



Digital Communication on the TikTok Platform in Increasing the Visibility of MSMEs (Study on TikTok Account @rm.padang.unilintau)

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 11 Mar, 2026

Revised 14 May, 2026

Accepted 25 May, 2026

Keywords:

TikTok, Visibility, culinary MSME, New Media Theory, Digital Communication

ABSTRACT

Micro-scale culinary MSMEs are commonly assumed to have limited digital reach due to a lack of capital and a follower base. This study challenges this assumption by analyzing the visibility anomaly on the TikTok account @rm.padang.unilintau, a culinary MSME in Palembang City that managed to achieve 219,200 organic impressions even though it only has 792 followers. A descriptive qualitative approach was used, with data obtained through virtual observation of three sample videos, in-depth interviews with managers and business owners, and digital metric documentation. The analysis refers to the three characteristics of McQuail and Deuze (2020) New Media Theory, hypertextuality, interactivity, and dispersal. The results showed that the use of viral audio hacked the For You Page algorithm through sound-based hypertextual indexing, resulting in a 645% spike in impressions compared to low-popularity audio videos. Stimulation of appetite appeal through the visualization of side dishes without verbal narratives encourages high-intent engagement as well as physical visit conversion. The dispersal of content to the WhatsApp ecosystem expands the reach beyond geographical boundaries without the cost of paid advertising. Overall, the findings prove that the distribution of content in new media is no longer determined by the hierarchy of the number of followers, but rather by the precision of strategy in responding to algorithmic logic. This research offers a digital communication framework based on new media characteristics as an alternative for MSMEs operating with limited marketing capital.

INTRODUCTION

The TikTok platform has revolutionized the logic of content distribution by making the *For You Page* (FYP) algorithm instead of the follower base the main determinant of visibility. More than 70% of TikTok users' watch time is automatically controlled by content that algorithms serve based on interaction signals, rather than through active profile search. This shift creates structural opportunities for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to compete in the digital space without relying on large advertising budgets. Quality content from small capital accounts also theoretically has the potential to reach millions of viewers if it is able to optimize the characteristics inherent in the platform. (Muhamad Nur Fitrianto, 2025) (Squirrelly & Sakir, 2025)

The existing literature, although diverse, tends to assume that the success of digital visibility is directly proportional to the number of followers or *influencer* (Squirrelly et al., 2025) engagement. Studies on TikTok and MSMEs generally fall into three main focuses, technical, algorithm and virality factors, content strategy and (Tatasari et al., 2025) *brand awareness* (Kamal et al., 2025) (Laila & Hasanah, 2025), and the impact of marketing on MSME sales in the region. The three clusters leave significant analytical gaps, there has been no study that specifically dissects the digital communication mechanism in MSME accounts with very low followers that is able to disrupt the algorithmic hierarchy organically.

This gap is filled by this research through a case study on the TikTok account @rm.padang.unilintau, a micro-scale Padang restaurant in Palembang City. The account featured an extreme visibility anomaly, with only 792 followers and no ad budget, the three videos pinned on the account profile managed to achieve 29,400, 184,600, and 219,200 impressions, respectively. This gap between the technical capacity of the account and the achievement of actual distribution is an academically relevant departure point to test whether the characteristics of new media

as formulated by McQuail and Deuze (2020) really operate at the micro level of MSMEs.

This study aims to analyze how digital communication activities on TikTok accounts @rm.padang.unilintau have succeeded in generating visibility that far exceeds the normal capacity of micro-scale accounts and identify the supporting factors and inhibiting the effectiveness of digital communication. The novelty of this research lies in the shift of the focus of analysis from the user figure to the mechanism of the algorithmic system, with New Media Theory as an analytical framework to prove that the dispersal power of content is no longer determined by the status of the account, but rather by the precision of the digital communication pattern applied.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to understand in depth the mechanism of how content strategies work and why an account with low followers is able to achieve massive visibility, a question that cannot be adequately answered through a statistical approach alone. This study was designed as a *single case study* with the TikTok account @rm.padang.unilintau as the object of the study.

