

Analysis of Virtual Communication through TikTok Streaks in Building Closeness among Generation Z in Yogyakarta

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Social Closeness; Social Presence;
Virtual Communication; Generation Z;
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TikTok has emerged as a prominent social media platform in Indonesia, boasting the second-largest user base globally at 194,37 million, alongside several functionalities including voice and video recording, editing tools, TikTok Shop, Direct Message, and the recent addition of TikTok Streaks. Generation Z utilizes the TikTok Streaks function for virtual communication, fostering a sense of social presence through the flame icon, which subconsciously enhances interpersonal ties in digital environments. This study seeks to ascertain the function of the TikTok Streaks feature in fostering social intimacy and social presence within Generation Z. This study utilizes virtual ethnography with an interpretive framework, collecting data through virtual ethnographic observation at four levels: media space, media document, object, and media experience; in-depth interviews with 15 students in Yogyakarta; and documentation studies employing social presence theory, which identifies three primary indicators: social context, online communication, and interactivity. The study's findings indicate that interactions within the TikTok Streaks media in a social context establish a social monitoring system that enhances interpersonal ties among TikTok users, despite the absence of substantive talks. Frequent engagement with the TikTok Streak feature, utilizing symbols like stickers and emoticons, can enhance feelings of intimacy and social presence in online communication. Interactivity emphasizes the reciprocal feedback among TikTok users, fostering a sense of continuous connection even through minimal communication. This study comes to the conclusion that TikTok Streaks has established a new standard of intimacy in the age of digital communication by developing a new means of preserving social connectivity in virtual places.

1. Introduction

The way people build, maintain and evaluate social relationships has changed since the advent of digital communication. Social media is no longer used solely to disseminate information and entertainment; it now also functions as a communication space where people interact with one another regularly, flexibly and across geographical boundaries (Yurisman, 2025). The development of social media, particularly TikTok, demonstrates that this platform can no longer be understood merely as a short-video-based entertainment app. Quantitatively, the scale of TikTok usage is also immense; DataLoka.id indicates that TikTok had approximately 194,37 million users in Indonesia by Juli 2025 (Nouvan, 2026). These figures confirm that TikTok is not a peripheral platform, but one of the primary digital spaces to seek entertainment, trends, self-expression and social connections (Wahyuni & Fajarini, 2025).

From the outset of its growth, TikTok has evolved into a digital space that integrates content consumption, creative production, and social interaction within a single platform architecture (Sulistia, D. A., & Simamora, 2023). This is evident from its feature structure, which centres not only on the 'For You' feed, a personalised feed based on user interests and engagement, but also on a range of creative features such as camera tools, effects, sounds, editing tools, Duet, Stitch, Stories, LIVE, and content creation tools that enable users to easily produce, modify, and respond to others' content. With this array of features, TikTok functions not merely as a viewing platform, but as a participatory ecosystem that encourages users to continuously watch, create, imitate, remix, and interact (Sri et al., 2022).

TikTok's presence is becoming increasingly prominent among young people, particularly Gen Z, as the platform offers three features that align perfectly with this generation's communication culture: a high degree of personalisation, low barriers to content creation, and rapid interaction (Pratama, 2025). The 'For You' feed immediately presents users with content that feels relevant to their preferences, whilst features such as voice, effects, text, and editing templates allow for self-expression without the need for complex technical skills. At the same time, participatory features like Duet and Stitch provide space for a culture of response, remixing, and user-to-user connectivity (Kustiawan et al., 2025).

As it has evolved, TikTok has also expanded its communication capabilities through the Direct Message (DM) feature. Officially, TikTok explains that DMs help users connect with friends and communities, as this feature allows users to send and receive messages and TikTok videos directly (Simanjuntak & Febriyanti, 2025). The introduction of Direct Messages is significant because it transforms TikTok from a communication space initially dominated by public video content on the homepage into a more private space for one-to-one communication. From this point, user interaction does not stop at watching, liking, or commenting, but can continue into more regular conversations in chat rooms. It is within this context that TikTok launched a new feature called Streaks in July 2024. TikTok explains that when two users, or users in a group chat, exchange messages for three consecutive days, a Streak badge will appear in their chat. This means the Streak system operates based on the consistency of daily interaction, not the depth of message content. What is maintained is not the length of the conversation, but the continuity of responses from day to day (Malinda, 2024).

The development of TikTok Streaks has transformed the way individuals build and maintain social relationships in the digital space. Communication no longer always takes place through lengthy conversations or face-to-face meetings, but also through brief, symbolic and repetitive interactions mediated by the platform (Najwa et al., 2024). As a result, TikTok Streaks serve not only as a gamification feature, but also as a virtual communication space that enables users to build interpersonal relationships through various interactive features that mark the continuity of interaction between users from day to day (Simanjuntak & Febriyanti, 2025).

