

Analysis of the Streak Feature in Forming Phatic Communication in Generation Z's Interactions on the TikTok Platform

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to describe and understand the meaning of the streak phenomenon on TikTok as a form of digital social communication practice among Generation Z. The streak reflects how Gen Z interprets continuous interaction as a symbol of closeness, consistency, and commitment in online friendships. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through in-depth interviews with active TikTok users who regularly maintain streaks. The findings reveal that streaks function not only as a gamified feature that motivates daily interaction but also as a form of phatic communication, maintaining social connection without necessarily conveying substantive messages. Over time, the meaning and motivation behind streaks transform from novelty and entertainment into a form of digital ritual representing emotional closeness and peer-driven social pressure. Therefore, TikTok streaks can be understood as symbolic communication practices that illustrate how Generation Z negotiates commitment, social connection, and personal balance in the era of social media.

INTRODUCTION

Phatic communication in the digital era, where seemingly trivial exchanges play a crucial role in maintaining interpersonal relationships. Phatic communication refers to small talk, greetings, or light utterances that serve to initiate, sustain, or reaffirm social bonds between interlocutors rather than to convey substantial information. In contemporary mediated environments, these expressions have migrated from face-to-face settings into various online platforms. Previous research has shown that phatic communication has adapted to new media forms, such as blogging and other online interactions, indicating its continuous relevance in modern communication practice. In this context, features embedded in social media applications can function as new channels for phatic exchanges in everyday digital interactions.

Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat have become central arenas

for social interaction, especially among younger users. These platforms no longer serve merely as entertainment spaces but also as environments where users build, negotiate, and maintain social relationships through a variety of interactive features (Baykal, 2020). Among these features, TikTok's streak function allows users to maintain continuous communication through direct messages, encouraging regular contact between interlocutors (TikTok, 2020c). This continuity suggests that social media not only shapes new patterns of communication but also influences how individuals express presence, commitment, and relational closeness in online spaces.

The rapid development of digital technology and internet infrastructure has further transformed patterns of interaction in virtual environments. The expansion of internet connectivity and the evolution of devices. From early computers to today's mobile touch-screen technologies, have enabled real-time

communication that transcends geographical boundaries (Tarumingkeng, 2023). In Indonesia, internet penetration continues to grow, with recent survey data from APJII indicating that a large majority of the population is now connected online, and social media ranks among the most frequently accessed services (Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia) APJII (Asosiasi, 2024). The same report shows that TikTok is the most frequently accessed social media platform in Indonesia and is the most widely used by Generation Z, with 42.27 percent of Gen Z respondents using TikTok, surpassing Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook (Rayhan Fairuz SA, 2025). This situation illustrates how the internet has become intertwined with daily life, turning online interaction into a routine practice embedded in users' social behavior. Within this broader digital ecosystem, social media acts as a key arena where interpersonal communication is mediated by platforms and their specific features.

TikTok has emerged as one of the most popular social media platforms in Indonesia, characterized by short, form audiovisual content that is easily consumed and widely shared (Susanti, 2024). Over time, TikTok has evolved from being perceived merely as a space for dance or entertainment videos into a platform that hosts diverse content, including education, lifestyle, and personal expression. This growth has been supported by continuous feature innovation, such as creative video tools, live streaming, and direct messaging, which together foster more intensive user engagement (Astuti & Subandiah, 2021). The direct message function, in particular, provides a private space where users can exchange texts, emojis, and videos, thus enabling ongoing interpersonal interaction within the TikTok environment. This interactive space forms the basis on which new communicative practice, such as maintaining streaks can emerge.

Within TikTok's direct messaging system, the streak feature introduces a gamified mechanism that visually marks and rewards continuous interaction between users over consecutive days (TikTok, 2020). When users consistently exchange messages for a set period, a streak badge appears and increases over time, while interruptions in communication can cause the streak to fade or end, prompting users to sustain contact to preserve it. In practice, this feature can function as a trigger for phatic communication, as

users may send simple messages, emojis, or short videos mainly to keep the streak active rather than to share substantive information. Building on this context, the present study seeks to analyze how TikTok's streak feature shapes and facilitates phatic communication in Generation Z's interactions on the platform. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research aims to explore the meanings, motivations, and relational implications of streak-based interactions as a contemporary form of digital phatic communication among Gen Z users.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in three interconnected pillars: the concept of phatic communication, the dynamics of social media and digital interaction, and the digital culture of Generation Z. Phatic communication offers a lens to understand how light, routine exchanges serve to maintain social bonds rather than convey substantive information. In parallel, social media platforms create mediated spaces where interaction is shaped by user-generated content, networking features, and algorithmic curation. Within this environment, Generation Z, as digital natives whose everyday lives are closely tied to online media, becomes a key group for examining how phatic practices are formed, negotiated, and transformed through platforms such as TikTok.

