

## SKIN POSITIVITY DISCOURSE ON TIKTOK: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BEAUTY STANDARDS IN THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT

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| Article Info                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
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| <p><b>Keywords:</b><br/><i>Skin tone discourse;</i><br/><i>TikTok</i></p> <hr/> <p>The Authors (s): This is an open-access article under the This work is licensed under a <a href="#">Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License</a>.</p>  | <p>This study explores skin tone discourse on TikTok within the Indonesian context, where beauty standards have long privileged lighter skin and contributed to ongoing issues of colorism and self-perception. Employing a qualitative approach through Critical Discourse Analysis using Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the research analyzes selected videos from the TikTok account @heylulaa by examining verbal, visual, and interactional elements. The findings indicate that dominant beauty standards continue to be reproduced in everyday discourse, leading to experiences of discrimination and internalized insecurity, while at the same time revealing the emergence of counter-discourses that promote self-acceptance and challenge these norms. However, such resistance does not fully replace dominant standards, as both coexist and are shaped by the dynamics and aesthetic conventions of digital media. In conclusion, TikTok functions as a dynamic space where skin tone discourse is continuously negotiated between conformity and resistance, reflecting the complex relationship between power, identity, and media in shaping contemporary beauty standards.</p> |

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, beauty standards have long functioned as socially constructed ideals that define what is considered physically attractive (Grogan, 2016). These standards are not static but continuously evolve across time, cultures, and social contexts. In Indonesia, dominant beauty ideals have historically privileged fair skin as a central marker of attractiveness. Such preferences are not merely aesthetic but are deeply embedded in cultural values and social practices, often shaping individuals' self-perception and social acceptance. Previous studies have shown that beauty standards are closely linked to issues of identity, social comparison, and self-esteem, particularly in contexts where appearance is highly valued (Jiotsa et al., 2021).

With the rapid development of digital technology, the construction and circulation of beauty standards are no longer dominated by traditional media alone. Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, have emerged as influential spaces where beauty ideals are produced, negotiated, and normalized. These platforms enable users to create and share multimodal content that combines visual, textual, and auditory elements, allowing meanings to be

constructed dynamically through interaction and engagement. In this sense, social media does not simply reflect reality but actively participates in shaping it. Previous research suggests that social media plays a significant role in influencing users' perceptions of beauty and self-presentation, particularly through visual-based content and algorithm-driven exposure (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Previous studies also indicate that social media content can influence how individuals perceive their physical appearance and self-worth. For example, (Cohen et al., 2018) found that visual-based content, such as selfies, can contribute to self-objectification and influence individuals' self-perception.

Despite the increasing diversity of content on digital platforms, dominant beauty standards continue to persist. In the Indonesian context, these standards are closely associated with colorism, where lighter skin tones are valued more highly than darker ones. Colorism functions as a form of social inequality that privileges certain physical characteristics while marginalizing others. This phenomenon is reinforced through media representation and everyday discourse, shaping how individuals are perceived and treated in society. Research on Indonesian beauty discourse also shows that media representations, such as advertisements, continue to reinforce the association between beauty and white skin, contributing to feelings of insecurity among audiences (Rosanti, 2024). Furthermore, studies on the historical development of beauty standards in Indonesia indicate that the preference for fair skin has been shaped by external cultural influences and continuously reproduced through media and popular culture (Puspitasari & Suryadi, 2020).

At the same time, recent studies suggest that beauty standards in Indonesian society are gradually shifting. Research on contemporary beauty discourse shows that younger generations are becoming more open to diverse representations of beauty, influenced by the growing presence of local beauty products and social media platforms (Saraharah & Ningtyas, 2023). In particular, TikTok has been identified as a space where alternative beauty narratives can emerge. For instance, a study on the TikTok account @skinofmeid demonstrates how content creators actively construct positive representations of darker skin tones and challenge dominant beauty norms, contributing to more inclusive understandings of beauty (Dewantoro et al., 2025).

