widely, TikTok has created a new phenomenon known as viral culture, where popularity and social recognition are the main goals of digital communication activities.

This virality phenomenon has given rise to new communication patterns that are participatory, fast, and visual. TikTok is not only an entertainment space but also a social arena where users compete to build their self-image and digital identity. In this context, the concept of self-branding is relevant. Self-branding refers to an individual's efforts to manage their self-image to appear attractive, competent, and appealing to the public through digital media (Labrecque, 2020). In the era of social media, this process is no longer only carried out by celebrities or public figures, but also by students who want to build their existence and gain social recognition in cyberspace.

In Indonesia, especially among students, the use of TikTok is increasing. Based on data from We Are Social (2024), TikTok is among the top three platforms most actively used by Indonesian internet users, with an average access time of more than 110 minutes per day. This data show that TikTok is not only a medium of entertainment but also the main means of communication, learning, and self-expression for the younger generation. Students as a group with high access to digital technology and communication skills are important actors in creating viral content trends, which are often rooted in local creativity and campus culture.

This phenomenon is also evident at the Jawa Timur "Veteran" National Development University (UPN Jatim). Communication Science students are not only consumers of TikTok content, but also creators who actively produce videos with various purposes, ranging from entertainment and self-promotion to building personal branding that can support their future careers in the field of communications and media. In several cases, UPN Jawa Timur students even succeeded in creating viral content that reached hundreds of thousands of viewers, showing their great potential as digital communicators in the era of a networked society.

However, the phenomenon of "going viral" does not occur randomly. Behind the success of virality is a strategic and planned communication process that is influenced by an understanding of the TikTok algorithm and audience dynamics. Students who are active on TikTok consciously apply communication strategies to build self-branding, such as choosing a content theme (niche), using trending sounds, personal storytelling, and actively interacting with followers. This shows that they not only act as passive users but also as meaning producers who understand how content works in digital communication systems.

Therefore, this research seeks to answer two important questions: what are the motives that encourage UPN Veteran Jawa Timur Communication Studies students to build self-branding on TikTok, and what communication strategies do they apply in an effort to achieve virality on this platform? The approach used is descriptive qualitative, with the aim of exploring students' meanings, experiences, and communication strategies in the context of a continuously developing digital culture.

This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on digital communication, especially in the realm of self-branding and viral culture among students. Practically, the research results can be the basis for educational institutions, especially UPN Veteran Jawa Timur, in developing digital literacy programs and strategic communication training so that students can build a positive, ethical, and sustainable digital identity on social media.

1.1 Formulation of The Problem

This study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the motives that encourage UPN Veteran Jawa Timur Communication Science students to build self-branding on the

459

TikTok platform? (2) What communication strategies do UPN Veteran Jawa Timur Communication Science students use to achieve virality through TikTok content?

1.2   Research Purposes

This research aims to determine the motives and communication strategies of UPN Veteran Jawa Timur Communication Science students in building self-branding on TikTok so that the content

1.3   Benefits of Research

Theoretically, this research is expected to increase knowledge about digital communication, especially in the context of self-branding and viral phenomena on social media. This study contributes to the development of communication theories, such as Uses and Gratifications and Impression Management, in the context of Indonesian students.

Practically, this research provides insights for students to build positive and strategic self-branding on social media. becomes an input for UPN Veteran Jawa Timur in developing digital literacy and creative communication training.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Student Self-Branding in the Era of Social Media

The concept of self-branding or personal branding was first introduced by Peters (1997) in his writing The Brand Called You, which states that every individual is a "brand" that needs to be managed and marketed strategically. In the digital era, this concept has developed into digital self-branding, which is the way individuals manage their identity, image, and reputation in the online world.

According to Labrecque (2020), self-branding on social media requires maintaining consistent messages, visuals, and communication behavior in accordance with the identity they want to build. For Communication Science students, self-branding is not only about introducing oneself but also about showing professional competence, personal value, and digital credibility.

Students act as meaning producers who shape their self-images in digital spaces. Through TikTok, they express their identity, values, and aspirations through speaking style, visual displays, and personal narratives. In modern communication, self-branding is not only carried out by public figures or influencers but also by students who want to appear professional and attractive in the digital world. Thus, TikTok has become a medium for Communication Science students to build their self-image and show their uniqueness amidst the competition in the creative and media industries.