The Concept of Phatic Communication

Phatic communication refers to forms of small talk that prioritize maintaining social relationships rather than conveying substantive information. It includes greetings, light remarks, or brief utterances that serve to open, sustain, or close conversations in a polite and harmonious manner (Saragih, 2021). Various scholars highlight its relational function in creating and preserving social bonds, with functions such as breaking silence, initiating interaction, sustaining conversation, showing solidarity, building comfort, and expressing respect or politeness (Puspitasari et al., 2024). Phatic expressions can be delivered verbally, for instance through casual questions about one's condition, or non-verbally, such as smiles, nods, or gestures that signal acknowledgement and friendliness (Patmi, 2021).

In interpersonal communication, phatic exchanges act as a foundation for building emotional closeness and sustaining interpersonal relationships, both in face-to-face settings and within digital

environments. They serve as initial steps that encourage openness and continuity in interaction, supporting the construction of social bonds and self-presentation processes (Zahraa Adnan & Adnan Fadhil, 2022). In digital media and social networking platforms, phatic communication appears in the form of comments, reactions, short messages, or simple interactions that aim to maintain connection rather than to exchange detailed information, illustrating how its core social function adapts from traditional contexts to contemporary mediated communication (Alba-Juez, 2023)

Social Media and Digital Interaction

Technological advancements have diversified media landscapes, with the internet enabling boundless communication via social media, which users optimize through access, understanding, and analysis to form new paradigms (Sari & Prasetya, 2022). Social media fosters unique experiences through user-generated content (UGC) like photos, videos, and comments produced by users themselves (Purba & Irwansyah, 2022). Social networking features such as likes, shares, direct messages, and community building (Pambudi et al., 2023) and algorithmic curation like TikTok's For You Page that personalizes content based on (Zainu Ridlo et al., 2024). Digital interactions adapt traditional social exchanges, allowing dynamic connections via platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok despite lacking face-to-face immediacy, enabling remote friendships and emotional bonds through forums, chats, and games (Ginting et al., 2024)

Z Generation and Digital Culture

Generation Z refers to individuals born roughly between 1997 and 2012 who have grown up alongside rapid advances in digital information and communication technologies, leading them to be known as “digital natives” whose daily lives are deeply integrated with the internet, social media, and digital devices (Hatim Gazali, 2021). Studies highlight that this generation is generally open to diversity and change, highly target-oriented, and strongly dependent on technology, with key traits such as freedom, adaptability, collaboration, speed, and high innovation (Kristyowati & Sekolah Tinggi Theologi Indonesia Manado, 2021). Within digital culture, understood as patterns of communication, interaction, and self-expression. Shaped by digital technologies, Generation Z acts not only as passive users but also as active participants who create content, construct online identities, and build virtual communities, with

a marked preference for audio-visual formats like short videos and graphics over written text, making social media a central arena for communication, information sharing, and self-expression (Zis et al., 2021).

TikTok's Features

TikTok is a short-video platform originally launched in China under the name Douyin by ByteDance, later expanding globally and gaining popularity after merging with Musical.ly in 2016, offering users tools to create creative, music-enhanced, and visually dynamic content that is easy to produce and share widely (Rika Widianita, 2023). Its success as an interaction medium is supported by creative features, a powerful recommendation algorithm that tailors content to user interests, high accessibility, and diverse interaction tools such as comments, duets, stitches, and direct messages, which foster continuous engagement and social connection (Deswina Anfarizi, 2023).

Direct messages function as an interpersonal communication space where users can exchange texts and videos privately or in groups, strengthening relational ties within TikTok's social environment (TikTok, 2020). Building on this, TikTok introduced the “streak” feature, a badge system that rewards users who exchange messages for consecutive days and ends when interaction stops, thereby encouraging sustained contact and opening opportunities to maintain relationships through repeated message exchanges and content (Rina Amelia, Slamet Triyadi, 2023)

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design to explore the meanings and experiences that emerge from the use of TikTok's streak feature as a form of phatic communication among users. The qualitative approach is oriented toward interpreting and explaining social phenomena based on participants' subjective experiences and the specific context in which their interactions occur (Abdussamad, 2021). The participants in this study are ten adolescents and young adults between the ages of 12 and 27 who actively use TikTok's streak feature. Through this approach, the research seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of how users engage with the streak feature in their everyday communication practices, and how patterns of interaction formed through this feature reflect the dynamics of phatic communication in digital spaces.