In response to these dominant norms, alternative discourses have begun to emerge, particularly through movements that promote skin tone acceptance and challenge colorist ideals. These discourses emphasize that beauty is not determined by skin color and encourage individuals to embrace their natural appearance. Social media platforms play a significant role in amplifying these perspectives by providing space for users to share personal experiences and redefine beauty standards. However, while such representations appear to resist dominant beauty ideals, they cannot be understood solely as forms of resistance.

A closer examination suggests that the discourse of skin tone acceptance on social media is also shaped by broader digital dynamics, including algorithmic visibility, audience expectations, and aesthetic conventions. Elements such as lighting, camera angles, and visual presentation contribute to what can be described as aesthetic control, where even representations of darker skin are curated to remain visually appealing. This suggests that power operates subtly through processes of normalization, influencing both how content is produced and how it is interpreted (Foucault, 2016). As a result, the discourse of skin tone acceptance may simultaneously challenge and reproduce dominant beauty standards within digital media environments.

Although previous studies have examined beauty standards, social media influence, and shifts in beauty perception, limited research has specifically explored how skin tone-focused discourse is constructed and negotiated within the Indonesian TikTok context. Most existing studies tend to focus on general representations or adopt descriptive approaches, with less attention given to the underlying power relations and ideological processes embedded in

everyday digital discourse. Therefore, there is a need for a critical analysis that examines how skin tone discourse both challenges and reproduces dominant beauty standards.

To address this gap, this study employs Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly the three-dimensional model proposed by Fairclough, which examines discourse at the levels of text (micro), discursive practice (meso), and social practice (macro). Through this approach, the study analyzes how skin tone discourse in @heylulaa's TikTok content is constructed through verbal, visual, and interactional elements, and how it simultaneously negotiates resistance and conformity within digital media practices. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on skin tone-centered discourse within the Indonesian TikTok context and its critical perspective in examining how colorism is both resisted and reproduced, offering a more nuanced understanding of how power, discourse, and aesthetics intersect in shaping contemporary beauty standards.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how skin tone-related discourse is constructed in social media content. A qualitative approach is appropriate as it enables an in-depth exploration of meaning, interpretation, and social context rather than relying on numerical measurement (Perreault, 2011). The analysis is guided by the three-dimensional framework proposed by (Fairclough Norman, 1995), which examines discourse at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice.

The data for this study consist of selected TikTok videos produced by the content creator @heylulaa. These videos were chosen because they explicitly address issues related to skin tone, colorism, and self-acceptance, particularly in relation to darker skin. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select relevant data based on specific criteria, including the presence of messages that challenge dominant beauty standards, the representation of darker skin tone, and the use of verbal or visual elements that convey meanings related to beauty discourse (Etikan, 2016). This approach ensures that the selected data are closely aligned with the research objectives.

Data were collected through documentation and non-participant observation. The observation was conducted over a specific period, from April 22 to April 28, 2026, during which relevant videos were identified, selected, and documented from the creator's TikTok account. The collected data include visual elements (such as facial appearance, lighting, and camera framing), verbal elements (including spoken language, captions, and on-screen text), and, where relevant, interactional elements such as engagement indicators. In addition, note-taking was used to systematically record key features of each video, including recurring themes, discursive patterns, and communicative strategies.

The themes in this study were generated through a coding process. After data collection, the researcher transcribed the verbal content and examined the visual elements of each video. Open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units related to skin tone, beauty standards, and self-perception. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding, resulting in recurring themes such as colorism, internalized insecurity, self-acceptance, and resistance to beauty standards. This process ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the data while allowing patterns to emerge systematically.

