

Follower is the King: The Commodification of Authenticity among TikTok Content Creators in Commercial Video Productions

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

commodification,
authenticity,
TikTok,
content creator,
digital identity construction.

We have observed a recent trend where TikTok content creators develop thematic content that is perceived as their authenticity. Thematic content is tied to the authenticity established by the content creators to create differentiation and reach many followers. Thematic content refers to the consistency of messages conveyed by content creators as part of their digital identity construction. These media messages were initially designed to entertain, educate, and inform audiences or followers within the new media context. However, these practices have shifted towards monetization, which leads to commodification. We aim to assess the impact of this commodification with the following question: How do TikTok content creators experience the commodification of authenticity in commercial video production? Our study is a qualitative descriptive analysis using case study as a method. We analyze five popular TikTok content creators. Key findings reveal that creators deliberately craft their digital identities to enhance popularity and financial gain. Authenticity, once a genuine trait, is now commodified to increase value. Moreover, creators often develop digital alter egos as part of this process. The implications of this study include: a) the enhancement of promotional culture that threatens the true values of authentic interactions on the platform, and b) the potential devaluation of authenticity due to its extensive exploitation by content creators.

INTRODUCTION

The ease of uploading video content on social media has led many users to routinely create and publish thematic content. This has turned content creation into a profession known as *content creator*, with TikTok being one of the digital platforms widely used by these creators. Each creator publishes content based on their personality and expertise, such as dance, cooking, makeup, and more (Widianti, 2023). Initially, TikTok served as a medium for entertainment and self-expression. However, over time, the regular creation of thematic content has become a hallmark of a content creator's authenticity. Authenticity can be understood as staying true to oneself, being natural, and living authentically. It is depicted as consistency across three levels: primary experience, symbolic awareness, and behavioral and communicative display. Authenticity often relies on originality to foster a sense of closeness and connection with followers (Marwick, 2015). Through this authenticity, each creator successfully builds their personal brand on their account. Audiences who share similar interests or personalities with the creators often become their followers. For instance, a beauty content creator's followers are typically those interested in makeup.

However, content creators now use TikTok not only as a platform for entertainment or self-expression but also as a means to generate income. In other words, content creators have started leveraging their authenticity in video production to earn money. This shift is evident from the increasing number of creators accepting endorsements and incorporating advertisements into their content. When TikTok content creators engage in endorsements, the meaning of their videos shifts from having pure value (entertainment) to exchange value (monetary income). This process can be seen as a form of commodification. As explained in Vincent Mosco's *Political Economy of Communication* theory (2009), commodification involves an exchange of value between function and utility. Mosco further defines political economy as the study of social relations, particularly power relations, that emerge from the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of resources. Political economy theory addresses three processes: commodification, spatialization, and structuration (Mosco, 2009). This study focuses on commodification, specifically the exchange value of TikTok content creators' authenticity.

The concept of commodification has been explored in previous studies, four of which are highlighted for the purposes of this research. In the study by Abd Razaq, Islahuddin, and Abdul Khakim (2022), titled “Commodification of Money Sharing Content on Baim Paula’s YouTube Account,” a qualitative approach using an interpretive paradigm and case study method was employed to examine the impact of content commodification on Baim Paula’s YouTube account. The results revealed two forms of commodification: content commodification and labor commodification. Another study by Ulya (2019), titled “Commodification of Workers in Beginner and Underrated YouTubers (A Case Study of YouTube Indonesia),” also used a qualitative approach with a critical paradigm and case study method, focusing on YouTube. The study aimed to show how beginner YouTubers experience exploitation, with findings indicating commodification in the form of content ownership exploitation and digital labor. This commodification of YouTuber labor often occurs without the knowledge of either the YouTubers themselves or the public.

Research on authenticity was highlighted in a study by Audrezet et al. (2018), titled “Authenticity Under Threat: When Social Media Influencers Need to Go Beyond Self-Presentation.” This qualitative study explored strategies used by social media influencers to maintain authenticity while collaborating with brands to create commercial posts. Two categories of strategies were identified: intrinsic and extrinsic. Another study on authenticity, by Kowalczyk & Pounders (2016), titled “Transforming Celebrities through Social Media: The Role of Authenticity and Emotional Attachment,” used a mixed-method approach to understand how and why consumers use social media to interact with celebrities. The results revealed that authenticity and emotional attachment are essential for building strong and profitable relationships between celebrities and their followers. Maintaining these elements is crucial in celebrity marketing strategies.

