

(Research Article)

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Educational TikTok Content: Knowledge Representation in the Short Video Era

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Abstract: The swift proliferation of short-video-centric social media, notably TikTok, has revolutionized the educational landscape by facilitating novel methods of knowledge production, dissemination, and interpretation. This phenomenon denotes a transition in media and signifies an epistemological transformation in educational practices within the digital age. This study seeks to analyze the representation and interpretation of knowledge in TikTok educational content using a qualitative methodology grounded in an interpretive case study framework. Data were gathered via digital participant observation, comprehensive interviews, and document analysis involving 12 participants, comprising educational content creators and active TikTok users in higher education settings. Thematic data analysis was performed utilizing a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis framework to elucidate the interplay among visual, verbal, and auditory components in the construction of meaning. The results show three main patterns: the conflict between quick understanding and deep knowledge, the importance of emotional multimodal experiences in learning, and the negotiation of knowledge authority in changing digital spaces. These results indicate that learning via TikTok encompasses not only cognitive aspects but also intricate emotional, aesthetic, and social dimensions. This study theoretically enhances multimodal discourse analysis by integrating users' subjective experiences, while practically informing the advancement of critical digital literacy and the design of social media-based learning. Moreover, this study facilitates additional investigation into algorithmic dynamics, digital identity, and the evolution of learning methodologies within platform-centric contexts.

Keywords: Digital Literacy; Knowledge Representation; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Multimodal Experience; Social Media-Based Learning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The learning landscape has changed a lot in the last few years, especially with the rise of short-video-based social media like TikTok. This platform has changed from a place to have fun to a place where knowledge can be made and shared in a lively way. In different types of schools, both formal and informal, students and teachers have started to use TikTok as a different way to learn that is shorter, more visual, and easier to get to, particularly in language learning contexts (Jumaat et al., 2025). This phenomenon is manifest in daily practices, where students not only engage with brief educational content but also actively recreate knowledge in innovative video formats.

From the point of view of users, especially Generation Z, learning through TikTok is very different from learning in a traditional classroom. Preliminary observations and exploratory interviews with university students indicated that they comprehend certain concepts more effectively through the simultaneous integration of visuals, concise text, music, and narration. Nonetheless, significant inquiries emerge concerning the representation, simplification, or potential distortion of knowledge within concise video

formats. This complexity shows that making sense of TikTok content isn't just about language; it's also about how different semiotic resources, like images, sound, movement, and text, work together. When you look at this research in a bigger picture, you can see how important it is. TikTok is becoming more and more popular as a way to learn around the world. This shows that it has a lot of potential to help with digital literacy and technology-based learning, as evidenced by growing student engagement with multimodal content in higher education contexts (Alharbi & Alghamdi, 2026). Similar trends can be seen in Indonesia, where there is a lot of educational content about language, science, and social issues. However, with this potential come real problems with the quality of information, how meaning is made, and how algorithms affect what content is seen. Consequently, comprehending the construction and representation of educational discourse within this novel media ecosystem is imperative.

Recent research has investigated TikTok in educational settings and through multimodal discourse analysis. Some studies emphasize identity construction and value formation via multimodal elements, whereas others concentrate on the structural patterns of instructional discourse in brief videos. Furthermore, multimodal annotation frameworks have been created to encapsulate the intricacies of audio-visual interactions. Yet, numerous studies are confined to evaluating content effectiveness, conducting general analyses, or examining semiotic structures, without thoroughly investigating users' subjective experiences and the social processes that shape the construction and interpretation of knowledge. Consequently, a substantial research gap persists, especially regarding the construction of knowledge representation in TikTok educational content through intricate multimodal practices and the ways users interpret and navigate such information in their daily lives. These aspects of experience, interpretation, and social processes have garnered insufficient attention, particularly in Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), which focuses on power dynamics, ideology, and the construction of meaning.

