

Subject Abject : TikTok as Playing Space in Constructing Self-Identity for Women

^{1**}Juliana Kurniawati, ²Ari Sudahri

¹Universitas Muhammadiyah Bengkulu

²Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember

E-mail: juliana.umb.ac.id

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji peran TikTok sebagai ruang bermain dalam kaitannya dengan pembentukan identitas perempuan, fokus pada konsep “subjek” dan “abjek” yang terinspirasi dari pemikiran Julia Kristeva. TikTok merupakan platform media sosial yang semakin populer, tidak hanya sebagai media untuk ekspresi kreatif, tetapi juga sebagai ruang dinamis di mana perempuan menegosiasikan, membangun, dan mendekonstruksi identitas melalui konten yang mereka produksi dan konsumsi. Artikel ini menggunakan metode netnografi untuk menganalisis praktik budaya digital di TikTok. Pengamatan dilakukan terhadap interaksi, penciptaan, dan respons pengguna perempuan terhadap konten yang berkaitan dengan identitas diri. Data dikumpulkan melalui pengamatan partisipatif aktivitas di platform, analisis konten video, dan komentar yang muncul, untuk memahami dinamika pembentukan identitas dalam konteks digital. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa TikTok berfungsi sebagai ruang bermain liminal di mana batas antara “subjek” dan “abjek” menjadi cair. Identitas diri perempuan dikonstruksikan melalui negosiasi antara kebebasan dan marginalisasi di ruang digital. Pada saat yang sama agensi, penolakan, dan batasan platform beririsan untuk membentuk ekspresi diri dan validasi sosial.

Kata Kunci: abjek, konstruksi, identitas diri perempuan, subjek, ruang bermain

Abstract

This article examines the role of TikTok as a space for play in relation to the formation of female identity, focusing on the concepts of the "subject" and the "abject" inspired by the thought of Julia Kristeva. TikTok is an increasingly popular social media platform—serving not only as a medium for creative expression but also as a dynamic space where women negotiate, construct, and deconstruct their identities through the content they produce and consume. This article employs a netnographic method to analyze digital cultural practices on TikTok. Observations focused on the interactions, content creation, and responses of female users regarding content related to self-identity. Data were collected through participant observation of platform activities, as well as the analysis of video content and user comments, to understand the dynamics of identity formation within a digital context. The research findings indicate that TikTok functions as a liminal playing space where the boundaries between the "subject" and the "abject" become fluid. Female self-identity is constructed through a negotiation between freedom and marginalization in the digital space; simultaneously, agency, resistance, and platform constraints intersect to shape self-expression and social validation.

Keywords: abject, construct, female self-identity, subject, playing space

INTRODUCTION

Communication technology in the digital era has experienced rapid development with the emergence of various social media platforms that have changed the way individuals interact, communicate, and express themselves. Among digital platforms, TikTok is one of the most dominant media, with more than one billion active users worldwide. We Are Social and Meltwater reported that the number of TikTok users globally will reach 1.58 billion in 2024. The majority of users are aged between 18-34 years (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024). The latest data released by DataReportal also states that Indonesia has the largest number of TikTok users in the world, reaching 157.6 million users. This figure even surpasses the United States with a total of 120.5 million users (DataReportal, 2024). TikTok allows users to create and share short videos with a variety of content including dance, comedy, tutorials, songs, duets, daily lives and many more creative content.

Increasingly sophisticated digital technology has shifted play spaces from the real world to the virtual world. Social media as a playground where individuals can interact and express themselves in ways that were previously impossible. TikTok, as one of the most popular platforms today, serves as an arena for construction and deconstruction where users, especially women, can try on different personas, share experiences, and explore their identities in a supportive environment (boyd, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010). TikTok allows them to engage in creative forms by creating content that is part of the identity game (boyd, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010). Zizi Papacharissi (2010) explains that online spaces provide opportunities for users to express themselves more flexibly than conventional social spaces.

