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Constructing sociological student identity through personal branding on TikTok: A study of sociology students at Sriwijaya University

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of social media has created new spaces for individuals to construct and present their identities in digital environments. This study aims to examine how sociology students construct their academic identity through personal branding practices on TikTok, with particular attention to how they translate sociological knowledge, manage self-presentation, and negotiate platform dynamics. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, involving in-depth interviews and observations of TikTok accounts belonging to sociology students at Universitas Sriwijaya, who actively produce content related to social issues. The findings reveal that TikTok functions as a digital stage where students strategically construct their academic identities by transforming sociological perspectives into accessible and engaging content. This process involves three interconnected dimensions: the translation of academic knowledge into digital formats, the use of impression-management strategies through language, visuals, and communication styles, and the negotiation between maintaining academic authenticity and adapting to algorithmic visibility. Audience interactions, such as likes, comments, and follower growth, play a significant role in legitimizing the identity performed by students, while algorithmic structures shape how knowledge is presented and distributed. This study concludes that personal branding on TikTok is not merely a form of self-expression but a reflexive and strategic process of identity construction within algorithm-driven public spaces. By highlighting the role of students as emerging intellectual actors, this study contributes to the development of digital sociology, particularly in understanding how academic identity and knowledge dissemination are transformed in contemporary digital culture.

Keywords: digital identity; personal branding; social media; sociology students; TikTok

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has significantly transformed the patterns of social interaction in contemporary society. Social media is no longer merely a communication tool but has become a space for the production of meaning and the formation of social identities. This transformation indicates that individual identity is constructed not only through face-to-face interactions but also through digital representations that are visual, narrative, and performative in nature.

In Indonesia, Internet and social media penetration has increased significantly in recent years. Data indicate that the majority of the productive-age population are active users of the Internet and social media (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025). This shows that digital space has become an integral part of social life, particularly among young people and university students.

TikTok is one such platform that has experienced rapid growth. According to a report by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association, TikTok is among the platforms with the highest usage rates among young people (APJII, 2024). Furthermore, reports from the Ministry of Communication and Informatics show that the duration of short-video-based social media usage continues to increase and is dominated by university-age users (Kementerian Komunikasi dan Digital, 2024). These data confirm that TikTok has become a significant social space in students' lives.

Within this context, the phenomenon of personal branding has emerged as a strategic practice for building self-image in digital spaces. Personal branding refers to individuals' conscious efforts to shape the public's perception of themselves through consistent self-representation (Shepherd, 2005). This suggests that digital identities are not formed spontaneously but are constructed deliberately.

Theoretically, this practice can be explained through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, which views social life as a stage where individuals perform impression management to create certain impressions. Therefore, social media platforms, including TikTok, can be understood as digital front stages where students present curated identities.

Additionally, the social construction of reality theory proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966) explains that identity is formed through externalization, objectivation, and internalization within social interactions. The digital identity of students formed through personal branding practices on TikTok can be understood as a result of these processes.

This phenomenon becomes increasingly relevant when associated with sociology students. As members of a discipline that studies society, sociology students possess an academic identity characterized by social analysis and critical thinking. When this identity is represented within the TikTok space, which is heavily shaped by algorithmic logic and visibility dynamics, questions arise regarding how such academic identities are constructed and interpreted by users.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how sociology students at Universitas Sriwijaya construct their identities through personal branding practices on TikTok and how they interpret these practices based on their subjective experiences.

In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the role of social media as a site for identity construction, particularly among young people and students. Digital platforms enable users to curate, negotiate, and perform identities in strategic and context-dependent ways. The concept of digital identity emphasizes that self-presentation in online environments is shaped not only by individual agency but also by technological affordances and audience interaction (Marwick, 2015; Hernández-Serrano et al., 2022; Astleitner & Schlick, 2025).

In the context of TikTok, identity construction takes on a distinct form because of the platform's emphasis on short-form videos, algorithmic distribution, and participatory culture. Unlike earlier platforms, TikTok encourages rapid content production combined with high visibility, allowing users to reach large audiences regardless of their initial social capital. This creates opportunities for students to position themselves not only as learners but also as knowledge producers in the digital public sphere (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; MacKinnon et al., 2021).