2.2   TikTok as a Communication Space and Digital Identity

TikTok is a short video-based social media platform that encourages two-way communication with an attention economy-based algorithm (Anderson, 2023). In this concept, public attention is the main currency that determines the success of a communication message. For students, TikTok functions as a space for forming a digital identity, a representation of oneself in the virtual world that reflects personality, values, and social position. According to Setiawan (2023), students use TikTok to show creativity, intelligence, and personal uniqueness to be accepted by the online community.

2.3   Student Motives in Building Self-Branding on TikTok

The main theoretical basis for explaining student motives is the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz and Gurevitch, 1974). This theory views media users as active and rational parties in choosing media to meet their needs. There are three main categories of motives in the context of this research: (1) personal motives, namely the need to express oneself, demonstrate abilities, or build self-confidence through content; (2) social motives, namely the desire to gain recognition, support, and validation from the online community; and (3) professional motives, namely the hope that digital popularity will open up career opportunities, collaboration, or professional reputation in the field of communications.

Thus, the Uses and Gratifications theory is used in this research to explain why students are motivated to use TikTok as a self-branding tool.

2.4 Communication Students as Digital Communicators

Communication Science students have conceptual advantages in understanding communication theory and its application in the digital world. They not only produce content but also apply theories such as audience perception, message construction, and communication effects. In the context of TikTok, students act as strategic digital communicators, combining creativity and theoretical understanding to create a credible self-image.

This activity shows the direct application of communication theory in practice: (1) Uses and Gratifications Theory → explains the reasons and needs for media use; (2) Impression Management Theory → explains how to form an image and impression in the public; and (3) Viral Communication Theory → explains the strategy for spreading messages and managing social media algorithms.

Thus, Communication Studies students on TikTok are not just social media users but also strategic communication practitioners who understand how messages are constructed, received, and interpreted in digital spaces.

3. METHOD

3.1 Types of research

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach because it focuses on efforts to understand social phenomena in depth from the perspective of the research subjects. This approach was chosen to explore students' motives and communication strategies for building self-branding on TikTok naturally and contextually. According to Moleong (2017), qualitative research is used to understand the meaning underlying human actions, experiences and interactions in certain social contexts. Thus, this research does not emphasize numbers or statistics, but on the meaning, processes and communication strategies that students use in their digital activities.

3.2 Research Location

The research was conducted at the Communication Science Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, National Development University "Veteran" Jawa Timur (UPN Jatim), located in Surabaya. The campus environment has a strong digital culture, making it easy to observe and research this phenomenon directly.

3.3 Research Subjects and Objects

The subjects of this research are active students of the UPN Veteran Jawa Timur Communication Studies Program who use TikTok actively, both as consumers and as content creators. The criteria for research subjects were active students in semesters 3–7 in the 2024/2025 academic year, with an active TikTok account with a minimum of 1,000 followers or content with high interaction (>5,000 views). They were willing to be interviewed and give permission for the content to be analyzed. The number of participants in this research was two students, who were selected using a purposive sampling technique, namely selecting informants based on certain considerations that were relevant to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2020).

3.4 Data collection technique

This research uses three main data collection techniques: (1) In-Depth Interview: The main technique used to obtain data regarding students' experiences, motivation, and communication strategies in activities on TikTok. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was conducted in person or via Zoom/Google Meet. (2) Content Observation: Researchers directly observed the informant's TikTok content to assess the communication style, visuals, language, and techniques used in building self-branding.

(3) Documentation: Supporting data in the form of screenshots of content, TikTok profiles, and interaction statistics are used to strengthen interview and observation findings.

3.5 Research Instrument

The main instrument in this research is the researcher himself, as is common in qualitative research, as well as field notes to record expressions, tone of voice, and social context during the interview process.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research involved two active students of the UPN Veteran Jawa Timur Communication Studies Program, who were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Both informants are active TikTok users with an average number of followers between 1,000-15,000 accounts and have had at least one piece of content that has achieved a high level of interaction (likes, comments, shares). Most of the informants came from the 2021–2023 class. They have been using TikTok for the last 1–3 years, with an average upload duration of 3–4 times per week. The type of content uploaded varies from entertainment content (comedy, lip sync, light sketches) to educational content about communication, public speaking, etc.

