



How TikTok's FYP Algorithm Shapes Female Users' Content Preferences A Virtual Ethnographic Study in Bandung

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Received : July 14, 2026

Revised : July 28, 2026

Accepted : August 27, 2026

Online : September 28, 2026

Abstract

TikTok's For You Page (FYP) is often described as if it directly determines what users prefer. This study instead examines preference formation as a recursive communication process between users and algorithmic curation. Using virtual ethnography, the study involved 20 women TikTok users in Bandung and combined online interviews, participatory platform observation, digital fieldnotes, and analysis of recurring content and interaction practices. The findings show that participants understood the FYP through practical folk theories: they expected likes, saves, shares, watch choices, and rapid skipping to teach the system what to display. These actions did not merely express pre-existing preferences; they also reorganized subsequent exposure and made some interests more salient. Four patterns were identified. First, participants experienced the FYP as a feedback loop rather than a one-way recommendation channel. Second, likes, saves, shares, and skipping were treated as stronger preference signals than following or commenting. Third, recommended content supported identity expression through fashion, beauty, everyday-life, educational, health, culinary, tourism, and entertainment content, with local relevance shaping interpretation. Fourth, longer use increased the perceived fit of recommendations but could also narrow variety, encouraging users to ignore or actively recalibrate unwanted content. The study contributes a communication-centered account of negotiated algorithmic curation: preference emerges through repeated exchanges among platform signals, user interpretations, identity work, and resistance.

Keywords: *Algorithmic Curation, Algorithmic Folk Theories, Content Preferences, TikTok FYP, Virtual Ethnography, Women Users*

INTRODUCTION

TikTok places algorithmic recommendation at the center of everyday media consumption. Unlike social platforms organized mainly around a user's declared network, the For You Page (FYP) continuously assembles a feed from behavioral traces and contextual signals. The FYP is the interface through which recommendations appear; it is not identical to the underlying recommendation system. This distinction matters because users encounter an apparently personal stream of videos without direct access to the code, model weights, or full range of data used to organize it. What they can observe is a sequence of communicative exchanges: viewing, liking, saving, sharing, commenting, following, or skipping content, followed by changes they perceive in later recommendations.

Research on TikTok has therefore shifted from asking only why the platform is popular to examining how algorithmic curation participates in attention, self-making, and cultural consumption. Bhandari and Bimo (2022) describe TikTok's model of the algorithmized self, in which identity is negotiated partly through the content the system returns to users. Schellewald (2023) similarly shows that TikTok's appeal depends on the close relation between continuous



scrolling, relatable content, and users' sense that the feed is personally meaningful. These studies suggest that recommendation is not simply a technical delivery mechanism. It is a communicative infrastructure that structures what becomes visible, interpretable, and available for response.

Users nevertheless do not experience that infrastructure passively. Because the system is opaque, they develop informal explanations of how it works. Such explanations are commonly described as algorithmic folk theories or, more broadly, algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017). On TikTok, these understandings can guide deliberate attempts to cultivate or correct the FYP. Users may intensify signals associated with desired content, avoid unwanted videos, or test whether a single search has altered the feed. Karizat et al. (2021) connect these folk theories to identity and algorithmic resistance, while Vera and Ghosh (2025) show that users actively manage unwanted recommendations when the system overemphasizes one behavior. Preference is thus neither fully predetermined by the user nor mechanically imposed by the platform. It is negotiated through an iterative loop of interpretation, action, recommendation, and adjustment.

Gender is analytically relevant to this process, but it should not be treated as a claim that all women use TikTok in the same way. Social expectations, aesthetic norms, commercial content, and opportunities for self-presentation shape how particular identities become visible and intelligible on platforms. Research on Muslim women creators, for example, demonstrates that TikTok can accommodate overlapping forms of lifestyle, religious, political, and gendered expression rather than a single category of "women's content" (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024). Studying women users therefore offers a situated view of how preference, identity, and curation intersect; it does not establish an essential or universal female preference.

Bandung provides a strategic bounded case for that inquiry. The city has been part of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network as a City of Design since 2015 and has a visible ecology of design, fashion, culinary, and community-based creative activity (UNESCO Creative Cities Network, n.d.). These conditions make locally meaningful lifestyle and cultural content especially useful for observing how global platform logics are interpreted through an urban context. Bandung is not used here as a proxy for all Indonesian women. Rather, it enables the study to examine how personalized recommendation meets a recognizable local environment in which aesthetics, consumption, leisure, and creative identity already carry social significance.

