



Framing Educational Issues of Students on TikTok: A Critical Discourse Analysis Based on Norman Fairclough's Framework

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 28 April 2026	The productive-age generation, particularly Millennials and Gen Alpha, leverages social media as a discursive space to shape and circulate discourse. Beyond acting as passive consumers, they serve as active information producers, including within the realm of educational issues. This study aims to analyze how college students' educational discourse was framed on TikTok from 2025 to 2026. Data were drawn from nine TikTok accounts that actively address educational issues in Indonesia, with content selected randomly from the observed profiles. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, data were collected using a selective note-taking technique across various posts related to education. The findings reveal that educational framing on TikTok portrays higher education as excessively costly, offering no guarantee for future success, and triggering regret among the younger generation. At the textual level, the discourse reflects an underlying ideology that fosters negative perceptions of education and constructs a generational identity characterized by a waning interest in pursuing university degrees. At the level of discursive practice, this framing is reinforced by real-world social conditions, including escalating tuition fees and academic stressors driven by family expectations, mental pressure, and final thesis completion. Furthermore, at the sociocultural level, the educational discourse intersects with broader social phenomena such as the emerging use of the lexeme "unalive" and the rise of quarter-life crisis anxieties highlighting the intricate connection between educational experiences and the broader social dynamics of today's youth.
Accepted: 26 July 2026	
Published: 06 August 2026	
Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Educational Discourse, Norman Fairclough, TikTok	

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1. Introduction

To build a nation, one must refine its educational system. To become a great nation, it is essential to cultivate a learning process that develops superior, character-driven human resources while fostering educational innovation and adaptation to enhance the quality of future generations. Education serves not only as a critical foundation for national progress, but also as a baton that ensures the sustained existence of a strong, competitive, and adaptable nation. Echoing this perspective, Sumadyo et al. (2024) assert that education aims not merely to foster students' academic capabilities, but also to shape their character.

Improving education requires more than updating knowledge; it involves providing new perspectives through the learning process itself. Every generation faces substantial hurdles in resolving global challenges within education. Yet today, education is frequently perceived as a burden—a sentiment vividly expressed across social media platforms. As noted by Sumadyo et al. (2025), teachers act as the frontline in the learning process, shaping affective attitudes to build strong student character as mandated by Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. This law states that National Education functions to develop capabilities and shape a dignified national character and civilization in order to enrich the life of the nation. Schools must advance this learning process to foster character-driven students capable of transforming global challenges into opportunities rather than obstacles. However, education often becomes a daunting specter, particularly for lower-middle-class families. In an era where survival is inextricably linked to economic stability, the pursuit of a university degree is increasingly viewed as non-fundamental.

Education is inherently a process that reflects the dynamics of human thought. The growing complexity of human cognition has driven a transformation in educational practices, most notably through the integration of digital technologies. Today, the learning process is no longer confined by spatial and temporal boundaries; instead, it has shifted toward flexible, technology-based models. This shift is corroborated by research from Prameswari and Susanti (2021), who argue that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic served as a pivotal turning point for digital technology integration in educational innovation. The emergence of interactive learning tools such as Padlet, HyperDocs, Liveworksheets, and Mentimeter, exemplifies this technology-driven evolution in education.

Advancements in digital technology have broadened access to diverse information sources, reference materials, and discussion forums, thereby fostering a more open exchange of ideas. Technology serves not merely as an information retrieval tool, but as a medium for social interaction that brings together varied perspectives. Within this framework, individuals enjoy equal opportunities to voice their views, including on educational matters. Consequently, the primary educational challenge in Indonesia is no longer solely about dropout rates, but rather the gradual erosion of Indonesian youth's enthusiasm for pursuing higher education.

A variety of systemic issues in the country increasingly dampen students' motivation to pursue a bachelor's degree. These challenges include: (1) The Skill Gap Phenomenon: A growing disparity between the skills individuals currently possess and those demanded by present and future job markets (Faizah et al., 2025). This gap prompts the younger generation to reconsider higher education. (2) Drastic Declines in Student Enrollment: A sharp drop in student numbers directly threatens institutional stability, visibility, accreditation, and financial sustainability. Data from the Higher Education Database (PDDIKTI) for the 2022–2025 period indicate a significant decline in prospective students across many private universities. (3) Escalating Tuition Costs and Educational Access in 3T Regions: Rising Single

