

Understanding Audience Engagement: A Qualitative Study of User Responses to the #kaburajadulu Campaign on TikTok

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Abstract

This study examines how audiences engage with and respond to the #kaburajadulu digital campaign on TikTok, an organic social media campaign among Indonesian youth expressing dissatisfaction with socio-economic conditions in Indonesia. This research employs a qualitative comment analysis approach, in which this research analyzed 500 purposively selected comments from 1,347 accessible comments on a highly engaged TikTok video associated with the campaign. Comments were classified into three analytical dimensions: perception, emotional engagement, and judgmental evaluation, with positive and negative sentiments identified across each category. Findings reveal that negative sentiments dominate (62.2%), with judgmental evaluations accounting for the majority of responses (60.0%). Audience comments reflect frustration over limited employment opportunities, rising living costs, and dissatisfaction with domestic socio-economic conditions, alongside aspirations for better lives abroad. Drawing on participatory culture theory, collective action theory, and public opinion theory, this study demonstrates that the TikTok comment section functions as a participatory digital space where users collectively express public opinion, construct shared meanings, and negotiate socio-political issues. This research contributes to digital communication studies by illustrating how viral social media campaigns serve as platforms for emotional expression and public discourse formation among Indonesian youth.

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INTRODUCTION

TikTok has become a significant platform for participatory digital culture, particularly among young users who use the platform to engage with social, cultural, and political issues through creative expression. Unlike earlier social media platforms that relied heavily on textual interaction, TikTok combines short-form video, music, memes, hashtags, remixing, and algorithmic visibility to support highly expressive forms of participation. This makes the platform particularly relevant for examining how young people communicate opinions, respond to public issues, and participate in networked forms of civic discourse.

Studies on youth activism and social media show that young users increasingly use digital platforms to express political views, participate in social movements, and share personal perspectives on public issues. Cortés-Ramos et al. (2021), for example, demonstrate that social media provides

young people with spaces for activism, self-expression, and participation in social causes. In the specific context of TikTok, Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) argue that the platform has become an important site for youth political expression because it allows users to communicate political meanings through playful, creative, and affective forms such as memes, trends, and participatory video practices.

The relevance of TikTok to youth participation is also related to its strong association with Generation Z. Pew Research Center data show that TikTok is widely used among teenagers, indicating the platform's centrality in the everyday media practices of younger audiences (Vogels et al., 2022). Zeng and Abidin (2021) further show how TikTok's meme culture enables Generation Z users to articulate generational identity and political sentiment, particularly through humorous and memetic forms of expression. These findings are consistent with studies of youth collective political expression, which suggest that young people often use platform affordances and memetic communication to voice political opinions in ways that are creative, informal, and collectively recognizable (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019).

This study draws on Jenkins' concept of participatory culture to understand TikTok as a space where users actively contribute to meaning-making rather than merely consuming media content. Jenkins (2006) explains participatory culture as a media environment in which audiences become active contributors through circulation, collaboration, and creative expression. Applied to TikTok, this perspective helps explain how users participate not only by producing videos but also by commenting, remixing, sharing, responding to trends, and engaging with hashtags. Therefore, TikTok can be understood as a participatory digital space where Generation Z users construct meanings, express political and social concerns, and contribute to broader public discourse through platform-specific forms of engagement.

Within this participatory environment, the *#kaburajadulu* hashtag emerged as a significant social media phenomenon in Indonesia. Initially circulated as a humorous or sarcastic expression to escape frustrating social realities, the hashtag gained broader traction as users began attaching personal narratives and social commentary, reflecting collective emotional expression in digital spaces (Papacharissi, 2015; Papacharissi, 2016). The term "*kabur aja dulu*" translated as "just escape for now," is believed to have emerged around 2023 and gained widespread viral circulation on TikTok around February 2025, following intensified discussions on migration, employment challenges, and socio-economic dissatisfaction.