In the context of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), virtual communication is defined as the process of exchanging messages that takes place in cyberspace, such that all communication occurring within this space is entirely mediated by technology and possesses several characteristics, namely: aspatial, asynchronous, acorporeal and astigmatic (Smith & Kollock, 1999). Streaks allow users to maintain social relationships without physical meetings and without having to communicate directly at the same time. Through the exchange of digital symbols such as emojis, stickers and short videos, Streaks provide a sense of presence and social connectedness even though they do not involve in-depth or face-to-face conversations. This feature utilises the flexibility of virtual communication to enable continuous and routine interaction, although it is more symbolic than communicative in nature (Utami et al., 2026). This phenomenon raises an important issue in the study of virtual communication, namely whether minimal but continuous interaction can be interpreted as a form of social closeness, or whether it merely presents a symbolic impression of connectedness (Guritno et al., 2024).

Based on the results of preliminary interviews conducted with several students, the phenomenon of using TikTok's Streaks feature amongst Generation Z, particularly students, has become an integral part of their social lives. At Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta, students maintain their relationships despite reduced face-to-face communication by keeping the 'flame' alive through

the sharing of videos, stickers, or brief reactions. This indicates that TikTok Streaks function more as a symbol of connection, even if at times merely as a routine that sustains the existence of social relationships. On the other hand, students at the State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga utilise this feature to create virtual closeness with fellow mutuals, even though communication outside of TikTok is limited. Meanwhile, at Telkom University in Bandung, Streaks are understood as a light hearted digital commitment to maintaining closeness without the need for lengthy conversations, whilst students at the University of Indonesia view them as a marker of a relationship that is not always essential for emotional closeness, but rather more of a social routine. This phenomenon demonstrates how the younger generation is increasingly relying on flexible digital interactions that are tailored to the demands of their academic and social lives (Nieżurawska, et al., 2023).

The relevance and impact of TikTok's Streaks feature have been documented in several previous studies, which form the basis of this research. A study entitled "Analisis Fitur Streak pada Tiktok terhadap Intensitas Komunikasi Antarpribadi Mahasiswa Universitas Sumatera Utara" by Gracia (2025) shows that Streaks encourage interpersonal communication, transforming what was once a rare occurrence into a daily routine. Meanwhile, the study "Pemanfaatan Fitur Streak Dalam Menjaga Hubungan Pertemanan di Aplikasi TikTok" by Rahayu et al. (2025) highlights another aspect of this phenomenon, namely the intensity of communication and the potential for addiction within TikTok's Streak feature, without delving into the symbolic role it plays in fostering social closeness. Furthermore, the journal article "Analisis Perilaku Komunikasi Pengguna Media Sosial Tik Tok" by Pratama et al. (2023) confirms that the use of TikTok is not merely viewed as entertainment, but also as a form of interpersonal communication that fosters social connections among university students. These studies generally examine TikTok in terms of the intensity of communication, the potential for addiction, and digital communication behaviour. Within the framework of virtual communication, social relationships are understood to be capable of forming even without physical presence, as users are able to adapt to the digital medium through symbols, responses, and specific communication rhythms. On the other hand, developments in Social Presence Theory also confirm that the sense of presence and connectedness in digital communication is determined not only by the medium, but by users' subjective perceptions of the presence of others in the interaction taking place.

Nevertheless, previous research has tended to treat TikTok as a platform in general, focusing primarily on measuring usage, intensity, or the behavioural impact of communication. Attention to the 'Streaks' feature as a virtual communication practice that fosters a sense of closeness remains relatively limited. Yet, Streaks serve not only as technical indicators within the app but also have the potential to symbolise the continuity of relationships between users. This is where the research gap lies: there are not yet many studies that specifically examine how simple interactions such as regularly sending emojis, stickers, or short videos to one another can be interpreted as a form of social closeness. In other words, what has not yet been extensively explored is not merely the use of TikTok, but how specific features within the platform shape its users' relational experiences.

The Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY), ranked fifth for the Digital Competitiveness Index (EV-DCI) with a score of 52.1, demonstrates a relatively strong digital performance compared to other regions outside Java, confirming that Yogyakarta possesses rapidly developing digital infrastructure and literacy, supported by high levels of academic activity, digital creativity, and a young community that is adaptable to technology (East Ventures, 2025). According to data from GoodStats.id in 2024, Yogyakarta was selected as the best city for study purposes, with a score of 67.2% (Yonatan, 2024). This makes Yogyakarta a region dominated by the younger generation, Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012 (Abdillah, 2022). This study focuses on Generation Z aged 18–21 who are building more stable social relationships, are quick to follow trends, and are actively shaping their self-identity through virtual communication, particularly among university students in Yogyakarta who possess a strong digital culture.