Tuition Fees (UKT) and limited access in frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped (3T) regions in Indonesia have triggered widespread social media outcries. An article in *Tempo* (2025) titled “Biaya Pendidikan Terus Membengkak” (Education Costs Continue to Swell) highlights that education inflation in recent years has outpaced general annual inflation from 2015 to 2024. This aligns with reports from Commission X of the House of Representatives (overseeing Education, Sports, Science, and Technology), which note that higher education participation in Indonesia remains far from optimal, with tuition fees, transportation, and accommodation posing major barriers for low-income families (Andina, 2025). (4) Institutional Unpreparedness for AI and Relevancy Issues: Universities face challenges in integrating artificial intelligence, upholding ethical reasoning, and addressing curricula that feel disconnected from real-world demands. (5) Mental Health Concerns and Bullying: Mental health struggles among university students are frequently linked to the arduous process of completing thesis research, sleep deprivation caused by early morning lectures, and unrelenting assignment deadlines.

With the evolution of communication channels, these issues are increasingly voiced on social media, particularly TikTok. As a short-form video platform that attracts a young, dynamic audience (Suryana, 2025), TikTok has emerged as a significant medium for shaping and circulating public discourse. The majority of TikTok users in Indonesia comprise Millennials and school-aged youth, commonly known as Generation Z (Djarjah, 2023). Through this platform, young users frequently articulate their experiences, critiques, and aspirations regarding educational issues.

Today’s youth actively leverage social media platforms as spaces for learning and peer sharing, with Millennials playing a key role as educational advocates working toward future national development. This trend underscores a growing reliance on digital spaces for discursive exchange. Rather than remaining passive information consumers, young people serve as active discourse producers. This shift enables diverse framings of educational issues, heavily influenced by language, social context, and specific interests.

Consequently, examining how digital media specifically TikTok constructs and represents educational issues is highly critical. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a robust framework to uncover how language used in these digital spaces constructs social reality, produces meaning, and shapes public perceptions of education.

2. Literature Review

Discursive analysis of language is a process of uncovering meaning that is intrinsically bound to social reality and societal practices. As consumers of text—the concrete realization of meaningful language—society’s contextual understanding directly influences how texts are interpreted. Grounded in Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), language is conceptualized across three interconnected dimensions: text, text production and consumption, and social practice (Zalfa Naurah et al., 2023).

From Fairclough’s perspective, media discourse does not merely transmit information; it shapes social understanding through strategic choices in diction and information sources (Wulan Permata Sari, 2025). Diction can undergo shifts, transformations, or acquire new layers of meaning as a result of linguistic interactions in communication. Supporting this notion, empirical findings across the textual dimension demonstrate that text construction is formed through choices of hashtags, words, evaluative phrases, captions, and visual mobility. Within the discursive practice dimension, discourse is produced and reproduced through TikTok’s distinct participatory and highly shareable format. At the sociocultural dimension,

hashtags such as #KaburAjaDulu reflect youth anxieties while normalizing migration as an aspirational choice. Research concludes that #KaburAjaDulu constitutes an aspirational mobility discourse embedding social critique, mobility ideology, and identity negotiation among youth in digital spaces (Serliyanti et al., 2026).

The social media platform TikTok has gained widespread popularity across diverse demographics for various reasons. College students, in particular, represent an active user base on the platform. TikTok functions far beyond mere entertainment; its content encompasses education, socialization, culture, economics, and politics. This broad functionality offers users—especially university students—an avenue to articulate arguments through video content and comment sections, ultimately generating language framing in digital media. In a related study, Melisa and Yudhistira (2025) concluded that Dedi Mulyadi's political communication practices on YouTube are inseparable from West Java's social, cultural, and symbolic contexts, particularly as social media becomes a primary arena for political representation. By leveraging emotional resonance and local cultural symbols in digital content, Mulyadi not only shapes his self-image but also responds to power representation disparities between central and regional elites.

Further findings presented by Nasution (2024) demonstrate that TikTok content created by the Pandawaragroup aligns with Fairclough's critical discourse principles through accessible diction choices. The Pandawaragroup produces environmental awareness content in response to ongoing real-world phenomena, crafting texts designed to convey pro-environmental messages to *warganet* (netizens). Their content incorporates situational, institutional, and broader social contexts. Thus, contemporary social media—specifically TikTok—serves not only as a platform for self-expression, but as a space that operationalizes textual representation, text production and consumption, and social practice.

