

The Role of the Social Media Platform Tiktok in Shaping Public Opinion on the Case of Teen Bullying in Cilacap Among Teenagers in Cirebon City and Regency

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Keywords:

social media, public opinion, bullying, teens, tiktok

Abstract

The rapid development of social media, particularly TikTok, has transformed the way adolescents access information and form public opinions. The viral teenage bullying case in Cilacap in 2023 illustrates how TikTok can influence adolescents' perceptions of social issues. This research aims to examine the role of TikTok in shaping public opinion regarding the Cilacap bullying case among adolescents in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency from the perspective of New Media Theory. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving eight adolescents aged 15–18 years who actively used TikTok and became aware of the case through the platform. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation, then analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that TikTok served as the primary source of information for adolescents in following the case. The interactive, participatory, and rapid characteristics of new media facilitated public opinion formation through audiovisual content, comment sections, repost features, and user engagement. The study identified differences in digital participation between adolescents from Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency, with participants from Cirebon City showing greater involvement in expressing opinions and sharing information, while participants from Cirebon Regency tended to engage more passively in discussions. Furthermore, exposure to the case increased adolescents' awareness of digital literacy and highlighted the importance of verifying information before accepting or redistributing content. This study concludes that TikTok plays a significant role in shaping adolescent public opinion through interactivity, user participation, and rapid information dissemination. However, these advantages must be supported by adequate digital literacy to encourage critical evaluation of information and responsible social media use.

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of information and communication technology in the digital era has profoundly influenced various aspects of everyday life, particularly the ways in which people communicate and exchange information (Alemayehu Tegegn, 2024; Alsaleh, 2024; Amelia & Balqis, 2023; Asimakopoulous et al., 2025). The widespread availability of the internet, combined with the rapid growth of social media platforms, has enabled individuals to access information quickly and conveniently regardless of geographical and temporal limitations. Beyond serving as communication tools, social media platforms have evolved into digital public spaces where users can share ideas, express opinions, shape perceptions, and contribute

to the formation of public opinion. According to DataReportal (2024), the number of social media users in Indonesia continues to increase annually, with adolescents and young adults representing a significant proportion of active users who utilize various digital platforms in their daily activities (Nauvan et al., 2024).

One social media platform that has gained significant popularity among teenagers is TikTok. This short-form video platform allows users to create, upload, and share various types of content through algorithm-based systems that facilitate content dissemination and virality. TikTok's widespread popularity is largely attributed to its concise, engaging, and accessible content format, which enables information to reach broad audiences within a short period. The platform's accessibility and intuitive interface have become important factors contributing to its appeal, particularly among adolescents. According to Vaterlaus and Winter (2021), adolescents' use of TikTok extends beyond entertainment purposes, as the platform has developed into a medium for seeking and sharing information, understanding emerging social phenomena, expressing ideas and creativity, and building social connections through digital interactions (Aminullah et al., 2025).

The increasing influence of TikTok as a digital communication platform has positioned it as an important medium in the formation of public opinion. Content that receives viral attention on TikTok often generates various emotional responses from users, including empathy, anger, support, and immediate judgments toward specific events. The rapid circulation of information on TikTok may encourage users to respond quickly without adequately evaluating the credibility and reliability of the sources. Consequently, public opinion can be shaped by short video segments, emotionally appealing narratives, and particular perspectives that are widely circulated on social media. This phenomenon may result in public interpretations that do not always represent a comprehensive or objective understanding of an issue.

The adolescent bullying case in Cilacap demonstrates how TikTok, as a new media platform, contributes to the process of public opinion formation. In 2023, a short video depicting violence against a junior high school student went viral after being circulated on TikTok and attracted significant public attention. The platform's characteristics, which enable rapid content distribution and user interaction through comments, reposts, and digital discussions, allowed the case to gain extensive visibility. The circulation of the video was further amplified by information-sharing accounts and online media outlets that provided additional contextual narratives, including emotional perspectives that influenced public perceptions of the incident. Subsequently, information regarding the case spread to other platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter/X, and WhatsApp, creating a cross-platform communication flow. This process demonstrates that social media functions not only as a channel for information dissemination but also as an interactive space where users, particularly adolescents, participate in constructing meanings and forming opinions regarding social issues.