To examine this issue, this study employs Social Presence Theory (Short, William, & Christie, 1976), which focuses on the adaptation of classical theory to the field of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) (Tu, 2000), as its analytical framework. In this theory, social presence is not understood as something objective or determined solely by the medium, but rather as the user's subjective perception of the extent to which others feel present in the interaction. Drawing on Tu's work, social presence can be understood through three dimensions: social context, online

communication, and interactivity. This framework is relevant for explaining that TikTok Streaks function not only as technical markers within the app, but also as mechanisms that enable a sense of closeness to be formed through the continuity of messages, digital symbols, and reciprocal responses. From this perspective, closeness in virtual communication is no longer measured solely by the depth of conversational content, but also by the continuity of symbolic interaction perceived as a form of attention, presence, and connectedness.

Therefore, this study aims to analyse how virtual communication via TikTok's Streaks feature is interpreted in the formation of closeness among Generation Z in Yogyakarta, whilst identifying the role of social presence in this process. Generation Z was chosen as the focus because this group has grown up with digital culture and incorporates social media into their daily communication practices, whilst Yogyakarta was selected as the research context because it is a vibrant social space with a student population that actively engages on digital media. To gain a deeper understanding of these experiences, this study employs a qualitative approach using virtual ethnography, thereby enabling a more comprehensive analysis of the meanings, experiences, and interaction practices of users within the Streaks feature.

2. Method

This study was designed to address the question of how TikTok's Streaks feature is interpreted in the formation of closeness among Generation Z in Yogyakarta; consequently, the methodology employed focuses on exploring users' experiences, interaction practices, and subjective meanings within the digital space. The research employs a qualitative approach with a virtual ethnography design within an interpretive paradigm. The choice of virtual ethnography is based on the nature of the research subject, which takes place in cyberspace, specifically within TikTok's Direct Message feature; consequently, interactions, symbols, and communication routines must be understood as digital social practices, rather than merely technical behaviours associated with app usage. As this method is well-established in digital communication research, the explanation in this section focuses on the procedures for its application within the research context, rather than on a lengthy repetition of methodological definitions (Nasrullah, 2017).

This study was conducted in the Special Region of Yogyakarta and focused on Generation Z students who frequently use TikTok and utilise the Streaks feature. All informants were Generation Z students currently enrolled at five universities in Yogyakarta, including Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Yogyakarta, Universitas Islam Indonesia, and Universitas Ahmad Dahlan; had a history of active Streaks activity for at least 30 consecutive days; and remained in Yogyakarta throughout the duration of the study. Based on these criteria, the study involved 15 informants from five universities, with three informants from each campus. The informants' identities were fully anonymised using codes such as INF-01/UGM and INF-02/UMY to uphold research ethics.

The data sources for this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained directly from the field through virtual observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and digital documentation in the form of screenshots of the Streak interface, message content, visual symbols, and interaction traces on TikTok Direct Messages. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from scientific literature, journal articles, and previous research relevant to virtual communication, TikTok, and Social Presence Theory. The main research instrument was the researcher themselves, with the aid of interview guidelines, observation recording formats, and documentation within TikTok users' media spaces (Sugiyono, 2021).

To ensure that the results section is logically structured and consistent with the methodology, the data collection procedures are organised in the order that will also be followed in the results section, namely: (1) identification of the media space, (2) analysis of media documents, (3) observation of media objects, and (4) exploration of media experiences. The media space level is used to identify the structure and characteristics of TikTok as a platform. The media document level is used to analyse the content and messages within the Streaks feature. The media object level is used to observe

patterns of interaction and responses between users. The media experience level is used to explore the subjective meanings of these practices (Nasrullah, 2017).

Data analysis was conducted interactively using the Miles, Huberman and Saldaña model, namely through the stages of data reduction, data presentation and drawing conclusions (Miles et al., 2020). To ensure that the analysis did not remain at a descriptive level, this study employed Chih Hsiung Tu's (2000) Social Presence Theory as a framework for data categorisation. The analysis process was carried out in two stages. The first stage involved identifying initial themes from the data, such as the reasons for maintaining a streak, the form of messages sent, the perception of loss when a streak is broken, the reluctance to not reply, and the forms of attention demonstrated through digital symbols. The second stage involved mapping these themes into the three dimensions of social presence according to Tu, namely social context, online communication, and interactivity. Through this approach, the data is not merely interpreted as a habit of TikTok usage, but as a mechanism for fostering a sense of presence and closeness within virtual communication (Tu, 2000).

