

MEANING OF TIKTOK CONTENT MESSAGES ABOUT SELF HARM AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR GEN Z

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ABSTRACT

Understanding messages in TikTok content with a self-harm theme among Generation Z is important because this platform is increasingly used as a place to express emotions. As a generation familiar with digital culture, Gen Z interprets messages not only from direct narratives but also from symbols, music, and visuals used in the content. This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method through in-depth interviews with five informants aged 18 to 24 who actively use TikTok. Data analysis was conducted through a process of reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing, while linking the findings to New Media Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Berlo's SMCR Communication Model. The results show that self-harm content is understood not just as an act of hurting oneself but as a way to express feelings like loneliness, emotional pressure, and a need for validation. Symbols like "barcodes," dark visuals, mellow music, and short texts are elements that shape meaning among Gen Z. Overall, this study highlights the importance of digital literacy and attention to mental health, from society, parents, educators, to policymakers, so that the meaning of sensitive content like self-harm can be understood and addressed more wisely.

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Article history

Received : March 5, 2026
Revised : June 19, 2026
Accepted : June 22, 2026

Keywords:

TikTok
Self Harm
Gen Z
Message Interpretation
New Media

1. Introduction

With the advancement of technology and the ease and speed of communication, social media has become an important part of everyday life for young generations in Indonesia. (Kemp, 2025b) states that in January 2025, there were 143 million people in Indonesia actively using social media. More than 100 million Indonesian users spent an average of about 9 percent of their real-life time just using TikTok in November 2024 (Kemp, 2025a). The 16–24 age group is the most active social media users compared to other age groups (Kemp, 2025a). As a result, this age group is Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010 (Putra, 2016). For Generation Z, TikTok is not just a form of entertainment, but also a way to communicate, find inspiration, and even shape social identity. However, TikTok also has the

potential for negative impacts that need to be anticipated, especially when the content consumed is related to mental health issues like self-harm.

According to research by Trepal and Wester (2007) in (Saputra, 2019), the type of self-harm most often handled by clinical practitioners is cutting or slashing parts of the body (73%). Cutting the body or arms is one of the self-harming actions using sharp objects to cause wounds as an outlet for emotional pain. According to Walsh (Hidayati & Muthia, 2016), one influence is environmental factors that can trigger self-harming behavior, including conflicts in interpersonal relationships, feelings of frustration, loneliness or social isolation, traumatic experiences, as well as aspects of social or relational relationships. KPAI Deputy Chair Jasra Putra said that the trend of self-harm on TikTok threatens young people in Indonesia. Jasra believes that the phenomenon of self-harm through social media encouragement is a recurring phenomenon and the perpetrators are far from facing legal consequences (Prabowo, 2023).

This research focuses on the increasing use of TikTok among Generation Z, which has made TikTok a main space for consuming various types of content, including self-harm content. Self-harm content appears in different forms, like verbal narratives, text, visual symbols, emotional expressions, and music that dramatizes the personal experiences of content creators. Problems arise when content that should serve as an emotional outlet, personal experience, or warning is interpreted differently by the audience. It's important to understand how Generation Z interprets the messages contained in self-harm themed TikTok content. It's also necessary to analyze the types of symbols, narratives, and visual elements in self-harm TikTok content that are presented, as they shape certain meanings among Generation Z. In addition, this research also looks into how these interpretations affect the attitudes, emotional responses, and behaviors of Generation Z. This study aims to understand how Generation Z interprets messages in TikTok content about self-harm. It also aims to identify and analyze the forms of symbols, narratives, and visual elements in TikTok self-harm content and how they are represented to shape certain meanings among Generation Z. The study is also intended to analyze the implications of these message interpretations in TikTok self-harm content on the attitudes, emotional responses, and behaviors of Generation Z.

The theory of new media is a theory developed by Pierre Levy (1990) that explains the evolution of media from conventional media to the digital era like today (Yunita, 2018). The strength of new media lies in computer-based communication technology that allows information to be searched and disseminated quickly and efficiently via the internet. New media has high accessibility because it can be accessed through various digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers. New media shows that digitalization has become a part of communication and allows interaction without face-to-face meetings (Feroza & Misnawati, 2020). Pierre Levy said that in the theory of new media there are two perspectives (Pusvita & Mauliansyah, 2021), namely the social interaction perspective and the social integration perspective.