Most informants stated that they used TikTok as a medium to show their personality, creativity, and uniqueness. For communication students, the ability to speak, appear in front of the camera, and convey interesting messages is a form of practical exercise for the knowledge they are acquiring. " At first, it was just for fun, but over time we realized that it could be a place to practice public speaking as well. So people can know our speaking style, it's a kind of branding too," (Informant Faza, Student at Fikom UPN Jatim)

Personal motives for using social media, especially TikTok, are related to an individual's need to express themselves, demonstrate their identity, and develop their potential in the digital space. For students, especially communication science students, TikTok is not only a place for entertainment but also a medium for practicing skills such as speaking in front of the camera, composing narratives, and building self-image (personal branding). Thus, the use of TikTok has evolved from a casual activity to a practical learning tool that helps students form and maintain their communicative identity in public spaces.

According to informant Adit, "In my opinion, TikTok is like a mirror. Our speaking style and the way we create content reflect our character." This motive is in line with the Uses and Gratifications theory, where media is used to fulfill the need for self-actualization and personal expression. Students want to be seen as creative, communicative, and confident individuals. In other words, this illustrates that this platform functions as a medium for self-reflection. The style of delivering messages, ways of interacting, and creativity in creating content reflect the personality and personal values that you want to convey to the public. In this context, TikTok becomes a "digital stage" where individuals are free to express themselves authentically.

From the perspective of Uses and Gratification Theory, the motive for self-actualization and self-expression is one of the psychological needs fulfilled through the use of media. This theory explains that audiences actively choose certain media to meet their specific needs, such as entertainment, information, social interaction, and self-development. In this case, communications students use TikTok to fulfill their self-actualization needs—namely, the urge to demonstrate their abilities, talents, and personalities to the public.

Social motives are a strong factor in student activities on TikTok. They feel satisfied when they receive positive responses, comments, or an increase in the number of followers. For some students, interaction in the comments column becomes a form of two-way communication that provides emotional support. This is reflected in Adit's statement "It feels really good if a lot of people like the video and people comment positively, it seems like it makes you enthusiastic about continuing to post," (Informant Adit, student at Fikom UPN Jatim)

This social motif shows that virality is perceived as a form of social recognition. The higher the engagement, the greater the student's sense of self-confidence and self-worth in the digital world. Apart from that, this expression shows that social interaction in the digital world can be a motivational booster

462

or encouragement to continue to be creative and active on the platform. Students feel public appreciation which indirectly strengthens their social identity and position in the online community.

Some students have professional motivation, namely building a personal brand that can support a future career in the fields of communications, advertising or creative media. They realize that digital popularity can be symbolic capital to enter the creative industry. "Now many companies look at social media too. If they have good content, it can become a digital portfolio," (Informant Faza, student at Fikom UPN Jatim)

Professional motives are one of the important drives that influence students' activities in using TikTok, especially for those who are oriented towards career development in the fields of communication, advertising, journalism and the creative industry. In this context, TikTok is no longer only seen as a means of entertainment, but as a strategic medium for building strong and credible personal branding. This awareness emerged along with the increasing role of social media as a digital portfolio that is able to show a person's abilities and character more clearly than a conventional CV. Students are starting to understand that digital existence and track record have a big impact on their opportunities in pursuing a career in the future.

The majority of informants stated that TikTok content reflects their personality and self-image. This platform is used as a stage to showcase the best version of themselves. Informant Faza: "I want to be known as someone who is funny but also has content, so sometimes I insert educational things in my videos." Likewise, informant Adit stated "In my opinion, TikTok is like a mirror. Our speaking style and the way we create content reflect our character."

The majority of informants in this study revealed that the content they created on TikTok was a representation of the personality, character and self-image they wanted to present to the public. TikTok functions not only as a short video sharing platform, but as a "digital stage" where individuals strategically build and manage their personal identities. Students are aware that every content they upload will shape other people's perceptions of who they are. Therefore, they try to present the best version of themselves, both in speaking style, facial expressions, and the message they want to convey to the audience. In other words, TikTok has become an important medium in the process of forming a digital identity (digital persona) among the younger generation, especially students. Informant Faza: "Usually I look at trends first, for example there is a sound that is going viral, I think about how to use that sound but still relate to my topic." Apart from trends, they also pay attention to upload times to get optimal reach.