Of the four studies mentioned, none have yet explored authenticity as an object of commodification, particularly in the context of new media. Furthermore, few studies have focused on the commodification of video content on TikTok. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the commodification of TikTok content creators’ authenticity with the following research question: *How do TikTok content creators experience the commodification of authenticity in commercial video production?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authenticity

Authenticity is when an individual acts in accordance with their true self, consistently expressing themselves in alignment with their inner thoughts and feelings (Harter, 2002). An individual is considered authentic when their emotions and experiences align with their awareness of what is genuine within themselves (Rogers, 1961). Authenticity can be understood as being honest with oneself, being true to one's innate nature, and living in accordance with one's life path (Nartova Bochaver, Reznichenko & Maltby, 2021). Rogers' definition of authenticity evolved into a tripartite construct formulated by Barrett-Lennard (1998). According to him, authenticity is characterized by consistency across three levels: a person's core experiences, the symbols of awareness, and the expression of behavior and communication.

From this tripartite construct, Wood (2008) developed a definition explaining authenticity through three dimensions. The first dimension is *authentic living*, where there is alignment between consciously perceived experiences and the behavior exhibited. An authentic person behaves consistently with their awareness and beliefs. The second dimension is *accepting external influence*, referring to the influence of others accepted by the individual and the belief that they must conform to others' expectations. As social beings, humans are interconnected with their surroundings and the people around them. The aspect of accepting external influence reflects whether an individual remains true to themselves or is swayed by the pressure to meet others' expectations. The third dimension is *self-alienation*. Wood (2008) explains that it is impossible for anyone to be perfectly aligned with their true self, life experiences, and the social influences that tend to alienate individuals from their true selves, making it difficult for them to understand themselves. This feeling of distance from the true self is considered relatively more relevant for most individuals in understanding authenticity within themselves. This dimension represents the extent to which an individual feels disconnected from their true self. This concept is the opposite of the congruence seen in an authentic person.

Commodification

Commodification is the process of turning goods and services into market-oriented exchange values. Vincent Mosco's conception of commodification concerning media and

communication serves as a starting point for understanding this concept. Commodification is divided into three types: content commodification, audience commodification, and labor commodification (Mosco, 2009).

Content commodification refers to media content that is designed for sale in the market because it aligns with market interests. In this case, the researcher observes that content creators' authenticity is now being used as an exchange value. Content creators' authenticity is sold to advertisers as an attraction to market their products through the creators' videos. In Vincent Mosco's book (2009), Dallas Smythe states that the audience is the primary commodity for the media. Audience commodification relates to the ratings that media content receives, which are sold to advertisers, with the audience serving as a benchmark. In this context, content creators use their followers, viewers, and likes as exchange values to be sold to advertisers. At this stage, the audience has been commodified by communication media for advertisers. Production exists because of workers. There are two stages in the process of labor commodification. The first stage involves the use of communication systems and technology, which further expand the commodification of workers. The second stage occurs when workers commodify themselves as products of production. In this case, the content creator becomes a sellable asset to advertisers, turning their authenticity into economic value.

From the above definitions, authenticity commodification occurs when a person's authenticity is used to earn money—something that should not be bought but admired, not economically valued but cherished, not labelled with a price but loved (Mildenberger, 2023). According to Duffy and Hund (2015), content creators must remain authentic in their commercial activities. Personal experiences and authentic content based on their personality are what content creators use to attract audiences and encourage them to buy or be influenced by their advertisements. In Mildenberger's writing (2023), it is stated that "commodification typically refers to the negative effects that may arise if certain goods are exchanged for money on the market." This statement, along with previous cases and research, leads the researcher to explore how and why authenticity commodification affects content creators in their content creation.

Content Creator and New Media

A content creator is someone who produces educational or entertaining content to reach an audience. The content made by content creators is digital and published on the internet through social media, which is part of new media. Content creators are closely linked to new media due to the characteristics of new media. Through new media, a content creator has easy access, can interact with audiences effortlessly, and can enhance their creativity (Bell, 2014). The emergence of new media has led many individuals to become content creators because digital technology is affordable and easy to use, allowing content to be published directly on the internet (Luik, 2020). In the past, it required significant effort to give or receive feedback, but now it can be as simple as pressing a button.

