

# Subject and Abject: TikTok as a Playing Space in Constructing Self-Identity for Women in the Digital Era

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## ABSTRACT

### Keywords:

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TikTok

This article examines the role of TikTok as a playing space in relation to women's identity construction, focusing on the concept of "subject" and "abjects" inspired by Julia Kristeva's thinking. TikTok is an increasingly popular social media platform, not only a medium for creative expression, but also a dynamic space where women negotiate, construct and deconstruct their identities through the content they produce and consume. They utilize platform features, such as challenges, filters, and trends, to shape and display their identities. This article uses netnography methods to analyze digital cultural practices on TikTok. Observing female users interacting, creating, and responding to content related to self-identity. Data were collected through participant observation of activities on the platform, analysis of video content, and comments that emerged, to understand the dynamics of identity formation in a digital context. The research findings reveal that TikTok functions as a liminal space where the boundaries between "subjects" (identities that display their selfhood) and "abjects" (identities that are rejected or considered taboo) become blurred or fluid, allowing women to explore complex aspects of themselves that are often marginalized in traditional social contexts. Women as active subjects, produce content for their own pleasure, not to please the male gaze, but this becomes problematic when they follow the logic of the media in presenting themselves. This article makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of gender identity construction in the digital era, as well as the implications of social media as a play space that facilitates the construction of self-identity.

## 1. 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. 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. 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 contents.

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. TikTok allows them to engage in creative forms by creating content that is part of the identity game.

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. 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. There are many cases where women experience criticism, judgment, or even harassment that can affect the way they see themselves.

In this context, the concept of 'subject' and 'abject' introduced by Julia Kristeva is appropriate to unpack this dynamic. Kristeva introduces ideas about identity ambivalence related to subjective experiences (subjects) and how individuals are often considered as 'others' (abjects) 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. However, women are faced with various challenges, including public judgment, stigma, and cyberbullying. 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 abjects that are often imposed by social responses to their actions in digital spaces.

Using Julia Kristeva's thinking, the concepts of subject and abject 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 abjects reflect the position of individuals who are ignored, sidelined, or alienated by societal norms. 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-abject 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 abject.

This study not only expands academic discourse but also provides new analytical tools to understand the construction of women's identities in the algorithm era. This study aims to explore TikTok as a play space that facilitates women in the process of constructing their self-identity in the digital realm. This study will analyze the dynamics of the self as a subject or abject practiced by women in digital interactions on TikTok, and the TikTok platform provides a unique play space in their efforts to express and shape their identities in the digital era. This background 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. This study is not only relevant to academics, but also to gender activists, policy makers, and social media users who care about the issue of women's identity construction in cyberspace. By dismantling the abjection mechanism on TikTok, we can understand how digital play spaces a tool of liberation can be as well as oppression—and how women respond to this dilemma through creativity.

## 2. Method

This 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. A combination of methods was chosen to capture the complexity between subject agency and platform structure. Netnography method (digital ethnography) to analyze digital cultural practices on TikTok. Observing female users interacting, creating, and responding to content related to self-identity. Data was collected through participant observation of activities on the platform, video content analysis, and comments that emerged, to understand the dynamics of identity formation in a digital context.

This study will analyze TikTok content produced by Indonesian women with the following criteria: content that displays themes of the body, sexuality, or gender identity, content that triggers public debate (viral or considered controversial), content with the use of creative features (filters, sound effects, unique editing), has elements of abjection (negative narrative comments, shadowbanned content). Content that meets the criteria will be analyzed visually (clothes, body movements, background), verbally (narration, on-screen text, hashtags), audio/sound (song choices, sound effects). For example, content about body positivity that displays background music with beats as an effort to reflect the transformation of abject (fat body) into a source of strength (subject). Theo Van Leeuwen and Gunther Kress's Multimodal Semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) is used to help analyze this. Three multimodal levels are Representational: the female body/identity is displayed (e.g., close-up face vs. full body), use of filters/effects to modify reality. Interactive level: gaze (direct gaze into the camera vs. avoiding), use of music/sound to build emotions. Composition level: video layout (scene cuts, transitions). Viewer comments in response to the content will also be analyzed to identify the possibility of strengthening the dominant discourse, the presence of resistance, or the formation of alternative discourses. Data was collected by screen recording and digital archiving. Tools such as TAGS for TikTok help to collect metadata (hashtags, engagement metrics).

## 3. 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.

### 3.1 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 abject (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:

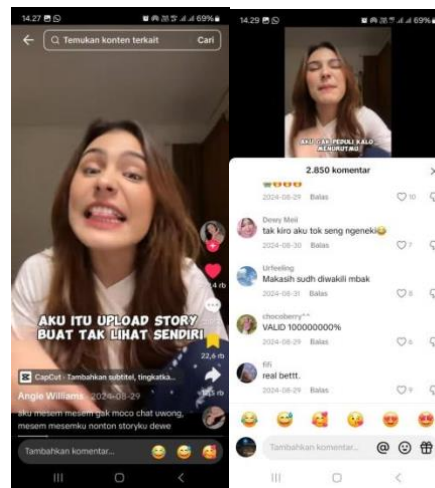


Figure 1. 1a TikTok @angie wiilliams; 1b. viewer's comments

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.

Interactive level: The woman in this screenshot is looking directly into the camera. This direct eye contact creates a direct connection with the viewer. It builds a sense of engagement, honesty, and as if she is speaking personally to each individual watching. This direct gaze is "demanding," meaning it demands attention and a response from the viewer. Use of sound to build emotion: The woman speaks loudly, using the Suroboyoan dialect of Javanese.

