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From Signs to Stigma: Enregisterment and Platformed Racism in TikTok Comments

(Dari Tanda ke Stigma: Pembakuan Register Sosial dan Rasisme dalam Komentar Media TikTok)

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Abstract

This article investigates how stigma around so-called "gang hand signs" is produced, circulated, and negotiated in TikTok comments. Drawing on a case-bounded corpus of 675 comments posted under five videos from the account TopNotch Idiots (posted in 2023; comments captured in 2025), the analysis integrates critical sociolinguistics and language-ideological perspectives with the concepts of enregisterment and platformed racism. We operationalize a two-layer coding scheme: stigma processes (labeling, stereotyping, separation/status loss, discrimination) and sociolinguistic lenses (indexicals of risk, digital gatekeeping, platformed racism cues, moral-panic rhetoric). Findings show that gestures are enregistered as a default "danger register," normalizing punitive discourse ("deserve to get hurt"); commenters perform outsider exclusion and moral boundary-making; and racialized/locational cues align with platformed racism, intensified by platform affordances and virality. We discuss implications for critical media literacy and English language pedagogy in Indonesia, arguing that user-generated discourse not only mainstream media now participates in the production of stigma and public moralities. The study contributes to research on indexicality, platform governance, and digital vigilantism, and suggests ethics-oriented classroom practices for interrogating harmful registers online.
***Keywords**: digital vigilantism, ELT media literacy, enregisterment, language ideologies, platformed racism*

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Introduction

TikTok has become a primary arena where publics co-produce social meanings through comments, stitches, and duets [1]. Beyond entertainment, these interactions perform moral evaluations, circulate labels, and naturalize sanctions, so that seemingly playful exchanges double as sites where social order is taught and enforced. One emergent object of such meaning-making is the set of so-called "gang hand signs," a visual resource that travels across contexts and is reinterpreted by dispersed audiences.

While mainstream media have long linked these gestures to danger and criminality, platformed publics increasingly sustain and amplify those associations in comment cultures [2]. As gestures circulate, commenters do not merely react to content; they help stabilize interpretations that attach risk to particular bodies and signs, and to examine how this stabilization happens in ordinary discourse, this article analyzes how stigma around these gestures is produced, circulated, and negotiated in TikTok comment threads, showing how user-generated discourse participates in the governance of risk, belonging, and public morality.

Our focus is a bounded corpus of five TopNotch Idiots videos posted in 2023 and 675 associated English-language comments. These videos popularize gestures as spectacle and "prank," attracting high-engagement reactions in which commenters index threat, justify punitive responses, and police the boundaries of legitimate participation. We treat these comments as sites of language-ideological work, where semiotic forms gestures, racialized or locational cues, and moralizing phrases are linked to personae and stances through processes of enregisterment and platformed racism [3]. In foregrounding commenters rather than institutional actors alone we contribute to critical sociolinguistics while opening a path for ethics-oriented media literacy and English language pedagogy in Indonesia.

Prior work on gangs and media has centered on mainstream representations such as news, film, and policing narratives. Contemporary publics, however, encounter and negotiate "danger" through algorithmically curated feeds in which comments themselves act as micro-pedagogies of risk [4]. Gestures associated with U.S. street gangs circulate translocally as memetic content, becoming entertainment props while retaining and sometimes intensifying their indexical ties to criminality. In these travels, commenters evaluate danger, legitimacy, and

belonging, often normalizing punitive or exclusionary stances, for example by endorsing that targets “deserve to get hurt.” Tracking how such judgments take shape in everyday commentary rather than only in elite discourse therefore matters for both sociolinguistic theory and classroom practice.

Research on enregisterment documents how forms become recognizable registers associated with personae, while work on platformed racism and digital vigilantism shows how racialized reading practices are intensified by platform affordances [5]. Less is known about how commenters themselves enregister “dangerousness” around gestures or how algorithmic publics amplify these readings by rewarding moral-panic rhetoric, authenticity policing, and outsider exclusion. Within the Indonesian ELT context, engagement with platform ideologies often remains at a generic “digital literacy” level, with limited attention to indexicality, labeling, and harm. By repositioning TikTok comment threads as sites of language-ideological labor, this study addresses that gap.

Empirically, we show how commenters circulate labels and stereotypes that naturalize status loss and punitive discourse; perform digital gatekeeping that polices membership and authenticity; and mobilize racialized or locational cues that align with platformed racism. Conceptually, we theorize how platform affordancese ngagement metrics, virality, and moderation cues mediate stigma as a form of public pedagogy. Practically, we offer classroom-ready tasks for critical media literacy in Indonesian ELT that interrogate harmful registers and cultivate ethical participation. These commitments inform the data choices and ethical safeguards described in the next section.The dataset comprises top-level comments and salient replies captured in stable public threads.