The data analysis follows the three stages of Fairclough's CDA framework. At the textual level (micro), the analysis focuses on linguistic and visual features, including word choice, sentence structure, imagery, and the representation of skin tone. At the level of discursive practice (meso), the analysis examines how the content is produced, distributed, and consumed within the TikTok platform, including the influence of platform conventions, audience engagement, and algorithmic visibility. At the level of social practice (macro), the

analysis interprets how the discourse relates to broader socio-cultural contexts, particularly dominant beauty standards, colorism, and power relations. In addition, a thematic analysis approach was employed to identify and organize recurring patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved grouping coded data into broader thematic categories, which facilitated the interpretation of how skin tone discourse is constructed across the analyzed content.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Results

##### 3.1.1 TikTok as a Cultural Space for Skin Tone Discourse

TikTok has become a significant digital platform where beauty-related meanings are produced, circulated, and negotiated through short-form video content. Its algorithmic system and interactive features enable content creators to reach wide audiences and construct alternative narratives that challenge dominant beauty standards. In the case of @heylulaa, the audience primarily consists of young social media users, particularly those who actively engage with beauty-related content, as reflected in the comment sections that show shared experiences, emotional responses, and supportive interactions.

The data analyzed in this study consist of five selected videos from @heylulaa that explicitly address issues of skin tone, colorism, and self-acceptance. These videos were selected because they consistently represent recurring themes related to discrimination, internalized insecurity, and resistance toward dominant beauty ideals. Although only selected extracts are presented in this section, they reflect patterns that appear across all analyzed videos.

##### 3.1.2 Skin Positivity Discourse

In this section, the findings are presented based on selected extracts from Heylula's TikTok videos. The analysis focuses on how skin tone-related discourse is constructed through verbal expressions, personal narratives, and visual elements.

##### 1. Colorism and Discrimination

The theme of colorism and discrimination is prominently reflected in the data, particularly through expressions that associate darker skin with negative attributes. These expressions illustrate how dominant beauty standards are reproduced in everyday interactions. The following extracts exemplify how such discourse operates at both interpersonal and structural levels.

**Extract 1: “Why don’t you just use skin-whitening products so your skin can be white? How can a girl have such dark skin, it looks so dirty.” “kenapa gak pake pemutih aja sih supaya kulitnya putih... cewek kok hitam keliatan degil banget”**

**Extract 2: “I’m tired of being rejected from jobs everywhere just because my skin is dark.” “aku capek ditolak kerja sana sini hanya karena kulit aku gelap”**

**Analysis:** These extracts collectively demonstrate how colorism operates both at the interpersonal and structural levels. At the textual level (micro), Extract 1 reflects the use of evaluative language that associates lighter skin with cleanliness and desirability, while positioning darker skin negatively. This indicates the normalization of a hierarchical beauty ideology embedded in daily communication. At the level of discursive practice (meso), these expressions are reproduced through everyday interactions and social communication, reinforcing shared assumptions about beauty. Meanwhile, Extract 2 extends this discourse into institutional contexts, showing how skin tone influences access to social and economic opportunities. At the level of social practice (macro), these findings suggest that colorism is

not merely a matter of personal bias but functions as a broader system of inequality that is reproduced through discourse and social structures.

## **2. Internalized Insecurity**

The impact of colorism is not limited to external interactions but also extends to individuals' internal experiences. The data reveal how repeated exposure to discriminatory discourse leads to the internalization of dominant beauty standards. The following extracts demonstrate how such discourse shapes self-perception and emotional responses.

**Extract 3: "I hate myself... I want to have lighter skin, I want to be like others." "aku benci sama diri aku sendiri... aku mau putih, aku mau kayak orang lain"**

**Extract 4: "I heard those things almost every day, and that's what made me feel insecure." "itu hampir setiap hari dan itulah yang membuat adanya rasa insecure di diri aku"**

Analysis: The extracts illustrate the internalization of dominant beauty standards, where repeated exposure to discriminatory discourse shapes individual self-perception. At the textual level (micro), Extract 3 reveals expressions of self-rejection and the desire to conform to socially constructed ideals of beauty. Extract 4 further highlights how repeated negative statements contribute to feelings of insecurity. At the level of discursive practice (meso), these experiences are shaped by continuous interaction with dominant narratives circulated through social communication. At the level of social practice (macro), these findings indicate that discourse becomes embedded within individual identity, influencing emotional responses and reinforcing broader cultural expectations about beauty.

