
The Meaning of UTM Students' Communication Experience in the Fire Streak Trend on Tiktok: A Phenomenological Approach

Melina Fatimah Azzahra¹, Yuliana Astutik², Dwi Sulistiyawati³, Andina
Sukma Ayu Febrianti⁴, Nur Aliya Natasyah⁵, Luthfira Aslinda⁶, Sri
Wahyuningsih⁷

^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8} Universitas Trunodjoyo Madura, Jawa Timur, Surabaya, Indonesia

Corresponding author: melinaazzahra26@gmail.com , yulianaastutik405@gmail.com ,
duwis2677@gmail.com , sukmaayuandina@gmail.com , Tasyah636@gmail.com ,
luthfiraaslindaa@gmail.com , sri.w@trunojoto.ac.id

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the communication experiences of students at Universitas Trunojoyo Madura (UTM) regarding the TikTok Streak Fire phenomenon through a phenomenological approach. Data were collected using in-depth interviews, digital observation, and documentation involving 14 informants identified as active TikTok users who consistently maintained their Streak Fire over a significant duration. The findings reveal four principal themes, consistency as a representation of self-identity, indicating that streaks are perceived as reflections of discipline and personal commitment. Streak as a symbol of relational closeness, functioning as an indicator of care and emotional presence between users. Social pressure and fear of losing digital presence, arising from the internalization of online communication norms. Entertainment and emotional release, wherein maintaining streaks provides psychological benefits such as enjoyment and stress reduction. The study concludes that Streak Fire serves as a meaningful digital communication symbol encompassing emotional, relational, and identity dimensions, thereby playing a significant role in shaping interaction patterns among Generation Z students

Keywords– Digital Communication, TikTok Streak Fire, Phenomenology, Self-Identity, Generation Z.



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1. Introduction

In today's digital age, almost everyone is highly dependent on the internet, and interactions on social media platforms have given birth to various new habits. One phenomenon that is widely discussed is the Fire Streak on TikTok. Although the concept of this feature was inspired by non-stop sequential Direct Messages every day, on TikTok, the Fire Streak serves as a visual symbol showing how routine and intense the daily communication is between two users or a group. The Fire icon and the number that appear become a sign of how many consecutive days they have interacted through Direct Messages or the content they create.

The main phenomenon found in this study is the Fire Streak trend on the TikTok application, which acts as an element of daily interaction between two users. The Fire symbol and the number indicating the duration of communication through direct messages or interaction with each other define this feature. Originating from similar features in other messaging applications, this phenomenon on TikTok has become a sign of interpersonal connection and consistency in the digital era.

The course of communication interaction gives rise to the appearance of the Fire icon, and the displayed number will increase over time. The Streak will disappear if the interaction stops, which usually causes frustration or anxiety among users. Based on preliminary observations, UTM (University of Trunojoyo Madura) students of Generation Z spend a lot of time on TikTok, around tens of hours per month (We Are Social, 2024), making the Fire Streak a routine part of their communication. This is a digital commitment to maintaining friendships, not just a game. The social implications of this phenomenon show a dependence on virtual connections, indicating that the broken lines can cause FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) or an illusion of connection without real intimacy. Significance for research: although it reflects human self-development through media (McLuhan), this phenomenon raises questions about the subjective meaning behind the Fire symbol for UTM students.

This research aims to provide actual preliminary knowledge about the Fire Streak phenomenon on TikTok. We conducted direct conversations with several UTM students who actively use TikTok and have Fire Streaks. The argument is based on semi-structured interviews, where the existing questions can change depending on their stories. We focus on their first encounters, including why they work hard to maintain the Fire Streak or their emotions when that Fire Streak ends. From here, we can find the main themes that emerge, including what causes their addiction or anxiety.

Reference from (McLuhan, 1964): In his work titled *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), Marshall McLuhan argued that media are "extensions of ourselves" (extensions of man). In this case, TikTok as a digital platform functions to enhance human communication capabilities, where the Fire Streak acts as an extension of the human desire to maintain personal relationships. The Fire symbol and numbers describe the "self" extended through technology, reflecting emotional attachment. This concept was developed by Stephen W. Littlejohn (2009), who explains how media play a role in influencing our perspective on social reality. In this study, McLuhan's theory is used to evaluate how the Fire Streak extends the daily interactions of students, so that virtual relationships feel like a physical extension of friendship. For example, in the pre-digital era, people used the telephone to extend the voice; in the current era, the Streak extends emotional presence. Criticism: McLuhan's theory is considered too deterministic, ignoring the extent to which humans control technology, so it needs to be combined with a constructivist approach.