Previous studies have examined personal branding as a strategic process through which individuals construct recognizable and consistent self-images (Khamis et al., 2017). However, much of this research

has focused on influencers, entrepreneurs, and professionals, with limited attention to students as emerging intellectual actors. This study addresses this gap by exploring how sociology students use TikTok to construct and communicate their academic identities.

Therefore, this research contributes significantly to the development of digital sociology, particularly in understanding how academic identity is constructed within algorithm-driven environments. It also offers insights into how sociological knowledge can be disseminated beyond traditional academic settings.

In addition, the transformation of digital platforms, such as TikTok, reflects shifts in the public sphere, where knowledge dissemination becomes more decentralized and participatory. In this context, students can be seen as emerging intellectual actors who contribute to the circulation of sociological perspectives beyond traditional academic spaces, particularly when platform features are used to package knowledge in an accessible form (Nguyen & Parameswaran, 2023; Steinke et al., 2024).

Moreover, TikTok's accessibility bridges the gap between academic knowledge and everyday experience. Sociological concepts that are often perceived as abstract can be contextualized using relatable examples and visual storytelling. This process enhances public understanding of social issues and fosters critical awareness among audiences who may not have formal sociology training.

However, this democratization of knowledge raises important questions regarding epistemic authority and credibility. In digital spaces where anyone can produce content, the distinction between expert knowledge and opinions becomes blurred. Sociology students must therefore navigate the challenge of maintaining academic rigor while adapting to TikTok's informal and fast-paced nature. This tension highlights the need to critically examine how academic authority is constructed and recognized in digital environments (MacKinnon et al., 2021; Nguyen & Parameswaran, 2023).

To further clarify the analytical focus, this study seeks to explore several interrelated dimensions of students' experiences in these digital spaces. First, it examines how sociology students construct and present their academic identities through personal branding practices on TikTok. This includes understanding how they translate sociological knowledge into digital content and how they position themselves as individuals with academic competence in public digital environments.

Second, this study investigates the strategies employed by students to manage impressions and communicate sociological perspectives in ways that are both accessible and engaging for broader audiences. Particular attention is given to the use of language, visual elements, and communication styles that reflect a balance between academic rigor and popular appeal.

Finally, this study explores how students negotiate the tension between maintaining the authenticity of their academic identity and adapting to the algorithmic dynamics of TikTok, which often requires conformity to platform trends and audience preferences. Through these analytical focuses, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how academic identity is constructed, performed, and negotiated within contemporary digital environments.

This study makes three main contributions to the literature. First, it extends existing discussions on digital identity by focusing specifically on academic identity construction among sociology students, a group that has received limited attention compared to influencers or professionals in the literature. Second, this study introduces the concept of algorithm-identity negotiation, highlighting how students actively balance academic authenticity with platform-driven visibility. Third, this study contributes to digital sociology by demonstrating how students function as emerging intellectual actors who translate and disseminate sociological knowledge within algorithmic public spaces.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological method. The phenomenological approach is used to understand individuals' subjective experiences regarding a social phenomenon and the meanings they construct from those experiences. Through this approach, the researcher seeks to explore students' experiences in constructing self-identity through personal branding practices on TikTok and to understand how these experiences are interpreted by the informants.

Phenomenology enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences within specific social contexts (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

2.1. Informants

The informants in this study comprised eight students from the Sociology Study Program at Universitas Sriwijaya. Informants were selected based on criteria relevant to the research objectives, namely: (1) active students of the Sociology Study Program at Universitas Sriwijaya; (2) active users of the TikTok application; (3) regularly producing and uploading content on TikTok; and (4) presenting their identity as sociology students in the content they publish. This means that the content produced by the participants contained elements that explicitly or implicitly indicated their identity as sociology students. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that intentionally selects participants based on specific criteria considered capable of providing relevant information for the research focus (Campbell et al., 2020).