Existing literature provides important accounts of TikTok's affordances, algorithmic identity, and users' beliefs about recommendation. However, three issues remain insufficiently connected. First, studies of algorithmic folk theories often explain what users believe but give less attention to how those beliefs organize everyday preference-signaling practices. Second, research on identity and TikTok frequently prioritizes creators and visibility, while ordinary users also enact identity through what they watch, save, share, or reject. Third, evidence from non-Western urban settings remains limited, particularly on how local relevance enters a globally standardized recommendation interface. A communication perspective can connect these issues by treating every engagement and avoidance practice as a message interpreted both by the platform and by users themselves.

Accordingly, this study investigates how women TikTok users in Bandung understand and negotiate FYP curation in the formation and expression of content preferences. It asks: (a) How do women TikTok users in Bandung explain the operation of FYP curation through their everyday algorithmic folk theories? (b) How do those understandings shape their preference-signaling, identity expression, and resistance to unwanted recommendations? By answering these questions, the study moves away from the claim that the algorithm is itself a preference and toward an account of how preferences are communicatively co-produced through user-platform interaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Algorithmic Curation as Communicative Infrastructure

Algorithmic curation ranks, filters, and sequences content, but its social significance emerges through user experience. TikTok's FYP translates a large and changing content pool into an individualized stream. The platform's recommendation logic is not directly visible to users; what becomes visible is a pattern of selections. Consequently, users interpret the feed as a form of platform communication about who they are and what the system expects them to value. [Bhandari and Bimo \(2022\)](#) argue that TikTok makes the algorithm unusually central to self-making because content arrives before stable social ties or explicit profile declarations become the primary organizing principle.

This process is recursive. User actions provide signals, recommendations organize later exposure, and exposure creates new opportunities for action. Personalization may increase relevance and sharing intention when users perceive content as authentic or creative ([Chu et al., 2024](#)). Yet the same recursion can also concentrate attention and reduce variety. The analytically important question is therefore not whether the algorithm "knows" a preference, but how users interpret changes in the feed and how repeated exposure stabilizes, expands, or narrows what feels preferable.

Algorithmic Folk Theories and Resistance

Algorithmic folk theories are practical, incomplete, and experience-based explanations that users construct to make opaque systems intelligible. They do not need to be technically accurate to affect behavior. [Klug et al. \(2021\)](#) found that TikTok users form assumptions about the importance of watching, liking, timing, hashtags, and other cues, then act on those assumptions. [Bucher's \(2017\)](#) concept of the algorithmic imaginary similarly directs attention to how people imagine algorithms and how those imaginings generate feelings, expectations, and action.

On TikTok, folk theories are closely tied to identity because users may read the feed as a platform-generated representation of the self. [Karizat et al. \(2021\)](#) show that users collectively produce knowledge about how identity is recognized and can resist when recommendations misclassify, overemphasize, or marginalize aspects of that identity. Resistance can include rapid skipping, avoiding interaction, searching for contrasting topics, or deliberately engaging with desired content. [Vera and Ghosh \(2025\)](#) further demonstrate that unwanted recommendations are often managed through everyday tactics rather than formal controls. These practices reveal user agency, but agency remains asymmetrical because the platform controls the system's categories, visibility rules, and feedback mechanisms.

Gendered Identity, Locality, and Preference

Content preference is not merely an individual taste detached from social context. Fashion, beauty, health, work, leisure, religion, and everyday-life genres provide cultural resources through which users recognize possible selves and communities. TikTok's multimodal affordances, including music, filters, duets, stitches, and short-form storytelling, support both consumption and participation. Multimodal forms also make preferences observable through aesthetic styles, emotional tones, and recurring formats rather than only through declared opinions ([Nurhabibah et al., 2023](#)).

A gender-sensitive approach asks how platformed visibility intersects with social expectations and identity positions. It does not assume that women share homogeneous interests. [El Sayed and Hotait \(2024\)](#) show how women creators combine multiple identity dimensions and use TikTok's affordances to negotiate belonging and marginalization. For ordinary users, similar

negotiations can occur through selective attention and circulation: saving an outfit reference, sharing health information, rejecting a beauty norm, or following local culinary recommendations can each articulate a relation to identity and community.