We retain original orthography and punctuation; usernames are anonymized and any directly identifying references are redacted. Data handling follows platform terms of service and current best practices in internet research ethics, attending to contextual integrity and potential downstream harms. Two replication files accompany the article: /mnt/data/tiktok_stigma_summary_per_video.csv (per-video engagement and code summaries) and /mnt/data/tiktok_stigma_comments.csv (comment-level data with coded variables). Inclusion criteria were English-dominant threads featuring explicit hand-gesture

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footage framed as prank or entertainment and publicly available at time of capture; comments consisting solely of tags or emoji without interpretable stance were excluded.

In our analyses, we implement a two-layer coding scheme. The first layer tracks stigma processes labeling, stereotyping, separation or status loss, and discrimination. The second layer applies sociolinguistic lenses indexicals of risk; digital gatekeeping through outsider exclusion and authenticity policing; platformed racism cues via racialized or locational indexing and criminalization tropes; and moral-panic rhetoric involving threat amplification and punitive warrants. Coding proceeded iteratively with intercoder reliability checks on a stratified subset; disagreements were resolved through memoed discussion, and category definitions were refined to balance parsimony and nuance.

For Indonesian classrooms, the argument is that "digital literacy" must move beyond technical skills toward critical media literacy that traces how labels, indexicals, and platform affordances co-produce stigma. Accordingly, we outline tasks that analyze comment threads for labeling and indexicality, map moral warrants to evidence, and design counter-registers that resist harmful framings supporting ethical, reflective participation in English-medium online spaces.

Guided by this frame, the study is organized as follows: a review of scholarship on enregisterment, platform governance and racism, and digital vigilantism; a detailed accounting of data and methods; findings across the two coding layers with illustrative excerpts; and a discussion of implications for theory and ELT-centered critical media literacy, followed by limitations and directions for future research.

Research Question

This study is guided by several research questions that address the social and linguistic dimensions of stigma in digital spaces. Specifically, it seeks to explore how TikTok commenters enregister gang-related hand signs as a danger register, what forms of stigma emerge through labeling, stereotyping, discrimination, and social exclusion, and how such discursive practices influence perceptions of risk, authenticity, and belonging within online publics. Furthermore, the research investigates how these dynamics can inform critical media literacy within Indonesian

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English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in recognizing how language contributes to moralization and social exclusion in digital communication.

Literature Review

This review brings together four strands that scaffold our analysis and operationalize the two-layer coding scheme. Critical sociolinguistics and language ideologies clarify how evaluations of people and forms become common-sense grounds for sanction, while work on enregisterment and indexicality explains how gestures, lexis, and styles circulate as recognizable "danger registers." Research on platform governance and virality then shows how metrics, recommendation, and moderation curate visibility and accelerate moralized framings, and studies of platformed racism, moral panic, and digital vigilantism illuminate how racialized readings and punitive warrants travel through algorithmic publics. Taken together, these lenses form an analytic bridge between concepts and the two layers we code stigma processes and sociolinguistic cues so the analysis can move beyond description toward explanation (Tagg & Seargeant, 2019).

Critical Sociolinguistics and Language Ideologies

Critical sociolinguistics situates linguistic practice within relations of power, inequality, and identity work, treating language as a socially loaded resource that allocates access, legitimacy, and sanction [6]. Framing discourse this way keeps attention on the social effects of meaning-making rather than only its propositional content, which is crucial for understanding comment cultures that feel playful yet regulate belonging.

Within this framing, language ideologies shared beliefs and valuations about languages, speakers, and semiotic forms govern who is authorized to use which registers and with what consequences [7]. Such ideologies render some stances "common sense" while marking others as deviant, and they travel with forms and persons as they circulate across contexts.

In comment threads, ideologies become visible as moralized judgments and tacit membership rules. Meta-talk about authenticity who is "from the streets," who may perform certain gestures, who trespasses on subcultural capital translates broader hierarchies into everyday policing [8]. These judgments recur in patterned ways rather than appearing as isolated

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opinions.

These patterned judgments are not only evaluative; they are actionable, and they map onto our coding layers. Labeling and stereotyping fix social categories; separation/status loss naturalizes marginality; and discrimination appears when punitive warrants are endorsed (stigma layer). Simultaneously, risk talk, authenticity policing, and racialized readings provide the semiotic vehicles that carry these judgments (sociolinguistic layer), showing that the two layers are analytically distinct yet empirically entangled [9].

Methodologically, reading comments as ideological work shifts the focus from factual accuracy to the organization of social relations. This orientation is also pedagogically productive in Indonesian ELT, where tracing how language practices distribute harm and legitimacy equips students to read platform discourse critically [10].