This practice reflects students' awareness of the TikTok algorithm and the principles of the attention economy, where timing and consistency are important factors in capturing audience attention. Students also mentioned the importance of personal storytelling to make content feel authentic. Informant Adit: "I usually upload at night, from 7 to 9, because that's when most people are online."

This strategy supports the Personal Branding theory that authenticity and consistency in conveying messages are the main foundations for establishing a digital reputation. The informants in this research showed that the creative process in creating content on TikTok does not run randomly, but is strongly influenced by trends, challenges and the use of sounds that are currently viral on the platform. Informant Faza: "If I tell about personal experiences, the engagement is higher. Many who comment feel related."

Most informants chose to focus on a certain theme (niche content), for example "light communication", "student tips", or "campus humor". They maintain the visual color, speaking style, and video format so that the audience can easily recognize it. "If the content changes, the algorithm likes to go down. I just stick to the student theme so people remember I'm talking about campus," (Faza informant)

Informants in this research revealed that they consciously chose to focus on certain themes or niche content in creating content on TikTok. This niche is usually closely related to their interests, personal experiences, or areas they specialize in, such as "light communication", "student tips", or "campus humor". This strategy is not only carried out spontaneously, but is a form of careful content planning. By maintaining a consistent theme, students strive to build a clear digital identity that is easy for the audience to remember. As stated by Faza's informant, "If the content changes, the algorithm likes to go down. I just stick to the student theme so people remember I'm the one discussing campus." This statement shows

that consistency in content is not only important for building personal branding, but is also an effective strategy for maintaining account performance in the eyes of the TikTok algorithm.

Almost all informants mentioned the importance of following TikTok trends such as trending sounds, challenges, or viral hashtags. They monitor trends daily through their "Discover" page to tailor the content to trending topics. "When a particular song is trending, I immediately think about how to use that song but still fit my content style," (Informant Adit, Jawa Timur Fikom UPN student)

Content that is personal and honest is proven to be more easily accepted by audiences. Students tend to use a light and authentic storytelling style, such as sharing college experiences, organizational activities, or funny stories in class. This approach creates a close and relatable impression for student audiences. "I make videos about things that are really funny in class; it turns out a lot of people relate to them and they go viral. Sometimes the spontaneous ones are actually liked," (Informant Faza, student at Fikom UPN Jawa Timur)

This proves that emotion and authenticity of messages are the main keys in attracting attention and building closeness with the audience. Personal and honest content plays an important role in building emotional connections between creators and audiences, especially on TikTok. The informants stated that they preferred to use a light and authentic storytelling style to share personal experiences. This kind of content usually emerges from everyday life, such as college experiences, campus organization activities, and funny moments in class. The delivery style is not stiff or contrived, making the audience feel closer to the creator. As stated by informant Faza, "I make videos about things that are really funny in class, and it turns out that many people relate to them and they go viral. Sometimes the spontaneous ones actually get liked." This sentence reflects that authenticity and spontaneity are often the main attractions that make the audience interested and feel connected.

Students actively build two-way interactions with their audience through comment replies, duet features, and video replies. These interactions strengthen emotional engagement and increase the algorithm's chances of showing content to more users. "Yes, I often use this feature to then provide feedback to netizens who comment on the videos I upload and I think that makes me closer to them because of the intensity of the communication we carry out through feedback" (Informant Faza, student at Fikom UPN Jatim).

Informant Adit also stated that "replying to their comments made me evaluate the content I created so that a very good collaboration between me and netizens was created." Some students are members of the campus TikTok creator community, where they support each other, learn editing, and exchange content ideas. This suggests that virality is formed through social collaboration and not just individual creativity.

The interview results revealed that virality has three main meanings for UPN Veteran Jawa Timur Communication Science students: social recognition, a sign that their content is accepted and appreciated by the audience as a means of self-actualization, and a way to express their communication skills and creativity. As symbolic capital of digital reputation, it can support academic and professional careers. "For me, going viral is not just being famous, but proof that we can create a message that reaches many people," (Informant Adit, Student at Fikom UPN Jatim) "Viral is like a double-edged sword. It is good to be known, but people also judge us a lot. Sometimes we get tired of maintaining our image." (Informant Faza, Student at Fikom UPN Jawa Timur)

These findings show an ambivalence in the meaning of virality: on the one hand, it gives psychological satisfaction; on the other, it gives rise to performative anxiety. This reinforces the concept of the attention economy, in which public attention becomes a source of power and pressure for young creators. Activities on TikTok have been proven to help students develop communication skills, self-confidence, and visual creativity (Lestari, 2024; Putra, 2023). Informant Faza "I have become braver in speaking in front of the camera, now I am often asked to be an MC on campus." Students who experienced viral experiences also showed increased awareness of their digital self-image. They start organizing content to be consistent with the personality and values they want to convey.