Data collection is carried out through three complementary techniques. First, non-participant virtual observation of 3 sample videos embedded in the TikTok account profile @rm.padang.unilintau with recording digital metrics (views, likes, shares, saves), audio elements, and visual characteristics. Second, in-depth interviews with two key informants, Varas as the account manager and Uni Roza as the business owner. Third, documentation in the form of archiving metrics and content characteristics for the purpose of data triangulation.

The analysis technique refers to the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) which takes place cyclically through data condensation (selection and focusing of relevant information), data presentation, and drawing verified conclusions. The validity of the findings was strengthened through triangulation between metric data, interview results, and New Media Theory literature, as well as *member checking* to post-analysis informants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The @rm.padang.unilintau account is a TikTok account owned by Padang Uni Lintau Restaurant located in Palembang City. This account is managed independently by a family member who concurrently has operational duties at one of the stall branches, without a creative team, without a content budget, and without a planned upload schedule. All content production uses a mobile camera with an average duration of 15 to 30 seconds per video. At the time of the study, this account was recorded to have 792 followers, 21 accounts followed, and an accumulation of 9,246 likes from 32 videos that have been uploaded with a sporadic publication frequency of three to seven days.

Despite its status as a very micro-scale account, its content distribution achievements far exceed expectations. The three videos pinned on the profile page as the best representation of the account's content achieved 29,400, 184,600, and 219,200 impressions, respectively, an anomaly that contrasts with the common assumption that visibility is directly proportional to the number of followers. The analysis of these achievement patterns uses the framework of three characteristics of New Media Theory, hypertextuality, interactivity, and dispersal.

Table 1. Embed Video Metrics Matrix @rm.padang.unilintau

Indicator	Video Embed 1	Embed Video 2	Video Embed 3
Views	29.400	184.600	219.200
Likes	276	3.516	3.174
Shares	42	766	387
Audio Elements	TABOLA BALE (viral)	Baok Lah Denai – Elsa Mayora	The Winner Takes It All – ABBA (viral)
Visual Focus	Fish Showcase & Operational Activities	Side dish display + branch location indicator text	Stack orders of packaged rice in massive quantities

Source: Researchers' observations on the TikTok account @rm.padang.unilintau, 2026

The data in table 1 show a very nonlinear pattern. The 645% increase in impressions between embedded video 1 and embedded video 3 cannot be explained by the difference in visual quality alone, considering that all three use similar production formats. The most striking difference lies precisely in the selection of audio elements, which is the gateway to understanding the way in which the three characteristics of the new media work simultaneously.

Hypertextuality: Hacking Algorithms through Viral Audio

(McQuail & Deuze, 2020) Hypertextuality refers to the ability of content to connect non-linearly with other content through shared elements that are automatically recognized by the platform's system. In the TikTok ecosystem, this mechanism is most concretely present through audio elements. Each time a creator uses an audio, the system indexes the video into a cluster of the same audio content, a mechanism known as *sound-based hypertextual indexing* (Marseille Purana & Duality Sonny, 2025). As a result, videos that use audio are going viral and are distributed to millions of users, regardless of the scale of the account that uploads them.

Field findings suggest that the account manager, Varas, has been practicing this hypertextual tactic intuitively. The audio selection process is recognized as not based on thematic relevance to culinary content, but solely on the popularity of audio in the TikTok ecosystem at the time of upload. This logic, while seemingly irrational from a conventional marketing perspective, has proven to be algorithmically effective. When ABBA's "The Winner Takes It All" and Elsa Mayora's "Baok Lah Denai" went viral, the video of the stall's side dish storefront using the audio was distributed to users who liked the audio, even to those who had never searched for food content before (Setiawati & Stuttgart, 2024).

Confirmation from the consumer side strengthens these findings. A number of new customers claim to have found the account through the FYP mechanism when searching for content without a specific search objective. The metric data in table 1 validates this pattern quantitatively, embedded video 2 with viral audio achieved 184,600 impressions and embedded video 3 exceeded 219,200 views, while embedded video 1 with less proper audio only achieved 29,400 views. This nearly seven-fold gap consistently supports the argument that the hypertextuality variable through viral audio is the dominant contributor in the variation in visibility achievement between videos, TikTok's algorithm actively predicts potential virality based on audio elements. This is what Varas as the admin of TikTok *rm uni lintau* to increase visibility even though it is done without any special consideration beforehand. (Tatasari et al., 2025)

Interactivity: Appetite Appeal and Digital Community Conversion

(McQuail & Deuze, 2020) Interactivity in New Media Theory is defined as the capacity of a medium to enable a direct and continuous two-way exchange of messages between senders and receivers. Every form of interaction that occurs, comments, likes, and admin responses is read by the TikTok algorithm as a signal that determines how widely a content needs to be distributed further.