In light of this context, this study seeks to conduct a critical analysis of the representation of knowledge in TikTok educational content utilizing a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) framework. The emphasis is on the interplay of visual, verbal, and auditory components in meaning construction, as well as the production and negotiation of educational discourse by both creators and audiences. In theory, this study helps to advance multimodal discourse analysis in the context of modern digital media. In practice, it provides guidance for the formulation of more analytical, contemplative, and significant social media-based learning methodologies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The phenomenon of learning through TikTok cannot be perceived solely as a change in medium; it signifies a transformation in the production, representation, and interpretation of knowledge within digital social interactions. In this context, theoretical inquiry serves as a framework for analyzing the construction of learning experiences, communicative practices, and power dynamics within short-form, multimodal video content. This study utilizes three primary theoretical frameworks: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), multimodal literacy in digital communication, and social constructivist learning theory. These frameworks collectively illuminate the dimensions of meaning, experience, and social processes intrinsic to the phenomenon under investigation.

The initial framework, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), constitutes the principal foundation of this study. MCDA is based on the idea that meaning is made not only through spoken language but also through the interaction of different semiotic modes, such as visual, auditory, gestural, and spatial elements. This approach has been increasingly utilized for the analysis of intricate social media platforms like TikTok, which amalgamate various communicative elements concurrently (Grzenkiewicz & Wildfeuer, 2025; Harianja et al., 2025; Sburlan & Bucos, 2026). Moreover, Zhao and Machin (2026), in Social Semiotics, contend that digital platforms mold discursive structures via visual and algorithmic logics that affect the production and consumption of meaning. Li and Guo (2024) in *Discourse, Context & Media* support this view by showing that short-form video

content often changes reality by using selective and broken representational strategies. MCDA goes beyond just looking at how messages are sent. It also looks at how these representations represent certain ideologies, such as how knowledge is made easier to understand, made more popular, or even changed.

Nevertheless, MCDA necessitates augmentation by a framework that considers how individuals acquire the ability to interpret and generate meaning in multimodal contexts. In this context, the theory of multimodal literacy in digital communication is particularly pertinent. Recent studies show that people who use social media, especially younger people, are not just passive consumers. They are also active agents who make meaning by combining text, images, and sound (Kholida et al., 2025; Lacasa et al., 2025; Makinde et al., 2025). In *New Media & Society*, Scolari (2022) stresses that modern digital literacy is inherently transmedia, meaning that users must be able to use more than one type of representation at the same time. In the meantime, Kress (2021) talks about modern multimodality and says that meaning in digital media is basically "designed meaning" that comes from careful and planned semiotic choices. From the participants' viewpoint, comprehension of educational TikTok content frequently arises not solely from verbal narration but also from visual representation, musical elements, and editing rhythm, all of which influence emotional engagement and interpretative processes.

This study employs social constructivist learning theory to enhance the understanding of how knowledge is socially negotiated in digital environments. This viewpoint asserts that knowledge is not conveyed in a linear fashion but is instead developed through social interaction, personal experience, and reflective processes. Recent research by Rodas-Coloma and Cabezas-González (2026) in *Frontiers in Education* shows that TikTok creates a participatory learning environment where users can both produce and consume knowledge at the same time. Montag et al. (2021), in *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, similarly underscore the influence of algorithm-driven platforms on social interaction and learning patterns via engagement mechanisms. In practice, users acquire knowledge not solely from the content itself but also through interactions, including comments, remixing, and video reproduction. This demonstrates that the meaning of knowledge is dynamic, collective, and perpetually negotiated.

These three approaches have different but complementary focuses when compared to each other. MCDA emphasizes the structure and ideology of discourse, multimodal literacy stresses individuals' abilities to interpret messages, and social constructivism underscores the significance of social interaction in knowledge formation. This study employs MCDA as its principal analytical framework, aiming to elucidate the construction of knowledge representations through diverse semiotic modes and the dynamics of power relations and ideological influences within educational TikTok content. The other two frameworks provide additional viewpoints to enhance comprehension of participants' experiences and the overarching social dynamics associated with these practices.