Social Cognitive Theory is a theory formulated by Albert Bandura in the 1960s. This theory is an approach that emphasizes social role modeling, or learning by observing other people's behavior in relation to human motivation, thoughts, and behavior. By observing others, a person can learn various knowledge, rules, skills, strategies, beliefs, and attitudes. Individuals also learn the usefulness and appropriateness of a behavior by watching the models or examples being shown. After that, they will act based on their belief in their own

abilities and the anticipated outcomes of those actions (Yanuardianto, 2019). Social cognitive theory states that people form expectations about outcomes related to the consequences of certain actions based on personal experiences and observation of models (Mudayat & Mualip, 2024).

The Berlo model was introduced by David Kenneth Berlo in 1960. This model is also known as the SMCR model, which stands for Source, Message, Channel, and Receiver (Mulyana, 2017). In this model, the source is understood as the party that creates the message, the message is the translation of ideas into symbolic codes like language or gestures, the channel functions as the medium that carries the message, and the receiver is the party targeted by the communication (Indinabila, 2020). According to this model, the understanding of a message can be influenced by the communicator's movements and the meaning of words. Berlo explains that communication happens through an encoding mechanism at the source and a decoding mechanism at the receiver (Indinabila, 2020).

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological research method. The observation unit in this study is individuals who fall into the Generation Z category, specifically those aged 18 to 24 years. This age group was chosen because they are the most active social media users, especially on TikTok, compared to other age groups. Active TikTok users with usage frequency of more than 2 hours. Those who have watched, liked, responded to, or even frequently reposted TikTok content themed around self-harm. In this study, the interviewees consisted of 5 people, both male and female.

Informants were selected purposively, meaning individuals who had experience or direct involvement with self-harm content on TikTok. The selection process was carried out in several ways. First, the researcher looked through comments on TikTok videos with self-harm themes. From those comments, the researcher looked for users who responded to the content by showing emotional involvement. In addition, the researcher also checked user accounts that appeared to have reposted self-harm themed content on their TikTok accounts. Next, the researcher contacted them via private messages and asked if they were willing to be interviewed. Then, the informants would be interviewed online through social media messages, such as TikTok, WhatsApp, Telegram, and so on. There are several criteria that informants must meet, namely being between 18 and 24 years old, being active TikTok users with more than 2 hours of usage per day, and having ever or even often watched, liked, commented on, and reposted TikTok content with a self-harm theme. The research is planned to take place over three months, from September to November 2025.

The data collection process will be done in several ways, including non-participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and documentation. In addition, this study also uses secondary data, which involves collecting and analyzing data that is already available from various relevant sources, such as literature related to the research theme, research reports, statistical data, and other documentation. Secondary data includes scientific literature like national and international journals that discuss self-harm phenomena, the impact of social media, and Generation Z behavior. The researcher also uses books that cover communication theory, adolescent psychology, and digital media. Additionally, official reports from national and international institutions also serve as important sources of secondary data.

Techniques for checking the validity of data in qualitative research include credibility tests, transferability tests, dependability tests, and confirmability tests. The collected data is analyzed using data analysis techniques with the Miles and Huberman model. According to Miles and Huberman in (Yusuf, 2017), in qualitative research, the data collected through various data collection techniques such as interviews, observations, quotations, and summaries from documents, notes are mostly words rather than numbers. The Miles and Huberman data analysis model is well-known for providing a systematic and practical framework for processing qualitative data in depth. This model consists of three components: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions and verification.