The digital communication activities of the *@rm.padang.unilintau* account fully rely on visual sensory language as a trigger for interaction. *Close-up shots* of the texture of side dishes such as thick souped tambusu curry, dark-colored rendang, and large portions of baung heads are designed to create *appetite appeal*, a visual appeal that provokes the audience's sensory response even before reading the video caption. This approach is deliberate by the account manager by placing the product and the operational atmosphere of the stall as the main protagonist of each content, without the presence of the narrator in front of the camera. Content marketing based on product visual display is more effective in increasing brand awareness than content based on direct narrative. It is this strategy that supports the visibility anomaly that continues to increase with and without accident. (Savia et al., 2025) (Kamal et al., 2025)

This visual strategy has been shown to encourage *high-intent engagement* (Dwi Susanti et al., 2024), which is audience engagement that reflects real buying interest rather than just passive engagement. This pattern can be seen from the character of the comments that come in, which are predominantly in the form of specific questions regarding the availability of certain menus and branch locations rather than just generic compliments. Responses to these comments are taken in turn by several family members, so the comment column effectively serves as an active pre-purchase consultation room most of the time. Each response given simultaneously signals relevance to the algorithm, keeping the content distribution cycle active.

The ultimate impact of this interactivity goes beyond the digital space. The business owner, Uni Roza, confirmed that there was an increase in physical visits to stalls which was explicitly triggered by TikTok content. Consumers who come often mention the specific menu they see on the platform before deciding to visit, a phenomenon known in marketing communication studies as *digital-to-offline conversion* (Setiawati & Stuttgart, 2024). The achievement of this conversion occurs without the slightest expense of paid promotional costs, proving the high efficiency of the interactivity-based approach.

Dispersal: Visibility Anomalies from Micro to Macro

(McQuail & Deuze, 2020) Dispersal is understood as the ability for messages to spread decentrally through a participatory network of users, without centralized control from the sender of origin. In TikTok, dispersal works through two channels that operate simultaneously, automatic distribution by the FYP algorithm, and a *share* feature that allows users to forward content outside the TikTok ecosystem to WhatsApp, community groups, and other social media platforms. The combination of the two creates a layered deployment effect that goes far beyond the distribution range of a single source. (São Paulo, 2018)

Empirical evidence of this mechanism is evident in table 1 data that embedded video 3 achieved 219,200 views with 387 voluntary shares, while embedded video 2 recorded 766 shares with 184,600 views. The share numbers represent hundreds of new deployment points, each of which has the potential to reach dozens of

additional contacts outside the TikTok ecosystem. The visualization of a massive pile of packaged rice orders in the embed 3 video proved to serve as a *social proof* as well as a *food envy trigger*, a visual element that encourages the audience to react emotionally and pass on the content to the people closest to them. (Nasution et al., 2025)

Findings on the ground show that the move of content from TikTok to the WhatsApp ecosystem occurred in a way, driven by a combination of two consumer motivations, the desire to recommend something considered valuable to those closest to them, and the drive to share discoveries that are considered communally relevant. This pattern is a tangible form of *cross-platform* (Rilma & Agnesia, 2023) dispersal that automatically expands the reach of content beyond its home ecosystem. Furthermore, this move also reaches segments of the audience that are not active on TikTok including older people who often play a role as decision-makers in the selection of family dining places, thereby expanding potential conversions demographically.

Factors Supporting and Inhibiting Visibility

The synthesis of content observation data, platform metrics, and in-depth interviews identifies four factors that simultaneously underpin successful visibility. First, the authenticity of the content. The entire footage is an honest visualization of the day-to-day operations of the stall without complex editing, an approach known as *raw content authenticity*. The compatibility between digital representations and the actual quality of the product creates an implicit contract between the content and the consumer experience on the ground, which is proven to drive loyalty and *word-of-mouth* (Savia et al., 2025). Consumers consistently report that the quality of food in the stall meets or even exceeds the expectations built through video content.