The widespread circulation of bullying-related content highlights TikTok's significant influence in shaping public opinion through the combination of visual content and emotionally persuasive narratives. Exposure to such content often encourages users to immediately respond by commenting, reposting, or sharing videos without first evaluating the accuracy and credibility of the information presented. As a result, this digital environment has contributed to the emergence of the trial-by-social-media phenomenon, in which individuals may be judged

by online communities based on information that circulates widely in digital spaces. Such a phenomenon can have serious consequences for both victims and alleged perpetrators, as public opinions formed online are not always based on comprehensive or verified evidence (Manurung & Jamba, 2024).

Although the viral dissemination of this case contributed positively by increasing public awareness of bullying issues, it also generated several negative consequences, including the spread of unverified information, cyberbullying, and increased social pressure within digital environments, particularly among adolescents. Due to their intensive use of TikTok in daily life, teenagers are more likely to encounter and be influenced by opinions circulating across social media platforms. These conditions indicate that social media has evolved beyond its conventional role as a source of entertainment and information. It has become an influential platform that shapes perceptions, attitudes, and the formation of public opinion among young people (Istimeisyah et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature examining TikTok and public opinion formation, existing studies have predominantly focused on the broader effects of social media on user behavior, digital information dissemination, and its influence on everyday life. Similarly, research on bullying has largely concentrated on identifying its causes, examining its psychological impacts on victims, and exploring prevention strategies within educational contexts. However, limited attention has been given to TikTok's specific role as a new media platform in facilitating information dissemination and shaping adolescents' public opinions regarding viral bullying incidents. This research gap is significant, considering that the defining characteristics of new media, including interactivity, active user participation, and rapid information circulation, substantially influence how adolescents access, interpret, and develop opinions about events occurring in digital environments.

Existing studies have provided limited examination of TikTok's role as a new media platform in facilitating information dissemination and shaping adolescents' public opinions in response to social issues that gain widespread attention on social media. Most previous studies have focused on TikTok as a medium for entertainment, communication, or digital promotion, while research examining its role in shaping adolescents' public opinions regarding bullying cases remains relatively limited. Specifically, in relation to the adolescent bullying case in Cilacap, few studies have explored how new media characteristics, such as interactivity, user participation, and rapid information dissemination, influence the process of public opinion formation among adolescents in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency who received information about the case through social media. Therefore, further research is needed to explain the role of TikTok as a new media platform in shaping adolescents' public opinions regarding viral bullying cases in digital environments.

This study employed New Media Theory as a conceptual framework to analyze the role of TikTok as a social media platform in information dissemination and public opinion formation among adolescents. New Media Theory explains that digital technology has transformed communication patterns from a one-way model into a more interactive and participatory process that is no longer restricted by spatial and temporal boundaries. These characteristics enable social media users to function not only as information consumers but also as active content producers who create, manage, and disseminate information. In the context of the teenage bullying case in Cilacap that went viral on social media, TikTok

functions as a digital public space that allows adolescents to access information, interact with other users through various platform features, and form opinions based on available information and ongoing discussions. Therefore, New Media Theory is relevant for explaining how TikTok's characteristics contribute to the formation of adolescents' public opinions regarding the bullying case examined in this study.

This study offers novelty by focusing on the role of TikTok as a new media platform in shaping adolescents' public opinions regarding viral bullying cases on social media. Unlike previous studies that primarily examined TikTok as a platform for entertainment, communication, or digital marketing, this study focuses on how new media characteristics contribute to public opinion formation. The novelty of this research also lies in its focus on adolescents from Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency, who represent social media users exposed to information about bullying incidents occurring outside their immediate geographical environment. Using the perspective of New Media Theory, this study investigates how key digital media characteristics, including interactivity, rapid information dissemination, and active user participation, influence how adolescents access information, interpret social events, and develop public opinions regarding bullying cases circulating in digital spaces.

Considering this phenomenon, this study aims to examine the role of TikTok in shaping public opinion regarding the teenage bullying case in Cilacap while exploring the social and psychological implications of adolescents' participation in digital communication environments. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing literature on the role of new media in public opinion formation and provide insights for strengthening digital literacy initiatives among adolescents. Ultimately, this research seeks to encourage adolescents to develop more critical and responsible skills in evaluating, verifying, and sharing information through social media platforms.