The validity of the data was tested through source triangulation, namely by comparing interview findings, virtual observation results, and digital documentation. This step was used to check the consistency between what the informants said and what was actually evident in their communication practices on the Streaks feature. Thus, the interpretation of virtual closeness was not based solely on the informants' subjective statements but was also supported by observable evidence of digital interaction (Rifa & Kunci, 2023).

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Results

Based on the findings of a virtual ethnographic study conducted by the researchers on Generation Z users of TikTok Streaks in Yogyakarta, it was found that the TikTok Streaks feature not only serves as an indicator of sustained interaction, but is also perceived as a marker of relationships that are maintained in the digital space (Simanjuntak & Febriyanti, 2025). This study identified that, at the media space level, TikTok as a platform supports fast, visual, and low-barrier communication, where Streaks enable routine interpersonal interaction. Users view Streaks as a symbol of relationship continuity, where the relationship is considered to remain intact as long as the flame icon remains lit. At the media document level, the content of communication within Streaks tends to be simple and symbolic, with the use of emojis, stickers, and short videos serving as sufficient communication tools to maintain the continuity of interaction. At the media object level, the interaction patterns are routine and reciprocal, with responses being crucial for maintaining the continuity of the streak, even though the form of interaction is very simple. Finally, at the level of media experience, the continuity of a streak is understood as a digital commitment that reinforces a sense of connection even in the absence of in-depth conversation, suggesting that minimal yet sustained communication can foster a sense of social closeness. These findings suggest that TikTok Streaks are shifting the way users assess social closeness, from the intensity of conversation to indicators of the continuity of digital interaction that are more focused on social routines (source: adapted by the researcher).

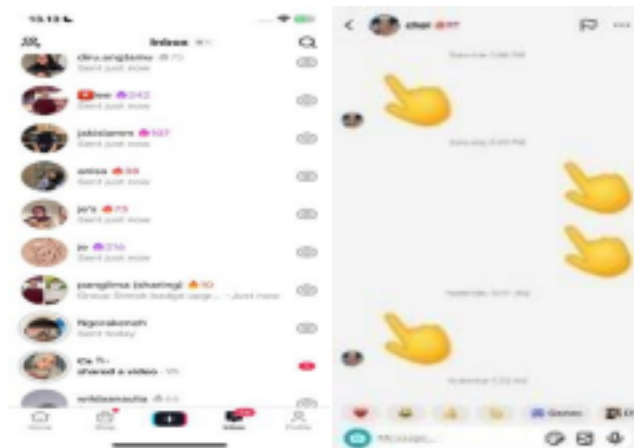


Figure 1. Documentation of Video Sharing via TikTok Direct Messages (Source: INF-1/UMY)

This symbolic form of interaction places greater emphasis on the continuity of the relationship than on the depth of verbal conversation. Most users feel that their social presence is maintained through simple and consistent messaging. For example, an unbroken streak, routine responses to one another, and consistent symbolic activities such as sending stickers or emojis serve as key indicators that their relationship is ongoing despite the absence of lengthy verbal communication. This feature has, in effect, shifted the way users measure social closeness from relationships dependent on deep conversation to digital indicators reliant on the continuity of interaction within the digital space.

In a social context, TikTok Streaks also create a kind of social monitoring system, in which users indirectly monitor and maintain their relationships. INF-2/UMY explained,

"I feel as though I'm monitoring my relationships every day. If the streak is broken, I immediately feel as though something is missing".

This suggests that using streaks as an indicator of continuous interaction allows users to sense each other's presence even in the absence of lengthy verbal communication. This is supported by a statement from INF-1/UPNVY,

"Streaks give a sense of continuity to my relationships, making me feel closer to people I don't usually talk to very often".

This leads to the understanding that streaks function as a tool for maintaining social relationships that are not directly visible, but remain significant in building closeness.

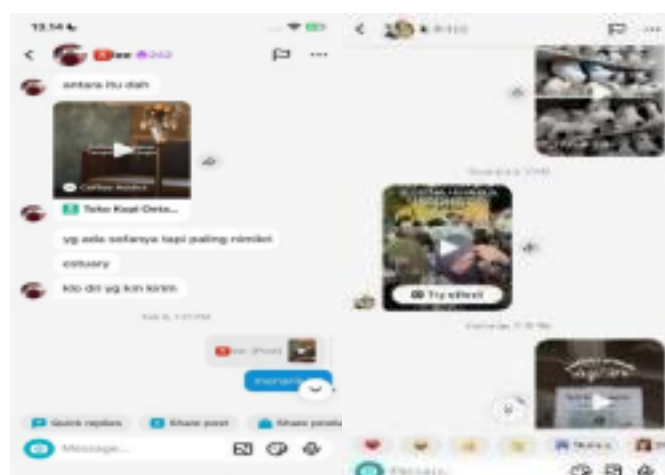


Figure 2. Documentation of Video Sharing via TikTok Direct Messages (Source: INF-2/UMY
Source: INF-1/UPNVY)

However, for some people, such as INF-2/UGM, this social monitoring system does not affect their closeness. Informant 2 stated,

“Although I maintain my streak, I don’t feel any closer to my friends. It’s just a number to me.”