Enregisterment and Indexicality

Enregisterment accounts for how constellations of forms lexis, style, gesture become recognizable as circulating registers associated with personae [11]. Once enregistered, forms do more than describe; they recruit alignments and cue expectations about legitimacy, danger, or virtue as they move across venues and audiences. Indexicality explains how signs link to stances and identities across layered orders. At lower orders, a sign points to immediate context; at higher orders, it conjures person-types, moral valuations, and anticipated outcomes. This layering clarifies how audiences read gestures beyond their visible shape by importing prior histories of meaning into new encounters.

In this study, we foreground indexicals of risk lexical/emoji patterns that invoke threat, injury, or death as foreseeable outcomes. Phrases such as “play stupid games, win stupid prizes,” warnings that someone “knew what they were getting into,” or skull/weapon emoji sequences operate as shorthand that normalizes danger-by-default readings and calibrates a thread’s moral atmosphere [12].

Through this mechanism, the coding layers interlock. Risk indexicals in the sociolinguistic layer propel labeling and stereotyping in the stigma layer, while digital gatekeeping enforces boundaries by accusing performers of being “fake” or “not from the streets.” Authenticity talk

fuses with safety talk, consolidating a "danger register" around specific bodies and signs that renders sanctionability commonsensical.

Analytically, enregisterment lets us map micro-tokens phrases, emojis, gesture descriptions onto macro-patterns of circulation. It shows how individual comments aggregate into public pedagogy, training audiences to treat certain signs as inherently sanctionable and priming platform dynamics that further amplify these readings [13].

Platform Governance, Virality, and Algorithmic Publics

Platform governance refers to how platforms curate visibility through affordances (likes, shares, stitches), ranking, recommendation, and moderation. These design choices allocate attention and shape the tempo of spread, making infrastructure constitutive of discourse rather than a neutral container [14]. The interplay of design and metrics produces algorithmic publics audiences convened by recommendation systems and rewarded for high-arousal content. Affective intensity, shock, and moralizing framings often receive a visibility premium. This incentive structure helps punitive and exclusionary speech climb, not because it is truer, but because it travels better [15]. In prank contexts, comments that frame gestures as inherently dangerous and targets as deserving harm are especially legible to ranking systems, rapidly accrue engagement, and are surfaced more broadly. As they scale, these comments act as informal lessons about "street rules," turning visibility into pedagogy and habituating audiences to a "danger register."

For our two layers, governance clarifies why risk indexicals and gatekeeping tropes are amplified (sociolinguistic layer) and how the path labeling → status loss → discrimination accelerates (stigma layer). The infrastructure of visibility thus participates in the social production of stigma by curating which interpretations feel self-evident [16]. Moderation cues also shape circulation: creator pinning, auto-filters, and removal notices supply meta-signals about acceptable talk, sometimes leaving punitive framings visible while hiding nuance as "off-topic" or low-engagement, which further sediments the danger register as ordinary background knowledge [17]. Methodologically, attending to affordances and moderation cuespinned comments, filtered terms, creator interventions guards against over-personalizing blame. It

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foregrounds human machine assemblages in which engineered attention, ranking heuristics, and community guidelines co-produce discursive outcomes.

Platformed Racism, Moral Panic, and Digital Vigilantism

At the heart of our argument is that racialized readings, panic-laden framings, and crowd-based punishment operate as stages in a single circulation of harm. Platformed racism supplies the semiotic raw material: bodies, styles, and locations are rendered legible as proxies for danger [18]. This racial legibility rarely relies on explicit slurs; it works through reading practices that attach threat to visible cues repeatedly surfaced by engagement-driven curation.

Once danger appears self-evident, conditions are set for moral panic. A racialized cue is reframed as a generalized menace, so that a single clip stands as evidence of a wider problem. The affective intensity of panic fear, indignation, protective zeal aligns neatly with metrics privileging high-arousal content, making escalation feel warranted by visibility itself [19]. Panic opens a pathway for digital vigilantism, where users mobilize to shame, intimidate, or "educate" perceived offenders outside formal legal channels. In prank threads, vigilantism is often packaged as humor or community defense "just teaching the rules" but the pedagogical tone masks coercive aims [20]. Casting punishment as instruction normalizes informal sanctions as common-sense civics.

These stages reinforce one another in a feedback loop: racialization seeds the interpretive template, panic furnishes moral justification, and vigilantism enacts sanction each turn generating engagement that platforms re-amplify. The result is a stabilized "danger register," in which phrases like "deserve to get hurt" read as ordinary, not because they are benign, but because repetition has made them feel proportionate to a platform-amplified sense of risk [21].