New media refers to forms of communication media that rely on digital technologies, internet connectivity, and media convergence to support the creation, distribution, and consumption of information. The emergence of new media has fundamentally transformed communication patterns by shifting them from predominantly one-way processes toward more interactive, participatory, and accessible forms of communication. Flew explains that the characteristics of new media include interactivity, connectivity, and accessibility, which enable users to actively participate in communication processes. Consequently, advances in digital technology have transformed audiences from passive recipients of information into active participants who can create, distribute, and share content across various digital platforms (Utami, 2021).

The advancement of Web 2.0 technology has been identified as an important factor contributing to the rapid development of new media. Kaplan and Haenlein, as cited in Waskithoaji and Darmawan (2022), argue that social media, as an essential component of new media, enables users to create, modify, and share content through internet-based platforms. As a result, communication has become increasingly dynamic and participatory because users can actively contribute to the production and circulation of information.

Denis McQuail identifies digitization, interactivity, network connectivity, media convergence, and user-generated content as key characteristics of new media. These characteristics enable information to be distributed rapidly to broad audiences, overcoming

limitations related to time and geographical distance while supporting more efficient communication processes.

New Media Theory suggests that digital media transforms users from passive recipients of information into active participants who can create, distribute, and respond to content. These characteristics position social media as an interactive communication platform capable of facilitating extensive information exchange and audience engagement. This perspective is supported by the findings of Regina Arun, Farida Nurfalah, and Welly Wihayati (2021), who demonstrated that Instagram functions as an effective communication medium through visual content, user interaction, and rapid information dissemination in the digital era.

In the contemporary digital era, social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter/X have become integral components of the new media environment and are widely used by the public, particularly adolescents. Equipped with various interactive features, these platforms function not only as communication and entertainment tools but also as influential channels for information dissemination and public opinion formation regarding various social issues.

Digital communication refers to the process of exchanging information through technology-based digital media, including social media platforms, instant messaging applications, websites, and other online communication channels. According to Rulli Nasrullah (as cited in Avicenna et al., 2025), digital communication is characterized by rapid information circulation, broad audience reach, and high levels of user engagement in communication processes. Technological advancements in the digital era have fundamentally transformed communication patterns, enabling interactions that are more dynamic, flexible, and less restricted by temporal and spatial boundaries.

In the digital media era, communication is no longer limited to a one-way process, as seen in conventional media, but has become a two-way and participatory process. Users no longer function merely as recipients of information; they can also become creators, disseminators, and responders to information circulating online. This condition aligns with the characteristics of new media, which facilitate direct interaction among users through various digital features, including comments, content sharing, and online discussions.

TikTok is one of the digital communication platforms widely used by adolescents because it presents information through engaging, concise, and easily understandable audiovisual content. Through features such as the For You Page (FYP), comments, live streaming, and content reposting, TikTok facilitates interactive communication while encouraging users to actively participate in sharing information and responding to various issues (Padila, 2025).

In the context of this study, digital communication through TikTok functioned as a medium for disseminating information about the bullying incident in Cilacap, which subsequently generated various reactions and discussions among adolescents. The rapid dissemination characteristics of TikTok enable events to become viral within a short period, potentially influencing how users understand, interpret, and form opinions regarding issues developing in digital spaces.

Public opinion refers to the views, attitudes, judgments, or reactions developed by society toward an issue or event of collective concern. According to Jalaluddin Rakhmat, as cited in Hidayat and Prasetyo (2023), public opinion emerges through ongoing social communication processes involving information exchange, collective experiences, and individual interpretations of social phenomena. Therefore, public opinion is not formed instantly but develops gradually through processes of acquiring, interpreting, and sharing information among members of society.

The development of new media and digital communication technologies has significantly transformed the process of public opinion formation in contemporary society. By enabling rapid, extensive, and interactive information circulation, social media provides individuals with greater opportunities to access information, participate in discussions, and express their views on current issues. Consequently, these platforms have become important digital public spaces where ideas are exchanged, public discourse develops, and opinions regarding social events are continuously constructed.

With its short-form video format, TikTok has emerged as an influential social media platform that contributes to public opinion formation through the rapid distribution of engaging and easily accessible audiovisual content. Features such as the For You Page (FYP), comments, content reposts, and user interactions allow information to reach broad audiences within a short period. Consequently, viral information on TikTok may influence how users understand, interpret, and evaluate events occurring in society.

In this study, public opinion refers to the views and assessments of adolescents in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency regarding the bullying case in Cilacap after receiving information through TikTok. The process of opinion formation is influenced by the information accessed, interactions occurring in digital spaces, and individual interpretations of the content consumed.