Second, responsiveness as a digital *customer service* strategy. A pattern of managing comments involving multiple family members in turn creates a *multi-layer informal customer service* that is active most of the time. Each interaction answered not only answers the needs of potential consumers, but also signals relevance to the platform's algorithm, which in turn maintains the priority of content distribution. This condition is an example of how family social capital functions as an effective substitution for professional digital teams. Third, product value alignment. The combination of very affordable prices and satisfactory quality creates a strong (Marseille Purana & Duality Sonny, 2025) (Squirrelly & Sakir, 2025) *value proposition* that triggers a *price-quality surprise effect*, encouraging consumers to spontaneously recommend the stall to others. (Ananda et al., 2025)

Fourth, the family ecosystem as internal social capital. Account management involving multiple family members informally provides a backup of human resources at no significant additional cost, allowing for the sustainability of digital responses even without formal operational procedures. This type of social capital has proven to be a significant differentiating factor for the sustainability of digital MSMEs (São Paulo, 2018).

On the other hand, four inhibiting factors were identified that hindered the optimization of existing potential. First, inconsistencies in content production due to *role overload* in a single manager. The delay between uploads ranging from three to seven days is not a deliberate strategy, but a consequence of the double burden between digital content management and stall operations at the same time. The account manager himself acknowledges that there is a gap between the intention to upload regularly and its realization, a phenomenon known in the literature as the *intention-behavior gap* (Laila & Hasanah, 2025). These inconsistencies have direct algorithmic consequences as the platform automatically reduces the priority of distributing inactive accounts on a regular basis.

Second, the absence of the use of platform analytics data. The account manager admitted that he never accessed TikTok's built-in analytics features, such as average watch time, video completion rate, and traffic sources, even though these features are available for free. Consequently, the success achieved is more of a *windfall* than the results of a strategy that can be replicated and systematically improved. Third, the lack of integration of commercial features. This account operates purely as a *foot traffic driver* without TikTok *Live* integration, online ordering links, or TikTok *Shop*. Of the hundreds of thousands of viewers, only those who can reach the physical location of the stall have the opportunity to become actual consumers, a *significant revenue gap*. This limitation is due to the lack of technical literacy on these commercial features, not by the absence of desire. Fourth, reliance on a single creator creates (Rilma & Agnesia, 2023) a *single-point-of-failure* that makes the algorithmic momentum that has been built vulnerable to stalling whenever the creator faces a drop in motivation or operational pressure.

Reading the supporting and inhibiting factors side by side produces a complete picture of the digital communication position of the Uni Lintau Restaurant. On the one hand, this account has strong capital: content authenticity, comment column responsiveness, *superior product value proposition*, and family ecosystem support. On the other hand, this potential has not been optimized due to production inconsistencies, the absence of the use of analytics, the lack of integration of commercial features, and the fragility of production systems that rely on one individual. Overall, these findings confirm that the characteristics of hypertextuality, interactivity, and dispersal in New Media Theory can only be fully optimized when internal supporting factors are strengthened and structural barriers are systematically overcome (McQuail & Deuze, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This research proves that the distribution of content in new media is no longer determined by the hierarchy of the number of followers, but by the precision of the strategy in responding to algorithmic logic. Through the framework of New Media Theory, the three characteristics, hypertextuality, interactivity, and dispersal, were shown to work simultaneously and reinforce each other, resulting in a visibility achievement that far exceeded the normal capacity of micro-scale accounts. The use of viral audio as a hypertextual key, an appetite appeal strategy without verbal narration as a trigger for interactivity, and a *cross-platform* dispersal mechanism to WhatsApp are three pillars of digital communication that can be replicated by other MSMEs operating with limited resources.

Theoretically, this study extends the application of McQuail's New Media Theory to the microcontext of local MSMEs, while proving the empirical validity of the concepts of dispersal and *hypertextuality* beyond the study of mainstream media. Practically, the framework offered provides strategic guidance for MSMEs to maximize visibility without relying on advertising capital. Further research is recommended to conduct a comparative study between visibility strategies and paid TikTok *Ads*, as well as examine the psychological influence of *raw content* on consumer trust in the traditional culinary MSME segment.

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