

Linguistic Expression of Diploma Students on TikTok: A Study of English Self-Disclosure

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Abstract: *This study investigates how English diploma students use TikTok for self-disclosure and language practice. With TikTok's rising popularity as a digital platform, it has become a meaningful space for students to display linguistic abilities, especially in English. The study aims to explore how students employ English in their self-disclosure and the functions behind these choices. A qualitative descriptive approach was applied, with data collected through video observation of students' TikTok content and follow-up interviews. The analysis used Miles and Huberman's model, supported by literature review. Findings reveal that students use English not only for communication but also for identity construction, social presence, and interactive engagement. Their language shows a blend of formal and informal English shaped by digital culture and peer context. In conclusion, TikTok provides an informal yet meaningful environment for English practice and identity formation, offering a model of informal language learning among Generation Z.*

Keywords: digital culture; english practice; self-disclosure; tiktok

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana mahasiswa diploma bahasa Inggris menggunakan TikTok untuk self-disclosure dan latihan bahasa. Dengan meningkatnya popularitas TikTok sebagai platform digital, media ini menjadi ruang bermakna bagi mahasiswa untuk menampilkan kemampuan linguistik mereka, khususnya dalam bahasa Inggris. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami penggunaan bahasa Inggris dalam self-disclosure serta fungsi di balik pilihan bahasa tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan pengumpulan data melalui observasi video konten TikTok mahasiswa dan wawancara lanjutan. Analisis dilakukan dengan model Miles dan Huberman yang didukung kajian pustaka. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa menggunakan bahasa Inggris tidak hanya untuk berkomunikasi, tetapi juga untuk membangun identitas, memperkuat kehadiran sosial, dan berinteraksi secara kreatif. Bahasa yang digunakan memperlihatkan perpaduan formal dan informal yang dipengaruhi budaya digital dan konteks teman sebaya. Kesimpulannya, TikTok berfungsi sebagai lingkungan informal namun bermakna bagi praktik bahasa Inggris dan pembentukan identitas, serta dapat menjadi model pembelajaran bahasa informal di kalangan Generasi Z.

Kata kunci: budaya digital; latihan bahasa inggris; self-disclosure; tiktok

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Introduction

TikTok has rapidly emerged as one of the most influential digital platforms, providing a unique space for young people to communicate, perform, and express themselves. For English diploma students, TikTok represents not only a form of entertainment but also a medium for practicing language and engaging in self-disclosure. The platform's audiovisual features and interactive nature allow students to combine verbal and non-verbal elements, which makes their expressions more dynamic and accessible to a broad audience.

Although self-disclosure is a natural social process, its manifestation on digital platforms such as TikTok involves new layers of meaning. Previous studies have shown that social media environments reshape patterns of disclosure, identity construction, and interaction (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Choi, Panek, Nardis, & Toma, 2021). In particular, the use of English in online spaces highlights both linguistic competence and social positioning, reflecting how students negotiate their identities in a globalized digital context.

Despite growing research on self-disclosure in social media, little attention has been given to how English diploma students in Indonesia utilize TikTok as a tool for identity performance and informal language learning. Existing studies often focus on platforms such as Facebook or Instagram (Joinson, 2001; Utz, 2015), while research on TikTok is still emerging. This gap provides an opportunity to explore how students strategically use English for self-expression, identity building, and social interaction in this rapidly evolving platform.

The objective of this study is therefore to analyze how English diploma students disclose aspects of themselves on TikTok, focusing on the linguistic strategies they employ, the purposes of their disclosure, and the broader implications for identity formation and informal language practice. To strengthen the analysis, this study draws on relevant theoretical perspectives such as Goffman's dramaturgy (1959) and Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), which provide useful frameworks for understanding the layered and performative nature of online self-disclosure.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how English diploma students use TikTok as a platform for self-disclosure in English. The qualitative approach was chosen because self-disclosure is a socially and contextually situated process that cannot be fully captured through numerical data. Instead, it requires rich description and in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, as emphasized by Martha and Kresno (2016).

Participants

Participants consisted of five to seven English diploma students who actively used TikTok as their primary platform for self-expression. The inclusion criteria required

students to (1) be enrolled in an English diploma program, (2) regularly upload TikTok content containing elements of self-disclosure, and (3) use English as part of their expression. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure they matched the study's objectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three main techniques:

Observation of TikTok video content uploaded by participants. The researcher examined language use, topics, and multimodal features (text, visuals, audio).

In-depth interviews with participants to capture their motivations, experiences, and reflections on using English for self-disclosure.

Documentation, including screenshots and saved records of relevant TikTok content, to support the analysis.

Observation sheets and interview guides were used as instruments. All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing participants to elaborate freely while ensuring consistency across sessions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) model of qualitative analysis, which consists of three stages:

1. Data Reduction - selecting, focusing, and simplifying the data from observations and interviews.
2. Data Display - organizing information into narrative descriptions and tables.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification - identifying emerging patterns and themes related to students' linguistic choices, functions of self-disclosure, and social identity construction.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure confidentiality, all participants' identities were anonymized. Consent was obtained before observation and interviews. Only data relevant to the research focus were recorded and analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The researchers conducted observations on the social media platform TikTok, the main platform where the phenomenon of self-discourse in English by students takes place. These observations focused on content uploaded by students that showed practices

of self-expression through the use of English. The observations covered various aspects such as word choice, communication style, topics discussed, interaction with the audience, and the types of visual content that supported self-expression in English. These observations aimed to understand how students utilized TikTok features to express their identities, thoughts, and feelings in English.

