



# Constructing Childhood Realities: A Communication Science Analysis of TikTok's Age Verification Failure and Psychosocial Impact

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**Abstract:** This study explores the failure of TikTok's age verification system and its psychosocial impact on children aged 10 to 13 in Indonesia. Although the platform sets official age restrictions, many minors are able to bypass these controls and gain access to content that is not suitable for their developmental stage. The analysis highlights how this exposure can lead to increased anxiety, social pressure, distorted self-image, and reduced emotional well-being. The research identifies several contributing conditions in Indonesia, such as the large number of young users, high daily engagement, gaps in regulatory enforcement, cultural practices that increase minors' visibility online, and recurring technical issues in the verification process. Content analysis revealed common themes in accessible material, including suggestive behavior, mild violence, commercialized influencer culture, and unrealistic body ideals. These patterns suggest that prolonged and repeated exposure shapes children's perceptions of social norms and expectations, influencing their self-concept and interactions with peers. The findings underscore the urgent need for stronger collaboration between government authorities, digital platforms, and parents. This includes improving verification mechanisms, strengthening regulatory measures, and integrating digital literacy education from an early age to build resilience and equip children with the skills needed to navigate the digital environment safely.

**Keywords:** Child Digital Safety, Psychosocial Impact, Tiktok Age Verification

## 1. Introduction

TikTok has grown rapidly as one of the most widely used social media platforms globally, including among children aged 10 to 13 years. Despite official age restrictions, children often bypass TikTok's age verification system with relative ease, enabling them to access content that may be inappropriate or harmful to their developmental stage. (Kelles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020). This phenomenon raises critical concerns about child digital safety, especially as early exposure to inappropriate online content can have psychological and social consequences (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

The failure of TikTok's age verification system in Indonesia presents unique psychosocial risks that are shaped by the country's distinct digital and cultural environment. Indonesia is home to the largest TikTok user base globally, with approximately 157.6 million users as of July 2024, most of whom are in the 18–24 age group. Such a large concentration of young users means that lapses in age verification can have a disproportionately broad impact (Kurniawati, 2024)

This risk is further compounded by the nation's regulatory framework. Although Government Regulation No. 17/2025 addresses child protection in electronic systems, its adaptive and reactive nature makes it less stringent than comparable measures in Europe or the United States, leaving enforcement gaps that can be exploited by platform users (KataData, 2025). Cultural practices also play a role, particularly the prevalence of sharenting, where parents routinely share images and videos of their children online. This not only increases minors' online visibility but also exposes them to potential exploitation or harassment (Wismashanti, 2023).

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High engagement levels intensify these risks. On average, Indonesians spend more than three hours a day on TikTok, with studies reporting that 70% of young users experience stress and 60% experience anxiety linked to the content they consume (Kumparan, 2024). Technical and procedural shortcomings in the verification process add another layer of concern, as repeated verification failures—even when valid identification is provided—can cause frustration, feelings of digital exclusion, and psychological distress (Reddit, 2024).

These combined factors create a distinct psychosocial landscape in Indonesia, where young users are more vulnerable to inappropriate content, social pressures, and mental health challenges than their peers in countries with stricter digital governance.

In Indonesia, digital penetration and social media usage among children are increasing, amplifying the urgency of effective protection mechanisms (Harini, Putra, & Wahyuni, 2023). While Indonesian policymakers have enacted regulations to safeguard children in the digital ecosystem, such as Government Regulation No. 17/2025 focusing on electronic system governance and child protection, challenges remain in the actual enforcement and efficacy of age verification on platforms like TikTok (Putra, 2023). The ease with which children circumvent these controls not only undermines the intent of policy frameworks but also heightens the risk of exposure to psychosocial stressors.

Psychosocial risks linked to early and unfiltered social media exposure include anxiety, depression, social comparison pressures, and distorted self-image in children, who are in a vulnerable developmental phase (Fox & Rideout, 2018). The repetitive nature of content exposure, driven by algorithmic recommendations, may deepen these negative effects by cultivating problematic perceptions about societal norms and expectations. This study employs Gerbner's Cultivation Theory as a theoretical framework, which posits that prolonged exposure to media content shapes individuals' perception of social reality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002). Applying this theory to TikTok suggests that the failure of robust age verification allows children to consistently consume content that potentially influences their worldview, beliefs, and emotional well-being in subtle yet sustained ways.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design using content analysis methodology focusing on TikTok videos and related user interactions accessible to children aged 10 to 13 years. The qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of how TikTok's age verification failure manifests in the content available to this young audience and its possible psychosocial effects (Saqya & Wiyantmo, 2023) (Andara, Rahdatul, & Sutini, 2022). This case study format allows the exploration of social and cultural contexts surrounding the digital experiences of children on TikTok without relying on primary interview data, focusing exclusively on observable digital content. Collected content samples were analyzed through manual thematic content analysis. This process included organizing data by identifying relevant video samples and user comments, coding the material into categories related to risks such as content suggestiveness, violence, commercial influence, and psychological impact, followed by thematic development and interpretation (Imawan, Zamzani, & Ghazali, 2023). Manual coding was chosen to ensure a nuanced, researcher-driven interpretation of the symbolic and latent meanings within TikTok content, facilitating a contextual understanding of how content themes relate to psychosocial development.