Women who actively and creatively express themselves through TikTok get the opportunity to build their identities dynamically. Through the content they produce, they are involved in the process of constructing identities that go beyond traditional boundaries (Abidin, 2016; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Although TikTok is a space that provides creative freedom, women still often face pressure to meet certain standards of beauty and behavior that can change their position from subject to abject in the public narrative. These standards can influence how women are positioned in public narratives—from subjects with agency to objects of judgment or marginalization (Gill, 2007).

In many cases, women on social media also experience criticism, negative judgment, and even online harassment, which can impact how they perceive themselves and their identities in digital spaces (Jane, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018). There are many cases where women experience criticism, judgment, or even harassment that can affect the way they see

themselves. Social media platforms enable individuals to display multiple personas and negotiate their identities through practices of self-presentation in digital public spaces (Papacharissi, 2010).

According to Kristeva (1982), the concept of abjection explains how society constructs identity boundaries by positioning certain individuals as "others" or objects. The concepts of subject and object demonstrate the ambivalence of identity within an individual's subjective experience (Kristeva, 1982). In this context, the concept of 'subject' and 'object' introduced by Julia Kristeva is appropriate to reveal this dynamic. Kristeva introduces ideas about identity ambivalence related to subjective experiences (subjects) and how individuals are often considered as 'others' (objects) in the dominant view of society. This theory allows for a deeper understanding of how women on TikTok operate between self-fulfillment plans and social exclusion, leaving them caught in a complex internal conflict when forming and expressing their identities.

TikTok offers a space or arena for expressing identities as desired by its users (Papacharissi, 2010; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). However, women are faced with various challenges, including public judgment, stigma, and cyberbullying (Jane, 2017). In this context, Julia Kristeva's approach is considered helpful in understanding how women struggle to maintain their status as subjects, while dealing directly with the experience of being objects that are often imposed by social responses to their actions in digital spaces.

Using Julia Kristeva's thinking, the concepts of subject and object describe the ambivalence of individual identities and how they are positioned within social structures. Subjects refer to individuals who have the voice and power to shape their own identities, while objects reflect the position of individuals who are ignored, sidelined, or alienated by societal norms (Kristeva, 1982; McAfee, 2004). This understanding is important in studying women in constructing their identities in social spaces that often impose strict expectations.

Previous studies that are relevant to the study of women's identity construction on the TikTok platform through Julia Kristeva's abjection perspective include research by Marwick & Boyd (2011) in "To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter" which examines young women in identity construction through self-branding practices on social media. Their findings show the pressure to present an "authentic yet curated" version of themselves. Duffy (2017) in "(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love" explores the paradox between self-expression and exploitation in women's creative content. Banet-Weiser (2021) in "Empowered: Popular

Feminism and Popular Misogyny" analyzes the body positivity movement on Instagram and its challenges.

Sobande (2020) examines the strategies of black creators in dealing with digital blackface and racist algorithms. Both studies focus on visual platforms such as Instagram, without considering TikTok's unique features (duet, FYP algorithm) in identity construction. Tyler (2020) "Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality" develops the concept of digital abjection to explain how social media platforms systematically marginalize certain groups. Raun (2018) analyzes the practice of transgender "self-representation" on TikTok. Zhang & Mao (2022) compare feminist content on TikTok China vs US, finding the role of state censorship in the construction of women's identities.

Previous research is the basis for understanding the phenomenon of identity construction on social media, as well as TikTok as a play space, abjection mechanisms in digital space, and TikTok's participatory culture. However, from several of these studies, it was identified that they had not explicitly touched on the abjection aspect, the dynamics of subject-object in Julia Kristeva's abjection lens related to women's content on TikTok have not been explored. This study aims to fill this gap by bringing Kristeva's theory into the realm of digital media studies empirically, developing a hybrid methodology to capture the complexity of subject-object. Background of the study provides a clear picture of the context, role, challenges, and potential that exist in women in using TikTok, as well as the theoretical scope that will be used in further analysis. By dismantling the abjection mechanism on TikTok, we can understand how digital play spaces can be a tool of liberation as well as oppression and how women respond to this dilemma through creativity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study uses an interpretive qualitative approach with a poststructuralist critical paradigm to analyze the construction of women's identity on TikTok through Julia Kristeva's abjection thinking. An interpretive qualitative approach allows researchers to understand the meanings, experiences, and social practices constructed by individuals in specific contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research applies netnography, a digital ethnographic method that enables the exploration of cultural practices and social interactions within online communities (Kozinets, 2020). Through this approach, the study observes how female users interact, create, and respond to identity-related content on TikTok. The approach aims to capture the dynamics of women's identity formation in digital spaces, including how they