New media supports the creativity of content creators with its user-friendly nature. Through new media, content creators have the convenience of using various platforms to share their work. This openness encourages many people to showcase their creativity, from creating simple to professional content, as a way to express their identity. In new media, success can be measured in different ways, such as how often a piece of work is discussed, popularity within a particular community, or the close relationship between the content creator and the audience (Bell, 2014). This is what makes content creators and new media inseparable.

METHOD

This research is a qualitative study using the case study method. The research subjects in this study were selected using purposive sampling, which is the deliberate selection of research subjects based on certain criteria or considerations by the researcher. In purposeful sampling, the researcher selects subjects to study or understand phenomena in line with the research objectives (Herdiansyah, 2015). In this case study method (Yin, 2003), the researcher focuses on individuals who have knowledge, experience, and information related to the commodification of authenticity of thematic TikTok content creators. Based on this, the criteria for selecting research subjects are as follows:

1. Thematic TikTok content creators or those who consistently produce themed content, as this research examines the commodification of authenticity where the theme or distinctiveness of the content creator is commodified.

2. Content creators with a minimum of 10,000 followers. According to De Vierman (2017), macro-influencers are those with between 100,000 to 1,000,000 followers.
3. Have experienced conflicts with brands during endorsements, where the brand's brief did not align with their unique style.

Based on these criteria, the research subjects are determined as follows:

1. @jepe.14: With 263,500 followers at the time of data collection, he uploads K-pop-related videos, including reaction videos, interviews, and other interactive content.
2. @piniela_: With 243,100 followers at the time of data collection, she produces drama-themed content and is known for her persona as a young mom from Surabaya.
3. @venayahhh: With 129,200 followers at the time of data collection, she shares content about dance and idols.
4. @michaeldendy: With 1.2M followers at the time of data collection, he shares couple-themed content.
5. @igleon_: With 3.7M followers at the time of data collection, he shares couple-themed content.

The method used in this research is the case study method to obtain in-depth information. A case study aims to explore unique facts that raise questions of how and why. This method aims to uncover the uniqueness of the case being studied. The case study method goes through the following process: determining the topic, research objectives, identifying units of analysis, conducting a literature review, designing interview guidelines, making observations, collecting data (observation and interviews), comparing similarities and differences between different units of analysis, drafting the initial report, and finally, compiling the final draft of the research report (Creswell, 2007). The data analysis techniques used in the research are data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

We found three major findings from our informants' data: Content Creators and the Formation of Authenticity, Content Creators and Commodification, and Authenticity and

Commodification on TikTok. For the findings presentation, we have organized our results into Table 1.

Table 1. Content creators' experience of the commodification of authenticity

Content creators' experience of the commodification of authenticity	Description of findings
Content Creators and the Formation of Authenticity	Each TikTok content creator has their own authenticity, which is shaped through their TikTok video content. The formation of each content creator's authenticity is based on different reasons. The experiences of the content creators, the presence of followers, and a sense of self-alienation drive them to develop their authenticity on TikTok in order to gain benefits.
Content Creators and Commodification	The authenticity that content creators build on their TikTok accounts was initially intended purely for entertainment, education, and providing information. However, the creators' motives for making content have expanded. Now, their content creation leads to commercialization, aimed at gaining popularity and earning money.
Authenticity and Commodification on TikTok	The commercialization of digital identity has emerged among content creators. Our informants construct their identity on TikTok for commercial purposes. In new media, identity is fluid and can become a commodity in society. In this study, the identity that TikTok content creators build can become something that popularizes them and serves as a new, marketable commodity.

From the findings and analysis above, the researcher discovered that the commercialization of digital identity is occurring among content creators. As shown in Figure 1, all of the informants

constructed their identities on TikTok for commercial purposes. According to Manovich (2000), new media serves as a tool for representation or framing. New media, such as the internet, and in the context of this research, TikTok, provides an alternative space where ‘self’ or ‘identity’ can exist, both virtually and in reality. New media, including TikTok, is a place where individuals can express their imagination, interact, play, and discover a new identity or persona by reframing their experiences. Identity in new media is fluid and can become a commodity within society. According to Rummens (2001), identity can be understood as the characteristics that distinguish one person from another. Furthermore, identity can also be understood as the characteristics socialized to others. Identity refers to labels that are constructed either relationally or within a specific context. Kjeldgaard (2005) explains that there is now a new tendency for identity, which is a reflexive process negotiated within plural lifestyles. In this research, the identity constructed by content creators on TikTok can popularize them and become a marketable new commodity.