This research aims to address this gap by examining how TikTok users express sentiments, construct narratives, and engage with social issues through the comment section of a selected *#kaburajadulu* video. The research is guided by three main questions: (1) How do TikTok users express positive and negative sentiments toward the *#kaburajadulu* campaign in the comment section of a selected TikTok video? (2) What dominant narratives characterize positive sentiments and negative sentiments expressed by TikTok users in response to the *#kaburajadulu* campaign? (3) How do positive and negative sentiments and narratives combine to shape audience engagement in the comment section of the *#kaburajadulu* campaign?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Participatory culture and TikTok

Jenkins' concept of participatory culture provides a foundational framework for understanding audience engagement in digital media environments. Participatory culture refers to a media ecology in which users are not merely passive consumers of content but active participants in producing, circulating, interpreting, and negotiating meaning (Jenkins, 2006). Although Jenkins' early discussion was closely associated with digital practices such as fan communities, blogs, forums, and user-

generated media, the concept remains relevant for examining contemporary social media platforms. In this sense, TikTok can be understood as a space where participation is embedded in platform affordances such as commenting, duet, stitch, remixing, and hashtag-based aggregation. These features enable users to interact not only with content but also with other users, thereby transforming audience engagement into a collective process of meaning-making.

In the context of TikTok, participatory culture is not limited to visible forms of content production but also emerges through textual interaction in comment sections. Comments allow users to interpret videos, express emotions, challenge dominant meanings, and contribute to shared discussions around particular issues or hashtags. Abidin's study of TikTok highlights that engagement on the platform is shaped by attention economies, visibility labour, affective performance, and platform-specific cultural practices (Abidin, 2021). Building on this perspective, the present study positions the comment section as an important site of participatory engagement, particularly in relation to the #kaburajadulu discourse. Through comments, audiences actively construct meanings, articulate affective responses, and collectively negotiate how the hashtag is understood within wider social and cultural conversations.

Viral campaigns and public discourse

The relationship between viral content on social media and public opinion formation has become an important concern in digital communication research. Social media platforms enable users to encounter, circulate, and respond to user-generated content, including social and political criticism, which may shape how individuals perceive public issues. Boulianne's meta-analysis shows that digital media use is positively associated with civic and political engagement, indicating that online exposure and interaction can contribute to broader forms of public participation (Boulianne, 2019). In the context of TikTok, this process is further shaped by platform affordances and algorithmic curation, where emotionally resonant, highly engaging, and easily shareable content is often made more visible to wider audiences.

Hashtag-based campaigns also play a significant role in transforming individual expressions into collective discourse. Papacharissi (2015) explains that networked publics are often organized through affective expressions, where emotion, sentiment, and storytelling connect dispersed individuals around shared issues. From this perspective, viral campaigns such as #kaburajadulu can be understood as affective and discursive spaces in which users articulate opinions, express emotions, and negotiate meanings through comment sections. These interactions allow individual responses to become interconnected, producing shared narratives that contribute to digitally mediated public discourse.

Collective action and public opinion theory

Collective action theory provides a useful framework for understanding how individual expressions of dissatisfaction can develop into broader forms of collective orientation. Olson (1965) explains collective action as a process in which individuals with shared interests may attempt to pursue common goals, although such action is often shaped by coordination problems, incentives, and the costs of participation. In digital environments, however, collective engagement does not always depend on formal organization or institutional leadership. Instead, social media platforms allow dispersed individuals to express similar concerns, recognize shared grievances, and connect their personal experiences to wider public issues.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013) extend this discussion through the concept of connective action, which explains how digital media enable personalized expressions to circulate, accumulate, and become connected through networked communication. Unlike traditional collective action,

which often depends on formal organizations, collective identity, and centralized mobilization, connective action is more personalized, flexible, and digitally mediated. In this process, users participate by sharing personal stories, emotions, opinions, and symbolic expressions that can be linked through hashtags, platform algorithms, and interactional features. Thus, digital platforms can transform individual acts of expression into broader collective narratives without requiring users to join a formal movement.

In the context of this research, TikTok comments can be understood as a space where individual responses to the #kaburajadulu campaign contribute to the emergence of collective orientations among users. Comments that express frustration, aspiration, and criticism allow users to recognize that their personal experiences are connected to broader socio-economic concerns. This process is consistent with the social identity model of collective action, which argues that perceived injustice, shared identity, and collective efficacy can encourage people to interpret individual grievances as part of a wider collective condition (van Zomeren et al., 2008). Therefore, the #kaburajadulu comment section does not merely reflect isolated opinions, but functions as a digitally mediated space where shared concerns and emotional alignment are articulated, reinforced, and transformed into collective meaning.