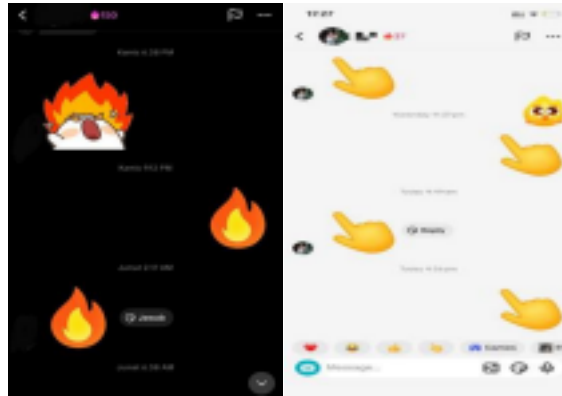


Figure 3. Documentation on the Use of Stickers in TikTok Direct Messages (Source: INF-1/UAD Source: INF-2/UGM)

This suggests that for some people, even though they maintain their streak, they do not experience any emotional change or a deeper sense of closeness with their friends. For them, streaks are more symbolic and do not have a significant impact on social closeness.

In online communication, interactions involving the exchange of symbols (emojis, stickers, short videos) have shown that even minimal communication can still foster a sense of connection. INF-2/UAD stated,

“Even though we don’t speak at length, simply sending an emoji or sticker is enough to show that we’re still connected.”

INF-3/UMY added that,

“The stickers or emojis I send are more than just symbols; they’re my way of showing care and letting my friends know I’m still there for them.”

The use of these symbols enables a strong social presence without the need for lengthy verbal conversations. This leads to the understanding that, in online communication, the continuity of interaction is the key aspect that maintains social relationships.

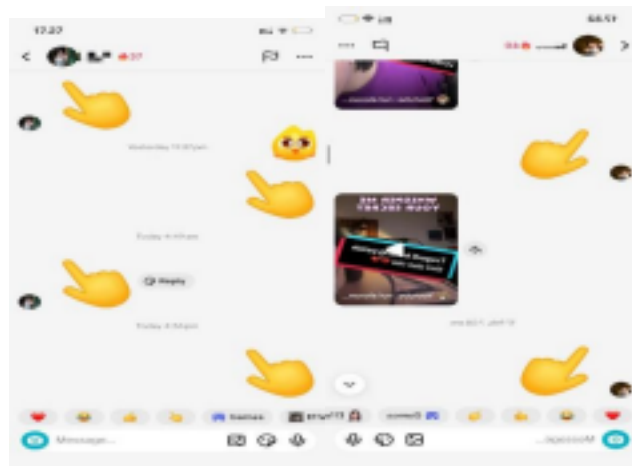


Figure 4. The TikTok streak has ended, but it can be restored/ The TikTok streak has ended and cannot be restored (Source: INF-2/UAD Source: INF-3/UMY)

Unlike INF 3 UII, she said,

"I feel that this relationship is only superficial, because all we send are emojis and stickers. It doesn't really make me feel any closer."



Figure 5. The TikTok streak has ended, but it can be restored. The TikTok streak has ended and cannot be restored (Source: INF-3/UII Source: INF-1/UMY)

This suggests that although communication via digital symbols has the power to keep relationships connected, the closeness created remains limited and superficial. Some users feel that this symbolic communication is not enough to build more meaningful and deep relationships

For most users, Streaks can foster strong social bonds through sustained interaction. INF 2/UPNVY shared their perspective on the positive impact of the Streaks feature:

"The continuity of TikTok Streaks fosters a sense of closeness among users. Therefore, it would be a great loss if they were allowed to cease without continuing."

They emphasised that the continuity of Streaks is vital in maintaining strong social bonds, even when interactions are minimal. On the other hand, INF-3/UPNVY also sees streaks as more than just a technical feature, but rather a symbol of connection that strengthens social relationships on an ongoing basis.

"Daily routine interactions through streaks do make me feel that my relationship with my friends is maintained, even though we don't have long conversations."