The conceptual framework of this study asserts that educational TikTok content represents a domain wherein the significance of knowledge is formulated through multimodal interaction, influenced by users' literacy skills and digital social dynamics. The data are consequently interpreted as dynamic social practices that not only illustrate the transmission of knowledge but also its experience, negotiation, and reproduction by users within the continually changing realm of digital media.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a qualitative methodology through an interpretative case study framework. This approach is chosen because of the research topic's focus on a deep understanding of the processes by which knowledge is conveyed in educational TikTok content, processes that are fundamentally contextual, dynamic, and laden with meaning. A case study design allows the researcher to investigate the phenomenon comprehensively within authentic contexts, especially in analyzing the dynamics of learning practices in short-form video-based digital environments. Additionally, this methodology corresponds with the research aims, which emphasize the analysis of participants' lived experiences, their processes of meaning-making, and the social dynamics that influence these interactions.

The participant selection strategy employs purposive sampling, predicated on the premise that participants are directly engaged in both the creation and consumption of educational content on TikTok. This study included twelve participants: six educational TikTok content creators and six active users (university students) who frequently engage with educational content. The criteria for inclusion were: (1) active TikTok use for at least the previous year; (2) prior experience in creating or consuming educational content; and (3) willingness to engage in in-depth interviews. The research was conducted in the realm of higher education in Indonesia, concentrating on students from two public and private universities, with TikTok as the principal digital platform for interaction.

Three main ways were used to collect data: digital participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Digital participant observation entailed a methodical analysis of educational TikTok content generated by participants and notable accounts from January to March 2026. The researcher recorded important parts of the content, such as the visuals, the story structure, the audio features, and the ways that users interacted with it, like comments and audience responses. In-depth interviews were performed in a semi-structured format to investigate participants' subjective experiences in the creation and interpretation of educational content. All interviews were conducted with participants' consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Document analysis also involved gathering and reviewing TikTok videos, captions, and user comments as additional data sources.

The data analysis in this study employs Thematic Analysis as formulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), a well-established and adaptable methodology for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data. This technique is especially effective for examining interview transcripts and observational data. The analytical process consisted of multiple stages: (1) data familiarization via repeated readings of interview transcripts and observation notes; (2) initial coding to discern pertinent units of meaning; (3) theme development by aggregating codes into more comprehensive categories; (4) reviewing and refining themes to guarantee internal consistency and coherence; and (5) defining and naming themes to conceptually encapsulate participants' experiential patterns and meaning-making processes. NVivo 14 software was used to organize, code, and show how themes were related to each other in order to make the analysis easier.

Four important criteria made sure that the data was reliable. Credibility was established via data triangulation, incorporating interviews, observations, and document analysis, alongside member checking with participants. Transferability was accomplished by offering detailed, contextualized accounts of the research environment and subjects. The research process was systematically documented, which is often called an audit trail, to keep it reliable. Confirmability was achieved by upholding transparency in the interpretative process and undertaking critical self-reflection to mitigate potential researcher bias.

Ethical considerations were regarded as a fundamental aspect of this study. All participants received detailed information about the research objectives and were obligated to provide informed consent prior to the collection of data. To keep participants' identities secret, codes or fake names were used. Additionally, the utilization of data from the TikTok platform conformed to digital ethics principles, encompassing user privacy and content ownership. The study was carried out in accordance with established standards of academic integrity and ethical responsibility.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The data analysis in this study employed a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) framework, allowing the researcher to interpret participants' experiences as intricate social practices, rather than mere content consumption, but as a process of constructing, experiencing, and negotiating knowledge. The coding and interpretation process revealed three interrelated themes: (1) Instant Understanding vs. Depth of Knowledge, (2) Body, Emotion, and Aesthetics as a Medium of Learning, and (3) Negotiation of Knowledge Authority in Digital Space. These three themes do not exist in

isolation; instead, they operate within a persistent tension among ease, speed, and complexity. The initial phenomenon arose from the participants' encounters with educational TikTok content characterized by its rapid pace and brevity. Most of the content in the observation presented complex ideas in 30 to 60 seconds, with a structure that was very dense and went straight to the point. This situation makes it feel like you're learning quickly, but it also makes you question things. A student (P3) said:

"Sometimes I think, 'Oh yes, I get it,' but then when I'm asked more deeply, I get confused. It's like I only get it on the surface." This experience shows that there is a paradox between feeling like you understand something right away and not having a lot of depth to the idea. TikTok's format makes it easy to oversimplify meaning. In some cases, participants even figured out that they remembered "the way of explaining" a concept, but not the concept itself. Another person who took part (P7), a creator, also talked about this problem: "It has to be simplified, whether you like it or not, because if it's too detailed, people will skip it. But yes, sometimes the original meaning gets lost." This shows that knowledge representation is not just about how to deliver it; it is also the result of a compromise between algorithms, audience attention, and time limits. Knowledge is no longer just passed on; it is now something that is negotiated. The second theme shows that the learning that happens on TikTok isn't just cognitive; it's also very much affected by emotional and aesthetic factors. In a lot of the content we saw, the creators used facial expressions, voice intonation, background music, and quick editing to get people interested. One of the participants (P1) said:

"It sticks with me more if the teacher is expressive and uses funny examples. It doesn't feel like studying anymore." In the meantime, another participant (P5) said: "Sometimes it's not the material that interests me and keeps me watching; it's the way they talk, the music, or the vibes." These results show that knowledge is built through a full sensory experience, not just through words or text. In this case, the creator's body (gestures, facial expressions) and aesthetic elements become part of the language. But this experience isn't completely stable either. Several people said they weren't sure if they were being helped or distracted. One student (P9) said: "Sometimes too many effects make me forget what I'm reading, but if there aren't any, it gets boring." This tension shows that aesthetics in TikTok can both add to and hide meaning.

The third theme is about how people on TikTok see credibility and knowledge authority. TikTok doesn't have clear institutional boundaries like formal academic spaces do. Instead, anyone can be a teacher. During the interview, one of the people (P2) said: "I don't always know if they're an expert or not, but the way they say it makes me believe it." At the same time, a creator (P8) gave a more critical response: "I often wonder if I'm really teaching or just making people feel like they understand. On TikTok, what matters is engagement." This statement shows that the way to get power has changed from expertise to performance. Credibility is no longer based only on academic background; it is also based on how well you can tell a story that is interesting and relatable. But the people who took part were not completely passive either. Several showed that they were thoughtful and doubtful. A student (P6) said: "Now that I know how to check educational content from other sources, I always do it because I'm afraid of getting it wrong." This shows that the digital world is a place where people negotiate all the time, weighing trust against doubt.

To elucidate the interrelation among the findings, the three principal themes discussed above serve not only as analytical categories but also as a network of interconnected meanings. Each theme signifies a distinct layer of experience, encompassing the cognitive comprehension of knowledge, the emotional resonance it evokes, and the social negotiation it entails within digital contexts. During the analysis, the researcher discovered that the boundaries between themes are not fixed; instead, they overlap and intersect in the participants' actual practices. To organize this complexity more clearly, the following is a thematic table that shows how the main themes, sub-themes, and key meanings from the data are related to each other. The purpose of this table is not to make the participants' experiences easier to understand, but to help readers understand the meaning dynamics that have been described in the previous sections.

Table 1. Thematic Framework of Findings.

Main Theme	Subtheme	Key Meaning
Instant Understanding vs. Depth	Simplification and the Illusion of Understanding	Knowledge as a superficial representation
Body and Aesthetics in Learning	Emotion, Visuals, and Performance	Meaning is constructed multimodally through sensory and emotional experience
Negotiation of Authority	Credibility, Algorithms, and Skepticism	Knowledge as perpetually negotiated social practice

These three themes show that learning on TikTok is not just about getting information; it's also about finding a balance between speed and depth, between engaging and meaningful, and between trusting and doubting. The immediate comprehension in the first theme is frequently bolstered by the aesthetic allure in the second theme, while concurrently being challenged within the framework of epistemic authority in the third theme. Consequently, the results of this research do not lead to a definitive conclusion; instead, they create an opportunity for contemplation regarding the representation of knowledge in the age of short video as a fluid, ambiguous, and perpetually negotiated process among its users.