Additionally, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974) Spiral of Silence theory helps explain how visible expressions of opinion within comment sections may influence users' willingness to express agreement or dissent. Meanwhile, Jürgen Habermas (1989) concept of the public sphere can be reinterpreted within digital contexts, where platforms such as TikTok function as spaces for discourse and opinion exchange. In this research, the comment section operates as a digital environment where public opinion is continuously constructed through textual interaction, allowing users to express, negotiate, and reshape perspectives collectively.

METHODS

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive approach, employing qualitative comment analysis as the method. Qualitative Comment analysis is suitable for examining meanings, patterns of sentiment, and evaluative judgments embedded within textual data. The research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed through individual interpretations and interactions.

Data were obtained from the comment section of a purposively selected TikTok video related to the #kaburajadulu campaign. The selected video, uploaded on February 17th 2025, by content creator Gerald Vincent, succeeding three specific criteria: (1) the video received the most comments compared to other campaign-related content which shows strong audience engagement (2) it featured substantial text-based discussions rather than dominant emoji-based responses and (3) encouraged ongoing interactions among users which results in visible discussion threads. Using a TikTok API-based extraction tool, a total of 1,347 comments were retrieved out of 1,496 available comments on February 4, 2026. After a data cleaning process which included the removal of duplicate entries, irrelevant content, and irrelevant comments; 500 comments were purposively selected for detailed qualitative analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on 500 comments analyzed in Figure 1, the negative sentiments accounted for 311 responses (62.2%), while positive sentiments comprised 189 responses (37.8%). In terms of analytical dimensions, judgmental evaluation was the most dominant category with 300 comments (60.0%), followed by perception with 120 comments (24.0%) and emotional engagement with 80 comments (16.0%). These findings suggest that audience engagement with the #kaburajadulu campaign is

primarily expressed through evaluative stances rather than purely emotional reactions, indicating a form of discursive engagement with the campaign's socio-political context.

The perception dimension reflects how users cognitively interpret the *#kaburajadulu* narrative within the comment section. A significant number of comments expressed agreement by framing migration as a rational response to socio-economic pressures, particularly in relation to limited employment opportunities, low wages, and economic instability in Indonesia. Within these responses, users often draw from personal observations or experiences to justify their perspectives, indicating that their interpretations are grounded in everyday realities. For instance, one user stated: *"pantesan saya punya teman Facebook jadi TKW rata rata mereka gak pulang pulang bahkan tahunan"* (Commented by sugeng527 on February 18th, 2025). This comment reflects on how users recognize the economic motivations behind migration and implicitly validate the campaign's underlying statement that working abroad offers greater stability and long-term benefits. Such comments demonstrate that audience perceptions are not formed in isolation but are shaped through the interpretation of shared social experiences and observations. Through the comment section, users articulate their understanding of the campaign by connecting it to broader socio-economic conditions, reinforcing how digital platforms facilitate meaning-making through collective yet individually expressed interpretations.

The emotional engagement dimension highlights recurring expressions of frustration, exhaustion, and aspiration within the TikTok comment section. Many users expressed emotional responses toward structural challenges within the Indonesian labor market, particularly in relation to limited job opportunities, complex requirements, and economic pressures. For instance, one user stated: *"sumpah bang kalo ada uang gua juga bakal kabur dari indo. bodo amat apa kata org yg katanya kurang nasionalisme. di indo kerja banyak syarat"* (Commented by el.marcomen on February 17th, 2025). This comment reflects a sense of frustration related with logical reasoning, positioning migration as a practical solution rather than purely a perspective.