2.2. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection in this study was conducted using several techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the informants' experiences, motivations, and interpretations of their personal branding practices on TikTok. Each informant participated in one to two interview sessions, with an average duration of 45–60 min per session. Second, social media observations were conducted. The researcher observed the TikTok accounts of the informants to examine the types of content produced, communication styles, and how the informants represented their academic identity in digital spaces. Observations were conducted over approximately three months to capture patterns and consistency in content production. Third, digital documentation is also used. Documentation involved collecting data in the form of screenshots, videos, captions, hashtags, and audience interactions in the informants' TikTok content. The use of multiple techniques aims to obtain more comprehensive data and allows triangulation to enhance the validity of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

2.3. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using a phenomenological approach in several stages. First, phenomenological reduction was used to identify significant statements related to the participants' experiences. Second, meaning clustering involves grouping statements into themes that represent essential meanings. The themes were derived through an iterative coding process. Significant statements were first coded into initial categories, which were then compared across informants and refined into broader themes. Third, the textural and structural descriptions describe what the participants experienced and how those experiences occurred. Fourth, meaning synthesis, integrating the findings to understand how students construct their identities through personal branding practices on TikTok, was conducted.

These analytical stages aim to obtain a deeper understanding of the experiences and meanings constructed by the participants within the studied phenomenon (Williams, 2021). To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, this study employed several validation strategies, including the triangulation of data sources and methods. Data obtained from the interviews were cross-checked with observations of TikTok content and digital documentation to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation. This triangulation approach enhances the reliability of qualitative findings by reducing potential biases (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Additionally, the researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the research process by continuously reflecting on their roles in interpreting the data. Reflexivity is essential in phenomenological research, as it allows the researcher to remain aware of subjective assumptions that may influence data interpretation (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, particularly regarding the use of digital content. Although the observed TikTok accounts were publicly accessible, the researcher ensured that the informants' identities remained confidential and that all data were used solely for academic purposes.

In addition to the analytical procedures described above, this study places a strong emphasis on capturing the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences within digital environments. The phenomenological approach enables researchers to move beyond surface-level descriptions by focusing on how informants interpret and give meaning to their engagement with TikTok as a space for academic self-presentation. This involves careful attention to both verbal narratives obtained through interviews and visual-digital expressions observed in the content.

To ensure analytical rigor, the researcher engaged in iterative data analysis, in which data collection and interpretation were conducted simultaneously. This iterative process allowed the emerging themes to be continuously refined and validated against new data, thereby enhancing the depth of interpretation. Memo writing during the analysis phase also supported the identification of patterns, contradictions, and nuanced meanings within the data. These analytical memos functioned as reflective tools that helped the researcher trace the development of the interpretations and maintain conceptual clarity throughout the research process.

Furthermore, contextual sensitivity was maintained by situating the findings within the broader socio-digital environment in which the participants operated. TikTok, as a platform characterized by algorithmic curation and participatory culture, shapes not only the form of content but also the ways in which meanings are constructed and communicated. Therefore, the analysis does not treat participants' experiences as isolated phenomena but rather as embedded within the dynamic interaction between individual agency, audience engagement, and technological structures.

Finally, the credibility of the findings was strengthened by prolonged engagement with the data and repeated observations of participants' digital activities. This sustained interaction enabled the researcher to identify consistent behavioral patterns and avoid premature conclusions. By integrating interpretive depth, reflexivity, and contextual awareness, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how sociology students construct their academic identities through personal branding practices on TikTok.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

To enhance analytical clarity, the findings were organized into three main dimensions: knowledge translation, impression management, and algorithmic negotiation. Based on in-depth interviews and observations of the informants' TikTok accounts, the study found that sociology students utilize TikTok as a space to present their academic identity through personal branding practices. The platform is not merely understood as an entertainment medium but also as a means of conveying sociological perspectives on various social phenomena occurring in society.

Most informants stated that they consciously used TikTok to demonstrate their intellectual capacity as sociology students. The content they produce generally contains analyses of social phenomena that are currently viral, such as social inequality, popular culture, and the dynamics of social behavior in digital space. One informant stated that their goal was to show the public that sociology students could explain social issues in a simple yet academically grounded manner.

In addition to using TikTok as a space to demonstrate their intellectual capacity, students also apply various strategies to manage the impressions they present to audiences. These strategies are reflected in their choices of language, visual presentation, and communication style in the videos they produce.