negotiate their position as subjects while confronting the possibility of being positioned as abject through social responses emerging in online interactions, drawing on the concept of abjection proposed by Julia Kristeva (1982).

Data were collected through digital participant observation, video content analysis, and comment analysis. The unit of analysis consists of TikTok content produced by Indonesian women that meets several criteria: (1) content addressing themes of the body, sexuality, or gender identity; (2) content that triggers public debate, such as viral or controversial posts; (3) content utilizing creative platform features including filters, sound effects, and distinctive editing styles; and (4) content displaying elements of abjection, such as negative narrative comments or indications of shadow banning. Relevant videos and comments were documented through screen recording and digital archiving, while metadata including hashtags and engagement metrics were collected using digital tools such as TAGS for TikTok.

The data were analyzed using multimodal semiotic analysis developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2001), which examines meaning-making across visual, verbal, and audio modes. Analysis was conducted at three levels. First, the representational level examines how female bodies and identities are visually presented, including camera framing (e.g., close-up versus full-body shots), clothing, body movements, background settings, and the use of filters or visual effects. Second, the interactive level analyzes the relationship between content creators and audiences through elements such as gaze direction and the use of music or sound effects to construct emotional engagement. Third, the compositional level explores how visual and auditory elements are arranged within the video, including scene cuts, transitions, and overall layout. In addition, viewer comments were examined to identify the reinforcement of dominant discourses, the presence of resistance, or the emergence of alternative discourses surrounding women's bodies and identities in digital spaces.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Henry Jenkins (2006) developed the concept of participatory culture to explain society shifting from a passive role as a consumer of popular culture to an active contributor and producer. The core of this concept is consumer involvement in creating, disseminating, and understanding culture. Jenkins also shows that new media and media convergence facilitate innovative ways of interaction between consumers and media content. Digital media platforms offer space for digital participatory cultural practices. The space offered is certainly not value-

free but at least it can facilitate women to form their digital self-identity as desired through various platforms. This presents a variety of complex phenomena that are interesting to study.

Presenting the Results

In the increasingly fluid digital era, social media has become not only a communication platform, but also an active playing space in shaping self-identity. TikTok, as one of the most influential platforms today, offers a space where users especially women can explore, perform, and even question their identities through creative content such as dance, lipsync, skits, and challenges. However, behind this freedom of expression, there is a complex power dynamic between the subject (the subject who actively creates themselves) and the object (who is rejected, marginalized, or considered "dirty" in the dominant narrative). The search that has been conducted for 2 months on the TikTok platform using the methodology explained above obtained the following findings:

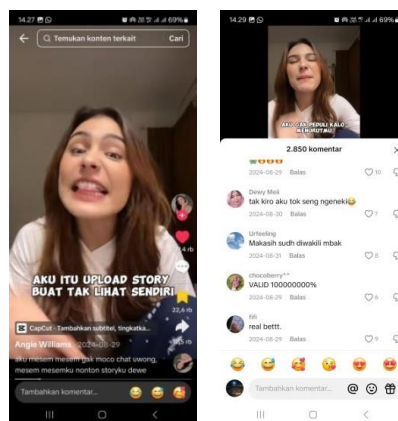


Fig 1a. TikTok @angie williams; 1b. viewer's comments

Theo van Leeuwen and Gunther Kress's multimodal semiotics concept consists of the Representational level: the female body/identity is shown (e.g., close-up of the face vs. full body), the use of filters/effects to modify reality; the interactive level: gaze (direct gaze to the camera vs. averted), the use of music/sound to build emotion; and the compositional level: video layout (cuts, transitions) is used to analyze the text in the form of videos and comments. In Fig. 1 Representational Level: This video shows a close-up of the face a young woman with shoulder-length brown hair. The close focus on the face emphasizes the facial expression and emotion being conveyed. This directs full attention to the individual and the verbal message that accompanies them. Use of filters/effects to modify reality: Based on the visuals, there is likely some subtle use of filters or effects. This is evident in the smooth skin and even lighting.