Locality further mediates this process. The FYP mixes geographically nearby material with nationally and globally circulating content, so a user's preference may be simultaneously personal, gendered, and place-based. Bandung's creative-city context is theoretically relevant because the same recommendation system encounters a dense local repertoire of design, fashion, food, tourism, and youth culture. The case therefore allows analysis of how platform standardization and situated meaning operate together.

Analytical Framework

The study integrates three concepts into one analytical sequence. First, algorithmic folk theories explain how users interpret why particular videos appear. Second, preference signaling explains how those interpretations guide engagement and avoidance practices. Third, algorithmic identity and resistance explain how users evaluate the feed as a representation of themselves and attempt to correct it when that representation feels inaccurate or too narrow. The resulting process is cyclical: perceived curation informs user action; user action supplies new signals; the revised feed reinforces or disrupts preferences; and users then accept, reinterpret, or resist the result. Identity mediates the cycle because judgments of relevance depend not only on content utility but also on whether recommendations fit users' values, aspirations, social roles, and local affiliations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative virtual ethnographic design. Referring to [Hine \(2015\)](#), virtual ethnography is appropriate when social meaning is produced through repeated engagement with a digital environment rather than contained in isolated posts. It enables the researcher to relate what participants say about a platform to what they do within it and to the technical affordances through which interaction becomes possible. In this study, the object of analysis was not TikTok's proprietary source code. The focus was the observable and narrated relationship between women users and FYP curation: how recommendations were interpreted, how interaction practices were expected to modify the feed, and how users assessed the resulting fit with their interests and identities.

The study involved 20 women TikTok users who reported living in Bandung City. Participants were selected purposively because they had direct experience using the FYP and could reflect on changes in recommendations over time. The sample supported comparison across different levels of use and content interests while remaining appropriate for qualitative, iterative engagement. The study does not claim statistical representation of women in Bandung or TikTok users more broadly.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Description
Sample size	20 women TikTok users
Residence	Bandung City
Age range	18-23

Characteristic	Description
Occupation or social role	Live host, university student, and Housewife
Length of TikTok use	2-4 years
Average daily use	More than 3 hours
Recurring content interests	Practical information; fashion and beauty; sports and health; local culinary and tourism; entertainment; point-of-view and everyday-life content

Source: Data Field (2024)

Data collection combined online interviews, participatory platform observation, and digital fieldnotes. The interviews explored participants' typical FYP content, their explanations of why recommendations appeared, the actions they believed influenced later recommendations, experiences of unwanted or repetitive content, and the relationship between the feed and self-expression (Issar, 2024; Felaco, 2025). Platform observation focused on recurring content categories, interaction affordances, and moments in which participants linked an action, such as liking, saving, sharing, following, commenting, watching, or skipping, to a perceived change in the FYP (Entrena-Serrano, 2025; Dekker et al., 2025). Public TikTok content connected to Bandung and themes recurring across interviews was also documented to situate participants' accounts within the local platform environment (Felaco, 2025).

Field data collection and observation activities were conducted between May and September 2024. As part of this process, we updated the data by monitoring the latest trends for 2025, incorporating a full month of observation (Dekker et al., 2025). This approach was taken to examine how algorithms shape female users' content preferences, which serve as a reference for their choices regarding style, fashion trends, and lifestyle (Taylor & Brisini, 2024).

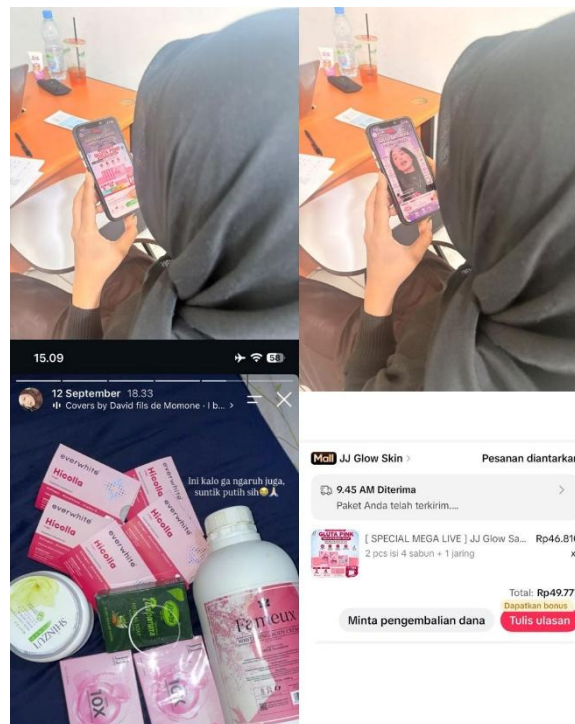


Figure 1. Female Users' Preferences (IN-07)