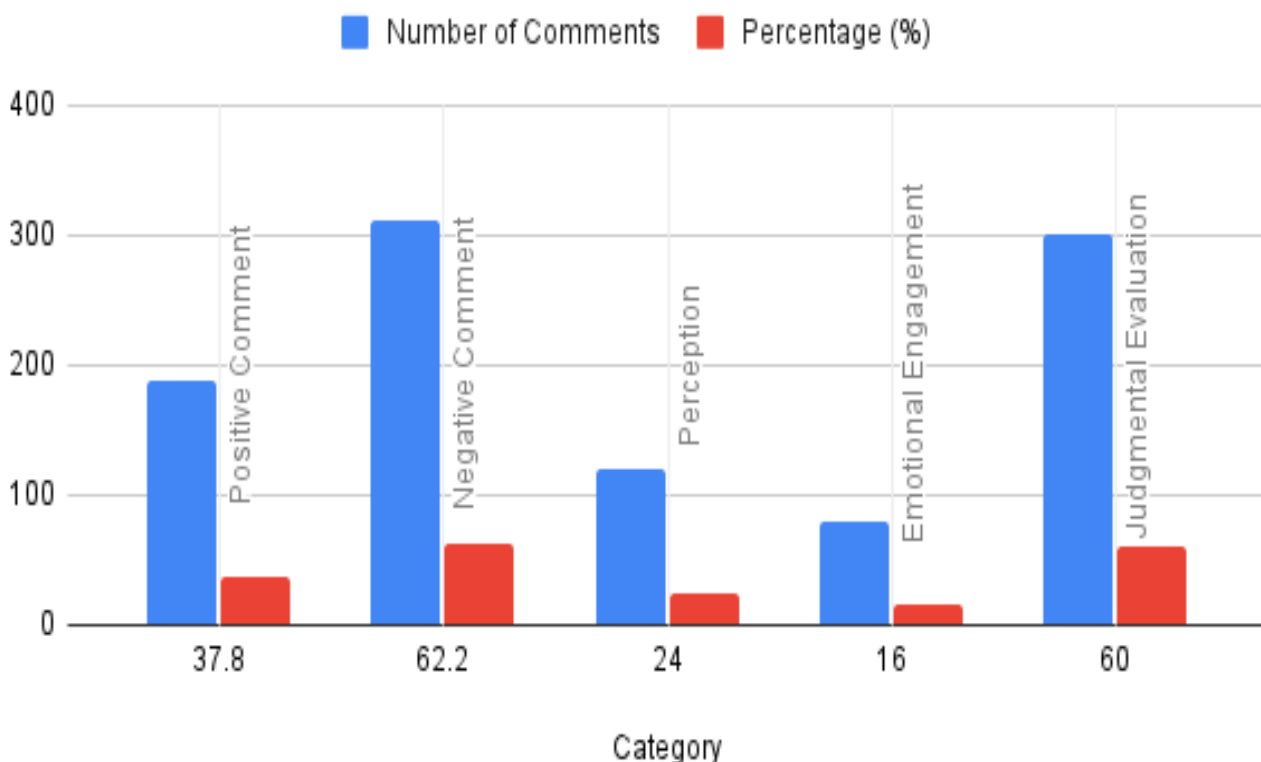


Figure 1. Distribution of User Comment Classification in the Selected Video of the *#kaburajadulu* Campaign

Source: The author

The judgmental evaluation dimension emerged as the most dominant category, highlighting the role of the *#kaburajadulu* campaign as a space for social criticism within the TikTok comment section. Critical evaluations frequently focus on governmental performance and structural inequalities, particularly in relation to employment opportunities and economic conditions. For instance, one user stated: “*rakyat bayar pajak tp negara tdk bisa kasih lapangan kerja yg byk utk para sarjana dll, miris.. neger@ ini*” (Commented by afrizalhasan25041979 on February 20th, 2025). This comment highlights migration not as an individual failure, but as a rational response to broader systemic challenges, indicating how users articulate evaluative judgments based on shared socio-economic concerns.

On the other hand, supportive evaluations validate the campaign by promoting migration as a pathway toward improved quality of life. Users frequently referred to higher income, better working conditions, and broader life opportunities abroad as key motivations. These evaluative expressions are communicated through textual interaction within the comment section, where users not only state their positions but also respond to and reinforce shared perspectives.

The coexistence of supportive and contradictory evaluations reflects the plural and dynamic nature of audience engagement, where meanings are continuously constructed and negotiated through interaction. This demonstrates that the comment section functions as a discursive space in which evaluative judgements are expressed, interpreted, and shaped collectively rather than being dominated by an individual perspective.