Discussion

This study identifies three interconnected key findings: (1) the tension between immediate comprehension and profound knowledge, (2) the function of the body, emotion, and aesthetics as mediums of learning, and (3) the negotiation of epistemic authority within TikTok's digital environment. These results show that learning in the age of short videos is not just a change in media; it is also a change in how knowledge is created, accessed, and understood.

The first finding indicates that TikTok generates an "illusion of understanding," wherein users perceive they comprehend a concept without achieving profound mastery. From the standpoint of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), this phenomenon is perceived as a consequence of meticulously curated representation processes, wherein meaning is diminished, simplified, and tailored to the principles of the attention economy. Recent research suggests that platforms such as TikTok tend to promote the creation of discourse that is rapid, emotive, and readily comprehensible, frequently sacrificing complexity (Zhao & Machin, 2026). In this context, knowledge is no longer depicted as a cohesive entity, but rather as fragmented and consumable components. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Chen and Gong (2025), which demonstrates that social media content frequently creates "alternative realities" through selective representation techniques. However, this study also adds to previous research by focusing on how users subjectively experience things and how they realize the limits of their understanding. This awareness indicates that users are not completely confined by algorithmic logic, but rather possess the critical ability to interrogate their consumption. So, TikTok users not only make knowledge, but they also question it within the app.

The second finding underscores that learning on TikTok is multimodal and affective, with the body, emotion, and aesthetics serving as essential components of the meaning-making process. According to Kress and van Leeuwen's theory, meaning in verbal language never exists in isolation; it always arises from the interplay of various semiotic modes. Recent studies indicate that TikTok content depends on the amalgamation of visual, auditory, and performative components to foster significant emotional engagement (Li & Huang, 2026; Karjalainen, 2026). This elucidates why participants in this study found comprehension facilitated by bodily expressions, vocal intonation, and engaging visual elements. But this finding also shows an important paradox: the same things that make things clearer can also make them less clear. Too much focus on aesthetics can change the focus from content to form and from meaning to sensation. In this context, learning transforms into an experience that is "felt" rather than

"understood." From a social constructivist viewpoint, this phenomenon illustrates that knowledge is constructed not solely through cognitive interaction, but also through emotional and sensory experiences. TikTok alters both the methodology and the experience of learning for individuals. This is an important part of the study because it helps us understand digital literacy better. Literacy is not just being able to read texts; it is also being able to navigate complex multimodal experiences, a capacity that becomes increasingly central as TikTok continues to reshape language learning and digital education (Punkhoom et al., 2025).

The third theme shows a big change in who has the most knowledge. TikTok no longer looks at someone's academic background to decide if they are credible. Instead, it looks at how well they can tell interesting and convincing stories. Within the context of MCDA, this signifies a transformation in power dynamics in discourse production, transitioning from formal institutions to individuals possessing digital visibility. Research conducted by Zhao and Machin (2026) indicates that social media algorithms significantly influence discourse by favoring content that is visually and emotionally compelling over that which is scientifically precise. This dynamic is further reflected in educational TikTok communities, where platform culture shapes how knowledge is presented and received (Hernandez & Cruz, 2025). Flügge and Ongenaert (2026) present analogous findings, underscoring that portrayals on social media frequently mirror specific ideological and economic interests. What is particularly noteworthy in this study is the emergence of digital skepticism among participants. They don't completely trust the authority given, but they do check information with other sources. This shows that users are in a middle ground between trust and doubt, and between acceptance and negotiation. In this setting, the authority of knowledge is dynamic and perpetually challenged. Knowledge is no longer controlled by institutions, but it is still influenced by power. It exists in a space of competition that is shaped by algorithms, aesthetics, and social interaction, reflecting broader shifts in how social media has come to influence the evolution of modern discourse (Bakhov et al., 2026).