Figure 1. Video endorsements of the TikTok content creators

The identity built by content creators is referred to as digital identity. According to Husna (2024), digital identity is how an individual forms their self-image through online activities and interactions across various platforms, such as social media, applications, and more. Moreover, digital identity encompasses an individual’s self-perception, how they wish to be viewed, and how they integrate themselves into the virtual world. It also reflects how individuals share personal information online. Digital identity not only portrays how individuals see themselves in the virtual world but also influences interpersonal relationships, communication, and societal views of themselves. The formation of digital identity includes activities like building social

media profiles, uploading content, maintaining an online reputation, and more (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Digital identity is a complex construction, involving choices about what aspects of oneself to present and how they interact in the digital environment (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). According to Goffman (1959), individuals play roles in social interactions, which also applies to the context of digital identity.

However, in reality, the digital identity created on social media often contrasts with a person's true self. In this study, we found that informant JP, who is not naturally talkative, is compelled to portray a talkative, cheerful, and fun persona. Informant PS, who is not actually a young mother from Surabaya, has had to align with the self-image she constructed as part of her digital identity on TikTok. Informant MD, who is quiet, is expected to appear lively in their video content. Informant IG, who is not as exuberant and powerful in real life, produces content that requires them to appear as such. They must maintain these digital identities because they are what they sell or commercialize. The commercialization of digital identity reflects the commodification of authenticity in the life of a content creator.

Discussion

The researcher divides the discussion of the commodification of authenticity experienced by TikTok content creators into two parts. First, commodification gives rise to a promotional culture that leads content creators to normalize transactional relationships. Second, the frequent commodification of authenticity fuels the promotional culture, which in turn causes the authenticity of content creators to become devalued.

Normalization of Transactional Relationship

Based on data analysis, the researcher interprets that the commodification of authenticity experienced by TikTok content creators gives rise to promotional culture. Promotional culture is shaped by advertising and influences our lives through audiences, identity, daily life, and environment (West, 2023). The concept of promotional culture was first introduced by Andrew Wernick (1991) to describe what he called the semiotic colonization of culture by commercial advertising. Promotion not only refers to advertising but has become the dominant form of

symbolic expression in many social contexts, institutions, and practices such as politics and universities. In Wernick's book, there is also a discussion about the growing promotion in universities. He analyzed how universities have been drawn into the logic of promotion, especially in terms of student and staff recruitment, as well as the career and academic advancement of faculty (Väliverronen, 2021).

Promotional culture refers to the widespread influence of advertising, public relations, marketing, and branding on various aspects of social life, including institutions, media, and daily practices. This phenomenon is marked by the penetration of promotional practices into social life in a broad and intensive manner, focusing on attracting and persuading audiences to buy, support, or engage with products, services, and ideas (Wernick, 1991; Davis, 2013). Promotional culture has expanded beyond the commercial sphere and encompasses various aspects of public discourse, politics, and social interaction. In media and cultural studies, promotional culture signifies the increasing presence of promotional activities, behaviors, sensitivities, and communication forms in society (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Wernick, 1991). One key component of promotional culture is the image or identity that someone or something desires to communicate to the public (Powers & Greenwell, 2016). This has led to the development of complex and diverse promotional tools that shape how society views and interacts with the world around them (Wernick, 1991).

In this research, content creators commodify their authenticity on their social media accounts, specifically TikTok. Social media users are forced to optimize themselves according to market logic while being constrained in communication and social interaction through self-presentation. Social media creates workers who are always working and employing themselves. Users are shaped by the information they are required to fulfill and produce. According to Van Dijck, social media is not neutral in terms of self-representation; it is a tool for shaping identity. Christian Fuchs states that social media has an imperialist capitalist tendency that seeks to transform all time, including leisure time, into labor. In the research, the researcher found that content creators, consciously or not, commercialize everything they possess, especially their authenticity.

According to the researcher's observations, the commodification of authenticity that gives rise to promotional culture causes content creators to normalize transactional relationships.

