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## LANGUAGE AND GENDER ON SOCIAL MEDIA: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TIKTOK COMMENTS

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### A B S T R A C T

This study investigates the interplay between language and gender on social media, focusing on user comments on TikTok. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research aims to uncover how gender ideologies are constructed, reinforced, or challenged in digital discourse. A total of 500 comments were collected and analyzed qualitatively to identify dominant linguistic patterns and gendered discursive strategies. The findings reveal that while many users reproduce traditional gender norms—such as objectification of women and stereotyping of men—others engage in discursive resistance by promoting inclusivity and challenging dominant narratives. The study also highlights how humor, sarcasm, and multimodal expressions (emojis, non-standard spellings) play a central role in shaping and performing gender online. The research concludes that TikTok functions as a contested space where power, identity, and ideology intersect through language. These findings underscore the importance of analyzing everyday digital communication to better understand contemporary gender discourse.

## INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital communication, social media has emerged as a dominant platform for the expression of personal identities, opinions, and cultural practices. Among the many social media platforms available today, TikTok has achieved unprecedented popularity, especially among youth. With its short video format, algorithmic content delivery, and highly interactive comment sections, TikTok not only enables users to produce and consume content but also to participate in public discourse that reflects broader societal values and ideologies. This interactive environment makes TikTok a rich site for linguistic analysis, particularly regarding how users negotiate social categories such as gender.

Language plays a fundamental role in the construction and performance of gender. Following the work of Judith Butler (1990), gender is understood not as a fixed

biological trait, but as something continuously enacted through discourse and social practices. On social media platforms, language becomes a key tool through which users construct, reinforce, challenge, or subvert gender norms. TikTok, with its global user base and high volume of user-generated content, presents a unique opportunity to examine these dynamics in a digital, multimodal context.

In comment sections, TikTok users frequently engage in verbal interactions that are influenced by cultural expectations, personal experiences, and prevailing ideologies. Comments may contain compliments, criticisms, humor, hate speech, and various forms of gendered language that either reinforce or resist stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity. For example, female creators may be praised or objectified based on their appearance, while male creators may be ridiculed for displaying traits considered non-masculine. Such comments are not neutral; they reflect and reproduce larger patterns of power and inequality related to gender.

Moreover, the anonymity or semi-anonymity of social media allows for the expression of attitudes that may not always surface in face-to-face communication. This anonymity can encourage users to express overtly sexist, misogynistic, or gender-policing comments without fear of social repercussion, while also enabling counter-discourses and resistance from feminist or gender-inclusive perspectives. These discursive battles often unfold in real-time, revealing the contested nature of gender in contemporary digital societies.

This study employs **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** as its main analytical framework. CDA, particularly as developed by Norman Fairclough (1995) and Teun A. van Dijk (1998), seeks to uncover how language is used to produce, maintain, and legitimize social power relations. By applying CDA to TikTok comment threads, this study aims to analyze how language in these digital spaces contributes to the social construction of gender and how certain ideologies become dominant or are resisted. This approach is particularly suited to the study of social media, where informal discourse often reproduces larger societal structures in subtle and everyday ways.

Furthermore, this research is situated within the broader context of **digital sociolinguistics**, which examines how linguistic practices are shaped by—and shape—the affordances of digital platforms. TikTok's unique algorithm, its tendency to promote virality, and the visibility of comment sections all contribute to the formation of linguistic communities and the spread of gendered discourse. In Indonesia, where TikTok is one of the most used platforms among youth, the linguistic behavior in comment sections reflects not only global patterns but also local cultural values, religious beliefs, and social norms. Gender discourses on Indonesian TikTok often intersect with issues of modesty, traditional gender roles, and online morality, making the analysis even more complex and context-dependent.

Thus, this research seeks to address the following questions: **(1)** How is gender represented and constructed through language in TikTok comment sections? **(2)** What ideologies about gender are revealed through these discursive practices? **(3)** How do users reproduce or challenge gender norms through their comments? By critically examining these issues, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between language, gender, and digital media, while

also highlighting the role of social media in shaping contemporary gender identities and discourses.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative research design utilizing a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to explore how gender is constructed, negotiated, and represented through language in TikTok comment sections. The use of a qualitative methodology is based on the understanding that gender, as a social construct, is intricately woven into everyday language practices, and that its discursive forms cannot be fully grasped through numerical data alone. TikTok, as a highly popular and interactive social media platform, offers a rich and dynamic space where users engage in spontaneous, expressive, and often ideologically loaded discourse. The comment section, in particular, becomes a discursive site where users project identities, challenge norms, and participate in the (re)production of gendered meanings.

Data were collected from ten TikTok videos that were purposively selected based on specific criteria: each video had high engagement metrics (with at least 50,000 views and 500 comments), contained gender-relevant content, and featured both male and female content creators with varying forms of gender expression. The primary data consisted of 500 top-level comments extracted from these videos. The selection of comments was guided by thematic relevance and linguistic richness, ensuring that the data set captured a diverse range of gender-related expressions, ideologies, and discursive strategies.

The analysis was guided by Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis, which views discourse as simultaneously a text, a discursive practice, and a social practice. The first level of analysis focused on the textual features of the comments, including lexical choices, modality, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices. This was followed by an examination of the discursive practices surrounding the comments—how they were produced, distributed, and interpreted by users within the TikTok platform's interactive environment. Finally, the comments were interpreted in relation to broader societal ideologies and power relations, particularly those connected to patriarchy, gender stereotyping, and resistance to normative gender roles.