The concept of the meaning of communication experience is rooted in the phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the individual's subjective understanding of their life experiences, including in communication. According to Moustakas (1994) in *Phenomenological Research Methods*, phenomenology seeks to understand the meaning of human experience based on perception and consciousness. In the context of communication, Stephen W. Littlejohn (2009) explains that meaning emerges through the process of an individual's

interpretation of the messages and interactions they experience. Communication experience is seen as a process of consciously building meaning through social interaction.

Students are a young generation group in a dynamic stage of cognitive and social development, active in the process of seeking self-identity. This phase is known as the stage of identity formation (identity versus role confusion). In the context of the University of Trunojoyo Madura (UTM), students reflect Generation Z, who grew up in a digital environment and are accustomed to interacting through social media as part of their daily lives. University of Trunojoyo Madura (UTM) students as research subjects represent the young generation group that actively uses social media in their daily lives. They are part of a digital society familiar with new communication trends, one of which is the Fire Streak trend on TikTok. A popular digital communication phenomenon on platforms like TikTok is the Fire Symbol, which serves as a sign of interaction consistency or a continuous relationship between users. According to symbolic interaction theory (Blumer, 1994), social meaning is formed through the use of symbols and the results of interaction between individuals. Fire Streak can be understood as a communication symbol reflecting interconnectedness, commitment, and social existence in digital space. TikTok is a short-video-based platform that is one of the most influential social media in digital culture today. It encourages new forms of communication oriented toward self-expression, creativity, and rapid, visual social involvement. This media also facilitates the formation of digital identity through algorithms and symbolic interaction between users. TikTok, as the platform where this phenomenon develops, plays an important role in shaping new communication patterns that combine aspects of entertainment, interaction, and self-identity construction; therefore, these four concepts are interrelated in understanding how UTM students interpret their communication experiences through the Fire Streak trend on TikTok.

Research conducted by Anwar (2019) reveals that Generation Z tends to be more dominant in conducting digital communication compared to face-to-face

communication. The results of this study indicate that social media becomes the primary space for this generation in forming and expressing self-identity. This research provides an overview of how digital interaction has become an important part of the communication experience of today's youth. In our research, we will explain intense communication and self-expression in broad social media within the Fire Streak trend on TikTok.

Research by Aulia et al. (2024) highlights how students build digital identity through symbolic interaction on the Instagram platform. These findings explain that the digital communication process not only functions as a means of information exchange but also as a medium for self-presentation and forming a personal image. The results of this study are relevant to the analysis of the meaning of Fire Streak as a form of self-presentation in the context of social media, because both emphasize aspects of identity and self-expression in digital space. In our research, we explain the self-identity built through interaction and specific digital features on social media such as the Fire Streak on TikTok.

The development of digital technology has brought significant changes in the communication patterns of the younger generation, especially students. Social media platforms like TikTok are not only a means of entertainment but also a space for interaction and self-expression. The new communication phenomena emerging within them, such as the Fire Streak trend, are interesting to study because they describe forms of social relationships and self-presentation in the digital era.

The problem formulation in this research is: what is the meaning of the communication experience of UTM students in maintaining the Fire Streak on the TikTok application? This question is directed toward understanding the process, subjective experiences, and interpretations arising from students' involvement in following the trend, both as a digital activity and a communication practice that holds certain values and meanings in their lives.

The objective of this research is to explore in depth the personal experiences of students participating in the Fire Streak trend on TikTok, specifically regarding

how they undergo, feel, and interpret that activity in their daily lives. This research also aims to identify the symbolic meaning attached by informants to the Fire Streak, namely how the feature is understood as a symbol of social relations, commitment, consistency, and self-representation in digital space. Through these objectives, the research seeks to capture the construction of meaning formed from the practice of maintaining the Fire Streak and its implications for student communication patterns on the TikTok platform.

2. Method

This research is categorized as qualitative research using a phenomenological approach, as its primary focus is on understanding the meanings and personal experiences of University of Trunojoyo Madura (UTM) students regarding the Fire Streak phenomenon on TikTok. A phenomenological study describes the common meaning of a concept or phenomenon for several individuals based on their lived experiences. The objective of this approach is to understand the context in depth by describing what occurs according to field observations and collected facts (Creswell, 2014). Previous studies demonstrate thematic relevance to this research, as they collectively discuss the use of TikTok, interactive features like Streaks, and communication behavior or user engagement in digital spaces. Several of these studies also employ a phenomenological approach, thereby providing a strong theoretical foundation for this research in understanding the subjective experiences of TikTok users.