Informants explained that they still used sociological terms in their content but simplified them to make the explanations more accessible to audiences without an academic background in sociology. The findings also indicate that consistency in content themes is an important strategy for building a digital identity. Most informants deliberately focused their content on social issues relevant to sociological

studies, such as social inequality, behavioral changes in society, and interpretations of viral phenomena on social media. This consistency demonstrates that content production is not random but is part of a sustained effort to construct a coherent identity narrative in digital spaces.

Audience interaction also plays a significant role in forming students' digital identities. Audience responses, such as likes, comments, and follower growth, serve as forms of social recognition for the content produced. Several informants reported that positive audience responses strengthened their confidence in presenting themselves as sociology students capable of critically explaining social phenomena.

However, the study also found that students must adapt their content production strategies to the dynamics of TikTok's algorithm. Some informants explained that to reach wider audiences, they sometimes followed popular trends on the platform. Nevertheless, they attempted to maintain social issues as the core theme of their content to preserve their identity as sociology students. These findings indicate that sociology students' personal branding practices on TikTok involve communication strategies, audience interaction, and adaptation to platform-based content distribution mechanisms (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Presents A Summary of The Main Findings of The Study

No	Findings Category	Description	Informant Quote
1	TikTok as a digital stage	TikTok is understood as a space for demonstrating intellectual capacity.	"I want people to know that sociology students can explain social issues in a simple way."
2	Impression management strategy	The selection of language, visuals, and communication style is done consciously by the brand.	"I use sociological terms but simplify them so it still looks academic without being too complicated."
3	Consistency of content themes	The content focuses on social issues and critiques of viral phenomena.	"My content is mostly about inequality or other social phenomena."
4	Legitimacy through audience response	Likes and comments strengthen the construction of self-identity.	"When many people leave positive comments, I become more confident about the identity I present."
5	Negotiation with the algorithm	The content style is adjusted to remain relevant to platform trends.	"Sometimes I have to follow trends to reach the FYP, but I still direct the content toward social issues."

Source: Primary Data (2025)

An important finding that emerged from further analysis was the role of algorithmic visibility in shaping students' content strategies. TikTok's "For You Page" (FYP) is the primary mechanism through which content gains exposure. The informants demonstrated a clear awareness of how algorithmic factors such as engagement rates, watch time, and trending audio influence content distribution.

Students strategically design their content to align with these preferences. For example, they utilize trending sounds, concise video durations, and visually engaging formats to increase the likelihood of appearing on the FYP page. However, this adaptation is not merely technical; it also involves the selective framing of sociological content to fit platform conventions.

This finding indicates that algorithmic systems play a constitutive role in shaping not only the content that is visible but also how knowledge is communicated. Sociological explanations are often condensed into simplified narratives to maintain audience attention, which may influence the depth of the analysis presented.

Despite these constraints, the students demonstrated agency in negotiating the algorithmic demands. Rather than abandoning academic content, they integrate sociological perspectives into popular formats, thus creating hybrid forms of knowledge dissemination. This suggests that algorithmic environments do not entirely determine user behavior but interact with users' choices.

Further analysis revealed that the process of identity construction among sociology students is not static but dynamic and continuously negotiated. Students do not merely present a fixed identity; instead, they adapt their self-presentation based on audience feedback and evolving trends on the platform.

The findings also indicate that students develop a form of digital literacy that goes beyond mere technical skills. This includes the ability to interpret audience preferences, understand algorithmic visibility, and strategically design content that aligns with academic values and platform expectations. This suggests that personal branding practices involve cognitive, communicative and strategic competencies.

Moreover, the integration of sociological concepts into short-form video content demonstrates students' ability to translate academic knowledge into accessible language. This process reflects not only communication skills but also a deeper understanding of sociological perspectives, as students must reinterpret complex theories into simplified but meaningful explanations.

An additional dimension that emerged from the analysis was the reflexive awareness demonstrated by sociology students in constructing their digital identities. Reflexivity refers to individuals' capacity to critically evaluate their own actions, motivations, and social positioning within a given context (Giddens, 1991). In this study, students do not merely produce content spontaneously but engage in a continuous process of reflection regarding how they are perceived by their audience and how their identity as sociology students is expressed.

Informants indicated that they frequently evaluated the effectiveness of their content by analyzing audience engagement metrics such as views, comments, and shares. However, this evaluation is not purely technical; it also involves reflecting on whether the content successfully conveys sociological insights. This suggests that students are engaged in what can be described as reflexive content production, where each piece of content becomes both an expression and an evaluation of their academic identity.