Source: Data Field (2025)

Analysis proceeded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Interview records and fieldnotes were first coded inductively for repeated descriptions of FYP behavior, preferred content, interaction practices, perceived recommendation changes, identity relevance, and avoidance. Codes were then compared with the sensitizing concepts of algorithmic folk theories, preference signaling, algorithmic identity, and resistance (Karizat et al., 2021; Bucher, 2017). This two-stage strategy retained participants' language while enabling theoretical interpretation. Descriptive lists of platform features or content genres were not treated as findings by themselves; they were analyzed according to the communicative function they served in the user-platform feedback loop (Bucher, 2017; Entrena-Serrano, 2025).

Triangulation occurred across three forms of evidence: interview accounts, observational fieldnotes, and documented examples of recurring content or interaction practices (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Convergence across sources strengthened interpretations; divergence was retained as evidence that personalization was experienced differently across participants. Claims about algorithmic effects were therefore inferential. The study attributes an effect only when participants linked an observable interaction to a perceived shift and when the pattern recurred in the broader dataset (Felaco, 2025; Issar, 2024). It does not claim causal access to TikTok's code. Network analysis was excluded because the study did not construct a node-edge dataset or conduct quantitative relational mapping. We assigned a code to each informant to maintain data confidentiality; codes IN-01 through IN-20 serve as the substitute identifiers used in the presented data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The FYP Was Understood as a Negotiated Feedback Loop

Participants did not describe the FYP as a neutral list of popular videos. Most understood it as a responsive environment that learned from accumulated behavior. They associated repeated exposure with prior viewing choices and interpreted later recommendations as evidence that the system had registered an interest. This practical explanation resembles the folk theories identified by Klug et al. (2021): users infer hidden rules from visible sequences even when they cannot verify the technical mechanism.

The finding also clarifies the conceptual error in treating the algorithm as a preference. Participants entered TikTok with interests, values, and needs, but those orientations became more or less salient through repeated recommendations. When a user watched, saved, or shared a type of video and then encountered similar material, the FYP appeared to confirm an identity or interest. The feed therefore mediated preference formation by amplifying selected cues; it did not originate preference independently. This reciprocal account aligns with the algorithmized self, in which the platform's representation of the user becomes part of ongoing self-understanding (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

"I keep finding myself drawn to content about body-whitening products because I want fair skin. Why? Because, personally, I feel that women with fair skin look clean and enjoy the "beauty privilege". (IN-07)

The informant added that by achieving a lighter skin tone, she hopes to realize her dream of becoming a skincare entrepreneur; the underlying rationale is that she must first possess the fair skin valued by societal standards so she can later convince customers based on genuine reviews of her own personal experience. Participants' explanations were not uniform or technically complete. Some emphasized explicit engagement such as likes, whereas others emphasized watch duration, searching, or rapid skipping. That variation is analytically important: folk theories functioned as working models for action, not verified accounts of TikTok engineering. The study therefore interprets the findings as perceived algorithmic effects grounded in experience rather than a reverse engineering of the recommendation system.

Preference Signaling Had a Practical Hierarchy

The data indicate a practical hierarchy among interaction signals. Likes, saves, shares, and skipping were more central to participants' accounts of preference management than following or commenting. A like marked immediate approval; saving marked anticipated future value; sharing connected platform content to an interpersonal relationship; and skipping communicated disinterest. These actions mattered because they served two audiences at once. They were socially meaningful to other users or creators, and participants also imagined them as data for the recommendation system.

Following was comparatively less necessary for discovering relevant content because the FYP could repeatedly surface creators or themes without a declared subscription. Commenting remained important for expression and community interaction, but participants did not consistently regard it as the most efficient way to cultivate recommendations. Saves and shares, by contrast, were described as useful because they extended a video's relevance beyond the moment of viewing. This finding supports a communication-centered interpretation of platform behavior: the same click can be an expression of taste, an interpersonal act, and an inferred instruction to the system.