Table 1. Observation Results related to the Phenomenon of Self-Discourse in the Use of English by Students on TikTok Social Media

No.	Aspect Observed	Yes	No
1	The widespread use of English in students' self-disclosure content.	√	
2	The uploaded content shows variation in themes (e.g., daily life, opinions, hobbies) in English.	√	
3	Audience responses on TikTok (likes, comments, shares) are evident in English-language content.	√	
4	Use of different language styles (formal/informal) in English self-disclosure.	√	
5	Presence of visual elements (e.g., text, filters, audio) that support English self-disclosure.	√	
6	Students demonstrate confidence in using English in the public space of TikTok.	√	
7	Interactions between students and other audiences occur in English in the comment sections.	√	
8	Students' motivation in engaging in English self-disclosure (e.g., improving ability, seeking validation, sharing experiences).	√	
9	Selection of content topics is related to daily life or personal perspectives.	√	
10	TikTok is used as a medium to build connections or communities based on the use of English.	√	

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with student participants to obtain more detailed information about the phenomenon of self-discourse in the use of English on the social media platform TikTok. In these interviews, researchers explored aspects surrounding the beginning of their self-discourse, their motivations for using English, and the impact and perceptions they felt after expressing themselves on the platform. The following are the results of the interviews presented in a table regarding the beginnings, reasons, and impacts of self-discourse in the use of English.

Table 2. Results of interviews with students regarding their reasons for self-disclosure

No	Question	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
1	What motivated you to disclose yourself on TikTok?	To share my experiences as a migrant student	To build self-confidence	So that people know about my struggles in life	Because many others have similar stories but are afraid to speak	As self-therapy because it is difficult to confide directly
2	What personal stories or experiences do you usually share on TikTok?	Stories about college life and living far from parents	About body image and social pressure	About learning difficulties and small achievements	Experiences of discrimination due to identity	Stories about relationships and past experiences in high school
3	Why did you choose TikTok compared to other platforms?	TikTok reaches many people more quickly	TikTok's algorithm makes content go viral	I can be expressive without fear of being judged	TikTok feels like an open community	Because it offers features like sound, music, and free expression
4	Do you use English when creating content? If yes, what is the reason?	Yes, to be more relatable to a wider audience	Sometimes, depending on the topic	Yes, because it allows me to express emotions more freely	Not always, but yes for certain topics	Yes, so that people around me do not immediately understand directly
5	Do you feel more comfortable or free expressing yourself in English?	Yes, because it feels more neutral	Depends on the content	Yes, I don't feel too judged	Sometimes yes, because it feels more expressive	Yes, as if having an emotional distance that protects me

6	What is the impact of self-disclosure on TikTok on your personal life?	I feel more confident and accepted	Sometimes anxious about being judged, but it makes me more honest with myself	It helps me accept myself	I feel less alone and stronger	I become braver in limiting toxic relationships
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Table 3. Interview Results on the Impact of Self-Disclosure among Students

No.	Question	R1	R2	R3
1	Does using English on TikTok make your self-disclosure easier?	Yes, it feels more neutral and not too personal	Yes, because it feels like keeping an emotional distance	Yes, I feel more comfortable and less vulnerable when using English
2	How do audiences respond to your English self-disclosure content?	They often say the comments look cool and professional	Some say it looks fake, but many also support	Many are interested and ask questions about learning English
3	Does self-disclosure in English impact your language skills?	Yes, I feel more active and more confident in using English	Yes, I dare to use more vocabulary without fear of being wrong	It really improves my writing and speaking skills

Discussion

The results indicate that TikTok provides English diploma students with an informal yet significant arena for practicing language and negotiating identity. Self-disclosure on this platform goes beyond mere communication; it functions as a strategy for identity construction, emotional expression, and social connection. This aligns with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, where individuals perform versions of themselves for their audiences. TikTok allows students to act as "performers," selectively managing impressions through their use of English and multimodal features.

Moreover, the gradual depth of personal disclosure reflects Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), in which students share surface-level information before

moving to more intimate content. For some participants, English serves as a protective linguistic layer, enabling them to express vulnerability without feeling overly exposed—a finding consistent with Joinson (2001), who argued that computer-mediated communication can reduce social risks in self-disclosure.

The use of English in TikTok also functions as a form of informal language learning. Students experiment with vocabulary, grammar, and registers in authentic contexts, motivated by peer feedback and digital visibility. This resonates with Utz's (2015) assertion that self-disclosure on social networking sites fosters a sense of connection and enhances communication skills. By integrating language learning with identity performance, students create a hybrid communicative practice that reflects both personal and academic goals.

In short, the findings highlight that TikTok operates as more than just a social platform—it is a digital stage where language, identity, and culture intersect. While challenges remain, such as exposure to criticism, the benefits of confidence-building, identity affirmation, and global connectivity make TikTok a valuable informal learning environment for Generation Z English learners.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings in this study, it can be concluded that TikTok is a significant medium for students to engage in self-disclosure, especially through the use of English as a means of self-expression. This platform not only offers a space for creative interaction and content creation, but also provides a sense of security and control over the intended audience. Students tend to choose English because it is considered more neutral, less emotional, and can create a social distance that makes them more comfortable in expressing personal experiences, academic pressures, and complex identities. Self-disclosure in English has positive psychological effects such as relief, increased self-confidence, and the formation of a stronger digital identity that is more open to the global environment. However, it cannot be ignored that there are social risks associated with this action, such as negative comments or social rejection, even though most respondents showed good adaptive abilities in responding to this. Therefore, it can be said that the practice of self-disclosure by students on TikTok through English is a form of identity representation of the younger generation influenced by the dynamics of digital media, linguistic strategies, and emotional needs to be understood and accepted in a society that is increasingly connected virtually.

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