Furthermore, the findings reveal the presence of what can be conceptualized as layered identity construction. Students simultaneously perform multiple identities in their TikTok content, including those of students, content creators, and informal educators. These layers are not mutually exclusive but intersect within a single digital performance. For example, a student may present themselves as a knowledgeable sociology student while also adopting entertaining elements to maintain audience engagement.

This layered identity indicates that digital self-presentation is inherently complex and multi-dimensional. This challenges the notion of a singular, stable identity and highlights the fluid and situational nature of identity in digital environments. The ability to navigate multiple roles reflects an advanced level of digital competence among students.

Another important finding relates to the knowledge translation process. Sociology students actively transform academic knowledge into formats accessible to non-academic audiences. This involves simplifying theoretical concepts, using everyday language, and incorporating relatable examples to facilitate understanding. However, this process is not merely reductive; it requires interpretive skills to ensure that the core meaning of the sociological concepts is preserved.

For instance, abstract concepts such as social stratification or cultural hegemony are often explained through viral social phenomena or popular topics. This strategy allows students to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and their everyday experiences. As a result, TikTok has become a site where academic knowledge is recontextualized and made relevant to broader audiences.

Simultaneously, this process introduces challenges related to maintaining analytical depth. The need for brevity and engagement in short-form video content often requires students to condense complex ideas into a simplified narrative. While this increases accessibility, it may also limit the depth of the explanation. This tension reflects a broader issue in digital knowledge dissemination, where clarity and engagement must be balanced with academic rigor.

Additionally, the findings highlight the emergence of peer-recognition dynamics within digital spaces. Students seek validation not only from general audiences but also from peers within their academic community. Comments and interactions from fellow sociology students are often perceived as

more meaningful forms of recognition because they are considered to reflect a shared understanding of disciplinary knowledge.

This suggests that digital identity construction operates simultaneously across multiple audiences. Students must navigate the expectations of both general audiences and academically informed viewers, which further complicates their content strategies. Consequently, personal branding becomes a process of negotiating between different forms of legitimacy.

3.2. Discussion

The findings indicate that sociology students' personal branding practices on TikTok can be understood as forms of self-presentation in digital spaces. Students consciously manage the display of their identities to audiences through the content they produce. This phenomenon aligns with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, which explains social interaction as a performance in which individuals attempt to manage impressions before an audience.

In the context of social media, TikTok can be interpreted as a digital front stage where students present their identities as individuals who are critical and reflective of social phenomena. The uploaded video content represents a curated performance that considers how the messages will be received by the audience. Meanwhile, the content production process—such as researching topics, constructing narratives, and editing videos—can be understood as part of the back stage, where individuals prepare their performances before presenting them publicly.

Furthermore, the construction of students' digital identities can be explained through the social construction of reality theory proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966). According to this theory, social reality is formed through three main processes: externalization, objectivation and internalization. In this study, externalization occurs when students express their sociological understanding through TikTok content production. Objectivation occurs when the content receives responses from audiences who acknowledge or respond to the interpretations presented. Internalization occurs when students interpret these responses as part of their identity formation.

The findings also show that content production on TikTok functions not only as a form of self-expression but also as part of a reflexive identity project. This aligns with Giddens' (1991) concept of the reflexive project of the self, which suggests that individuals in modern societies actively construct narratives of identity through various social practices. Within digital media environments, content production is one of the ways individuals manage and reflect upon their identities in front of public audiences.

However, the findings reveal that students also experience tensions between maintaining the authenticity of their academic identity and adapting to platform algorithms. To reach a broader audience, students often adjust their content formats to align with trending styles on TikTok. This demonstrates that digital identity formation is influenced not only by individual agency but also by technological structures that regulate content distribution on social media platforms.

This phenomenon indicates that students' digital identities emerge from a negotiation process between individual strategies, audience responses, and algorithmic platform logic. Students are neither completely controlled by algorithms nor entirely free from their influence. Instead, they develop adaptive strategies to balance the maintenance of their academic identity while participating in the dynamics of social media culture.