The present study offers a novel perspective on framing within TikTok regarding educational issues. In social media contexts, framing represents a process of selecting and highlighting specific aspects of reality to construct particular meanings among audiences (Arafah Indriana, 2026). Framing on TikTok reveals a proliferation of content advancing the discourse that education and traditional societal views on learning are no longer viewed as primary necessities or essential priorities, largely due to diminishing motivation within the educational process. This study applies Norman Fairclough's framework, focusing on three dimensions within every discursive event: (1) the textual level, examining ideas, social relations, and authorial identity; (2) the discursive practice level, encompassing text production and interpretation; and (3) the sociocultural practice level, illustrating how broader societal assumptions and contexts influence how discourse is constructed.

3. Method

A method is a systematic approach employed to carry out work so that objectives are achieved as intended (Zubairi, 2024). This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at investigating phenomena in-depth by collecting rich, detailed data that capture the complexity of the subject matter under investigation (Noor Hamidah, 2016).

This research focuses on interpretive analysis, wherein process and meaning are prioritized. As noted by Ansar and Ansar (2026), interpretive analysis assists researchers in understanding the underlying motives, aims, and values driving actions, thereby enabling the representation of social actions and meanings through careful attention to language and symbols used in social interaction. Consequently, this approach is particularly suited for this study, which emphasizes Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to gain a

deep understanding of the investigated phenomenon.

The analytical strategy centers on Fairclough's CDA framework, focusing on three dimensions present in every discursive event: (1) Textual Level: Analyzed linguistically with a focus on vocabulary, semantics, sentence structure, coherence, and cohesion to establish meaning. This dimension examines: (a) *Ideas or Concepts*: Referring to specific representations constructed within the text, which typically convey particular ideologies. (b) *Relations*: Referring to how social relationships between author and reader are constructed and how the text is communicated. (c) *Identity*: Examined through form and content to analyze how specific identities of both author and reader are constructed, as well as the personal image or identity intended for presentation. (2) Discursive Practice Level: Encompassing the processes of text production and interpretation, which link social-cognitive mechanisms to text generation and meaning-making. This level integrates historical and social facts, which are combined and modified within the discourse. (3) Sociocultural Practice Level: Examining how broader social assumptions and contexts outside the discourse influence its emergence and structure. Within this level, texts serve as data sources to observe social change (Ulfah et al., 2022).

Data were collected using a selective note-taking technique, which facilitated the efficient categorization and analysis required to answer the research questions. The researcher observed various posts related to student educational issues on TikTok, delimited to the 2025–2026 period in accordance with the study's scope. Videos were randomly selected from nine TikTok accounts that actively discuss educational issues in Indonesia.

4. Results and Discussion

Social media platforms like TikTok are widely used by teenagers, particularly among Millennials and Generation Z. Snow and Benford (Surahman Surahman 2025) notes that the mass media plays a crucial role in mediating and filtering movement claims through framing, thereby determining which issues gain public attention. Framing, in this sense, must actively construct meaning rather than merely transmit grievances. They further emphasize that framing processes may emerge unconsciously through everyday interactions, not solely as the product of deliberate organizational strategies. (Surahman Surahman 2025). Teenagers, especially girls, in fact often use TikTok as a space for self-expression—a platform for self-reflection and emotional sharing in search of social support (Shovmayanti, 2024). This positions TikTok as more than a platform for entertainment; it has evolved into a space for the circulation of ideas, the exchange of perspectives, and the articulation of concerns through narratives addressing fundamental national issues. Among these, the issue of education has generated substantial debate and heightened concern among students, giving rise to a body of discourse within TikTok content that can be examined through Norman Fairclough's framework of critical discourse analysis.

4.1 Textual Level

The textual level focuses on how a discourse topic embeds specific ideologies, examining the particular representations constructed within the text. Generally, these representations reflect underlying ideological positions and relations that define the connection between content creators and their audience. Content addressing education conveys these dynamics through narrative framing, revealing how personal and generational identities are presented to construct specific perceptions of education in contemporary Indonesia. Across various TikTok posts, a wide array of educational content emerges. For instance, the account @xiapnx, which actively discusses university life, presents various discourses with textual narratives

such as the following:

"College is supposedly the path to the future. But behind the grand campus buildings, there are many students who worry daily about rent, tuition fees, and even daily meals. Dreams are still being chased, even though it feels like our legs are already so tired."

"Sometimes it's not because we don't have dreams, but because every step toward those dreams is expensive. Even just to take the college entrance exam, many have to sacrifice for household needs."