While not overdone, these filters serve to enhance the appearance and create an aesthetic that is common on platforms like TikTok. The woman's use of braces is also part of the visual representation of her identity at the time this video was made.

Comment column : Viewers provide comments with narrative support for the content creator, as explained below: In Fig. 1b. the first comment from Dewy Meli (2024-08-30): "tak kiro aku tok seng ngeneki □" Language: Using Javanese ("tak kiro aku tok seng ngeneki") which means "I thought I was the only one like this". The emoticon "□" (face holding back tears/touched) shows a sense of empathy or identification with the video content. Interpretation: This comment shows that Dewy Meli feels she has a similar experience or feeling to what is conveyed in the video. There is a sense of relief or connection because she realizes that she is not alone in this. The second comment from Urfeeling (2024-08-31): "Makasih sudh diedit mbak" Language: Using Indonesian with a few abbreviations ("sudh" for "sudah"). The phrase "diwakili" shows that the video content has succeeded in conveying what Urfeeling might feel or want to express. Interpretation: This comment indicates that Urfeeling feels connected to the message of the video and is grateful to the content creator for "representing" his feelings or experiences. There is a sense of approval and validation felt. The third comment from chocoberry*** (2024-08-29): "VALID 100000000%***". Language: Uses English ("VALID") and very large numbers to emphasize strong approval or validation of the video content. Use of capital letters also reinforces the emphasis.



Fig 2a : TikTok @dithakurnia dan fig 2b @duyung terbuli and comments

Fig 2b at the representational level is explained as follows: this video shows a full body shot of an adult woman standing outdoors, on a paving block. She is wearing a long light green

dress that looks like satin or silk. Her body position is facing the camera with a slight smile. The overall appearance and clothing worn give a feminine and graceful impression. The overlay text at the top of the video indicates a narrative related to the representation of women with fuller bodies ("beautiful fat girls"). Use of Filters/Effects to Modify Reality: Based on the visuals, there is likely the use of subtle filters or effects. This is seen from the even skin tone and soft lighting. These effects are likely used to enhance the overall visual aesthetic of the video, which is a common practice on the TikTok platform.

Composition Level: The video layout uses transitions, TikTok often uses quick cuts and various transitions to maintain visual dynamics. Other Textual and Visual Elements: The layout of this screenshot also contains important compositional elements: Overlay Text: There is yellow text with a black outline at the top: "Scroll FYP often... now there are lots of beautiful fat girls!! 🤔😍❤️". This text is the main visual focus and conveys the explicit message of the video, which is appreciation of the beauty of women with fuller bodies. The emoticons used also reinforce the positive and enthusiastic message. Account Information and Date: At the bottom left is the account information "duyung terbully" and the upload date "2024-08-21". This provides context about the creator and time of the content upload. Additional Information (Caption): At the bottom is additional information that is partially covered, but there are hashtags such as "#fyp", "#fypgakni", and "#fypyo_". These hashtags serve to increase the visibility of the video and categorize it in TikTok trends. Interaction Icons: On the right are typical TikTok icons such as other users' profile photos, the number of likes (180.8 thousand), the number of comments (4,501), the number of shares (4,303), and the save icon. The placement of these icons is a standard part of TikTok's layout and facilitates user interaction. Flags in the Background: In the background are two red and white flags, indicating the possible location of the video being shot in Indonesia.