Informant Adit stated "I used to upload carelessly, but after a few videos became popular, I started to think, 'Oh, it turns out branding is important, huh.'" This finding is in line with the concept of Personal

Branding (Montoya, 2002) states that an individual's reputation is built on the consistency of values, communication style, and public perception. Thus, TikTok functions as a self-branding laboratory where students practice communication theory in real contexts. However, several informants realized that virality is not always positive.

The findings in this research show that students' activities in using TikTok do not occur randomly, but are a form of strategic communication practice that can be explained through the application of three classic communication theories: Uses and Gratifications Theory, Impression Management Theory, and Viral Communication Theory. First, based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, students consciously choose TikTok because this platform is able to fulfill their personal and social needs, especially in terms of self-actualization, personal expression, and the search for social recognition. They use TikTok not only as a means of entertainment but also as a platform to show their personality and creativity and build self-confidence through direct interaction with the audience. This shows that new media provides space for users to be more active, participatory, and involved in forming their own self-image, which is different from traditional media that tends to be one-way. This is in line with the findings of Rahman and (2022) and Zhang (2024).

5. CONCLUSION

This research shows that the phenomenon of using TikTok by UPN Veteran Jawa Timur Communication Science students is not just a form of entertainment, but is also a strategic communication practice in building digital identity and self-branding purposes. Based on the results of interviews and content observations, several conclusions were obtained about students' main motives in building self-branding on TikTok, consisting of three categories: personal motives, in the form of the desire to express themselves, develop creativity, and practice communication skills; social motives, in the form of the need to gain recognition, support, and expand digital friendship networks; and professional motives, in the form of efforts to build reputation and credibility in the digital world to support careers in the communications and creative industries.

Communication Science students act as digital communicators, who not only produce content but also apply communication theories such as Impression Management and Uses and Gratifications in real practice to build self-image on social media. Overall, this research confirms that self-branding and virality are contemporary communication phenomena that describe students' abilities to manage messages, understand audiences, and utilize social media algorithms to achieve personal and professional goals.

5.1 Suggestion

Based on the results of the research and analysis that has been carried out, several suggestions can be given to related parties as follows: (1) For Communication Science Students. Students are expected to be able to develop positive, educational, and ethical self-branding on social media; (2) For the UPN Veteran Jawa Timur Communication Studies Program. The results of this research can be used as material for the evaluation and development of a digital literacy and personal branding curriculum.

Ethical Approval
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Informed Consent Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Authors' Contributions
RDP and TN contributed to the conceptualization of the study. RDP and TN contributed to the methodology. TN performed the validation, review, and editing. RDP and TN collaborated on the formal analysis. RDP provided resources, wrote the original draft, and curated the data.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement
The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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Notes on Contributors

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Rinda Dwi Pradina is a new young lecturer at the National Development University "Veteran" Jawa Timur, Indonesia. As an early career academic, he has a great interest in the study of interpersonal communication, communication behavior, and the dynamics of human relationships in social and digital contexts. In teaching activities, he focuses on developing students' understanding of effective interpersonal interactions, empathy, and communication ethics. Rinda is also active in research and community service activities oriented towards increasing communication competence and interpersonal awareness in academic environments and the general public. He is committed to contributing to the development of communication science through innovative and human-centered research

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Tazkiyah Azizah is a young lecturer at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur, Indonesia. As an early-career academic, she is passionate about exploring issues surrounding professional communication ethics, moral responsibility, and ethical awareness in various communication contexts. Her academic journey is driven by a strong desire to integrate ethical values into communication practices, encouraging students and future professionals to uphold integrity, honesty, and accountability in their interactions. In her teaching, Tazkiyah focuses on building students' understanding of how ethics play a central role in professional communication—especially within media, organizational, and interpersonal settings. She believes that ethical communication is not only a theoretical concept but also a practical foundation for establishing trust and credibility in professional life. Through her research and academic activities, she aims to contribute to the development of communication science that emphasizes moral sensitivity and professionalism in the digital era.

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