"They say education is an investment in the future. But why does it feel more like digging a hole to fill another? Borrowing here and there to pay for knowledge that doesn't necessarily guarantee a job. We graduate from college not just with a diploma, but also with a debt burden."

Based on the three posts uploaded by the account owner @xiapnx, the findings reveal: (1) An ideological positioning arising from the creator's personal experiences—a sentiment widely shared by the broader public. This ideological stance portrays education in Indonesia as increasingly alarming due to exorbitant costs that fail to guarantee a secure future. This perspective is deeply intertwined with growing public anxiety over escalating educational expenses. High tuition fees, coupled with a tentative future for lower-class communities, serve as key drivers behind the declining motivation to pursue higher education. Education—traditionally expected to serve as a bridge to a successful career—has instead transformed into a daunting uncertainty. This narrative forms a pervasive societal framing that subtly restructures social relations, compelling the Indonesian public to reconsider pursuing tertiary education.

This discourse is similarly articulated by another TikTok account, @mlrn1, whose post reads:

"If I'd known it would end up like this, I'd have stuck to my original plan of not going to college—I definitely wouldn't feel this lost and stressed."

Similarly, in a post by the account *her*, it reads:

"Mom and Dad, if I could turn back time, I'd choose not to go to college. It's so sad knowing that every time you discuss financial issues while I'm in college, I feel so guilty. If I could turn back time, I'd choose to work right away instead of going to college :)"

Ultimately, this trend fosters a new perception surrounding the identity of Indonesian youth, who are increasingly abandoning interest in pursuing higher education due to prohibitive costs. Today's generation is progressively shaping a constructed relational logic—(2) constructed relations of thought—that views contemporary education merely as a source of regret for the younger generation. The bitter reality of higher education is increasingly dismissed, with university study perceived as an unending life pressure that erodes emotional resilience and a forward-thinking mindset regarding the value of education.

However, a progressive nation relies on a resilient generation endowed with strong determination and a competitive spirit. (3) The authorial perspective subtly constructs a generational identity marked by a waning motivation to pursue university degrees. Content creators inadvertently project a negative framing of higher education, whereas educational institutions and youth ought to collaborate in nurturing a resilient generation capable of fulfilling national aspirations. Such collaboration is vital to ensuring that the *"Golden Indonesia 2045 Vision"* remains not merely an abstract expectation or discourse, but a fundamental pillar supporting human capital development and the mastery of science and technology—aimed at preparing a competitive generation to navigate the current demographic bonus era. Crucially, this depends on the essential role of educational institutions in cultivating high-

quality, productive, and character-driven human resources (Afra et al., 2025).

4.2 Level of Discourse Practice

At the level of discursive practice within Norman Fairclough's framework, texts are linked to social cognition, emphasizing the integration of historical and social facts that are subsequently modified within a discourse. Content uploaded on TikTok regarding educational issues reflects the real-world reality that high education costs serve as a significant barrier for the younger generation in achieving their aspirations. This is exemplified in a post by the TikTok account @felallaa, who wrote:

"Compared to worrying about love, it turns out worrying about financial security for the future is even more distressing... 'Oh no, how am I going to pay this semester's tuition?' 'Where else can I find extra money?' 'What should I do to make some money?'"

Another account named *syabilu* also posted something similar:

"About the education that costs an extraordinary amount, about the college life where there's always a reason to cry every day, about the work that deals with human lives—no matter how often one complains, the words of thanks and good wishes from patients are the best remedy for fatigue and the greatest reward."

Both posts align with (1) social facts regarding exorbitant tuition fees—particularly in medical education across Indonesia—which remain exceptionally high and undergo frequent upward adjustments driven by laboratory operational expenses and medical training facilities. This is further substantiated by (2) historical facts indicating that, according to data from *Litbang Kompas* (Kompas Research and Development), total medical education costs via self-funded enrollment tracks (*jalur mandiri*) reach up to 740 million IDR over eight semesters (KompasData, 2023).

Concerns surrounding higher education extend beyond financial burdens. University study is increasingly perceived as a daunting ordeal, where heavy family expectations, high personal standards, and the arduous struggle of completing a final thesis represent formidable hurdles that students must overcome. As expressed by the TikTok account @anak.kuliah:

"My fear during university is falling grades. It's exhausting to study hard only to miss expectations, fearing having to retake courses, feeling overburdened by everything, and stressing over grades."

Similarly, the account @JASATUGASSKRIPSI&KARILUT posted:

"The peak struggle for final-year students is working through thesis revisions to the point of tears, compounded by declining health from sleep deprivation—not to mention annoying questions from people around asking, 'When are you graduating?'"