Research Location

This research was conducted in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia. The city was selected due to its dynamic social interactions and relevance to the study's focus on digital communication among Generation Z. As one of Indonesia's major urban centers, Surabaya provides a representative environment to observe contemporary digital behaviors. Data collection was carried out both offline and online through Google Meet sessions to accommodate participant availability and ensure comprehensive data coverage.

Data Collection Techniques

This study employed four qualitative data collection methods:

1. In-depth Interviews: Conducted to explore participants' experiences and perspectives regarding the TikTok Streak feature in depth.
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGD): Used to gather diverse insights and stimulate collective reflection among participants about digital relational practices.
3. Observation: Aimed at understanding user interactions and behaviors while engaging with the streak feature.
4. Documentation: Included collecting screenshots and visual evidence of streak activities to support observational and interview data.

RESULT

This section introduces the study on the streak feature as a form of phatic communication, which is an integral part of ongoing social media content consumption patterns and digital interactions. It serves as a bridge between the theoretical foundations outlined in the previous chapters and the research findings that will be presented. By understanding the characteristics of the research object, namely Generation Z's interactions through the streak feature on the TikTok platform, as well as the research subjects, Generation Z users of TikTok streaks, the findings can be contextualized within a more comprehensive framework.

The object of this study is Generation Z's interaction through the use of the streak feature on TikTok. The research focuses on how Generation Z expresses their thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences through TikTok streaks, as well as the factors that encourage them to interact via TikTok direct messages. This study aims to further analyze these interactions using the concept of phatic communication.

The research subjects consist of ten young people aged 12-27 years who use the TikTok streak feature. The group includes eight females and two males with diverse backgrounds in their use of streaks. The respondents were selected based on the criteria of being active users of the TikTok streak feature, with streak counts ranging from 200 to 500 fire badges. This age range was chosen because it falls within the Generation Z cohort, which is the group most widely associated with intensive TikTok use. Data collection from the informants was carried out using two methods, namely in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The following section presents a brief profile of the research subjects

Table 1. Informant Data

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Detail
1.	Evi	Female	22	Informant 1
2.	Nafis	Male	24	Informant 2
3.	Dinita	Female	22	Informant 3
4.	Cia	Female	22	Informant 4
5.	Jeconiah	Male	21	Informant 5
6.	Farah	Female	21	Informant 6
7.	Zizi	Female	25	Informant 7
8.	Devita	Female	22	Informant 8
9.	Melisa	Female	22	Informant 9
10.	Meli	Female	22	Informant 10

The findings show that Generation Z participants place a strong reliance on social media, particularly TikTok, which they perceive as an integral part of their daily lives and a primary space for activity, adaptation, and innovation. Social media is used not only to access information and entertainment but also to build networks and express personal identity through visual and interactive content. In relation to the streak feature, users reported that the

presence of a fire badge as a symbolic reward increases the intensity of direct message interactions and motivates them to maintain continuous communication. Informants indicated that streaks are sustained through the exchange of videos, emojis, and stickers in personal and group chats, mainly with close or relevant friends, and are experienced as markers of routine interaction, commitment, and togetherness. Streaks were also interpreted as sources of personal pride and satisfaction, as symbols of consistency and relational closeness, and as part of a gamified system reinforced by changing fire colors, day targets, and restore options that encourage users to keep daily interactions. Beyond interpersonal dynamics, the findings reveal that streaks can trigger renewed contact with old friends and even become an economic commodity through “streak jockey” practices, positioning TikTok streaks simultaneously as indicators of activity, signs of social proximity, playful challenges, and opportunities for monetization in digital behavior.

DISCUSSION

Generation Z and Social Media Consumption

This discussion highlights how Generation Z’s social media consumption patterns position TikTok as a central space for everyday activity, self-expression, and social interaction. Gen Z, as digital natives, integrates TikTok into routines that combine entertainment, work, and relationship maintenance, so the platform is perceived as a daily necessity rather than a secondary medium. This aligns with their preference for fast, audiovisual, and interactive content that supports both practical and emotional needs. Informant 6 explicitly frames TikTok as an almost indispensable part of daily life, stating,

"It feels like TikTok has become my main activity. I've also become dependent on it. When I don't use TikTok, it feels like something's missing." **Informant 1, 3 November 2025**

The statement illustrates not only high usage intensity but also emotional dependence, where TikTok becomes embedded in the informant’s sense of completeness in everyday experience. In a similar vein, Informant 1 emphasizes the dual function of social media, including TikTok, as both a professional support and a social-relational medium