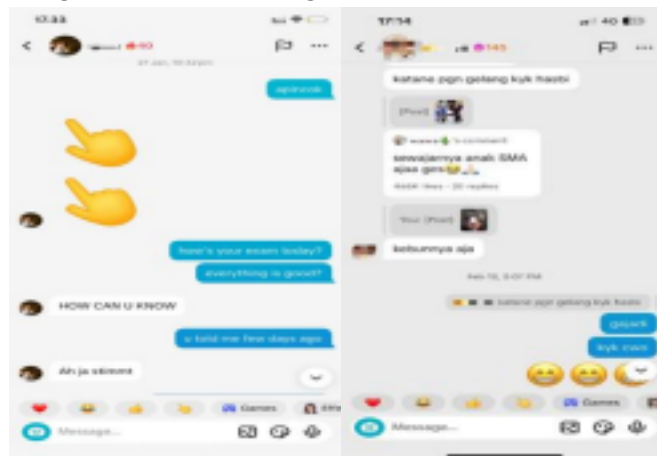


Figure 6. A Simple Conversation in TikTok Direct Messages (Source: INF-2/UPNVY Source: INF-3/UPNVY)

However, not all users experience the same impact from Streaks. INF-1/UGM expressed a more sceptical view regarding the effectiveness of Streaks in strengthening social bonds:

"The existence of TikTok Streaks hasn't affected my social relationships with anyone."

This suggests that for some people, even though they maintain a streak, they do not feel that any authentic or sustained social connection exists. For him, streaks feel more like an obligation or a symbol that does not always reflect the quality of their relationships. In fact, he does not feel a sense of loss when the connection they have built fades away

Generally, these findings suggest that TikTok Streaks can strengthen social bonds through sustained, routine and symbolic interactions, creating a maintained social presence even in the absence of in-depth conversation. For many users, Streaks provide a sense of connection and foster social closeness. However, not all users experience the same impact. Some users feel that streaks merely serve as an obligation or a symbol without fostering authentic emotional closeness. Therefore, whilst Streaks can foster more routine social connections, their impact on closeness remain dependent on how each user interprets them. Some users experience significant benefits, whilst others view them merely as a symbol without bringing about significant changes in their emotional closeness.

3.2. Discussion

This study found that TikTok streaks can foster emotional closeness and intimacy among individuals who feel more connected. The key factors underpinning this are the continuity of interaction and the digital commitment fostered through maintained routines, such as exchanging emojis, stickers or short videos on a daily basis. Consistency in maintaining these interactions provides a sense of continuity in the relationship, even though it does not involve deep conversation. Furthermore, for individuals who feel more connected, streaks serve as a symbol that their relationship is ongoing, which triggers a sense of emotional closeness, even though the communication is limited to symbolic interactions. For some people, this helps them feel valued and connected to their friends in their daily lives, even if not directly or intensely (Simanjuntak & Febriyanti, 2025). This implies that the continuity of digital interactions holds genuine relational significance for users, even though the form of communication is simple; consequently, virtual communication via TikTok's Streaks feature is interpreted not merely as a habit of app usage, but as a social mechanism that maintains closeness, particularly among Generation Z.

Generation Z, as digital natives, have a strong affinity for social media, particularly TikTok. This platform allows them to express themselves through short videos, filters and music, whilst creating a social space to build and maintain relationships. As users who are deeply connected to the digital world, social media has become an integral part of their lives, increasing their exposure to the flow of information and digital influences (Nieżurawska, et al., 2023). For most of Generation Z, simple symbols such as the fire icon play a significant role as a social bonding tool, yet their effectiveness depends heavily on the quality of online communication being conducted in a genuine and meaningful manner. Communication that is merely a formality or routine, such as simply maintaining streaks, is insufficient for building deep emotional closeness. Meaningful interactivity, involving intense conversation and active responses, is key to keeping relationships close and feeling genuine. Furthermore, in the context of interpersonal communication, the use of TikTok streaks serves as a means of maintaining relationships and preserving emotional bonds between individuals (Linggom & Abraham, 2022).

This study reveals that the habit of interacting with one another via such features creates a sense of continuous connection, even within a digital space. This reflects how Generation Z utilises technology to fulfil their social needs, which were previously dominated by face-to-face communication. Although technology and digital symbols facilitate communication, the quality of interactions and the depth of social relationships remain dependent on the intentions and sincerity of those involved. Therefore, the use of symbols such as flames must be balanced with authentic and attentive communication to maintain social bonds effectively (Rahayu et al., 2025).

3.2.1. Social Context

In the social context, the findings of this study indicate a shift in the standards of closeness from relationships measured by the intensity of conversation and the frequency of physical meetings to relationships measured by the continuity of interaction (Chessa & Solari, 2021). Informants did not always regard lengthy conversations as the primary criterion for closeness. Instead, they interpret a relationship as ongoing as long as messages are replied to and the streak is maintained. This suggests that Streaks function as a social indicator that the relationship is still active, even if the communication is not particularly deep.