A study conducted by Putri, Khumayah, and Nurfalah (2023), entitled “Formation of Self-Identity of Generation Z Through Instagram Social Media Among Students,” examined the role of Instagram in shaping Generation Z’s self-identity. This study employed a qualitative approach using observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings showed that Instagram contributed to the formation of Generation Z’s self-identity through user interactions and activities on social media. The difference between that study and the present research lies in the research focus: Putri et al. (2023) examined self-identity formation through Instagram, whereas this study investigates the role of TikTok in shaping adolescents’ public opinion regarding a viral bullying case from the perspective of New Media Theory (Putri et al., 2023).

A study conducted by Dinaya Citra et al. (2024), entitled “The Formation of Public Opinion in the ‘What’s the Point of School?’ Phenomenon on TikTok,” employed a qualitative approach to examine the process of public opinion formation surrounding a viral phenomenon on TikTok. The findings showed that TikTok contributed to public opinion formation through issue dissemination, user interactions, and media influence in constructing social reality. While that study focused on a viral education-related phenomenon on TikTok, the present study focuses on TikTok’s role in shaping public opinion regarding a teenage bullying case in Cilacap among adolescents in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency (Citra et al., 2024).

A study conducted by Nabila Assuhaila and Rahmat Hidayat (2026), entitled “Content Analysis of TikTok in Shaping Public Opinion on the Case of a Student Being Slapped at SMA Negeri 1 Cimarga,” employed a qualitative approach using content analysis to examine TikTok videos and user comments. The findings indicated that TikTok functions not only as an information dissemination platform but also as a medium through which public opinion is shaped through content narratives, user interactions, and framing processes related to school violence cases. Unlike the previous study, which focused on TikTok content analysis and online user responses, the present research examines how TikTok influences public opinion formation among adolescents in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency regarding the teenage bullying case in Cilacap (Assuhaila & Hidayat, 2026).

A study by Octaviana et al. (2023), entitled “The Role of TikTok in Influencing Adolescents’ Social Behavior in the Digital Age,” found that TikTok usage influences various aspects of adolescents’ social behavior, including interaction patterns, information access, and forms of self-expression in digital environments. While that study examined TikTok’s influence on adolescents’ social behavior, the present study specifically investigates TikTok’s role as a new media platform in shaping adolescents’ public opinion regarding viral bullying cases.

A study by Aprilianto and Fatikh (2024), entitled “Implications of Operant Conditioning Theory on Bullying in Schools,” demonstrated that positive reinforcement combined with consistent disciplinary consequences could effectively reduce bullying behavior in school environments. The study primarily focused on bullying prevention and behavioral modification from a psychological perspective. In contrast, the present study does not examine interventions for changing bullying behavior but instead explores TikTok’s role as a social media platform in shaping adolescents’ public opinion regarding viral bullying cases.

A study by Borualogo et al. (2019), entitled “Predictors of Bullying Among Elementary School Students,” identified parenting styles and paternal involvement as significant factors associated with bullying behavior among children. The study focused on identifying determinants of bullying behavior, whereas the present research examines how information regarding bullying cases that become viral on TikTok contributes to public opinion formation among adolescents.

A review of previous studies indicates that existing research has primarily examined TikTok’s influence on user behavior and public opinion, while bullying studies have largely focused on its causes, impacts, and prevention strategies. Despite these contributions, limited research has examined TikTok as a new media platform in shaping adolescents’ public opinion regarding bullying cases that receive widespread attention on social media, particularly among adolescents in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency. Therefore, this study was conducted to address this research gap using the New Media Theory perspective.