3. Results and Discussion

According to the definition from the International Study of Self-Injury, self-harm is behavior where a person intentionally hurts themselves, causing direct damage to body tissue, but it is not meant as a suicide attempt (Fitzgerald & Curtiz, 2017). Many people use self-harm as a way to cope with emotional pressure and as a process of distraction or escape from difficult situations (Paes, 2017). One of the most common forms of self-harm is cutting oneself or the arms (self-cutting) (Thesalonika & Apsari, 2022). According to a YouGov Omnibus survey, 45% of young adults have engaged in self-harm (Verenisa et al., 2021). The World Health Organization (2018) reports that self-harm and suicide are the second leading causes of death worldwide among the 18 to 29 age group. TikTok is a social media platform that was launched in 2016. In Indonesia, the TikTok app was launched in May 2017 (Ilahin, 2022). TikTok is an app used to record, edit, and upload videos to various social media platforms, so the content or videos can be seen by both users and non-users of the TikTok app. According to Putra (Novita et al., 2023), TikTok is an app that offers a variety of unique and interesting special effects, making it easy to use.

Along with the increasing use of social media, concerns have also arisen about the negative impact of algorithms that determine what content will appear to users. Algorithms tend to suggest similar content when users show interest in a particular topic. This can create what is called a 'filter bubble,' where users get stuck in a limited information loop and often lean toward certain biases (Pradana & Effendi, 2024). A filter bubble is a term for the algorithms used by the internet to filter information for users (Putri & Irma, 2023). This filter bubble creates an echo chamber effect, where internet users who like certain topics are grouped by the system to frequently encounter or be shown other users with similar interests (Wulandari et al., 2021). Pariser argues that the filter bubble will reinforce everyone's biases.

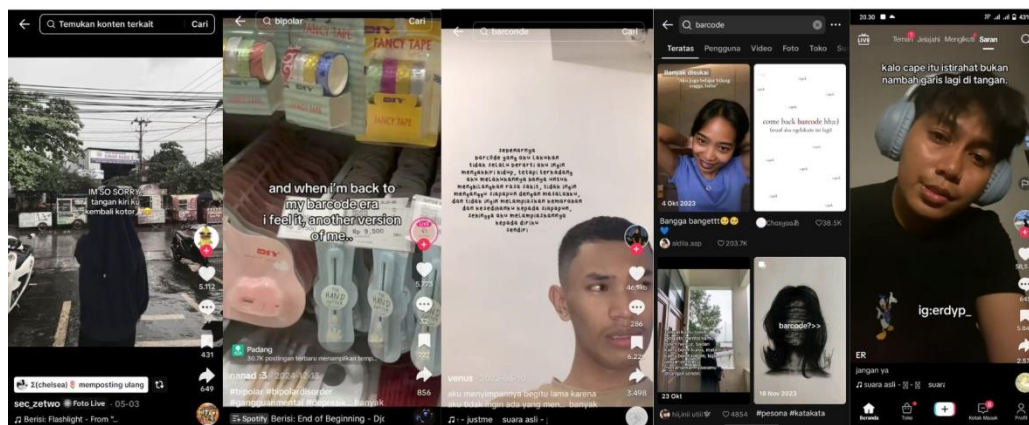


Figure 1 : Screenshots of various TikTok content themed around self-harm.

The research findings show that TikTok works through processes of digitalization and automation, as explained by Lev Manovich and Mondry. Almost all informants, including Rafael, said that self-harm content on TikTok pops up without them actively looking for it. After watching one or two similar videos, the algorithm immediately starts showing more of the same kind repeatedly on the For You Page (FYP). This automatic appearance pattern indicates that TikTok's algorithm actively selects and distributes content based on users' interaction history. These findings align with Manovich, who explains that, even if it wasn't clearly visible before, algorithms now play an important role in many aspects of life (Mikucki, 2021). This statement shows that user experience on new media is heavily influenced by the algorithmic mechanisms working behind the scenes. Then, field findings show the interactive features described by Rogers and McQuail, such as comments, likes, and duets. This can enhance the meaning received by informants. This interactivity makes users not just passive viewers, but also involved in the exchange of emotions and experiences. In the interview results, all informants showed that their engagement didn't stop at just watching. They read comments, responded emotionally, and in some cases felt supported by other users through the comment section. One informant, Davian, explained that comments full of support or personal feelings from other users made the content feel even more emotional and real. *"At first I was shocked, like 'how did this even show up?' but over time I got used to it too."* (Rafael, November 19, 2025)