TikTok Streaks not only serve as a tool to maintain the continuity of communication between users, but also create a social monitoring system that influences perceptions of social presence amongst Generation Z. In this context, perceptions of social presence are heavily influenced by an individual's psychological state regarding their interactive environment. According to Walther (1992), social presence is shaped by how individuals perceive their connectedness in communication conducted via media, and streaks serve as a social indicator demonstrating that relationships remain intact even in the absence of face-to-face interaction or in-depth conversation.

Most Generation Z students feel compelled to maintain their streaks, as they believe that communication will continue on a regular basis as long as those streaks are kept up. For them, maintaining streaks is not just about numbers, but also a symbol that their relationship is still going strong. This suggests that streaks create a sense of continuous connection, even if only through symbolic interactions such as emojis or stickers, which are repeated daily. Thus, the continuity of streaks becomes a way to monitor their relationship without the need for physical meetings or lengthy conversations (Walther, 1992).

The task-oriented theory of Hollingshead and McGrath (1995), which serves as one of the supporting frameworks for the social context indicators in Tu (2000), further supports this finding. It states that the type of activity within a virtual space helps determine how individuals interpret the presence of others. In this context, maintaining streaks can be viewed as a social task that must be upheld, creating a routine and indirectly forming a social monitoring system. Users feel that by maintaining streaks, they are not only nurturing social relationships but also staying connected with their friends in their digital lives (Greer & Ferguson, 2021).

However, although streaks can foster social connection, not all users experience them in the same way. Some users feel that streaks are merely a formality or an obligation lacking any deep emotional significance. This suggests that the social presence formed through streaks can be symbolic and depends on individual perceptions of the value and purpose of the communication taking place (Tu, 2000). Therefore, TikTok streaks function as a social monitoring system that maintains relationships, but their impact on social closeness remains dependent on each user's perspective. These findings clarify the results of previous research highlighting the influence of Streaks on the intensity of interpersonal communication. While previous research showed that Streaks can transform interactions that were initially infrequent into a daily routine, this study demonstrates that such routines not only increase the frequency of communication but are also perceived as a symbol of closeness. Thus, Streaks should no longer be interpreted merely as a trigger for interaction, but also as a mechanism that fosters a sense of connection.

3.2.2. Online Communication

In the realm of online communication, the use of symbols such as stickers, emojis, TikTok videos or GIFs plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of social presence in the digital space. According to Tu (2000), this refers to the use of indirect paralinguistic elements, such as symbols and punctuation, as substitutes for non-verbal cues in text-based communication, as described by Rice and Love (1987) in Tu (2000). Users can utilise these symbols to express feelings or show attention without having to use words explicitly. In other words, the relational quality in Streaks does not always arise from the content of the message, but from its symbolic function.

The findings of this study suggest that for the majority of users, sending symbols such as emojis or stickers via TikTok streaks is sufficient to provide a sense of social presence. Although the communication that takes place is not always in the form of in-depth verbal conversation, responses such as brief replies or the use of emoticons in TikTok direct messages give them the feeling that the relationship is being maintained (Eidelman, 2025).

However, not all users feel that these symbols are sufficient to create meaningful closeness. For some people, the use of digital symbols alone feels like an obligation that must be fulfilled, rather than a form of truly deep or meaningful communication. They feel that interactions limited to these symbols cannot replace more personal or intense conversations, which they consider more effective in strengthening authentic social relationships. This suggests that whilst digital symbols

provide a sense of presence, the closeness built still depends on the depth of communication and the interactivity occurring between the two parties (Kojima et al., 2021).

Thus, while digital symbols such as emojis, stickers or short videos can serve as substitutes for non-verbal cues in online communication, they are not always capable of creating genuine closeness in the absence of more meaningful communication. Consequently, although features such as TikTok's 'streaks' give the impression that social connections are being maintained, true closeness still depends on the quality and intensity of the communication between users. However, this study places a more specific emphasis than most studies of digital communication behaviour, while previous research has shown that TikTok enables users to establish a social presence and connections, this study demonstrates how these connections are maintained at a micro-level through a specific feature, namely Streaks. In other words, this study not only positions TikTok as a space for interaction, but also explains the symbolic mechanisms that make such interactions feel meaningful (Simanjuntak & Febriyanti, 2025).