This fear and anxiety surrounding the fulfillment of expectations within higher education serve as primary drivers of stress and depression among today's generation. As reported by the Newport Institute, university students across all academic disciplines experience depression. Findings from a survey conducted by Degreechoices highlight a sharp surge in depression rates between 2019 and 2024 across ten major academic programs, with pharmacy ranking first, followed by law and social work (Newport Institute, 2022).

4.3 Sociocultural Practice Level

The sociocultural practice level demonstrates that assumptions within the broader social context outside the discourse trigger the creation of a written or spoken text. In this framework, texts serve as rich data sources for observing broader social changes. This

dynamic is evident in a TikTok post uploaded by the account @BLANDED LEARNING PGSD, which reads as follows:

"No wonder so many students end their lives because college is that exhausting; there are so many burdens they have to bear alone, ranging from academic assignments, financial issues, family problems, and so on."

The social shift described in the post indirectly reflects the real-world occurrence of student suicide cases; however, within the TikTok discourse, it gives rise to coded terminology such as the lexeme *"unalive."* This reinforces the premise that (1) social contexts outside the discourse directly prompt the creation of written texts. The term *"unalive"* emerged as a lexeme popularized on video platforms like TikTok by content creators and users to substitute unpleasant or sensitive terminology. It is commonly employed when discussing sensitive themes—such as suicide—to circumvent automated content moderation and deletion. Linguistically, the lexeme refers to acts of suicide or homicide, functioning as an adjective, verb, or part of a phrase (McMillan, 2023).

Furthermore, digital discourse constructed within content serves not only as written texts, but (2) can also be utilized as data sources to observe broader social change. The findings indicate that TikTok content frequently surface-level themes into broader societal discussions, as seen in the emergence of the *quarter-life crisis* narrative, which is increasingly intertwined with higher education. This phenomenon typically impacts individuals aged 18 to 30 within their productive years, who face immense pressure to build successful careers, maintain social relationships, and establish a clear life direction—a stage often accompanied by persistent anxiety and self-doubt (Karina Widia Ratih, 2024). This dynamic is exemplified in a post by the TikTok account @roseaavn, who wrote:

"The weight of deadlines, revisions, and quarter-life crisis pressures varies for every student. Everyone's GPA is different, the effort to chase advisors differs, and mental breakdowns manifest differently. No one can claim their thesis is the easiest or the hardest."

This post underscores how prevailing social conditions experienced by the public—particularly university students navigating their academic journeys—serve as factual data points for analysis. Terms like *quarter-life crisis* are increasingly circulated across social media platforms like TikTok to articulate systemic pressures faced during key life transitions, including within the realm of higher education.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of digital media usage, particularly TikTok, has constructed and represented various educational issues through the discourses emerging in user posts. These discourses are inherently dynamic and serve to reveal how language constructs social reality, produces meaning, and shapes public perceptions of education.

At the textual level, framing stems from the authors' ideas and concepts that dictate specific representations within the text, revealing: (1) An ideological stance portraying education in Indonesia as deeply alarming due to exorbitant costs that fail to guarantee a secure future; (2) A constructed relational logic viewing contemporary education merely as a source of regret for today's younger generation; and (3) An authorial perspective that inadvertently constructs a generational identity marked by a waning interest in pursuing higher education.

At the discursive practice level, educational framing is grounded in: (1) Social facts regarding high tuition costs; and (2) Historical facts depicting university study as a daunting

ordeal, driven by heavy family expectations, high personal standards, and the arduous struggle of completing a final thesis.

Meanwhile, at the sociocultural practice level, framing illustrates that: (1) Broader social contexts outside the discourse trigger written text creation, such as the emergence of the lexeme “*unalive*”; and (2) Discourse serves as a data source to observe social change, as evidenced by the widespread discussion of the *quarter-life crisis* in relation to higher education.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contribution

Elisa Anandari conceived and designed the study and analyzed the data. **Elisa Anandari** and **Jatut Yoga Prameswari** analyzed the data and wrote the original draft of the manuscript. **Bambang Sumadyo** Supervised the research and reviewed the final manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Statement of the use of AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Gemini AI in order to improve the language clarity, grammar, and readability of the text, including paraphrasing and for translated this manuscript in english. And Mendeley for citation. After using this tool/service, the authors thoroughly reviewed, edited, and verified the content, and take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the publication.

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