This experience shows that the comment section becomes a place for interaction, which can affect how informants interpret the content. This aligns with the concept of interactivity in new media, where users have the chance to contribute and create their own meaning through their engagement. Furthermore, the phenomenon of de-massification is also clearly evident in this study's findings, where a single type of content can be understood differently by each individual. The informants' interpretation is never uniform but is heavily influenced by their emotional state, personal experiences, and the psychological context they experience while accessing TikTok and watching the content. In some cases, like what Davian experienced, repeated exposure from the algorithm even led him not only to understand self-harm content but also to temporarily imitate the behavior he saw in it. At this point, message control is no longer entirely in the hands of the creator, but has shifted to the audience. Each user or viewer interprets, selects, and responds to content based on their own internal conditions. This shows that new media has the ability to produce streams of very personal messages, where the same content can mean different things to each user.

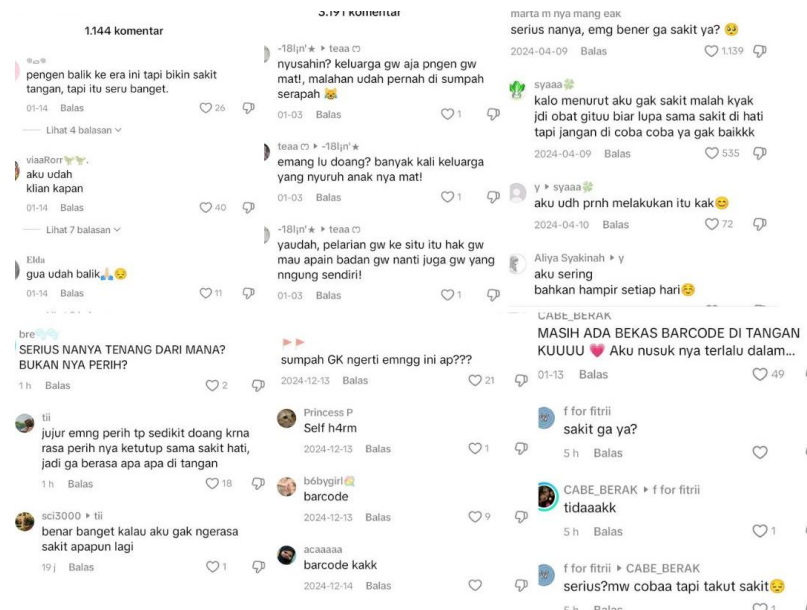


Figure 2 : Screenshots of various TikTok content themed around self-harm

The asynchronous nature is also clearly seen in how the informants use TikTok. They open the app based on their own schedule, like at night when things are quieter, during free time or breaks in activities, and even before bed. There's no specific time that forces them to access TikTok or view and respond to content. The content that appears on the FYP can be watched, saved, ignored, or responded to anytime depending on each informant's situation. This flexibility shows that receiving and responding to messages doesn't happen all at once but occurs individually for each user. The freedom to decide how long to spend on this content reinforces the nature of new media, which removes the time needed to send and receive messages and allows interactions that don't have to happen simultaneously.

The characteristics of networked communication as explained by Pierre Levy can be seen from the experiences of informants who feel connected to other users with similar emotions. Self-harm content on TikTok becomes a digital space that forms communities based on emotional closeness, not physical closeness. Levy calls this phenomenon a social interaction perspective, which is how the internet enables the creation of a broad, open, and dynamic interactive environment without the need to meet in person. The informants feel that connection; they admit they are more comfortable reading comments on TikTok than talking to those closest to them. The findings of this study also reflect Pierre Levy's idea of social integration. Self-harm content on TikTok is not just a medium for information, but also turns into a social practice that brings users together through shared emotions. This is evident from the statements of several informants who felt "understood," "not alone," or "more accepted" after finding content that resonated with their emotional state.