3.2.3. Interactivity

In terms of interactivity, TikTok's 'streaks' feature has proven to play a significant role in fostering a stronger sense of social presence among users. This dimension, developed based on Walther's (1992) theory of communication styles and Gunawardena's (1995) work on feedback capacity, emphasises that the higher the level of interactivity, the stronger the sense of presence experienced by individuals in communication. High interactivity enables reciprocal, rapid, and sustained message exchange, which in turn reinforces the experience of social presence for users.

In conventional interpersonal communication, interactivity is typically measured by meaningful reciprocity and the depth of conversation. However, in the practice of Streaks, interactivity is instead determined more by the consistency of mutual responses. The responses given may be very simple, but as long as they occur reciprocally and continuously, users still interpret them as a form of social presence (Simanjuntak & Febriyanti, 2025).

Most of the informants in this study stated that the higher the level of interactivity, the more connected and present they felt in their digital relationships. Regular interaction, even if limited to brief responses or symbols such as emojis or stickers, when carried out consistently, has fostered a more tangible sense of presence and warmth within the relationship. They believe that the interactivity maintained through continuous responses in TikTok streaks allows both parties to feel that the other remains present in their daily lives, even if only through digital interaction.

The increased frequency of interaction via TikTok streaks creates a sense that communication remains strong, even in the absence of deep conversations. This suggests that interactivity is a key factor in building closer bonds and a stronger sense of social presence (Kojima et al., 2021). Most informants believe that consistency in interaction, even if limited to sending emojis or reactions, helps them feel closer to their friends. They state that communication maintained through streaks gives them the sense that their relationships remain close, with a sign that they are always there for one another, even if only in the digital space.

Thus, these findings confirm that high levels of interactivity within TikTok Streaks not only strengthen digital communication but also enhance social presence and closeness between users. High levels of interactivity, in the form of routine and sustained responses, enable both parties to feel more present in their communication, ultimately fostering a stronger and more meaningful experience of social presence (Kreijns et al., 2024).

Within the framework of Social Presence Theory, these results confirm that social presence in the Streaks feature is formed through a close relationship between social context, online communication, and interactivity. The social context provides the basis for users to interpret a streak as an ongoing relationship that forms a social monitoring system. Online communication provides symbols that substitute for direct presence. Meanwhile, interactivity ensures that these symbols and relationships are continually updated through repeated responses. Thus, social presence in Streaks is not built by a single element, but by a combination of relationship perception, symbolic media, and reciprocal routines.

The main contribution of this study lies in the understanding that TikTok's 'streaks' feature serves not only as a tool for maintaining the continuity of digital communication, but also as a symbol of social closeness formed through symbolic and sustained interaction. This study adds to the body of knowledge in digital communication research by demonstrating that social relationships in the platform era do not always depend on deep communication, but also on small, consistently maintained routines of interaction. However, the limitation of this study lies in its focus solely on Generation Z in Yogyakarta, who may possess specific digital communication experiences and cultural contexts. Consequently, the findings of this study may not necessarily be generalisable to other age groups or platforms with different interaction structures. Further research should explore whether similar patterns occur on other social media platforms, or whether the closeness formed through streaks can endure when shifting to interactions outside the digital realm.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that TikTok's Streaks feature serves as a symbol of closeness and a sense of presence among users, particularly amongst Generation Z in Yogyakarta. This feature enables users to maintain regular communication through symbolic interactions, such as sending stickers, emojis, or short videos every day, even in the absence of in-depth conversation. The continuity of a streak is the primary indicator perceived as a sign that the relationship remains intact, with regular interaction and consistent responses playing a key role in maintaining social connectedness. However, whilst many feel a sense of closeness through streaks, some users view them as a digital routine unrelated to authentic emotional closeness. The social presence formed through streaks is more symbolic in nature, leading to a sense of connection even though the communication that takes place is not always deep. Nevertheless, the streaks feature has the potential to serve as a bridge to more meaningful interaction, if accompanied by emotional commitment and more personal conversations.

Overall, TikTok Streaks can foster a sense of connection and social presence, but this depends heavily on the social context, online communication and interactivity. In a social context, this feature creates a social monitoring system that allows users to keep tabs on one another and maintain their relationships, although for some people, streaks are nothing more than a game that does not significantly affect their closeness. In terms of online communication, not all users feel that symbols such as emojis or stickers can represent genuine feelings, as this symbolic communication can sometimes feel superficial. On the other hand, the majority of users believe that regular responses and more intense communication can influence their closeness. Therefore, although streaks can strengthen relationships and provide a sense of presence within the context of virtual communication, the closeness created will feel more authentic if accompanied by more intense and meaningful conversations, as well as higher levels of interactivity. Consequently, the closeness created through streaks is more symbolic and superficial in nature, yet it still holds value in maintaining a sense of connection in the virtual world.

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