The Comments column contains the following narrative: the first comment from the WWH account (2024-05-29): "not about beauty, but for your health, let's go to ideal BB, keep up the spirit, bro". Language: using Indonesian. This comment conveys concern for the health of the individual in the video and suggests achieving an ideal weight ("ideal BB"). The purple heart emoticon ("❤️") can indicate genuine concern or support. The words "semangat kaka" are a form of support and encouragement. Interpretation: This comment provides a different perspective from the focus on beauty. WWH emphasizes the health aspect and provides advice accompanied by support. This can be interpreted as a form of concern, although it may be

considered sensitive by some because it mentions weight. The second comment from the youronlymytha account (2024-05-29): "susah katakani nya". Language: using informal Indonesian ("bilangin nya" for "say it").



Fig. 3a dan b. @suri yu move; 3c. @umayah164

Fig. 3a and b at the representational level: The video shows a close-up of a woman's face with long, partially loose hair. Her face is the main focus. In the background, part of a man's face is visible, seemingly peeking or looking away. The focus on the woman's face draws attention to her expression and the message she is trying to convey. Use of Filters/Effects to Modify Reality: Based on the visuals, there is likely significant use of filters or effects. The woman's facial skin appears very smooth and there may be changes in facial features.

At the composition level: video layout, possible transitions in the video. TikTok often uses these dynamic visual elements. This screenshot layout also contains important compositional elements, namely: Overlay Text: There are two contrasting text labels: On the top left, with a bright font and background: "virtual world 😂". The laughing face emoticon may indicate irony or humor related to the "virtual world". On the top right, with a simpler font and background: "real world 🙄". The rolling eyes emoticon can indicate disbelief, irritation, or skepticism towards the "real world". Both are placed above the heads of the two individuals, giving them conceptual labels. Bottom Text: there is a longer text: "Repost, don't trust social media and android phone cameras, guys, you're afraid to run away from reality 😂😂". This text conveys an explicit message not to trust social media and phone cameras too much because they can distance you from reality. The laughing emoticon at the end may

indicate a joking tone but still conveys a warning. Account Information: At the bottom left is the account information "suri yu move". Interaction Icon: On the right are typical TikTok icons such as other users' profile photos, number of likes (1,543), number of comments (156), number of shares (125), and a save icon. The placement of these icons is a standard part of TikTok's layout and facilitates user interaction. Filter Icon: On the left is an icon indicating the use of filters ("Filter Vs"). These findings will be discussed in the following discussion points.

This study starts from the formulation of the problem regarding how TikTok acts as a playing space that mediates the construction of women's self-identity, as well as a battleground between subjectivity and abjection? Using a digital media studies approach and Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, this study aims to analyze women's self-representation on TikTok as a form of subject formation, identify discourses and practices of abjection that emerge in digital interactions on TikTok, and explain the dialectic between freedom of expression and social control in this digital playing space. The relevance of this research lies in its contribution to gender and media discourse by linking social criticism theory.

Tiktok as a Ambivalence Space: Freedom vs Control

The term playing space refers to Huizinga's (1949) concept of *homo ludens* humans as playful beings. Building alternative communities outside of mainstream norms (Raun, 2018). However, this space is also governed by algorithmic rules that are often patriarchal (Bishop, 2021). TikTok is not just a platform, but a ludic sphere (Huizinga, 1949) a play space where the rules of the game are determined by algorithms, community norms, and social pressures. Here, women use features such as duet, stitch, and filters to create themselves (self-fashioning) (Senft & Baym, 2015), but also face digital abjection (Tyler, 2020) in the form of Body policing: Women's body content is often commented on, reported, or shadowbanned (Banet-Weiser, 2021). TikTok's features and filters allow women to: explore identity through parody and performativity (Butler, 1990). Viral shame: Trends like "embarrassing childhood photos" can be empowering or derogatory (Dobson, 2015). Algorithmic bias: Women's voices deemed "too emotional" or "unattractive" are marginalized by recommendation systems (Noble, 2018). Previous studies of women's identities on social media have tended to focus on agency (e.g., Keller, 2019) or victimization (e.g., Jane, 2017), but have rarely connected these to Kristeva's abjection theory to see how platforms like TikTok are paradoxically both empowering and oppressive.