This study shows that the way knowledge is shown on TikTok can't be understood in a straight line. It arises from intricate interactions among discourse structures (MCDA), multimodal experiences (digital literacy), and social processes (constructivism). This study makes three important contributions: (1) it shows how subjective experience plays a role in how people use digital discourse, which is something that other studies have missed; (2) it shows that digital learning is not just about thinking, but also about feeling and doing; and (3) it shows that knowledge authority in the digital age is not fixed and can change. The researcher's reflexivity is essential for comprehending these findings. The researcher is not completely detached from the phenomenon within the digital society; rather, they are actively engaged in the practices of content consumption and production. The socio-cultural background of the participants, especially as a younger generation accustomed to speed and visuality, also affects how they understand knowledge. Consequently, the interpretation in this study is not impartial; it is the product of an interaction among data, theory, and the researcher's perspective. In the end, this study shows that TikTok is not just another way to learn; it is also a place where knowledge changes in a big way, becoming faster, more visual, more emotional, and more open to being simplified and distorted. Instead of seeing this phenomenon as either good or bad, this study wants us to understand how complicated it is: that behind short videos is a constant and changing process of negotiating meaning, identity, and power.

5. CONCLUSION

Research findings suggest that the portrayal of knowledge in educational TikTok content does not follow a linear and straightforward process; rather, it is constructed through intricate and extensively negotiated dynamics. The three main meaning patterns that came out show that learning in the age of short-form video goes back and forth between being easy to get to and being open to change. Knowledge is no longer a stable structure; instead, it is a fluid social practice that its users constantly produce, exchange, and question. Based on these results, this study presents a novel perspective that TikTok-based digital learning is not only an educational phenomenon but also a cultural and

epistemological one. The experiences of the participants indicate that comprehension of a concept is no longer exclusively contingent upon the profundity of the material, but also on the manner in which that knowledge is perceived through aesthetics, emotion, and performativity. In this context, digital literacy must be comprehended more expansively as the ability to traverse the intricacies of multimodal experiences, while concurrently adopting a critical perspective towards ever-evolving knowledge authorities.

This research conceptually enhances the field of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis by integrating the dimension of users' subjective experience as a significant element in digital discourse analysis. In practical terms, these findings are very important for a number of different groups of people. The findings of this research underscore the imperative for educational policymakers to incorporate multimodal literacy and critical literacy into the curriculum, ensuring that learners possess not only the ability to access information but also the capacity to interpret and evaluate it critically. This research underscores the necessity for educators and curriculum developers to create learning materials that are not only informative but also consider aesthetic elements and emotional engagement, all while maintaining profound meaning. Moreover, for the general populace, especially the youth, these findings underscore the imperative of enhancing digital literacy to maintain comprehension quality in the context of a swift and disjointed information flow. Nonetheless, this study possesses several limitations that require critical acknowledgment. The research focus, confined to the realm of higher education in Indonesia and characterized by a relatively small and homogeneous participant group, limits the generalizability of the findings to wider contexts. Furthermore, the temporal limitations of the research have resulted in an inadequate exploration of algorithmic dynamics and the variability of TikTok content. This study prioritizes user experience, indicating that the aspect of content creation from the viewpoint of professional creators remains inadequately examined.

Recognizing these constraints creates opportunities for more extensive and comprehensive research. Future research may employ a broader array of methodological frameworks, including long-term digital ethnography or big data-driven analysis, to systematically elucidate algorithmic patterns. Extending the research context to diverse age groups, cultural backgrounds, or geographical regions is essential for examining variations in experience and meaning. Moreover, subsequent research may investigate ideological dimensions, platform economics, and the enduring effects of short-form video-based knowledge consumption on cognitive processes and identity development. So, this conclusion doesn't just end the research; it also opens up a space for thought about how TikTok's ease and speed hide a complicated process that affects how people understand the world. Comprehending this process is essential to guarantee that digital transformation in education yields not merely extensive access, but also profound and analytical understanding.

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