Interaction through comments, likes, or content with a similar vibe creates a form of indirect solidarity. TikTok becomes a platform that allows an emotional community to form, where users can express and acknowledge their feelings through a digital space. Moreover, elements like music, dark visuals, and emotional text show how TikTok blends various digital representations to strengthen its message, which aligns with Lister's concept of simulated and virtual. Informants repeatedly mentioned that the combination of mellow music, dark visual tones, and short but emotional text makes the message in the videos feel much deeper,

even when they are only a few seconds long. These findings reinforce that the characteristics of new media are not just in its digital nature, but also in its ability to simulate affective experiences that conventional media find hard to achieve.

Through social cognitive theory, researchers can understand that the experience of watching self-harm content not only serves as a stimulus but also affects thoughts, emotions, and the tendency to behave like the person being observed in daily life. Bandura emphasizes that individuals learn through three main factors that influence each other: the environment, behavior, and cognition. These three form a reciprocal relationship that determines how someone interprets and responds to content. Digital environmental factors like content recommendations, comments from other users, and TikTok's communication culture play an important role in shaping the observer's perception. Repeated exposure to self-harm content becomes a form of 'observational experience' watched by the individual. As explained in the theory, the process of observing behavior examples can influence how someone understands and evaluates an action. This can be seen from the explanations of the informants, one of whom is M (initial of the name) who said that at first they felt shocked or uncomfortable, but as the exposure repeated, they began to understand the emotional context behind the self-harm actions shown. After seeing how the digital environment shapes the informant's perception, another aspect that also plays a role is behavioral factors that arise as a direct response to the content. Some informants initially chose to just scroll past, but then admitted that they actually started to watch the content more often all the way through.

"At first I was shocked, because I didn't expect content like that to appear so often. Over time, it started to feel a bit uncomfortable..." (M, November 12, 2025).

"The biggest impact I experienced was the emergence of self-harm behavior." (Chelsea, October 4, 2025)

The most significant finding is the statements from the informants, namely Davian and Chelsea, who said they had "tried" similar actions out of curiosity after frequently seeing that content. This aligns with Bandura's concept that individuals can be motivated to imitate a model's behavior if they observe that the behavior produces certain outcomes; in this case, the perception that self-harm is done as a form of "release" or a way to feel relief. Even though not all informants reached that stage of behavior, the fact that they thought about and considered it already shows how observation can influence an individual's cognitive process.

"So because that kind of content kept appearing a lot, I got really curious, tried it a few times, and it actually felt relieving." (Davian, November 25, 2025)

In this study, cognition and self-regulation were the most noticeable aspects. The informants explained that their mental state greatly determines how they interpret content. Informants who were in a stable emotional state tended to see self-harm content as a form of expression or someone else's venting. On the other hand, when they were in a fragile condition or mood, the content felt closer and more impactful, even significantly affecting their mood. In the interviews, some informants said they felt "understood" when they saw content that matched their feelings. They felt that, even without direct interaction, emotional closeness arose when other users expressed pain through video content or comment sections.

Besides that, positive comments like 'me too,' 'stay strong,' or other forms of support act as a kind of social persuasion. On the other hand, negative comments can heighten anxiety and make the person feel stressed. Another important finding is that some people choose emotion regulation strategies after seeing self-harm content, like distracting themselves,

stopping watching TikTok, or talking to a close friend. This pattern shows a self-regulation process as explained by Bandura, which is a person's ability to manage their actions and emotions based on experiences and psychological conditions they go through (Ningsih, 2023).

Next, this study also uses Berlo's Communication Model (SMCR), which consists of four main components: Source, Message, Channel, and Receiver. This model was chosen because it can explain the communication process in more detail, especially regarding how messages are formed, delivered, and responded to by the receiver in the context of digital media like TikTok. Through this model, researchers can see that the meaning given by informants to content doesn't happen in a vacuum, but is influenced by the characteristics of the message source, the message format, the delivery medium, as well as the conditions and experiences of the message receiver.

1. *Source*

In this study, the source refers to creators of self-harm content. Based on interview results, some informants consider these content creators to be young people, especially Generation Z who use TikTok as a place to express their feelings. This aligns with Berlo's explanation that the characteristics of a source, including attitude, communication skills, knowledge, cultural background, and social system, can influence how a message is formed and delivered. One of the informants, including M (initials), revealed that self-harm content creators tend to use a calm, soft, and emotional communication style. This style shows that the source's attitude is influenced by their psychological condition, such as feelings of sadness, disappointment, or the need to have their feelings understood.