Advertising has become a tool that penetrates various aspects of social life, including media and everyday practices. Content creators advertise themselves on the TikTok accounts they build. Everything, including people, ideas, and culture, has become something that can be promoted. All aspects of a content creator's life, particularly the authenticity they construct, are poured into the content they post. Now, what content creators expect from creating content is their success in promoting themselves, gaining popularity, and financial gain. What content creators are doing has become a promotional culture where they normalize transactional relationships. They see transactional relationships as normal because we live in an era of social media where everyone is doing the same thing. Promotion cannot be ignored when it has become the foundation of much of our social life, from online communication, digital platforms, work patterns, to home and work environments—everything is promotion-based now (Aronczyk, 2024). It's no wonder that many content creators are emerging on various social media platforms. With the existence of promotional culture, the researcher observed that content creators' authenticity is constructed as a digital identity, which is then commodified. The relationship between content creators and followers, particularly, is no longer a genuine one. Content creators have a transactional relationship with their followers to gain followers, likes, comments, and shares. Social media has ultimately stopped being a platform for connecting people and has instead become a competition for who can accumulate the most followers, likes, views, comments, and shares. This is what is now considered "normal".

Devaluation of Authenticity

From the analysis, the researcher also found that the frequent commodification of authenticity fuels promotional culture, which in turn leads to the devaluation of the authenticity of TikTok content creators. Authenticity becomes devalued due to the exploitation carried out by TikTok content creators. A basic understanding is that when a product is exchanged for money in a market, that product becomes devalued (Mildenberger, 2023). In this case, devaluation occurs because of a shift from the product's use value to its monetary value.

The authenticity that has become a commodity and commodified by content creators' changes meaning. The researcher observed that the authenticity displayed through their TikTok

content no longer serves its original purpose due to the shift from use value to monetary value. In this study, TikTok content creators exploit their authenticity to gain both popularity and financial rewards. Social media users are not paid for the time they spend or for the content they produce (Woolley, 2023). Fuchs (2015) states that the level of exploitation increases when workers are not paid. They are exploited endlessly. On social media, exploitation is evident when someone spends more time on the platform, connects with more people, and uploads more content (Woolley, 2023). Content creators continuously produce content and expose their authenticity even though they do not receive payment from the TikTok app. The only way to earn money is through endorsements.

Content creators, often unconsciously, exploit themselves and their authenticity while hiding behind the enjoyment and satisfaction they feel in the content creation process. Content that contains the authenticity of each content creator is continuously made and uploaded, resulting in the devaluation of authenticity. Authenticity is no longer seen as something genuine but rather as forced, used, and produced solely as a digital identity on TikTok for financial gain. The commodification of authenticity reinforces promotional culture, which normalizes the commercialization of digital identity, leading to the devaluation of a content creator's authenticity.

CONCLUSION

After conducting research from February 2024 to June 2024, the researcher concludes that the commodification of authenticity indeed occurs and is experienced by thematic TikTok content creators in various forms. The researcher found that content creators construct their authenticity in the form of video content on the TikTok platform. This authenticity is shaped by their personal experiences and interests. Additionally, their authenticity is also influenced by their environment, particularly their TikTok followers. The authenticity they construct and display on their TikTok accounts becomes their digital identity. Initially, the researcher found that this digital identity was expressed through TikTok content purely for entertainment, education, and information-sharing purposes. However, the purpose of content creation has since shifted. This digital identity began to be monetized. The researcher found that the strong

digital identity of each content creator allowed them to attract a larger audience, which eventually drew the attention of brands that wanted to advertise or endorse products through their content.

The presence of monetization goals proves that the commodification of authenticity has occurred among TikTok content creators. Every aspect of the content creator's persona has been commercialized for popularity and financial gain. Authenticity, which originally had intrinsic value, has been transformed into monetary value. The researcher also found that this commodification of authenticity has given rise to a promotional culture. First, the researcher found that the commodification of authenticity led to the normalization of transactional relationships within this promotional culture. As a result, content creators often cater to the desires of their followers when creating content. Through this approach, the relationship between content creators and followers runs smoothly. Followers feel involved in the content creation process, ultimately fostering trust. The trust that is built allows content creators to attract brands offering endorsements. Through these transactional relationships, content creators gain both popularity and financial rewards. However, to achieve this, the researcher found that frequent commodification of authenticity and the rise of promotional culture have also led to the devaluation of each content creator's authenticity. Content is no longer seen as a medium of self-expression but as a promotional tool. The presence of promotional culture causes content creators to unintentionally promote themselves on TikTok through the content they upload. Content creators who continuously produce and upload content experience a reduction in the uniqueness and authenticity of their content. Ultimately, the value of authenticity is diminished because content creators are solely producing content to gain popularity and money.

For future research, the researcher suggests exploring the commodification of authenticity from different perspectives, such as those of followers and brands. In this study, the researcher focused on the perspective of content creators. By doing so, future readers could gain knowledge or insights about the commodification of authenticity from the viewpoints of other parties.

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