## **3. Self-Acceptance and Empowerment**

In response to these experiences, the data also reveal the emergence of self-acceptance and empowerment. This shift indicates an effort to reconstruct identity and challenge dominant standards of beauty. The following extracts highlight how individuals articulate acceptance of their natural skin tone and promote more inclusive definitions of beauty.

**Extract 5: "I need to accept myself, because if I don't, then who else will?" "gue itu harus bisa menerima diri gue sendiri karena kalau misalkan bukan gue siapa lagi"**

**Extract 6: "It's okay if you have dark skin... everyone has their own kind of beauty." "gak papa kalo kalian itu punya kulit yang gelap... setiap orang itu punya kecantikan yang berbeda-beda"**

**Extract 7: "Everyone experiences insecurity." "setiap orang itu pasti punya rasa insecure"**

Analysis: These extracts reflect a shift toward self-acceptance and empowerment, positioning individuals as active agents in redefining their identity. At the textual level (micro), the language used emphasizes personal responsibility and inclusive definitions of beauty. At the level of discursive practice (meso), these expressions function as alternative narratives that challenge dominant beauty discourse and are circulated through social media interaction. At the level of social practice (macro), this shift represents the emergence of a counter-discourse that resists dominant ideologies and reconstructs meanings of beauty in more inclusive and diverse ways.

## **4. Resistance to Beauty Standards**

Beyond self-acceptance, the data further illustrate active resistance toward dominant beauty standards. This resistance is expressed through questioning, rejecting, and redefining socially constructed ideals of beauty. The following extracts demonstrate how individuals negotiate and challenge these norms.

**Extract 8: "Why should we follow what other people want if it doesn't make us happy?" "kenapa kita harus ngikutin kemauan orang lain yang gak bisa ngebuat kita itu merasa bahagia"**

**Extract 9: “Beauty is not defined by having light skin.” “cantik itu gak harus berkulit putih”**

Analysis: These extracts demonstrate explicit resistance to dominant beauty norms. At the textual level (micro), Extract 8 questions societal expectations, while Extract 9 directly challenges the association between beauty and whiteness. At the level of discursive practice (meso), these statements function as acts of negotiation, where individuals actively contest dominant meanings through communication. At the level of social practice (macro), these findings indicate that discourse is a site of struggle in which dominant ideologies are challenged, although not entirely replaced, resulting in a coexistence of conformity and resistance.

**5. Multimodal Representation of Skin Tone Discourse**

In addition to verbal expressions, the data also reveal that meaning is constructed through visual representation. The analyzed videos employ various visual strategies, such as camera framing, lighting, and on-screen text, to reinforce the discourse of skin tone acceptance. The following extracts illustrate how verbal and visual elements interact to construct meaning.



Figure 1. Skin tone representation in @heylulaa's TikTok content



Figure 2. On-screen text promoting skin tone acceptance



Figure 3. Audience responses reflecting shared experiences and support in @heylulaa's TikTok content

**Extract 10: “We are actually beautiful regardless of our skin color, as long as we can accept it.” “sebenarnya kita itu cantik apapun warna kulitnya asal kita bisa nerima itu”**

**Extract 11: “It’s okay to have dark skin, what matters is that you are beautiful.” “gapapa kulit hitam yg penting manisee”**

Analysis: These extracts are presented as on-screen text supported by visual representation. At the textual level (micro), the verbal messages emphasize inclusivity through phrases that affirm beauty regardless of skin color. As shown in Figure 1, the creator presents her natural skin tone through close-up framing and controlled lighting, which reinforces the visual representation of authenticity and confidence. Figure 2 further illustrates how on-screen text functions as a direct linguistic reinforcement of skin tone acceptance.