This comes from the way creators present their narratives in their content, for example through text that contains personal feelings, the use of melancholic music, and visuals that are dark or even depict certain emotional atmospheres. These elements make informants assume that the creator is in an emotional state or experiencing some kind of pressure, even though this information isn't always conveyed explicitly. This finding aligns with Berlo's theory because in the SMCR model, a source with a certain psychological condition or attitude will influence the form of the message they produce. Creators' ability to choose music, arrange visuals, and put together short texts also shows that they have adequate digital communication skills to convey messages effectively on TikTok. In addition, the source factors in Berlo's communication model can be explained through the following aspects:

A. Communication Skills

Self-harm content creators show their communication skills through visual arrangement, music choice, and concise yet emotional text packaging. Some informants explained that even though the message isn't delivered verbally, the use of non-verbal communication elements like a dark video tone, mellow music, and short writings makes the message feel strong and easy to understand. This shows that their communication skills, especially in conveying emotional messages through content, play an important role in how effectively the message gets across.

B. Attitude

The creator's attitude toward themselves and their audience is reflected in the way they present content. The informants noticed that creators tend to show an open attitude about their condition or feelings when making the content. This attitude affects how the

message is received, because the audience senses the authenticity of emotions and vulnerability. This attitude makes the informants feel that the creator 'wants to be understood' or 'is looking for a place to be heard'.

C.Knowledge

The creator's knowledge about emotional experiences and understanding of mental health dynamics is evident in their choice of words and the narratives they build. Informants felt that these messages often reflect personal experiences, making them feel authentic. This knowledge allows creators to craft messages that are relevant for viewers who might be going through similar situations.

D.Social System

The social system context of creators, like academic pressure, family relationships, social circles, and the digital social environment, also affects the content they create. Informants realized that many creators seem to make content as an outlet for stress, loneliness, and feelings that aren't expressed in real life. This aligns with Berlo's view that social systems can shape how someone frames messages and chooses communication channels.

E.Culture

TikTok's digital culture, which normalizes forms of emotional expression through short videos, also shapes the way creators convey messages. Some informants mentioned that their communication style is identical to Gen Z culture. The use of symbols like "barcode" or "dirty left hand" is a form of cultural construction that has developed in certain online communities, especially on TikTok. This factor strengthens the structure of messages and how the audience interprets them.

2.Message

In Berlo's communication model (SMCR), the components of a message include content, elements, treatment, structure, and code. These five aspects are clearly seen in self-harm themed TikTok content consumed by the informants. Each of these elements complements the others and shapes the communication experience, influencing how the informants understand, respond to, and make sense of the messages conveyed through the media.

A.Content

The messages in self-harm content that appear on TikTok generally focus on expressing negative emotions like sadness, fatigue, loneliness, and even despair. Informants mentioned that they often pick up on core messages like an acknowledgment that someone is "not okay" or that they need emotional support. These messages don't just come in the form of narratives, but also as short venting posts, affirming sentences, or depictions of emotional moods shown through text.

B.Elements

Besides the verbal content, messages in self-harm content are reinforced by nonverbal elements attached to the videos. Elements like dark visuals, blank or tired facial expressions, soft voices, mellow music, or images of injuries become important aspects that influence how the informants interpret them. Some informants said that even before reading the text, the visual atmosphere and music already set a certain mood that drew them in. Visual effects like dark color tones, low contrast, or blur effects strengthen the melancholic feeling, emphasizing the emotional context of the video.

C. *Treatment*

Treatment refers to how creators package and deliver messages in TikTok content about self harm to create a certain impact. In this context, creators usually take an emotional approach by letting music take the lead, showing short text, or arranging videos to feel like personal confessions. This way of delivering makes the message feel more intimate, so informants often feel like they are “stepping into” the atmosphere being shown. Using close-ups of faces, slow motion, or placing text in the center of the screen is also part of the strategy to make the message easier to read and more emotionally touching.