**Theoretical Framework.** This research adopts Gerbner's Cultivation Theory as the primary theoretical framework. Cultivation Theory argues that long-term and repetitive exposure to media shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality and influences their attitudes and behaviors (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002). In this context, the theory helps explain how continuous exposure of children to inappropriate or adult-themed content bypassing TikTok's age verification mechanisms may influence their psychosocial development by altering their understanding of social norms, self-identity, and interpersonal relationships.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Result

The content analysis of TikTok videos and user interactions accessible to children aged 10–13 years revealed multiple categories of problematic content that bypass TikTok's age verification controls. Despite TikTok's policies aimed at restricting minors from accessing unsuitable material, the investigation uncovered several concerning trends.

##### a. Suggestive Live Streaming Content Was Frequently Observed.

These streams, while often not overtly adult, include subtle cues such as suggestive dancing and flirtatious gestures that may influence young viewers' understanding of sexuality prematurely. Such content has been linked to early sexualization, which is known to impact children's psychosocial development adversely (*Sukarmin & Lasaima, 2023*). The algorithmically promoted repeats of these streams reinforce exposure patterns, potentially amplifying their effect

##### b. Meme And Short-Video Content Containing Mild Violence Or Aggression Was Prevalent.

These ranged from playful acts meant for entertainment to more explicit depictions of conflict and intimidation. Access to such normalized portrayals can desensitize children to aggression, with research indicating a correlation between exposure to media violence and increased anxiety, irritability, and social difficulties in early adolescence (*Valkenburg & Peter, 2021*) (*Putri & Wati, 2024*).

##### c. Another Pertinent Observation Was The Rise Of "Kidsfluencers," Or Children Who Create Content Often Sponsored By Brands Or Promoting Consumerist Lifestyles.

While this phenomenon can foster creativity, it also exposes child viewers to heightened commercial pressure and unrealistic social standards, which drives psychosocial stress through social comparison and materialistic values (*Rahadi, 2023*) (*Nesi & Prinstein, 2020*)

Moreover, content promoting body image ideals, dieting challenges, and mental health struggles, including sometimes romanticized depictions of self-harm or depression, were readily accessible (*Amnesty, 2025*). Such exposure increasingly places vulnerable children at risk of internalizing harmful beliefs that reduces their resilience and well-being.

#### 3.2. Discussion

Collectively, these findings highlight serious gaps in TikTok's age verification system, which relies heavily on self-reported age data and limited technical barriers. The ease of circumvention means that children routinely access content posing direct and indirect psychosocial risks (*Figueira, Chamarthi, Le, & Markopolou, 2020*) (*Motley, 2025*). Although TikTok deletes millions of underage accounts yearly, the cycles of re-registration and evasion minimize the effectiveness of these enforcement actions (*Breaking News Ireland, 2024*). Applying Gerbner's Cultivation Theory provides a valuable lens to understand how sustained exposure to problematic TikTok content shapes children's social reality perception. According to the theory, repeated media messages foster a symbolic environment that influences viewers' beliefs and attitudes. For children aged 10–13—still forming their social and emotional identities—immersion in suggestive, violent, or consumptive content risks anchoring distorted notions of normative behavior and social interaction. The repetitive nature of algorithmically

curated TikTok content means that children are not exposed to isolated incidents but rather to continuous streams of similar material, reinforcing specific worldviews that often emphasize superficiality, risk-taking, and validation through peer approval. This dynamic cultivates an internalized social script that may heighten anxiety, pressure to conform, and depressive symptoms, as echoed in recent adolescent mental health studies (*Van Den Eijnden, Koning, & Bujizen, 2020*) (*Odgers & Jensen, 2020*) (*Kelly, Zilanawala, Booker, & Sacker, 2021*)

Furthermore, the prominence of young influencer culture blurs lines between content consumption and commercial exploitation. Young viewers are confronted with aspirational norms that often include expensive lifestyles and physical appearance ideals, potentially increasing psychosocial distress through social comparison (*Nesi & Prinstein, 2020*). Without effective parental mediation or platform protection, this digital socialization may adversely influence self-esteem and mental health.