Based on the background and research gaps described above, this study aims to examine the role of TikTok in shaping public opinion regarding the teenage bullying case in Cilacap among adolescents in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency, as well as explore the social and psychological implications of adolescents’ participation in digital communication environments. This research is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this research contributes to new media studies and public opinion formation by enhancing understanding of how digital media characteristics, particularly TikTok, influence adolescents’ perceptions and judgments regarding social issues. Practically, this research benefits adolescents by encouraging more critical and responsible approaches to evaluating, verifying, and sharing information through social media platforms. It also benefits educators and parents by providing insights for strengthening digital literacy initiatives among adolescents, benefits policymakers by informing strategies for promoting responsible social media use and preventing misinformation, and benefits future researchers by serving as a reference for further studies on the role of social media in shaping adolescents’ public opinion within similar contexts.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative method with a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of TikTok’s role in shaping public opinion among adolescents in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency regarding the 2023 Cilacap bullying case that went viral on social media. The qualitative approach was selected because this study focused on adolescents’ experiences, perspectives, and responses to a viral social media phenomenon, consistent with Creswell and Poth (2024), who stated that qualitative research aims to understand social phenomena based on individuals’ subjective experiences within natural contexts. This research was based on New Media Theory, which explains that digital technology has transformed communication patterns from one-way models into more interactive and participatory forms, allowing individuals not only to receive information but also to create, share, and distribute

content through digital platforms. In this study, TikTok was examined as a new media platform that facilitated the rapid dissemination of information regarding the Cilacap bullying case and contributed to public opinion formation through user interactions, comments, reposts, and online discussions. The participants consisted of eight adolescents aged 15–19 years from Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency who had actively used TikTok for at least one year and had obtained information about the bullying case through the platform. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on predetermined criteria.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted both face-to-face and online to explore participants' experiences using TikTok and their responses to viral content related to the bullying case. The interview guidelines focused on how participants obtained information, their forms of interaction, and their perceptions of TikTok's role in shaping their opinions. In addition to interviews, documentation was used as a supporting data collection technique, including the analysis of TikTok videos, user comments, reposted content, and online news articles related to the case to complement and validate interview findings. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly journals, books, research articles, and other relevant sources related to TikTok, public opinion, adolescent bullying, and New Media Theory. Data credibility was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from different participants with documentary evidence. Member checking was also conducted to ensure that the researcher's interpretations accurately reflected participants' experiences. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2022), involving data reduction, coding, theme development, data organization, and conclusion drawing. The analysis identified recurring themes related to TikTok's role as a new media platform in information dissemination, digital interaction, and the formation of adolescents' public opinions regarding the Cilacap bullying case. Through this approach, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of TikTok's contribution to adolescent public opinion formation and the social implications of adolescents' engagement in digital communication environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved eight adolescents aged 15–18 years from Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency who actively use social media platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter/X. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore the participants' experiences and perspectives regarding the bullying case involving a junior high school student in Cilacap that gained widespread attention in 2023. The interview data were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in the identification of three major themes: social media as a source of information, emotional responses and digital participation, and awareness of misinformation accompanied by critical reflection.

Social Media as the Primary Source of Information



Figure 1: Viral Video of Bullying in Cilacap

Source: Official iNews 2023

The interview results show that all informants first learned about the case of teenage bullying in Cilacap through social media. However, there were differences in the initial sources of information between adolescents in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency.

Informants from Cirebon tend to obtain information directly through TikTok—primarily via the For You Page (FYP)—and then verify that information through Twitter/X or online news portals. The results of the interviews with the informants are presented as follows.

City Interview Results

How did you first learn about the case of teenage bullying in Cilacap?

- Informant A** : *I first learned about the case through a video that appeared on TikTok's For You Page.*
- Informant D** : *I watched a video that went viral on TikTok.*
- Informant E** : *I found out directly from TikTok.*
- Informant H** : *I saw it on TikTok, and then we talked about it with my classmates.*

Conversely, some informants from Cirebon Regency learned about the case through a friend's Instagram post or a link shared via WhatsApp before eventually seeking further information on TikTok. The results of the interviews with the informants are presented as follows.

Regency Interview Results

How did you first learn about the case of teenage bullying in Cilacap?

- Informant B** : *I found out about the case from a classmate who sent me a link to a TikTok video.*
- Informant C** : *I found out about the case from a classmate who sent me a link to a TikTok video.*
- Informant F** : *At first I saw it on TikTok, then I double-checked it on an online news portal.*
- Informant G** : *I saw it on TikTok, and then we talked about it with my classmates.*

The results demonstrate that TikTok was the primary platform through which information regarding the bullying case in Cilacap was disseminated, while other social media platforms complemented this process by further extending the reach of information to broader audiences.

Emotional Responses and Digital Participation



Figure 2: Viral Post About Bullying in Cilacap

Source: Viva.co.id 2023

The viral bullying case in Cilacap elicited a range of emotional responses from the informants. The majority of informants reported feeling sad, angry, and concerned after watching the video circulating on social media. The video, which directly depicted the bullying, evoked empathy for the victim and prompted them to respond to the case.