These findings demonstrate that TikTok functions not only as an entertainment platform but also as a social arena in which sociology students construct, negotiate, and represent their academic identities in digital spaces. Personal branding practices among students illustrate that social media can serve as a new medium for identity construction and disseminating sociological perspectives to broader audiences.

In addition to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, the findings can be interpreted through the lens of digital self-theory, which suggests that individuals construct multiple selves across different contexts. In the TikTok environment, students perform a version of themselves that integrates their academic identity with digital creativity, resulting in a hybrid form of self-presentation.

Furthermore, the role of platform structures in shaping identity cannot be overlooked. TikTok operates within what van Dijck (2013) refers to as a “platform society,” where social interactions are mediated by algorithmic systems. These systems influence not only content visibility but also the types of identities that are more likely to gain recognition in the digital space.

The concept of algorithmic culture (Striphas, 2015) is particularly relevant for explaining how students adapt their content strategies. Algorithmic culture refers to the increasing role of algorithms in shaping cultural production and cultural consumption. In this study, students demonstrated awareness of these dynamics by adjusting content formats while maintaining their academic messages.

This indicates that identity construction in digital spaces results from the complex interplay between individual agency, audience interaction, and technological structures. Students actively negotiate these elements to sustain coherent and credible academic identities.

The findings of this study also reveal that the construction of academic identity among sociology students on TikTok is closely related to broader transformations in the knowledge production landscape. In conventional academic contexts, knowledge is typically produced, validated and disseminated through formal institutions such as universities and scholarly publications. However, within digital environments, particularly on platforms like TikTok, knowledge production becomes more decentralized, participatory, and influenced by audience engagement (MacKinnon et al., 2021; Nguyen & Parameswaran, 2023).

This shift suggests a transition from institutional authority toward what can be understood as networked knowledge legitimacy, where recognition is shaped not only by academic credentials but also by visibility, interaction, and trust. In this context, sociology students operate within a hybrid epistemic space where academic knowledge must be communicated in ways that align with the dynamics of digital platforms. Consequently, students must translate complex sociological concepts into accessible and engaging content without losing their analytical depth.

In addition, the findings indicate the emergence of what can be conceptualized as a performative academic identity. Academic identity in digital spaces is not static but is continuously constructed through repeated practices of content production, audience interaction, and adaptation to platform trends. Students actively perform their identities as sociology students through consistent thematic content, communication styles and visual representation. This reinforces the argument that identity in digital contexts is dynamic, processual, and shaped by ongoing social interaction.

Another important dimension highlighted in this study is the integration of cognitive and affective elements in communicating academic content. While sociology is traditionally associated with critical and analytical thinking, TikTok as a platform requires content that is engaging, relatable, and emotionally resonant. As a result, students incorporate storytelling techniques, humor, and everyday examples to make sociological explanations more accessible to broader audiences in their teaching. This indicates that academic identity in digital spaces is not solely constructed through intellectual authority but also through the ability to connect with audiences emotionally.

Moreover, the findings demonstrate that identity construction is deeply influenced by algorithmic structures that shape content visibility. Students are aware of how TikTok’s algorithm operates and strategically adjust their content to increase reach and engagement. However, rather than passively following algorithmic demands, they actively negotiate these constraints by embedding sociological perspectives into popular content formats (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Steinke et al., 2024). This suggests that digital identity formation involves continuous negotiations between individual agency and technological structures.

Overall, these findings emphasize that personal branding practices among sociology students on TikTok reflect a complex interplay between self-presentation, knowledge dissemination, audience interaction, and platform dynamics. Therefore, TikTok functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a transformative social space where academic identities are constructed, performed, and legitimized in new and evolving ways.

To further synthesize the findings, this study highlights three interconnected dimensions that shape the construction of academic identity among sociology students in digital environments. First, academic identity is constructed by translating sociological knowledge into digital content, where

students position themselves as emerging intellectual actors within the public sphere. This process reflects not only self-presentation but also the active reinterpretation of academic knowledge into forms accessible to wider audiences.

Second, the findings demonstrate that identity construction is closely linked to impression-management strategies. Students consciously design their communication by combining academic language with engaging visual and narrative elements, indicating that the presentation of sociological knowledge is both a cognitive and a performative practice. This suggests that academic identity in digital spaces is not merely expressed but is strategically produced through mediated interactions.