Kristeva (1982) in Powers of Horror introduced the abject as something that disrupts the symbolic order such as menstrual blood, a woman's "noisy" voice, or uncontrolled laughter. In the context of TikTok, this concept helps us understand women's content that is deemed "excessive" (e.g., overemotional storytelling). Platform mechanisms that indirectly normalize certain beauty standards while excluding others (Barker & Jurasz, 2023). Resistance through abject aesthetics: some creators deliberately raise "taboo" issues (e.g., body hair, aging) to challenge norms (Sobande, 2020). This is as shown in fig.1 where women practice strong resistance to the dominant discourse that women present themselves on social media for male consumption.

Comments in response to this video indicate a strong emotional connection and identification between the audience and the content creator. Some of the comments that emerged were : (1) Sense of Fate/Seperacintaan: The audience feels that they are not alone in the experiences or feelings expressed in the video (example: Dewy Meli's comment); (2) Validation: The audience feels that what they feel or think has been represented or justified by the video content (example: Urfeeling and chocoberry**) comments; (3) Agreement/Affirmation: The audience agrees with the message or information conveyed in the video (example: eri real bettt. comment). The used of different languages (Javanese and English) also indicates the potential for diverse audience reach.

TikTok as an Arena for the Construction of Women's Identity

Unlike conventional mass media, social media provides space for audience participation in even radical ways (Rianto, 2016). This can be seen in the form of media content uploads such as statuses, images, videos, and even comments. The active nature of social media allows everyone to express themselves, even exploiting their own bodies for pleasure or simply for self-existence. Overall, this multimodal analysis of TikTok videos shows how various visual and textual elements work together to convey messages and build interactions with the audience. Close-up focus on the face with direct gaze creates a personal connection, the overlay text conveys the main message, and TikTok's typical layout elements facilitate interaction and provide context. For a more complete analysis, access to the full video is needed to understand the role of music/sound and the dynamics of scene cuts and transitions. Music or sound in TikTok videos plays a very important role in building atmosphere, conveying emotions, and reinforcing verbal messages. The type of music used (happy, sad, dramatic, etc.) will greatly influence the audience's interpretation of the video content, its presence is a significant interactive element.

In the contemporary digital landscape, TikTok has emerged as one of the most dynamic platforms for identity construction, especially for women. With over 1.5 billion monthly active users (TikTok, 2023), the platform is not only a space for entertainment, but also a complex arena where subjectivity and marginalization are constantly negotiated. Julia Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror* provides a critical lens for understanding how female identities on TikTok are shaped through processes of inclusion and exclusion. The abject, according to Kristeva, is what is "rejected" from the social body in order to maintain the stability of the symbolic order such as women's bodies that are deemed "excessive," uncontrolled emotions, or expressions that violate gender norms. In the context of TikTok, this concept manifests itself in content moderation that tends to suppress women's expressions of sexuality (Roberts, 2019), abusive comments that lead to body shaming and slut-shaming (Jane, 2017), and algorithms that subconsciously support heteronormative beauty standards (Noble, 2018).

Social media has become an ecosystem that has not only transformed communication but also reshaped the way individuals especially women negotiate their identities (boyd, 2014; Turkle, 2011). TikTok, as a short-form video platform dominated by young users (Statista, 2023), offers a unique playing space: an arena where gender performativity, self-expression, and social control compete (Raun, 2018; Cover, 2016). In this context, identity construction is no longer simply individual, but also collaborative, influenced by algorithms, viral trends, and audience reactions (Bishop, 2021).

However, this digital space is not neutral (Foucault, 1977). Foucault reminds us that where there is power, there is resistance and TikTok is a clear example of how women actively create themselves (subjects), while also facing the abjection mechanism (Kristeva, 1982) that pushes certain things into marginalized areas. Kristeva's concept of abject, which refers to what is "rejected" from the social body so that norms are maintained, such as the presence of women's expressions that are considered excessive, inappropriate bodies, or disturbing narratives, is relevant to reading the conflicts of women's identities that occur on TikTok.

