

Motives in accessing Tiktok content for personal branding development: A case study of public relations students

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Abstract

This study explores the motives of Public Relations students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, class of 2021, in accessing TikTok content from @Vmulliana to develop their personal branding. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications theory, this research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews with five purposively selected students. The analysis identifies four key motives: diversion, personal identity, personal relationship, and surveillance. Diversion reflects the platform's shift from entertainment to learning; personal identity signifies efforts to construct a professional self-image; personal relationship involves building social confidence and connections; while surveillance highlights the search for practical career insights. The main emerging theme reveals that students gain more practical and applicable learning experiences from Vina Mulliana's content compared to theory-dominated classroom instruction. This finding underscores the educational value of social media as a complementary learning tool in higher education. The study concludes that educational TikTok content effectively fosters personal branding awareness, encourages self-development, and bridges academic theory with real-world practice among communication students in the digital era.

Keywords

Motives, TikTok, Personal branding, Public relations students, Uses and gratifications

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital media has fundamentally reshaped how students construct their identities, access information, and acquire professional competencies [1]. TikTok, as one of the most influential short-form video platforms, has transitioned from a purely entertainment-oriented space into a highly accessible learning environment, driven by algorithmic personalization that enhances content relevance for its users [2]. Within the Indonesian context, TikTok is increasingly utilized as an informal pedagogical tool, where educational creators gain significant traction as students seek practical, digestible knowledge. For Public Relations (PR) students, personal branding

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has emerged as a critical competency for establishing credibility, visibility, and competitiveness within the professional landscape [3].

However, communication education in Indonesia frequently prioritizes theoretical frameworks over practical skill-building, prompting students to seek out alternative learning resources [4]. While extensive literature has explored TikTok through the lenses of entertainment, identity formation, or digital behaviour, there remains a paucity of research concerning how educational creators facilitate professional development—particularly regarding personal branding among PR students [5]. Although TikTok's utility as a learning platform is widely acknowledged, existing studies often overlook the nuanced ways in which students interpret, internalize, and practically apply educational content to their academic and career trajectories [6].

Furthermore, prior research specifically examining @Vmuliana has predominantly centered on the creator's own personal branding strategies or specific skill-based outcomes. These studies highlight how Vina Muliana constructs her professional persona and how her content influences certain competencies; however, they do not specifically analyze the motivations of followers—particularly PR students—in consuming and utilizing this content for their own personal branding development. Consequently, a significant gap exists in understanding the audience's perspective, specifically regarding how PR students actively select, interpret, and implement educational TikTok content within their professional preparation process.

Against this backdrop, the content produced by Vina Muliana (@Vmuliana) is particularly significant. Her TikTok videos offer concise and pragmatic guidance on career preparation, communication skills, and personal branding strategies [7]. With a following of approximately 9.4–9.8 million and consistently high viewership across her videos, her account demonstrates substantial reach and audience impact. This robust digital footprint, coupled with a consistent focus on career-centric themes, renders @Vmuliana an appropriate case for examining how educational TikTok content underpins students' professional development. Existing scholarship further suggests that credible TikTok creators can significantly influence students' learning behaviours [8].

This study employs the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory to examine the motives of PR students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (Class of 2021) in accessing @Vmuliana's content. U&G posits that audiences are active agents who select specific media to fulfil cognitive, affective, and identity-driven needs [9]. By identifying informational, identity-related, relational, and entertainment-seeking motives, this research provides insights into how students interpret and leverage TikTok content to bolster their personal branding [10]. Ultimately, this study contributes to broader academic discourse on digital learning and professional readiness by highlighting the role of social media as a vital complementary educational resource [11].

Method

This study utilizes a qualitative descriptive approach anchored in the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, a framework extensively applied to analyse media selection motives within contemporary digital landscapes [12]. The research was conducted among Public Relations (PR) students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY), specifically the Class of 2021. UMY was purposively selected as the research site to maintain context-specificity, focusing on a defined academic environment where students share comparable curricular exposure and institutional experiences. In qualitative inquiry, such contextual delimitation is vital to ensure coherence between the research objectives and the lived experiences of the participants.

The Class of 2021 cohort was deliberately chosen to ensure generational and academic homogeneity. As students nearing the completion of their undergraduate degree, they are actively navigating the transition to the workforce and are deeply involved in professional identity formation. This developmental stage is highly salient to the nuances of personal branding, rendering this cohort an appropriate demographic for examining the motives behind accessing career-oriented TikTok content.

A total of five participants were selected through purposive sampling, a technique that enables the identification of informants who fulfil specific, research-relevant criteria. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) active PR students from the Class of 2021 at UMY; (2) active TikTok users as part of their daily media consumption; and (3) regular engagement with @Vmuliana's content, particularly segments pertaining to career preparation and personal branding. The sample size was determined based on the principle of depth-oriented qualitative inquiry. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, this study prioritizes rich and detailed narratives to explore participants' subjective motivations and interpretations. Given the relatively homogeneous characteristics of the cohort and the focused scope of the study, five informants were considered adequate to generate meaningful thematic insights.

Primary data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' motives, personal experiences, and interpretations of TikTok as a pedagogical medium. This method is particularly effective for capturing subjective meanings and lived experiences within digital learning environments [13].

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, comprising three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification [14]. To ensure credibility and methodological rigor, the study employed member checking and triangulation, both of which are essential for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research [15]. This methodological framework was selected because it facilitates in-depth exploration while remaining appropriate and replicable for communication-based scholarly inquiries.

Results and discussion

Results

The findings demonstrate that students' engagement with TikTok content from @Vmulliana is underpinned by four distinct motivations within the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework: diversion, personal identity, personal relationship, and surveillance. These motives are empirically manifested in the ways students consume and subsequently apply the content within the context of professional preparation and personal branding.