From a regulatory perspective, Indonesia's Government Regulation No. 17 of 2025 underscores the country's commitment to enforce stricter age verification and child protection online (*Kominfo, 2025*). However, the findings demonstrate that technical challenges and the evolving sophistication of evasion tactics undermine regulation compliance. This aligns with global assessments showing social media platforms' systemic struggles to enforce age-based restrictions properly (*Amnesty, 2025*) (*Motley, 2025*). The gaps in TikTok's Kids Mode and absence of robust parental control mechanisms exacerbate these vulnerabilities (*UNICEF, 2024*). This situation calls for stronger multi-stakeholder collaboration, including technological advancements in age verification, regulatory oversight, platform accountability, and enhanced digital literacy for parents and children (*Putra, 2023*) (*UNICEF, 2024*). In conclusion, the interaction of algorithm-driven content exposure and flawed age verification systems materially increases the risk of psychosocial harm for child TikTok users. Addressing these challenges requires integrating theoretical insights with practical policies and community engagement to create safer digital spaces for children.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study reveals that TikTok's failure to effectively enforce age verification allows children aged 10 to 13 in Indonesia to access various inappropriate contents that may negatively impact their psychosocial well-being. These impacts include increased anxiety, pressures, and distorted self-image, which are significant concerns during this critical developmental period. The content children are exposed to—ranging from suggestive streams to consumer-driven influencer videos—can shape their perceptions and values in harmful ways. Drawing from Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, the repetitive social exposure to such media content creates a symbolic reality that influences children's understanding of social norms and behaviors. This process highlights how ineffective age verification is not merely a technical issue but also a critical factor affecting children's psychological and social development.

The findings underline the urgent need for stronger cooperation between the government, digital platforms like TikTok, and parents to develop more reliable age verification methods and provide better digital literacy education. Such collaboration is essential to create a safer online environment, ensuring children's protection and healthy growth in the digital age.

In my view, integrating digital literacy education from an early age could significantly mitigate many of the negative impacts identified in this study. By equipping children with the skills to critically assess online content, recognize manipulative or harmful materials, and understand the consequences of oversharing personal information, we can help them navigate platforms like TikTok with greater resilience. Early exposure to these skills in a structured, age-appropriate way would also encourage healthy online habits before potentially harmful patterns take root.

Furthermore, embedding digital literacy into formal education—not merely as a technical skill, but as a holistic understanding of online ethics, digital well-being, and media influence—could bridge the gap between parental oversight and platform regulation. This approach addresses one of the key vulnerabilities highlighted in this study: the reliance on flawed verification systems without sufficient user preparedness to handle inappropriate content when encountered. From my perspective, the long-term benefit of such integration is twofold: it reduces children’s dependency on external protections that may fail, and it fosters internalized safeguards through informed decision-making. While no single intervention can fully eliminate psychosocial risks, empowering young users with knowledge and critical thinking skills offers a sustainable, user-centered layer of protection.

For future researchers, I recommend exploring empirical models of early-age digital literacy programs implemented in different cultural contexts. This could provide deeper insights into which approaches are most effective in reducing the types of psychosocial harm examined in this study, particularly within Indonesia’s unique digital environment.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares that there are no institutional or financial conflicts of interest in the preparation of this article. However, during the research process, there were several personal and technical challenges that indirectly affected the author’s rhythm and concentration in carrying out the data collection and analysis process. Personally, the author faced challenges in terms of time management, as they had to divide their focus between academic activities, part-time work, and social dynamics that also affected emotional stability. Additionally, access to the latest scientific literature specifically addressing the issue of TikTok and young children’s use in Indonesia was quite limited. Some journals and important data are only available through institutional subscriptions or paid platforms, which posed a separate challenge in the process of searching for valid and up-to-date reference sources. In data collection, the limitations of TikTok’s features in accessing detailed user demographics made the process of selecting children’s content more subjective and required extra care in identifying age indicators from open-access content. As a solution

and input for future researchers, it is recommended to: Prepare a more flexible and realistic research schedule by taking personal circumstances into account; Utilize access to journal databases through educational institutions or collaboration with academic advisors; Employing digital ethnographic approaches or additional interviews as complementary to content analysis to strengthen the validity of data on children in social media. By openly acknowledging these challenges, the author hopes this research can serve as a more reflective and realistic foundation for future studies in the fields of digital communication and child protection.

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