In every individual there are technologies of the self, namely a series of techniques that allow individuals to work on themselves by regulating their bodies, minds and behaviors a number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own behaviors, and this in such a way as to change themselves, modify themselves, and to achieve a state of perfection, happiness, purity, magical power (Foucault, 1999: 162). Through this technology of the self, women narrate themselves on TikTok as they wish by becoming

their real self "the real me this is me" or the desired self "i wanna be ". Creating and uploading content is a practice of technologies of the self in virtual space, where the self is free to construct identity through video. Identity in cultural studies is understood in a non or anti essentialist way. Identity is not a fixed entity, but a descriptive discourse of the self that changes according to cultural and social conditions (Barker, 2008: 174). The identity that is formed is always in a discourse. Discourse produces subjects such as body labels on someone such as slim, fat, old, young, beautiful, and ugly. This new media provides a space for women to freely explore themselves and play with identity while becoming popular at the same time, while the desire to be "seen" is satisfied (Kurniawati, 2022).

Celebrating the Abject: Subversive Aesthetics

This practice reflects the ritualization of the abject (Kristeva, 1982) through repetition of play, transforming disgust into empowerment. Creators consciously place bodies that are considered "dirty" (such as body fat) at the center of performance, forcing audiences to confront their own biases. Indonesian creators with the hashtag #PlusSizeBeauty deliberately display "unfiltered" bodies (eg stretch marks, stomach folds) with provocative narratives such as in fig. 2 and fig. 3. This kind of content initially received negative comments, but went viral after being responded to with a duet challenge that transformed individual abjection into a collective movement. In Fig. 2a and 2b, a fat woman comfortably displays her body as a form of self-celebration. The comments show a variety of responses to the video content : (1) Health Concern: WWH's comment highlights the health aspect, which may be a response to the body representation or topic discussed in the video; (2) Difficulty in Communicating/Understanding: youronlymytha's comment suggests difficulty in communicating or understanding something related to the video; (3) Focus on Entertainment: py.pheye's comment emphasizes the entertainment value of the video, suggesting that the video successfully entertains viewers.

Overall, the comment analysis shows a variety of interpretations and focuses from viewers on the video content. Some paid attention to the health aspect, some had difficulty responding, and some enjoyed the entertainment aspect. This suggests that the video may have triggered a variety of thoughts and emotions in its audience. Overall, the multimodal analysis of this TikTok video shows how visual elements (woman in dress, background), textual (overlay text, caption, hashtags), and audio element indications work together to convey a message of acceptance and appreciation of women's diverse body shapes. The woman's direct gaze into the camera establishes a connection with the viewer, while the overlay text explicitly

conveys the main message. TikTok's distinctive layout facilitates interaction and provides social media context.

The celebration of the comfortable self without filters can be seen in fig. 3abc where overall, the multimodal analysis of the TikTok video screenshots shows the contrast presented between the "virtual world" associated with filters and the potential for distrust, and the "real world" which may be considered disappointing or skeptical. The indirect gaze of women and textual messages reinforce the idea of not being too fixated on representation on social media. TikTok's distinctive layout and interactive elements remain as part of the platform. Women in fig. 2 and fig. 3 are resisting the dominant discourse where the use of filters seems inevitable as part of the aesthetics of the self displayed on social media.

Dialectics of Subject and Object in Paradoxical Self-Objectification

This platform, on the one hand, gives women agency to actively represent themselves, choosing the narrative and visuals they want (Baym, 2010). They become subjects in the construction of their digital identities, using TikTok's creative features to express different aspects of themselves. However, TikTok's algorithmic logic and visual culture often encourage content that gains traction through representations that conform to prevailing beauty standards or trends. As a result, women may feel pressured to internalize and reproduce objectified self-images in order to gain visibility and validation (likes, comments, followers) (Gill, 2007; Mulvey, 1975). In this context, they actively present themselves as objects of the public gaze, an act that can limit more diverse and authentic expressions of identity.