Composition level: Video Layout: TikTok generally uses quick cuts and various types of transitions to maintain the pace and attention of the viewer. Other Textual and Visual Elements: This screenshot layout also displays other important compositional elements: Overlay Text: There is large white text with a black outline: "AKU UPLOAD A STORY BUAT TAK LIHAT SENDIRI". This text is the main visual focus besides the woman's face and conveys the video's key message. Account Information and Date: At the bottom left is the account information "Angie Williams" and the upload date "2024-08-29". This provides context about the creator and when the content was uploaded. Additional Information (Caption): Below the account information is smaller text: "aku mesem

mesemngak moco chat uwong, mesem mesemku nonton storyku dewe". This provides additional context or explanation about the content of the video. Interaction Icons: On the right are typical TikTok icons such as other users' profile photos, heart icons (likes), comment icons, share icons, and music icons. The placement of these icons is a standard part of TikTok's layout and facilitates user interaction.

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. Interpretation: This comment indicates a very high level of agreement with what is conveyed in the video. Chocoberry feels that the content is very true, relevant, or in accordance with his views. The fourth comment from an account named eri real bettt. (2024-08-29): "real betttt." Language: Using English ("real") and adding emphasis with the repetition of the letter "t" ("betttt"). Interpretation: This comment also indicates agreement or affirmation of the authenticity or truth of the video content. "Real" indicates that eri feels that what is conveyed is real or credible.



Fig 2. 2a TikTok @dithakurnia; 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.

At the interactive level: The woman in this video is looking directly at the camera. This direct gaze creates a direct connection with the audience, as if she is conveying a personal message. This gaze is "demanding," that is, attracting attention and inviting a response from the audience. Use of music/to build emotion: music or sound plays an important role in building atmosphere, conveying emotion, and reinforcing verbal messages in TikTok videos.

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"). Interpretation: This short comment is ambiguous without a clear video context. However, it can be interpreted as a response to video content that is considered difficult to explain, convince, or understand by others. There may be differences of opinion or perspective that are difficult to bridge regarding the topic of the video. The third comment from the account py.pheye (2024-05-29): "Entertaining myself when illnesses pile up. It's really funny 🤔" Language: Using informal Indonesian. This comment indicates that the video provides entertainment for py.pheye, especially when he is not feeling well ("illnesses pile up"). The laughing face emoticon ("😂") indicates that the video is considered funny. Interpretation: This comment focuses on the entertainment function of the video. Py.pheye finds the content to be positive and funny, which helps him cope with unpleasant conditions.





Fig 3. 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 interactive level: The woman in the video is not looking directly at the camera. Her gaze is slightly to the side, creating a sense of indirect engagement with the viewer. This averted gaze can arouse curiosity or create the impression of interacting with something off-camera (in this case, perhaps referring to the "real world" mentioned in the text). Use of music/sound to build emotion: the music icon (musical notes) at the bottom left of the screen indicates the presence of music or sound. Music or sound plays an important role in building atmosphere and conveying emotion in TikTok videos. The title of the song "Roy Goeltom - Roy G" may provide a slight clue as to the genre or mood of the music.

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.

### 3.2. Discussion

Julia Kristeva's abjection theory (1982) in Powers of Horror provides a critical lens to understand the construction of women's identity on TikTok, not only formed through self-affirmation, but also through the rejection of things considered taboo, inappropriate, or deviant from social norms.

Kristeva's concept of the abject—something that is both attractive and disgusting, such as a woman's body that is considered "excessive" or emotions that are expressed excessively—can be seen in the way women on TikTok deal with praise and body-shaming, support and cyberbullying, or empowering trends versus content that is considered "excessive".

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 an 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:

- 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).
- Validation: The audience feels that what they feel or think has been represented or justified by the video content (example: Urfeeling and chocoberry\*\*\*) comments.
- Agreement/Affirmation: The audience agrees with the message or information conveyed in the video (example: eri real bettt. comment).

These comments indicate that the video is likely to be relatable or touches on common experiences felt by many people, thus triggering an emotional response and sense of connection among the audience. The use 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 (old 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. For example, a woman who deliberately shows her body such as her arms, stomach, and others. The participatory nature and autonomy of social media users have created a new trend where individuals become freer to express themselves.

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. The 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 (online) 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). However, the tug-of-war between freedom and control always exists in cyberspace.

### **Celebrating the Object: Subversive Aesthetics**

This practice reflects the ritualization of the object (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:

- Health Concern: WWH's comment highlights the health aspect, which may be a response to the body representation or topic discussed in the video.
- Difficulty in Communicating/Understanding: youronlymytha's comment suggests difficulty in communicating or understanding something related to the video.
- 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**

The discussion of the construction of women's identity on TikTok presents a complex dynamic, where the concept of subjectivity and the potential for abjection intersect with the phenomenon of 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 "object" (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). Further research that specifically analyzes women's self-representation and gaze dynamics on TikTok will be essential to understanding the complex nuances of this phenomenon. 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.

#### 4. Conclusion

TikTok is an ambiguous playground, simultaneously liberating and oppressive. The construction of women's identity here is not a linear process, but rather a continuous process with abjects choreographed by algorithms. This finding requires a redefinition of digital autonomy in patriarchal media architecture. This in-depth discussion highlights the complexity of women's identity construction in the era of social media, while challenging the simplistic narrative of "digital empowerment". This study reveals that TikTok operates as a dialectical arena where women actively construct their own identities (subjects) while negotiating with the abjection mechanisms embedded in the platform's architecture. The key findings of the study can be summarized as follows: TikTok as a play space: ambivalence between freedom and control; TikTok as an arena for the struggle for women's identity construction; women celebrate abjects: subversive aesthetics and the dialectic of subject and abject in paradoxical self-objectification.

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