Informants from the city of Cirebon tended to show higher levels of digital participation. Some informants admitted to posting comments, reposting content, and participating in discussions on social media. They felt the need to express their opinions as a form of support for the victims and to show their concern for the issue that was trending. The results of the interviews with the informants are presented as follows.

City Interview Results

What was your initial reaction?

- Informant A** : *Shocked, angry, and feeling sorry for the victim.*
Informant D : *I got carried away after reading the comments from netizens.*
Informant E : *I felt so moved that I cried.*
Informant H : *I was immediately influenced by the prevailing opinion, which led me to think negatively about the perpetrator.*

Did you help share that content?

- Informant A** : *Yes, I shared it on my Instagram Story because I felt sorry for the victim.*
Informant D : *No, I'm just following the discussion in the comments section.*
Informant E : *Yes, I reposted it because I got carried away by my emotions.*
Informant H : *No, I'm just going along with what my friends think.*

In contrast, informants from Cirebon Regency tended to be more passive observers. Most of them simply followed developments in the case through posts on social media, read other users' comments, and discussed the case directly with their peers. Nevertheless, they still showed interest in the case and followed its developments on TikTok. The results of the interviews with the informants are presented as follows.

Regency Interview Results

What was your initial reaction?

- Informant B** : *I'm feeling very emotional and want to share this with others right away.*
- Informant C** : *I share their anger because my friends have reacted the same way.*
- Informant F** : *I got carried away after reading the comments from netizens.*
- Informant G** : *I was so angry that I immediately reposted it.*

Did you help share that content?

- Informant B** : *Yes, I shared it on my Instagram Story because I felt sorry for the victim.*
- Informant C** : *Yes, because I feel influenced by my circle of friends.*
- Informant F** : *No, I'm waiting for information that is truly reliable.*
- Informant G** : *Yes, because I was carried away by my emotions at the time.*

After further information about the case emerged, several sources from both regions admitted they had begun to question the accuracy of the information circulating. Some felt that the information they had received when the case first came to light did not necessarily reflect the full truth of what had actually happened.

Awareness of Misinformation and Critical Reflection

The experience of following developments in the bullying case in Cilacap gave the informants a new understanding of the importance of verifying information before believing or sharing it. All informants realized that information that goes viral on social media is not necessarily entirely true and needs to be cross-checked with other, more reliable sources.

Informants from Cirebon generally reported that they have begun double-checking information received from various news accounts and online media before forming conclusions about a case. They recognize that information circulating on social media often presents only part of the facts, so caution is needed when responding to it. The results of the interviews with the informants are presented as follows.

City Interview Results

How do you feel after learning that some of the information is inaccurate?

- Informant A** : *I regret sharing that information without verifying its accuracy.*
- Informant D** : *I realize that social media can shape opinions that tend to be one-sided.*
- Informant E** : *I feel disappointed and as if I've been deceived.*
- Informant H** : *I realize that I have been influenced by public opinion without having all the facts.*

Did that experience change the way you approach information on social media?

- Informant A** : *Yes, now I'm more careful before trusting or sharing any information.*
- Informant D** : *Yes, I'm more critical now when I read comments on social media.*

Informant E : *Yes, I now feel I need to verify it first.*

Informant H : *Yes, I'm now more cautious about accepting information from social media.*

Meanwhile, several informants from Cirebon Regency admitted that they still have difficulty distinguishing between valid and invalid information, especially when that information is presented in the form of attention-grabbing videos that have been widely shared by other users. However, they also stated that their experience following this case has made them more cautious in using social media. The results of the interviews with the informants are presented as follows.

Regency Interview Results

How do you feel after learning that some of the information is inaccurate?

Informant B : *I've become more cautious and don't immediately trust the information that's circulating.*

Informant C : *I regret that it turns out I was just going along with the crowd without finding out the real facts.*

Informant F : *I feel that my decision to check the news first was the right one.*

Informant G : *I regret sharing it without fact-checking it.*

Did that experience change the way you approach information on social media?