"Social media is also one of the tools that supports me in my work and social relationships, so I'm very active

on it, not only for communication but also as a way to relax and unwind." **Informant 1, 3 November 2025**

The findings also show that TikTok’s specific affordances, such as its algorithm, For You Page (FYP), and integrated editing tools. Strengthen user attachment and extend use beyond simple entertainment. Informant 4 explains,

"In a day, I can spend almost 5 to 6 hours scrolling on TikTok. I scroll on TikTok because my work is there. I use for edit and look for information on the platform." **Informant 4, 14 November 2025**

TikTok’s evolution and algorithmic personalization also contribute to its strong resonance with Gen Z identity. Informant 10 reflects on the platform’s development from its Musical.ly roots, stating that over time TikTok’s videos, which helps sustain long-term engagement. Meanwhile, Informant 6 remarks,

"I also like TikTok's algorithm. It's really smart it somehow knows and matches my mood." **Informant 6, 29 November 2025**

Indicating that the recommendation system is perceived as highly accurate and attuned to users’ emotional states. Collectively, these narratives affirm that Generation Z positions TikTok as a primary arena to act, adapt, and innovate in various aspects of life, supported by features that facilitate consumption, creation, interaction, and even work-related activities.

User Experiences with the TikTok Streak Feature

User accounts indicate that the streak feature strengthens interpersonal communication by providing a symbolic fire badge that rewards consistent message exchange, thereby increasing the intensity of interaction in direct messages. Direct messages function as a central interpersonal space where users share videos that feel personally relevant to friends or groups, so content circulation becomes a form of relational maintenance rather than mere entertainment. The streak feature then adds a symbolic achievement layer through the fire badge and encourages consistent daily messaging, making DM not only a messaging tool but also a ritualized space of connection.

"Usually I use DM to send videos that feel relatable to my friends, for example a video that really represents our friendship." **Informant 3, 14 November 2025**

"We have a DM group with my intern friends that we first made to share TikTok content as inspiration for

our social media work.” **Informant 9, 5 November 2025**

Users adopt simple but strategic practices such as sending any video, emojis, or nudges when they are busy or out of ideas, turning the act of messaging into a small daily ritual. Partner and chat selection are also meaningful, some prefer personal chats with friends who share similar humor or interests, while others feel more comfortable maintaining streaks in group chats that function as a selected circle and help them remember to send messages.

“I often share FYP videos that feel relatable to me with my friends, and keeping the streak fire alive together becomes a satisfaction in itself.” **Informant 1, 3 November 2025**

“If I’m too lazy to send videos or scroll TikTok, I usually just send a nudge or a love sticker so that my fire keeps burning.” **Informant 10, 5 November 2025**

For Generation Z, high streak counts are interpreted not only as numbers but also as pride, curiosity, and relational commitment. Long streaks can be seen as evidence of personal consistency, symbols of romantic closeness, or playful goals linked to TikTok’s gamified elements such as changing fire colors and restore options. At the same time, users negotiate streak continuation with their emotions, daily rhythms, and relationship conditions, letting it break when it feels monotonous or restoring it when they want to preserve the bond.

“My highest streak is 353 days, and there is a special satisfaction. Almost one year, so it makes me feel happy and proud.” **Informant 1, 3 November 2025**

“My highest streak is 512 days... at first I was just curious because on my FYP people said the fire could turn green, so we wanted to prove if it was true; it turned out it only went up to purple.” **Informant 2, 9 November 2025**

“Even when my partner and I are in a fight, we never stop nudging each other; we still send videos, and our fire has never gone out.” **Informant 3, 14 November 2025**

In some cases, streaks also enter the economic domain, becoming a commodified service that monetizes users’ desire to appear consistent and loyal in digital spaces. This illustrates how a feature that began as a simple marker of interaction can be

transformed into a resource for micro digital entrepreneurship among Gen Z.

“One day someone suddenly ordered: ‘Can you be a TikTok streak jockey?’ They gave me their username and password, I logged into their account, replied to DMs or just nudged their friends so the fire stayed on, and I charged a daily fee for it.” **Informant 4, 14 November 2025**

Streaks are maintained through the circulation of videos, emojis, and stickers in personal and group chats with close or relevant friends, making them markers of daily routine, commitment, and togetherness, while also functioning as sources of pride, satisfaction, and proof of consistency. The presence of gamification elements, such as changing fire colors, day targets, and restore options. Encourages users to maintain daily contact, and the feature further opens new dimensions, from reviving communication with old friends to enabling “streak jockey” practices that monetize the symbolic need to appear loyal and consistent in digital spaces.