The combination of verbal messages and visual representation demonstrates that meaning is constructed multimodally. The use of close-up framing creates a sense of intimacy, allowing viewers to focus on the creator's natural appearance. At the same time, the lighting enhances visibility while maintaining aesthetic appeal, suggesting that even representations of “natural” beauty are still shaped by visual conventions. At the level of discursive practice (meso), these visual and verbal elements are produced and circulated through TikTok's platform features, enabling the content to reach wider audiences and encouraging interaction. In addition to visual and verbal elements, audience engagement also plays a significant role in reinforcing the discourse. As shown in Figure 3, comments from viewers reflect both shared experiences of insecurity and expressions of support toward the creator. These responses indicate that the discourse resonates with audiences and is actively negotiated through interaction.

At the level of social practice (macro), this multimodal discourse reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics in which dominant beauty standards are both challenged and reproduced. While the content promotes acceptance of darker skin tone, it remains influenced by aesthetic conventions that shape how “authentic” beauty is presented. This suggests that meaning is not only constructed by the content creator but is also co-constructed through audience engagement within a wider system of power and representation in digital media environments.

### 3.1.3 Overall Findings

The findings of this study indicate that skin tone discourse in @heylulaa's TikTok content is constructed through interconnected patterns of discrimination, internalization, resistance, and multimodal representation. The data show that dominant beauty standards, particularly those privileging lighter skin, continue to be reproduced through everyday discourse and social interaction. At the same time, these standards are internalized by individuals, shaping self-perception and emotional responses.

However, the findings also reveal the emergence of counter-discourses that promote self-acceptance and challenge dominant beauty ideals. These counter-discourses are not only

expressed verbally but are also reinforced through visual strategies, such as framing, lighting, and on-screen text. This demonstrates that meaning is constructed multimodally within digital media environments.

Overall, the results suggest that skin tone discourse on TikTok is not fixed but dynamic, involving a continuous negotiation between conformity to dominant beauty standards and resistance against them. This highlights the complexity of digital media as a space where both power and resistance coexist in shaping contemporary understandings of beauty.

### 3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that skin tone discourse on TikTok is constructed through interconnected dimensions of colorism, internalized insecurity, self-acceptance, resistance, and multimodal representation, providing a deeper understanding of how beauty standards are not only reproduced but also negotiated within digital media environments. This finding is closely related to Amin et al. (2026), who examine how linguistic strategies in Instagram skincare advertisements construct persuasive messages and reinforce dominant beauty ideologies. Their study shows that imperatives, emotive vocabulary, structured narratives, and authoritative tones associate skincare consumption with confidence, self-worth, social acceptance, and aspirational beauty, demonstrating how commercial discourse can reproduce particular understandings of beauty and self-care. Similarly, the present study reveals that digital beauty discourse can shape perceptions of desirable appearance and shows how TikTok users negotiate, challenge, and potentially resist those ideals through skin-positivity discourse, particularly in relation to skin tone and colorism in the Indonesian context.

First, the findings on colorism and discrimination, as reflected in Extracts 1 and 2, indicate that dominant beauty standards continue to privilege lighter skin tones. The association of darker skin with negative attributes such as “dirty,” as well as experiences of job discrimination, suggests that colorism operates at both interpersonal and structural levels. This finding is consistent with previous research by (Rosanti, 2024), which shows that media representations in Indonesia often reinforce the association between beauty and white skin, leading to feelings of insecurity among audiences. Similarly, (Puspitasari & Suryadi, 2020) argue that beauty standards in Indonesia have been shaped by external influences, particularly the preference for fair skin, which is continuously reproduced through media and cultural discourse. However, this study extends these findings by showing how such discourse is articulated in everyday digital interaction, particularly through user-generated content on TikTok.

Second, the findings on internalized insecurity, as seen in Extracts 3 and 4, demonstrate how dominant beauty standards are internalized by individuals. The expressions of self-rejection and the desire to have lighter skin indicate that repeated exposure to discriminatory discourse shapes self-perception and emotional responses. This supports the argument by (Saraharah & Ningtyas, 2023) that beauty standards influence how individuals perceive themselves, particularly in a social context where appearance is highly valued. However, this study provides a more critical perspective by illustrating how such internalization is not only influenced by media but also reinforced through everyday discourse and interaction.