Informant B : *Yes, now I always check the information first before sharing it.*

Informant C : *Yes, I realize that I shouldn't be so quick to follow the crowd when it comes to spreading information.*

Informant F : *I'm used to checking information through credible sources before believing it.*

Informant G : *Yes, I'm more cautious now, even though I still get carried away by my emotions sometimes.*

In general, teenagers in both the city and regency of Cirebon recognize that social media has a significant influence on shaping public opinion regarding an event. They also acknowledge that critical thinking skills and digital literacy are essential to avoid being easily swayed by unverified information.

The Role of TikTok in Shaping Public Opinion Among Teens

The results of the study demonstrate that TikTok has become the principal source of information for adolescents seeking updates on the teenage bullying case in Cilacap. The majority of informants, both from Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency, stated that they first learned of the incident through a video that appeared on the For You Page (FYP). This finding indicates that TikTok's algorithm has the ability to rapidly distribute information to users, allowing an event occurring in a specific region to be easily learned about by people in other areas a relatively short time. The results of the interviews with the informants are presented as follows.

City Interview Results

In your opinion, what role has TikTok played in shaping public opinion on this case?

- Informant A** : *In my opinion, TikTok greatly accelerates the spread of information, so public opinion forms quickly.*
- Informant D** : *TikTok reinforces public opinion through user comments.*
- Informant E** : *TikTok is very influential because emotional content can quickly go viral.*
- Informant H** : *TikTok makes teenagers more likely to believe information even if it isn't necessarily true.*

Regency Interview Results

In your opinion, what role has TikTok played in shaping public opinion on this case?

- Informant B** : *TikTok makes people quick to get angry about a particular issue.*
- Informant C** : *TikTok can foster solidarity among the public, but often without a verification process.*
- Informant F** : *TikTok can shape public opinion, but it also has great potential for spreading misinformation.*
- Informant G** : *TikTok has a very strong influence on shaping teenagers' perceptions.*

From the perspective of New Media Theory, the characteristics of digital media allow the communication process to take place in a more open and interactive manner, unrestricted by time or space. TikTok serves not only as a medium for disseminating information but also as a digital public space that enables users to access diverse perspectives on an event. This ease of access makes TikTok one of the influential sources of information in shaping adolescents' initial perceptions of the bullying case in Cilacap.

The findings further indicate that the formation of public opinion is shaped not only by the availability of information but also by the manner in which that information is presented. TikTok videos containing authentic footage of the bullying incident, accompanied by emotionally charged narratives, were found to evoke empathy toward the victim and anger toward the perpetrator. These findings suggest that the visual and emotional characteristics of TikTok content can strongly influence users' interpretations of an event, even before they are exposed to more comprehensive or verified information from other sources.

Repeated exposure to content through TikTok's *For You Page* (FYP) contributes to the development of public opinion. Information that consistently appears on users' timelines is more likely to be perceived as relevant or significant, encouraging them to follow the progression of a case, engage with other users' comments, and search for additional information through other digital platforms. Accordingly, public opinion on TikTok develops gradually through continuous exposure to information, social interaction, and individuals' interpretation of the content they consume, rather than emerging instantaneously.

The findings of the present study are consistent with those reported by Dinaya Citra et al. (2024), who concluded that TikTok functions as an effective medium for shaping public

opinion through the rapid dissemination of information and extensive user interaction. Nevertheless, the present study offers a more specific contribution by demonstrating that the formation of public opinion is also influenced by the characteristics of TikTok's algorithm, which enables a local incident to evolve into an issue of national concern and attract the attention of adolescents from different regions, including Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency.

These findings demonstrate that TikTok extends beyond its function as a digital communication platform by serving as a space where social meanings are constructed and negotiated. Through the defining characteristics of new media—such as interactivity, connectivity, and algorithm-driven information dissemination—the platform plays a significant role in influencing how adolescents perceive, interpret, and evaluate events occurring digital environments.

User Interactivity and Participation in the Digital Space

One of the defining features of new media is its interactive nature, which enables users to move beyond the role of passive information recipients and become active participants who create, share, and disseminate content as *prosumers*. The findings of this study indicate that, after being exposed to the bullying case in Cilacap, the participants engaged in various forms of digital participation, including posting comments, reposting videos, expressing approval through the “like” feature, and taking part in discussions across the comment sections of TikTok and other social media platforms.

The study also identified differences in digital participation between adolescents residing in Cirebon City and those in Cirebon Regency. Adolescents from urban settings demonstrated a greater tendency to share information and voice their opinions, whereas participants from the regency were more likely to engage as observers rather than actively participating in online discussions. These differences indicate that the intensity of digital participation is not always the same, even though all participants accessed information through the same platform.