Diversion served as the primary gateway to content consumption. Most participants initially encountered the content through TikTok's "For You Page" (FYP), engaging with it as a form of light entertainment. However, this serendipitous discovery transitioned into more intentional pedagogical engagement. As one participant remarked, "I watched it first for fun, but later I realized I learned a lot from it," indicating a shift from passive, hedonic scrolling to purposeful media utilization.

Personal identity emerged as the most salient motivation. Participants articulated how the content facilitated the clarification of their professional objectives and the refinement of their self-concept as aspiring PR practitioners. One participant noted, "It helped me conceptualize the kind of PR practitioner I want to be," while others emphasized the pragmatic application of the content, such as optimizing CV layouts and enhancing their professional presence on LinkedIn.

The personal relationship motive was reflected in the participants' perceived sense of proximity to the creator. Although direct interaction was absent, students characterized the creator's tone as mentor-like and highly encouraging. One participant explained, "Her content feels like a mentor reminding me to improve," suggesting that these perceived relational bonds often described as parasocial in nature strengthened user engagement and fostered a deeper level of trust in the information provided.

Lastly, surveillance was evident in the students' proactive efforts to acquire knowledge regarding workplace norms, communication standards, and career readiness. Participants reported the direct implementation of the creator's advice such as revising resumes and refining LinkedIn profiles—demonstrating that TikTok functions as a vital complementary learning resource that bridges the gap between theoretical academic knowledge and real-world professional practice.

Overall, these findings suggest that U&G motives operate dynamically within the context of educational TikTok consumption show in [Table 1](#). The audience experience evolves from entertainment-driven exposure toward strategic, goal-oriented professional self-development.

Table 1. Summary of key findings

Motive	Description	Representative Evidence from Participants	Observed Outcome
Diversion	Initial entertainment use shifts into intentional learning	“I watched it first for fun, but subsequently realized I learned a lot.”	Shift from passive scrolling to purposeful viewing
Personal Identity	Helps define professional goals and self-concept	“It helped me conceptualize the kind of PR practitioner I want to be.”	Strengthened professional self-construction
Personal Relationship	Feeling connected, encouraged, and supported by the creator	“Her tone feels like a mentor reminding me to improve.”	Increased trust and motivation
Surveillance	Seeking practical insights on careers, communication, and workplace norms	“I directly applied the tips for CV and LinkedIn optimization.”	Practical behavioral application

Discussion

The findings indicate that students' engagement with @Vmuliana's TikTok content exemplifies the active, goal-oriented media use central to the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework [1]. Rather than passive consumption, participants selectively engaged with videos that addressed their professional concerns, suggesting that TikTok usage in this context is driven by cognitive, affective, and social needs. The observed transition from entertainment-based exposure to intentional learning demonstrates that TikTok serves as both a leisure platform and an informal learning environment where practical knowledge is integrated into students' professional development [5].

The prominence of the personal identity motive highlights the strategic role of digital media in professional self-construction. Participants did not merely consume information; they utilized the content to clarify career aspirations, refine self-presentation strategies, and shape their identities as future PR practitioners. This finding aligns with prior research suggesting that digital platforms significantly influence young adults' career orientation and self-branding [7]. In this study, identity-related gratification was manifested through behavioural adjustments, such as improving CV structures and optimizing LinkedIn profiles.

Furthermore, the interplay between personal relationship and surveillance motives illustrates that digital learning encompasses both informational and relational dimensions. Participants' perceived mentor-like connection with the creator enhanced trust and encouraged the application of professional advice. This dynamic reflects how parasocial interaction supports observational learning and behavioural modelling in mediated environments. These findings align with literature emphasizing the role of authenticity, clarity, and creator credibility in sustaining engagement with educational media [6].

Despite these contributions, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The relatively small and homogeneous sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce subjective bias. Future research should expand participant diversity across institutions and consider mixed-method designs to strengthen analytical robustness.

Overall, this study extends existing scholarship by contextualizing U&G motives within short-form educational TikTok content. The platform operates as a hybrid space where entertainment, informal learning, and professional identity formation intersect, underscoring its relevance for students in early-stage career preparation [7].

Conclusion

This study investigated the motives of Public Relations students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (Class of 2021) in accessing TikTok content from @Vmuliana for personal branding development. The findings suggest that students engage with TikTok not merely for entertainment, but as a multifunctional platform that fulfills cognitive, affective, and social needs. Through clear, structured, and relatable short-form videos, students acquire practical competencies—such as CV refinement, LinkedIn optimization, and enhanced self-presentation—which contribute to their perceived professional readiness in the Public Relations field. This shift from casual consumption to intentional, skill-oriented engagement underscores TikTok's role as an informal learning environment.

Furthermore, the study indicates that TikTok functions as a hybrid space where formal PR theories intersect with real-world industry insights. Students perceive @Vmuliana's delivery style as accessible and motivating, fostering a sense of perceived mentorship despite the lack of direct interaction. These parasocial interactions appear to strengthen students' commitment to following professional guidance, while the surveillance motive encourages the observation and modelling of industry-standard behaviours. Such dynamics illustrate how digital creators may contribute to identity construction and professional orientation among young adults.

In summary, these findings highlight TikTok's potential to complement formal education by providing practical and accessible insights that support early career preparation. As digital media continues to shape professional identity development, platforms like TikTok offer a flexible avenue for self-improvement. Future research could extend these findings by examining long-term impacts on employability, comparing motives across various academic disciplines, or analysing how different content formats influence informal learning in digital environments.

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