Julia Kristeva's perspective enriches the understanding of this paradox. Some women on TikTok may consciously or unconsciously present aspects of themselves or experiences that are socially considered "abject" (e.g., non-norm body representations, negative emotional expressions, or narratives of traumatic experiences). This act can be interpreted as Subversive Resistance where presenting "the abject" can be a strategy to challenge dominant norms and reclaim marginalized body representations and experiences. In this context, visible self-objectification actually becomes a tool for subversion of social boundaries (Van Zoonen, 1994). In addition, validation and connection are needed in cyberspace by displaying vulnerabilities or "imperfections" that may be considered "abject" can also be a way to build community and a sense of belonging with an audience who has similar experiences (Baym, 2010). This openness can generate validation and support that may not be found in real spaces. However, it is important to consider that displaying "the abject" can also be the result of internalizing distorted norms, where women feel the need to exploit vulnerable aspects of

themselves in order to gain attention and validation on a platform that prioritizes visuals and sensationalism. Thus, the dialectic between subject and abject in the practice of self-objectification on TikTok is complex and non-binary. Women can simultaneously be active subjects in shaping identities and engage in paradoxical practices of self-objectification, which sometimes involve the representation of "the abject". TikTok's digital space is a dynamic arena for identity negotiation, where the boundaries between subject and object, and between what is accepted and what is rejected, are constantly negotiated and questioned (Gill, 2007).

TikTok represents a paradox of the digital age a space where women can be both sovereign subjects and objectified objects. This study argues that liberating women's identities on social media requires not only individual courage, but also a structural overhaul of the platform's patriarchal logic. These findings pave the way for future studies on algorithmic resistance and the possibilities of playful activism in digital spaces. This study demonstrates that TikTok functions as a paradoxical space for the construction of women's identities, simultaneously enabling empowerment and enforcing marginalization. Consistent with prior research (Baym, 2010; Keller, 2019; Senft & Baym, 2015), TikTok provides women with opportunities for self-expression, participatory creativity, and performative identity work. However, unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize either agency or victimization (Jane, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2021), this study highlights the interplay between subjectivity and abjection, drawing on Kristeva's (1982) theory. Women negotiate their self-representation while facing body-shaming, algorithmic bias, and societal expectations, illustrating the dual pressures of empowerment and constraint.

The multimodal analysis reveals that visual framing, audio, text, and interactive features mediate identity construction, enabling women to challenge normative beauty standards and social norms. Similar to Butler (1990) and Sobande (2020), this study finds that strategic use of "abject aesthetics" (e.g., body-positive content, taboo topics) functions as a form of resistance, fostering community and validating experiences. Audience responses further show that content can trigger identification, emotional resonance, and affirmation, highlighting the collaborative nature of digital identity work.

These findings extend prior research by integrating Kristeva's abjection theory with contemporary digital media practices, illustrating how TikTok simultaneously operates as a ludic space (Huizinga, 1949) and a site of social control (Bishop, 2021). Women's agency is exercised within structural constraints, producing a dialectic between freedom of expression and marginalization. Overall, this study contributes to the literature on gender and digital

media by showing that short-form platforms like TikTok are arenas where empowerment, surveillance, and resistance coexist, and where identity is actively negotiated in relation to both audience expectations and algorithmic governance.

CONCLUSION

TikTok serves as a paradoxical space where women construct identities through both empowerment and marginalization. The platform enables self-expression, creative experimentation, and community-building, yet algorithmic biases, content moderation, and social norms impose pressures that may encourage self-objectification or marginalize non-normative expressions. Using Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection, this study shows that women negotiate subjectivity while engaging with content considered socially "excessive" or abject, transforming marginalization into subversive resistance. Multimodal practices including visual framing, audio-visual elements, and interactive features facilitate identity experimentation, while audience engagement reinforces validation and collective identification. Overall, TikTok exemplifies a dynamic negotiation between freedom and constraint, subjectivity and abjection. The findings highlight that digital empowerment is intertwined with structural and social limitations, emphasizing the need to consider both agency and platform governance in understanding women's identity formation in contemporary online spaces.

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