D. *Structure*

The message structure in self-harm content on TikTok is generally simple, concise, and straight to the point. This aligns with TikTok’s character of offering short videos. Creators don’t go into long explanations but summarize feelings in one or two sentences that are easy for viewers to understand and quickly process. This structure makes the message feel stronger and more meaningful because viewers are encouraged to interpret the emotional context themselves. This minimalist structure also allows viewers to feel an emotional connection without a long narrative, speeding up the message reception process.

E. *Code*

Codes in self-harm content include various digital symbols that creators use to convey meaning implicitly. Terms like “barcode” to refer to a cut mark or “dirty left hand” to refer to self-harm behavior are examples of codes circulating on TikTok. In addition, the use of dark tones is also part of the visual code that helps informants recognize self-harm-themed content. These codes allow the message to be conveyed without having to be stated explicitly, while also creating a sense of closeness among users who understand these symbols. Informants admitted that the presence of such codes helps them quickly grasp the context of a video even without a direct narrative.

3. *Channel*

On TikTok, the process of receiving messages mainly happens through sight and hearing, the two main senses that are optimized by the short-video platform. Interviews with informants show that these two sensory channels play a significant role in enhancing the emotional experience when viewing self-harm content. Visually, TikTok offers various elements that influence informants’ perceptions of self-harm content, such as dark video tones, dim lighting, the use of cool colors, and short emotionally-tinged texts. These elements serve as visual stimuli that create a certain mood, making the message delivered by the creator feel more bleak or intense. Meanwhile, the audio aspect, like mellow music, soft sounds, or even silence, can reinforce the emotions captured through the sense of hearing.

Informants like Davian explained that the combination of sad music and dark visuals makes the message feel deeper and more touching, even capable of bringing back previously buried personal experiences. Berlo explained that messages can be received through five types of sensory channels: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. However, not all of them are relevant in the context of digital media like TikTok. Here are some sensory channels that are relevant and suitable:

A. *Hearing*

The sense of hearing also helps shape the perception and emotions of informants when they consume self-harm content on TikTok. Audio elements like mellow or slow music, soft or whisper-like narration, and intentionally added quiet ambience by creators work to enhance the emotional atmosphere of the videos. For example, a sad musical tone adds a

certain emotional weight, making the message feel more touching and profound. Quiet or silent background sounds also create an intimate feeling, as if the creator is speaking directly to the viewer in a private setting. Informants like Olivia and others emphasize that music often acts as a “mood trigger,” because audio elements can influence emotions quickly and directly. With supportive audio, the message received is not only understood through text or visuals, but also felt emotionally, making self-harm content more personal and powerful in affecting the viewer's feelings.

B. Seeing

The sense of sight becomes the most dominant channel in TikTok communication. In this study, 'seeing' includes various visual elements such as dark and dim video tones, the creator's facial expressions, symbols or images related to self-harm, short emotionally charged texts, and the use of filters that add a gloomy vibe. These visual elements not only serve as aesthetic displays but also help shape the mood the creator wants to create. Informants explained that such visual stimuli make it easier for them to feel the emotions the video is trying to convey.

"The sad music and dark visuals are really powerful. The short text that feels like an outpouring of feelings made me understand their emotions better." (Davian, November 25, 2025)

4. Receiver

In this study, the receiver refers to the informants who receive messages from self-harm content on TikTok. Based on the interview results, it appears that each informant has different emotional, social, and cognitive backgrounds, which then influence how they interpret and respond to the content. This aligns with Berlo's theory, which emphasizes that the message reception process is affected by the characteristics of the receiver, including communication skills, attitudes, knowledge, social systems, and culture. The informants showed that receiving messages is not a passive process. Dark visuals, mellow music, and emotional text in self-harm content often trigger emotional responses, especially when the informants are in a less stable mental state. This shows that the psychological condition of the receiver can amplify the impact of the message, particularly when it relates to their personal experiences. Some informants also understood terms like 'barcode' and 'dirty left hand,' reflecting the influence of TikTok's digital culture in shaping the way they interpret messages. In fact, one informant, Davian, revealed that repeated exposure to content once sparked his curiosity to the point of pushing him to try self-harm.