TikTok Streaks as Phatic Communication

Phatic communication is understood as light conversation that serves to maintain closeness between communicators rather than to convey substantial information (Saragih, 2021). Greetings, small talk, and casual interpersonal exchanges are tools that foster friendliness and comfort between participants. Within this framework, the message’s social function outweighs its informational value. This principle resonates strongly in the ways TikTok users utilize the *streak* feature. The findings show that the TikTok Streak often operates as a relational “spark”, initiating or maintaining communication rhythms among users. Informant 1 stated that lighting the streak or “fire” itself acts as a communication trigger. According to them,

“Turning on the fire is also one of the communicative triggers. For example, when there’s a trending FYP video, it sparks conversations that can develop further, maybe adding insights depending on the issue of the day...” **Informant 1, 3 November 2025**

Similarly, Informant 5 emphasized that conversation often requires a trigger, and TikTok’s direct message (DM) space becomes an avenue for that. They explained,

“...there actually needs to be a trigger, one of them is the share feature I mentioned. So there are discussions happening in TikTok DMs related to the shared content...” **Informant 5, 29 November 2025**

The experiences of Informants 1 and 5 demonstrate that communication through TikTok DMs, particularly in the context of streaks, doesn't stop at serving a mechanical or instrumental purpose. Instead, the streak becomes a gateway to more meaningful exchanges, especially when the shared content connects to mutual experiences or ongoing conversations.

However, not all users experienced the same depth of interaction. Informant 2 mentioned that most streak-related messages remain superficial and brief, evolving into longer conversations only when the sent video touches a specific or relatable topic.

“Sometimes the chat only becomes long when discussing a video, like a travel destination video. We end up planning trips based on that...” **Informant 2, 9 November 2025**

“...if there's a funny video or informative one, I'll send it to them. That's how we chat often — sending videos like, 'Hey, this is funny!'...” **Informant 6, 29 November 2025**

Interestingly, TikTok based interactions often transcend the digital space and continue on other platforms or in face-to-face interactions.

“Sometimes when we hang out and don't know where to go, we'll say, 'let's go to that place I sent you on TikTok.' So, what started in TikTok DMs becomes real-life plans” **Informant 2, 9 November 2025**

“Conversations in TikTok DMs can continue in real life. Usually, after chatting on TikTok, we move to WhatsApp and end up hanging out together.” **Informant 4, 14 November 2025**

“We have a group for maintaining streaks, and usually we discuss the content in real life, like 'this is what I sent yesterday,' even though there wasn't any reply in the chat.” **Informant 9, 5 November 2025**

These patterns reveal that TikTok's streak function acts as a bridge connecting online and offline communication, extending digital exchanges into the users' social lives. Nonetheless, several users interpret

streaks as pragmatic tools rather than emotionally expressive ones.

“For me, it's just about maintaining the streak. Sometimes there's some back and forth, but mostly it's about keeping the streak number going.” **Informant 8, 5 November 2025**

“I just light the fire to maintain it. Maybe because of social pressure, like friends saying, 'keep the fire going or we'll stop being friends.' So, my motivation is just to maintain it.” **Informant 9, 5 November 2025**

Streak feature on TikTok embodies the principles of phatic communication by acting as a social “spark” that maintains interpersonal ties. While some users transform streak-based exchanges into meaningful conversations both online and offline, others view it as a symbolic or routine act to preserve relational momentum. The dual nature of streaks, as both relational triggers and social rituals, illustrates how phatic communication operates dynamically within digital spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that social media, particularly TikTok, has become a primary space for Generation Z to interact, express themselves, and build social identity, extending beyond mere entertainment into everyday relational and creative practices. The streak feature functions as a symbolic mechanism that strengthens interpersonal communication and a sense of togetherness through routine, gamified exchanges that provide emotional satisfaction and, in some cases, economic value. In line with phatic communication, streaks act as light, relational prompts that maintain contact without requiring substantive messages, while their continuation or termination reflects how users negotiate commitment, social pressure, and personal comfort in digital interactions. The findings of this study can inform app developers to better balance interaction-driven feature design with users' comfort and digital consumption needs. Developers are encouraged to create features that not only increase user activity but also support more meaningful social interactions. Overall, TikTok streaks represent a form of digital culture that illustrates changing patterns of communication and the evolving meaning of social closeness in the era of interactive media.

Author Contribution

Zefanya Sortaria Simanjuntak conducted all stages of the research, including conceptualization, design, data collection, analysis, and writing. The author applied relevant theories, performed representational analysis, and developed the final discussion. Dr. Syafrida N. Febriyanti, M.Med.Kom, supervised the study, providing guidance and feedback to refine its theoretical and structural quality. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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