Based on the existing gaps, it can be concluded that there has not yet been any research specifically delving into the meaning of students' communication experiences within the TikTok Fire Streak trend, particularly in the context of UTM students. To date, no phenomenological study has raised the Fire Streak as a digital communication practice that possesses symbolic, emotional, and relational dimensions in student life. Therefore, this research is significant as it offers a new contribution to digital communication studies, specifically regarding how students interpret the Fire Streak as a form of daily interaction, a digital ritual, and a

mechanism for forming and maintaining social relationships on the TikTok platform. This study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the communication dynamics of the younger generation within the continuously evolving digital culture.

The subjects of this research are students of the University of Trunojoyo Madura (UTM) who are active TikTok users and are involved in the Fire Streak phenomenon as part of their digital communication. The object of this research is the meaning of the communication experiences of UTM students in the Fire Streak phenomenon on TikTok. This object encompasses the awareness, perception, and emotions of students toward the activity of maintaining a Fire Streak as part of digital communication. Purposive Sampling is used in this study to find subject characteristics that are appropriate and aligned with the research focus. Data is collected through In-depth Interviews, which serve as the primary technique. These interviews are semi-structured, allowing the researcher to prepare core questions while still providing space for informants to share their stories freely.

In the observation phase of this research, the researcher directly observes the interactions of UTM students who follow the Fire Streak trend on TikTok. This participatory observation helps in understanding the social context of the phenomenon, as the researcher observes interactions without intervention. Documentation is used as a form of supplementary data to strengthen the research findings. Documentation may include screenshots of Fire Streaks, application interfaces, conversations related to Streak usage, or other relevant digital evidence. These documentary data help describe the phenomenon concretely and visually, thereby enriching the descriptions of experiences obtained through interviews.

After gaining a general overview, the researcher begins to identify statements that are relevant and significant to the Fire Streak phenomenon. Once significant statements are marked, the researcher groups them into specific meaning units or themes. These themes are formed based on similarities in meaning, patterns of experience, or recurring tendencies across all informants.

The final stage is to formulate the essence of the phenomenon—the core meaning that describes the shared experience of the participants. This essence is not merely a summary but a profound depiction of the meanings emerging from the previous themes. Data validity is tested using source triangulation to compare information from various sources (interviews, observation, and documentation), ensuring that the findings fully reflect the communication experiences of UTM students.

3. Result and Discussion

Research on UTM students involved in the TikTok Fire Streak trend reveals that this activity serves as a form of symbolic communication rich in meaning, far exceeding a mere digital routine. Students interpret the effort to maintain a streak as a reflection of a stable self, full of commitment and responsibility toward a significant digital obligation. The streak is also regarded as a symbol of attention, a sign of strong friendship, and a way to maintain the "warmth" of a relationship without the need for deep or constant interaction. However, the presence of an increasingly long streak also creates mental pressure and anxiety, making students feel a compelling need to keep the numbers rising. Additionally, several students view this activity as light entertainment that provides instant gratification and acts as a way to soothe emotions from the boredom of daily routines.

Within the framework of Symbolic Interactionism, the fire symbols and displayed numbers are interpreted and negotiated collectively by the students. The act of maintaining a streak is understood as a symbol carrying collective meanings, such as "I care" or "Our relationship matters." The significance of consistency, which is viewed as a personal identity, demonstrates how students use digital actions to project the self-image they desire. This phenomenon can also be explained through the Social Construction of Reality theory, where the norm of maintaining a streak has been internalized as a social obligation among friends.

Failure to maintain a streak is often interpreted as a lack of care, illustrating how digital norms created collectively have influenced student behavior. The experience of maintaining a streak provides a profound emotional experience, such as satisfaction when it continues and disappointment when it is broken,

which aligns with the core focus of phenomenology. Ultimately, research on UTM students shows that the fire streak is a multifaceted symbolic communication where fire symbols and numbers are collectively negotiated. Students utilize these digital actions to show that they are responsible and committed individuals, reinforcing their social standing within their digital peer groups.

4. Conclusion

The Fire Streak feature on the TikTok application plays a vital role in shaping and enhancing user engagement among UTM students. The Fire Streak functions as a form of symbolic communication that carries deep interpersonal meaning, reflecting relational closeness, attention, and commitment. The essential meanings discovered include symbols of relational proximity, personal consistency, and digital social pressure, demonstrating that a simple gamification mechanism can create powerful emotional experiences that influence user habits in a sustainable manner.

It is recommended that subsequent studies develop research linking symbolic interaction theory with theories of motivation, habit formation, or comparative research across other digital platforms. Practical suggestions are directed toward TikTok application developers to consider these findings as input in designing gamification feature policies that pay greater attention to the digital and emotional health of users. Future researchers are also encouraged to expand the variety of respondents and explore the relationship between streaks and the psychological well-being of users.

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