A. Communication Skills

Informants, as message receivers, show communication skills that allow them to understand both verbal and nonverbal elements in self-harm content. They can grasp the meaning from short texts that contain personal venting, dark or symbolic visuals, and even the use of music that creates certain emotional moods. Additionally, comments from other users help informants read a broader emotional context, as these comments often include support, empathy, or statements that someone else has gone through something similar. Skills in reading visual and emotional context enable informants to connect the messages shown with their personal experiences. Some informants even explained that, even though the content's message isn't delivered directly or verbally, they can still understand the creator's intent and emotions just through a combination of visuals, audio, and text. This shows that the informants' ability to process visual and audio messages really affects how they interpret self-harm content.

B. Attitude

Informants' attitudes toward self-harm content play a big role in how they receive the message. This attitude includes their views about themselves, mental health issues, and the content creators. Some informants showed a high level of empathy, making it easier for them to understand the reasons behind the behaviors shown in the content. There are also informants who see the content as a way of expressing emotions that haven't been shared yet. This attitude makes it easier for them to feel touched or 'get carried away' when seeing content that relates to their situation. On the other hand, informants who have a more critical attitude tend to avoid such content so it won't affect their mood. Some of them said that keeping a distance from negative content is a way to protect their own mental well-being. This difference in attitude shows that how we receive messages is really influenced by our psychological state, personal experiences, and the way we see ourselves and our environment.

C. Knowledge

Informants' prior knowledge about self-harm affects their sensitivity to the content. Those who understand that self-harm is a dangerous act tend to be more careful when consuming such content. Meanwhile, informants with limited knowledge are more likely to interpret the content as a form of emotional release. Additionally, knowing the symbols, terms, or emotional narratives that often appear in self-harm content helps informants quickly grasp the implicit meaning from the creator. For example, understanding terms like "barcode" or "dirty left hand" allows informants to immediately recognize that the content is related to self-harm without any explicit explanation.

D. Social System

The social systems of the informants, like family relationships, friendships, and digital social environments, play a big role in shaping how they make sense of self-harm content. Informants who don't have a safe space to share offline tend to look for validation on TikTok. They feel more understood when they read supportive comments from other users. Some informants even said that the comment sections often feel more "accepting" than their real-life surroundings. This shows that less supportive social systems can make TikTok function as an alternative source of emotional support. Besides that, the informants' social systems also include everyday dynamics like academic pressure, unstable friendships, and family problems. These factors make them more vulnerable and more likely to connect with the emotional messages in self-harm content.

E. Culture

TikTok's digital culture, which normalizes the use of mellow music, dark-toned visuals, and short text as a form of emotional expression, also shapes how informants understand and interpret the content they see. Informants who are part of Gen Z culture are generally very familiar with this kind of messaging style, so they can catch the emotional nuances without needing a long narrative. This familiarity makes the creators' communication style feel relatable and easy to accept. In addition, TikTok community culture has also created various symbols and codes, including terms like "barcode" or "dirty left hand" that can only be understood by active users of the platform. These symbols become part of the non-verbal language that develops in the digital environment, so informants' familiarity with TikTok culture helps them pick up on the messages that are actually hidden behind the visuals or text shown. In other words, this cultural condition creates a shared understanding that speeds up the process of interpreting messages.

4. Conclusion

Findings in this study show that Generation Z interprets self-harm themed content not just as acts of hurting oneself. Instead, it's seen as a form of emotional expression representing the mental state of the content creator who is "not okay," shared subtly through symbols, music, and visuals. The study shows that Generation Z can recognize and understand the symbols and distinctive elements of self-harm content, like "barcode" or "dirty left hand," dark visual tones, mellow music, and short narratives with a sad vibe. These elements are considered communication codes that have become part of TikTok's digital culture. The brief but emotional delivery can reinforce how informants interpret it. Some informants said the content could influence their thinking patterns and make them curious about self-harm actions. As a result, that kind of content doesn't just trigger emotional responses, but can also encourage certain behaviors like self-harm, especially in people who are in a fragile mental health state. However, some informants also see that content as a space to feel understood and to find a community that accepts their feelings.

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