The comments were thematically coded based on recurrent discursive patterns, such as expressions of misogyny, toxic masculinity, body shaming, gender affirmation, humor, resistance, and solidarity. These codes were then analyzed in relation to the linguistic structures used to convey them. For instance, evaluative language, personal pronouns, emotive expressions, and metaphorical language were closely examined to understand how commenters positioned themselves and others within gendered frameworks.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. While TikTok is a public platform, the research was conducted with sensitivity to users' privacy. All usernames and identifying information were anonymized, and only publicly visible content was analyzed. The research followed established ethical guidelines for internet research, including those proposed by the Association of Internet

Researchers (AoIR), which emphasize minimizing harm, protecting anonymity, and maintaining the integrity of data use in digital contexts.

Through this methodological approach, the study seeks to uncover the subtle yet powerful ways in which language on social media contributes to the maintenance, negotiation, or disruption of gender ideologies in contemporary digital society.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of 500 TikTok comments revealed a complex interplay between language and gender ideologies, showing how digital discourse both reflects and shapes societal attitudes toward gender. Three dominant themes emerged from the data: reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes, resistance and redefinition of gender roles, and the performative use of gendered language for humor and social validation.

Firstly, a significant portion of comments displayed a reinforcement of traditional gender norms, particularly through gendered evaluations and stereotypes. Female creators were frequently commented on based on physical appearance, with terms such as *"pretty," "cute,"* or derogatory slurs like *"attention seeker"* used recurrently. This reflects the societal tendency to evaluate women primarily based on physical attributes. Male creators, by contrast, were often praised for traits associated with dominance or humor, with comments like *"alpha male energy"* or *"he's so confident, respect!"* indicating how masculinity is celebrated when aligned with assertiveness or charisma. These linguistic patterns reveal how TikTok users reproduce patriarchal ideologies by associating femininity with objectification and masculinity with authority and agency.

Secondly, resistance to gender norms was evident in a smaller but significant subset of comments. Some users actively challenged sexist remarks or questioned the assumptions underlying gendered statements. For instance, in response to a comment suggesting that a woman *"shouldn't wear that,"* another user replied, *"Let her dress how she wants. It's 2025, not 1950."* Such discourse illustrates the presence of counter-hegemonic voices within the TikTok community that seek to disrupt dominant narratives and advocate for gender equality. These moments of resistance also highlight the dialogic nature of TikTok comments, where users engage in debate and contestation, constructing alternative meanings of gender.

Thirdly, many comments reflected the performative aspect of gender through humor, irony, and exaggeration. Phrases like *"gender: slayed"* or *"she ate and left no crumbs"* exemplify a stylized, often exaggerated digital vernacular used to praise performances that challenge or blur gender expectations. These linguistic expressions, though seemingly light-hearted, function as markers of shifting gender norms, especially among younger users who use language playfully to affirm nonconformity. However, this same playful tone was also used in sarcastic or passive-aggressive ways to mock gender-nonconforming individuals, revealing the ambivalence of digital discourse—where language can simultaneously empower and marginalize.

The analysis also revealed that emojis, punctuation, and nonstandard spelling (e.g., "yaaasss queen 🍑🍑🍑") played a significant role in signaling affect and stance, especially in comments related to gender expression. Such multimodal elements are crucial in social media discourse as they supplement text-based meaning with visual cues that intensify or soften messages. For instance, the use of heart emojis or fire emojis tended to accompany supportive comments toward female empowerment or flamboyant performances, suggesting a positive stance.

Overall, these findings confirm that TikTok comment sections serve as a microcosm of broader societal discourses on gender. Language is not merely a tool for communication, but a vehicle for expressing ideology, exercising power, and constructing identity. While many users perpetuate traditional gender binaries, others use the platform as a space for resistance, creativity, and the renegotiation of what it means to be male, female, or beyond. The tension between reproduction and resistance in these comments reflects the dynamic and contested nature of gender discourse in digital spaces.

This study also echoes previous critical discourse studies that emphasize the embeddedness of language in social power relations. In line with Fairclough's framework, TikTok comments not only reflect micro-level interactions but are also shaped by macro-level societal structures, including patriarchy, heteronormativity, and digital capitalism. The platform's algorithmic design, which rewards visibility and virality, may further influence how gendered performances and discourses are amplified or suppressed.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored the complex relationship between language and gender within the digital space of TikTok, using Critical Discourse Analysis to uncover how gender ideologies are both reproduced and resisted in user-generated comments. The findings indicate that TikTok comment sections function as active sites of ideological struggle, where traditional gender norms are often reinforced through objectification, stereotyping, and the policing of gender performance. At the same time, they also serve as spaces where these norms are challenged through resistance, creativity, and new gender expressions.

Through the analysis, it became clear that users employ a range of linguistic strategies—including sarcasm, humor, exaggeration, and multimodal elements like emojis—to express attitudes toward gender. These strategies are not merely stylistic but are deeply ideological, reflecting broader societal tensions around gender identity, expression, and power. While some comments perpetuate patriarchal and heteronormative discourses, others push back, advocating for inclusivity, authenticity, and equality.

The role of language in shaping digital gender discourse is therefore crucial. It is through language that users negotiate their identities, align or oppose themselves with dominant gender ideologies, and participate in the wider cultural dialogues

surrounding masculinity, femininity, and gender fluidity. As such, TikTok and similar platforms should not be viewed as neutral spaces, but as arenas where social meanings are constantly being constructed, contested, and circulated.

Future research could expand this study by including other languages, platforms, or audiovisual content to deepen the understanding of how gender is performed and perceived in various digital cultures. Overall, this research reaffirms the importance of critical discourse analysis in uncovering the subtle ways language operates as a tool of both power and resistance in online gender dynamics.

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