According to collective action theory, recurring expressions of shared grievances which includes employment difficulties, low wages, and economic uncertainty indicate the emergence of collective emotional alignment, as conceptualized within collective action theory (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). As users encounter similar experiences and emotional expressions between users, they begin to interpret their individual situations within a broader shared social context rather than as isolated conditions. In the context of the *#kaburajadulu* campaign, this is reflected in comment-based interactions where users acknowledge, validate, and reinforce one another’s frustrations and aspirations, contributing to the formation of collective awareness. This process aligns with Snow and Benford’s (1988) framing theory, whereby shared interpretations of social conditions enable individuals to identify similar concerns. The hashtag *#kaburajadulu* functions as a form of digital public sphere, where perspectives are expressed and negotiated through participatory interaction (Habermas, 1989). Furthermore, Papacharissi’s (2015) theory of affective publics is also particularly relevant, as emotional connectivity connection promotes sentiment-driven, loosely connected networks rather than formally organized collective action in the comment section.

The findings of this study have important theoretical implications for understanding participatory culture and digital public discourse on short-video platforms. The dominance of judgmental evaluation in the comment section indicates that audience engagement with the *#kaburajadulu* campaign is not merely affective or reactive, but also evaluative and interpretive. Users did not simply respond emotionally to viral content; rather, they used the comment section to articulate social criticism, assess structural problems, and negotiate meanings around migration, employment, wages, and state responsibility. This suggests that TikTok comment sections can function as participatory spaces where users collectively construct socio-political interpretations through everyday digital interaction. Therefore, the study extends Jenkins’ notion of participatory culture by showing that participation on TikTok is not limited to content creation, remixing, or sharing, but also occurs through textual engagement and evaluative discourse in comment-based interactions.

Practically, the findings imply that viral hashtags such as *#kaburajadulu* should be understood as indicators of public sentiment and socio-political anxiety, particularly among digitally active audiences. The strong presence of negative sentiment and critical evaluations reflects broader public

dissatisfaction with employment opportunities, economic uncertainty, and perceived structural inequality. For policymakers, this suggests that social media discourse should not be dismissed as merely emotional or informal expression. Instead, TikTok comments can serve as a form of public feedback that reveals how citizens perceive and interpret social problems. Government institutions, labor agencies, and public communication actors may use such discourse as an early signal to identify public concerns, improve policy responsiveness, and develop more empathetic communication strategies regarding employment, youth aspirations, and migration-related issues.

The study also has methodological and communication implications for future research on digital activism, affective publics, and hashtag-based discourse. By analyzing comments, researchers can capture how individual experiences become connected to broader collective narratives through recurring expressions of frustration, aspiration, and criticism. The #kaburajadulu campaign demonstrates that digital participation does not always develop into formal collective action, but it can generate collective awareness through affective alignment and shared interpretation. This supports the relevance of collective action theory, framing theory, and affective publics in explaining how users connect personal experiences with structural issues in digital spaces. Future studies may further examine how such online discourse evolves over time, how algorithmic visibility shapes public attention, and how different user groups interpret the campaign across social, economic, and generational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the #kaburajadulu campaign on TikTok operates as a participatory digital space where users collectively express public opinion, construct shared meanings, and engage in socio-political discourse through comment-based interaction. Based on a qualitative comment analysis of 500 selected comments, the findings show that negative sentiments dominate audience responses (62.2%), with judgmental evaluations emerging as the most dominant analytical dimension (60.0%). Audience engagement is shaped by recurring narratives of socio-economic dissatisfaction, aspirations for better opportunities abroad, and evaluative judgments toward domestic employment conditions and governmental performance. The findings also indicate that the TikTok comment space serves as an interactive environment where collective emotional alignment and public opinion formation occur. This research emphasizes on how users participate in meaning-making processes through textual interaction, through the application participatory culture theory, collective action theory, and public opinion theory which enables them to collectively interpret, negotiate, and articulate shared social realities without formal organization.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data is available by request to the author. Comment data were collected from publicly accessible TikTok content and anonymized in compliance with ethical research standards.

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