Avoidance was equally communicative. Participants reported swiping past content that did not match their interests and reducing interaction with topics they did not want reinforced. Rapid skipping was not merely an absence of engagement; within participants' folk theories, it was an active negative signal. This everyday recalibration is consistent with findings that TikTok users manage unwanted content through repeated behavioral tactics when direct controls feel limited (Vera & Ghosh, 2025). 1 out of 20 informants stated that:

"Personally, I prefer content featuring Javanese songs and the latest gadgets; I vividly remember adding a purple iPhone 14 Plus to my cart as a way of manifesting it for 2024, a goal that finally became a reality in 2025, thanks to my earnings as a live host". (IN-10)

Preferences Connected Utility, Identity, and Local Relevance

The observed and narrated preferences formed four broader clusters rather than an unstructured list. The first was practical information, including educational, business, career, health, and exercise content. The second was identity and self-presentation, especially fashion, beauty, outfit-of-the-day content, and everyday life formats. The third was locally anchored leisure, including Bandung culinary and tourism recommendations. The fourth was affective entertainment, including music, comedy, motivational quotations, point-of-view narratives, and rhythmic short-video formats. These clusters overlapped: a fashion video could be entertaining, instructive, and identity-relevant at the same time.

Platform features mattered when they enabled a communicative function. Music, filters, and short-form editing supported mood and aesthetic expression. Stitch and Duet enabled visible response to another creator. Live supported synchronous interaction, while private sharing and reposting moved content into interpersonal or networked circulation. The significance of these features therefore lay less in their number than in how they transformed viewing into expression, response, affiliation, or distribution. Cheng and Li (2024) similarly demonstrate that TikTok engagement depends on how content form and communicative cues invite action, although their study focuses on news videos.

Identity was present in both consumption and circulation. Participants used creators and recurring formats as reference points for possible styles, routines, values, and aspirations. OOTD and beauty content made aesthetic identities visible; educational and career content addressed self-development; local culinary and tourism content affirmed place-based familiarity; and everyday-life or quotation content provided emotional recognition. This supports the argument that TikTok's personalized feed participates in self-making even when a user is not an active creator (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

The Bandung case adds a local layer to algorithmic personalization. Participants did not encounter fashion, food, or tourism as abstract categories. They evaluated recommendations through knowledge of places, styles, and practices associated with their city. The FYP thus combined global genres with local interpretive resources. Bandung's creative-city context helps explain why design, lifestyle, and culinary content could function simultaneously as entertainment and as markers of urban belonging (UNESCO Creative Cities Network, n.d.; Kurniawan & Kurniawan, 2020).

"Bandung as a culinary city, seems to have new spots going FYP every month. Personally, I always use culinary content recommendations to decide what to eat for lunch the next day and where to go." (IN-03)

The informant also added that FYP content is often used to avoid specific culinary spots on weekends, since weekends are when tourists flock to the city, leading them to choose alternative locations for their weekend leisure activities.

Intensive Use Increased Relevance and the Risk of Narrowing

Usage duration shaped the intensity of the feedback loop. Participants who reported using TikTok for more than three hours per day described greater engagement with communities and a stronger sense that the FYP matched their interests. Those using the platform for one to two hours generally described moderate engagement oriented toward entertainment, information, inspiration, and current trends. Participants using TikTok for less than 30 minutes described more sporadic consumption and less stable preference patterns. These categories should be read as qualitative contrasts rather than population estimates because the study did not use a representative survey.

Greater perceived relevance also produced tension. When repeated engagement generated increasingly similar recommendations, personalization could feel accurate yet restrictive. Participants valued the convenience of discovering appropriate content, but some were concerned that the feed reduced variety or overemphasized a single topic. This tension explains why acceptance and resistance coexisted. Users wanted the FYP to recognize them, but not to reduce them to one search, mood, or identity cue. [Karizat et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Vera and Ghosh \(2025\)](#) similarly show that algorithmic resistance often emerges when users experience the feed as an inaccurate or overly narrow representation of the self.