From the perspective of New Media Theory, these findings reflect the principles of interactivity and user-generated content, whereby digital media enables users to participate actively in the communication process. TikTok provides a range of interactive features that allow users to respond directly to emerging issues, transforming communication from a predominantly one-way process into a more dynamic and participatory exchange. Through functions such as comments and reposts, users are able to initiate discussions, shape the perceptions of others, and extend the circulation of information across digital networks.

The findings indicate that the formation of public opinion in digital environments is inherently a collaborative process. Rather than being determined solely by content creators, public opinion develops through ongoing interactions among users who share opinions, experiences, and interpretations. Consequently, higher levels of user interaction increase the potential for the emergence of common perceptions and collective viewpoints among social media users.

The findings of this study are consistent with the research by Assuhaila and Hidayat (2026), which explains that public opinion on TikTok develops through the process of content framing and user interactions in the comments section. However, this study shows that the form of user participation is also influenced by users' social characteristics, resulting in differences in interaction patterns between urban and rural adolescents.

It is clear that interactivity is one of the key factors that distinguishes new media from conventional media. Through TikTok's various features, users not only receive information but also actively shape, reinforce, and even change public opinion regarding an event that is going viral.

Awareness of Misinformation and Critical Reflection When Confronted with Viral Information

The research findings indicate that the experience of following developments in the bullying case in Cilacap has raised informants' awareness of the importance of verifying information before believing it or sharing it with others. Most informants reported that they had begun comparing information obtained through TikTok with information from mass media or other sources deemed more credible. This awareness emerged after they realized that information going viral on social media does not necessarily present the full picture. The study further demonstrates that audiovisual content enriched with emotional narratives has a greater capacity to attract users' attention and influence their interpretations than text-based information. Consequently, users' perceptions and opinions may be revised as they gain access to more comprehensive and credible information from diverse sources.

According to New Media Theory, the rapid accessibility and dissemination of information constitute fundamental characteristics of digital media, facilitating the swift circulation of information across broad audiences. At the same time, these characteristics increase the potential for the spread of misinformation, unverified claims, and emotionally provocative content. Therefore, digital literacy plays a vital role in equipping users with the ability to critically assess information, confirm the credibility of its sources, and formulate well-informed opinions based on reliable and verifiable evidence.

The results of this study support the findings of Manurung and Jamba (2024), who argued that the rapid circulation of information on TikTok may foster the phenomenon of *trial by social media*, whereby public judgments are formed before sufficient and reliable information becomes available. These findings are also supported by (Siraj, Nurfalah, Listiana, & Santika, 2021) who explain that introducing communication ethics on social media can increase adolescents' awareness of the need to use social media wisely, responsibly, and more selectively when receiving and sharing information. The formation of public opinion in the digital age is influenced not only by the characteristics of new media but also by users' ability to critically filter, evaluate, and interpret information before forming or disseminating opinions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study on the role of TikTok in shaping public opinion among adolescents in Cirebon City and Cirebon Regency regarding the 2023 Cilacap bullying case, it can be concluded that TikTok functioned as the primary medium in shaping public opinion. The dissemination of audiovisual content accompanied by emotional narratives enabled information to circulate rapidly and influenced how adolescents understood, interpreted, and evaluated the incident, generating empathy toward the victim and condemnation of the perpetrator. TikTok's characteristics as a new media platform encouraged interactive and participatory communication through features such as comment sections, reposts, and user discussions, allowing adolescents to participate not only as information consumers but also as active contributors. However, differences in digital participation were identified between

adolescents in Cirebon City, who demonstrated higher levels of engagement, and adolescents in Cirebon Regency, who tended to participate more passively. Exposure to TikTok content also increased adolescents' awareness of digital literacy, as most participants recognized that viral content requires critical evaluation before being accepted or redistributed. This finding indicates that adolescents have begun to develop greater critical awareness regarding their engagement with social media. In conclusion, TikTok, as a new media platform, plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' public opinion through its interactive environment, user participation, and rapid information circulation. However, these benefits must be supported by adequate digital literacy to ensure that adolescents are able to critically evaluate information, prevent the spread of misinformation, and construct opinions based on credible evidence. Therefore, collaborative efforts involving families, schools, and communities are essential to fostering responsible, critical, and ethical social media use among adolescents.

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