Third, this study underscores that identity construction is shaped by ongoing negotiations with platform structures, particularly algorithmic dynamics. Students continuously adapt to the logic of visibility while attempting to maintain academic authenticity, resulting in a hybrid identity that integrates intellectual credibility with platform-oriented communication styles.

Taken together, these findings indicate that academic identity in digital contexts is not static but emerges through the interaction between individual agency, audience engagement and technological systems. This reinforces the argument that digital platforms function as active environments that shape contemporary forms of knowledge production and identity formation.

While the translation of sociological knowledge into short-form content increases accessibility, it raises concerns regarding oversimplification. Complex sociological concepts risk being reduced to simplified narratives, potentially limiting their analytical depth. Furthermore, algorithmic pressure may reshape academic authority, with visibility and engagement metrics becoming alternative indicators of credibility. This challenges traditional forms of knowledge validation, which are typically grounded in institutional legitimacy. These dynamics raise an important question regarding whether the use of TikTok strengthens disciplinary identity by expanding its reach or dilutes it by adapting to entertainment-driven formats.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that TikTok has become an important space for sociology students to build and represent their academic identities in digital environments. Through personal branding practices, students not only produce entertainment content but also present sociological perspectives on various social phenomena occurring in society. TikTok functions as a digital stage that allows students to manage their impressions and present themselves as individuals capable of analytical and reflective engagement with social issues.

Identity construction occurs through the interaction between individual strategies, audience responses, and platform algorithm dynamics. Students consciously select language, visuals, and content themes to build an academic image that remains accessible to a broader audience. Audience responses in the form of comments, likes, and follower growth provide social legitimacy for the identities being constructed, strengthening students' confidence in presenting themselves as individuals capable of critically explaining social phenomena.

Simultaneously, the study reveals a negotiation process between maintaining the authenticity of academic identity and adapting to platform algorithmic demands. Students adjust content formats and styles to align with trending dynamics to increase visibility. Consequently, digital identity becomes a dynamic outcome of the interaction between individual agency and technological structures.

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that digital platforms are not merely tools of communication but are active environments that shape social practices and identity formation. The ability of sociology students to construct academic identities through TikTok demonstrates the transformation of knowledge production in this digital era.

This also suggests a shift in the role of students from passive recipients of knowledge to active producers and disseminators of sociological perspectives. Such transformations highlight the importance of integrating digital competencies into higher education, particularly in disciplines that engage in social analysis and public discourse.

Overall, the findings confirm that social media, particularly TikTok, functions not only as an entertainment space but also as a social arena that enables students to construct, negotiate, and reinforce their academic identity. Furthermore, social media opens new opportunities for disseminating sociological perspectives to broader audiences, potentially expanding students' role as intellectual actors in the digital public sphere.

In addition, this study emphasizes that the construction of academic identity in digital spaces can be understood through three key dimensions: the process of translating sociological knowledge into accessible digital content, the strategic management of impressions in communicating academic perspectives, and the continuous negotiation between academic authenticity and algorithmic demands. These interconnected dimensions demonstrate that students are not only passive users of digital platforms but also active agents who shape how knowledge is produced, communicated, and recognized in contemporary society.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the development of digital sociology by highlighting the role of students as emerging intellectual actors in algorithm-driven public spaces. This finding expands the existing discussions on personal branding and digital identity by positioning students as important contributors to the dissemination of academic knowledge beyond traditional institutional boundaries. However, this study also highlights the ambivalent nature of digital platforms, where the expansion of knowledge dissemination is simultaneously accompanied by the risks of simplification and shifting academic authority.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical research principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval from an institutional review board was not required because the study involved minimal risk to the participants and did not include any clinical, medical, or biomedical interventions. This research focused solely on social and behavioral aspects through interviews and observations of publicly accessible digital content.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants were informed of the study objectives and procedures prior to participation. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before data collection began. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential. All data collected were used exclusively for academic and research purposes only.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, NT and KAS; methodology, validation, formal analysis, and resources, LSP; writing—original draft preparation, NT, DF, KAS., and LSP.; writing—review and editing, SWF; translation support, KAS. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Disclosure Statement

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Data Availability Statement

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