Content creators influenced this negotiation by offering recognizable styles and recurring interpretive frames. Participants were more likely to engage when creators presented information in ways that felt authentic, useful, aesthetically appealing, or emotionally resonant. Yet creator influence remained mediated by curation: users did not need to follow an account for its content to recur, and repeated recommendation could turn a creator into a reference point. The relationship among creator, user, and platform was therefore triangular. Creators encoded a message, users evaluated and circulated it, and the recommendation system reorganized its future visibility.

Across the themes, the findings support a model of negotiated algorithmic curation. Folk theories shaped which actions users selected; those actions were understood as preference signals; the resulting feed supported or constrained identity expression; and resistance emerged when the feed became repetitive or misaligned. The model is communicative because meaning did not reside in the algorithm alone. It emerged through repeated interpretation among users, content creators, social contacts, and the platform's recommendation interface.

"Usually, when I get recommendations that keep popping up like a step-by-step skincare routine for achieving a 'glass skin look'. Covering everything from the brand and application method to the frequently appearing promo schedule, I just go ahead and buy them. I only judge whether the product is worth the price after I've actually tried it, heheh." (IN-01)

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that TikTok's FYP shaped content preferences among women users in Bandung by organizing a recursive feedback loop rather than by determining taste unilaterally. Participants developed practical folk theories about how the system responded to watching, liking, saving, sharing, following, commenting, searching, and skipping. Those theories guided their actions, and perceived changes in the feed then reinforced, expanded, or narrowed particular interests. Likes, saves, shares, and skipping were especially important because participants treated

them as efficient signals to the system, while following and commenting were more closely associated with creator connection or public interaction.

Preferences clustered around practical information, identity and self-presentation, locally anchored leisure, and affective entertainment. Fashion, beauty, everyday-life, education, health, culinary, tourism, and entertainment content mattered not simply as categories but as resources for aspiration, belonging, and interpersonal circulation. Longer use intensified perceived personalization, but it also increased the possibility of repetitive recommendations. Users responded through everyday resistance, especially by withholding engagement, skipping content, or deliberately interacting with alternatives.

Theoretically, the study connects algorithmic folk theories, preference signaling, algorithmic identity, and resistance in a single communication process. It shows that preference is co-produced through interpretation and feedback among users, content creators, and platform curation. Practically, the findings suggest that digital-literacy initiatives should help users recognize how ordinary interaction becomes a signal, distinguish the FYP interface from the underlying system, and use available controls to diversify exposure. Platform designers should also make recommendation explanations and preference-correction tools more visible so that personalization does not depend solely on trial-and-error behavior.

The Bandung case further demonstrates that algorithmic personalization is not experienced as a purely technical process but as a situated communicative practice. Participants interpreted recommendation patterns through their existing knowledge, identities, routines, and local cultural environment, meaning that the same interaction could carry different significance depending on the user's context. This extends the concept of algorithmic folk theories by showing that users do not merely develop assumptions about how recommendation systems work; they incorporate those assumptions into everyday decisions about what to watch, engage with, ignore, or seek out. In this sense, the FYP functions not only as a mechanism for content selection but also as an environment in which users continuously negotiate personal interests, social connection, and self-presentation. The findings therefore suggest that understanding algorithmic personalization requires attention to both platform-level curation and the cultural and communicative contexts through which users interpret and respond to it.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has four principal limitations. First, it examines a bounded group of 20 women users in Bandung and does not support statistical generalization to all women, all residents of the city, or TikTok users elsewhere. Second, the study infers algorithmic effects from participants' accounts and observable recommendation patterns; it has no access to TikTok's code, model parameters, or complete behavioral logs. Third, personalized feeds and platform features change rapidly, so observations capture a particular period rather than a stable system. Fourth, participant demographics, recruitment details, observation frequency, and the distribution of usage categories must be fully reported from field records to allow readers to assess sample diversity and methodological transferability.

Future research should use longitudinal digital diaries or consent-based screen recording to document how a feed changes after specific interactions. Comparative studies could examine women and men, creators and non-creators, or users in Bandung and another Indonesian city to identify which patterns are gendered, role-specific, or locally situated. Researchers could also combine qualitative interviews with controlled account audits to test how searches, watch duration, saves, and rapid skipping affect subsequent recommendations. Finally, studies should examine whether built-in controls such as 'not interested,' keyword filtering, and feed refresh tools

help users correct unwanted identity inferences and increase content diversity.

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