Third, the findings related to self-acceptance and empowerment, particularly in Extracts 5, 6, and 7, reveal the emergence of a counter-discourse that challenges dominant beauty standards. The emphasis on accepting one’s natural skin tone and recognizing diversity in beauty aligns with the findings of (Dewantoro et al., 2025), which highlight how TikTok can serve as a platform for promoting alternative beauty narratives, particularly those that positively represent darker skin tones. This suggests that social media not only reproduces

dominant ideologies but also provides space for resistance and redefinition of beauty. Nevertheless, this study further shows that such self-acceptance is constructed through discourse, indicating that identity is continuously negotiated rather than fixed.

Fourth, the findings on resistance, as reflected in Extracts 8 and 9, demonstrate that individuals actively question and reject dominant beauty standards. This supports previous research that suggests younger generations are becoming more critical of traditional beauty norms (Saraharah & Ningtyas, 2023). However, the findings also indicate that resistance does not completely eliminate dominant standards, but instead coexists with them, creating a dynamic tension between conformity and opposition. This highlights the complexity of discourse as a site of struggle where multiple meanings are negotiated.

Finally, the multimodal analysis, particularly in Extracts 10 and 11 and Figures 1–3, reveals that skin tone discourse is constructed not only through verbal expressions but also through visual and interactional elements. The use of close-up framing, lighting, and on-screen text enhances the representation of skin tone, while audience comments indicate that discourse is co-constructed through engagement. This finding supports the argument by (Dewantoro et al., 2025) that TikTok enables interactive participation in shaping beauty narratives. Nurfausia, et al (2026) demonstrates how language choices in beauty-related discourse can be examined to understand how messages are constructed and communicated to audiences. This relevance extends to the present study which moves beyond advertising to examine beauty discourse in social media by reproducing, negotiating, or challenging prevailing beauty standards in the Indonesian context. However, this study goes further by showing that even representations of “natural” beauty are influenced by aesthetic conventions, suggesting that digital media simultaneously enables resistance while maintaining certain standards of visual appeal.

The findings of this study have important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study contributes to the field of Critical Discourse Analysis by demonstrating how discourse operates across textual, visual, and interactional dimensions within digital media. It also highlights the importance of multimodality in understanding contemporary discourse practices. Practically, the findings suggest that social media platforms like TikTok can serve as spaces for promoting more inclusive beauty standards. However, they also emphasize the need for critical awareness, as digital content may continue to reproduce dominant ideologies in subtle ways.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The analysis is based on a limited number of videos from a single content creator, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study focuses primarily on content analysis and does not include direct audience perspectives beyond observable comments. Future research is therefore recommended to include a wider range of data sources, such as multiple creators and audience interviews, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of skin tone discourse in digital media.

## **4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

### **4.1 Conclusion**

This study concludes that skin tone discourse in TikTok content is constructed through a complex interplay of discrimination, internalization, self-acceptance, resistance, and multimodal representation. The findings reveal that dominant beauty standards in Indonesia, particularly those privileging lighter skin, continue to be reproduced through everyday discourse and social interaction. These standards are not only external but are also internalized by individuals, shaping their self-perception and emotional experiences. At the same time, the study identifies the emergence of counter-discourses that promote self-acceptance and

challenge dominant beauty ideals. These counter-discourses indicate that individuals are not passive recipients but active agents in negotiating and redefining meanings of beauty. However, such resistance does not entirely replace dominant standards, as it often coexists with and is influenced by aesthetic conventions and digital media dynamics.

Furthermore, the study highlights that skin tone discourse on TikTok is constructed multimodally through the interaction of verbal, visual, and audience engagement elements. This demonstrates that digital media functions as a dynamic space where meaning is continuously produced and negotiated.

Although this study offers valuable insights, it is constrained by the limited number of videos analyzed from a single content creator and the absence of direct audience perspectives. Therefore, future research is encouraged to involve a wider range of data sources and include audience-centered approaches to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of skin tone discourse in digital environments.

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