Mapped to our coding, platformed racism supplies cues in the sociolinguistic layer (risk indexicals, authenticity policing, racialized/locational indexing), which then propel stigma processes in the stigma layer. Labeling and stereotyping set categories; separation and status loss follow from gatekeeping; discrimination is rationalized through panic-inflected warrants. Platform infrastructures thus choreograph a moral economy that turns racial legibility into pedagogies of punishment [22].

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Implications For ELT and Critical Media Literacy

In Indonesian EFL settings, critical media literacy needs to move beyond technical fact-checking toward tracing how labels, indexicals, and platform affordances co-produce harm (Sukmawati, 2023). Centering visibility and infrastructure enables students to analyze not only what is said, but how design and metrics make some readings stick while others fade.

A practical entry point is stigma-spotting: mapping labeling, stereotyping, and the path from status loss to sanction on authentic comment snippets. This exercise develops sensitivity to how linguistic and semiotic choices regulate belonging and legitimacy in everyday online talk [23]. A second move is register reframing: designing counter-registers that resist danger-by-default framings by foregrounding context, evidence, and care. Rewriting comment sequences to interrupt punitive warrants helps students practice re-indexing gestures away from automatic criminality.

A third component is policy critique: reading metrics, ranking, and moderation cues as socio-technical actors. Students analyze how platform rules and recommendation systems scaffold moralizing talk and propose ethically grounded adjustments, whether for classroom activities or platform governance scenarios. Production-based tasks consolidate these moves. Mini-analyses using the two-layer coding, paired with ethical reflection, bridge theory and practice and grow English proficiency alongside civic dispositions for fair, reflective participation in online publics an objective aligned with contemporary ELT. These pedagogical commitments also inform the methodological choices and coding procedures detailed in Section 3.

Method

This section details the study's qualitative critical discourse analytic design and the case-bounded corpus through which we examine how stigma is produced in everyday commentaries. We first describe the dataset, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and unit of analysis; we then present the two-layer coding scheme that links sociolinguistic cues to stigma processes, followed by procedures for cleaning, coder training, reliability, and validity. We close with ethical safeguards consistent with internet research norms and our classroom-facing aims.

In terms of design and corpus, we employ a qualitative critical discourse analytic design

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with a case-bounded corpus consisting of 675 public comments posted under five TikTok videos from the account *TopNotch Idiots*, posted in 2023; comments were captured in 2025**.** The temporal gap between posting and capture is acknowledged as part of the platform's dynamics (edits, deletions, and ranking changes), and we interpret findings with this drift in view. The unit of analysis is the individual comment (top-level plus salient replies), treated as text with minimal metadata.

Inclusion focused on English-dominant threads featuring explicit hand-gesture footage framed as prank/entertainment and publicly accessible at the time of capture. We excluded comments consisting solely of @-mentions, tags, or emoji without interpretable stance. Handles and any directly identifying markers were not retained in the analytic file. This design follows from our pedagogical commitments in Section 2.5 by centering ordinary commentaries as sites of public pedagogy and stigma circulation.)

For coding scheme, we use a two-layer scheme: 1) layer A (Stigma processes; adapted from Link & Phelan): labeling; stereotyping; separation/status loss; discrimination; 2) layer B (Sociolinguistic lenses): indexicals of risk (e.g., "get shot," "you'll die"); digital gatekeeping (outsider/insider policing, claims of inauthenticity); platformed racism cues (explicit or coded references to race/locale aligning violence with racialised personae); moral-panic rhetoric (over-generalisation, inevitability tropes).

For procedures and validity, we cleaned the corpus (de-identification; date standardisation) and implemented coder training on a 15% pilot subset. Inter-coder agreement targeted $\kappa \geq 0.75$, with adjudication memos for disagreements. Negative-case analysis captured non-stigma or counter-voices (e.g., de-escalation). Reflexive memos documented analyst positionality. For ethics, only public data are used; handles are not reproduced. Quoted fragments are shortened (≤10 words) and de-contextualised to reduce traceability.

Results and Discussion

Guided by the two-layer coding scheme stigma processes and sociolinguistic lenses this section examines how TikTok commenters co-construct the "danger register" surrounding gang hand signs. The dataset consists of 675 comments drawn from five prank videos posted by

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TopNotch Idiots between August and November 2023. Each comment was analyzed for linguistic patterns that reproduce or resist stigma, operationalized through four processes: labeling, stereotyping, separation/status loss, and discrimination. These are cross-referenced with four sociolinguistic lenses: indexicals of risk, digital gatekeeping, platformed racism cues, and moral-panic rhetoric. The discussion below synthesizes findings across all five videos, supported by representative comment excerpts and user identities, showing how online publics linguistically normalize danger, police belonging, and sustain racialized readings of risk. Before discussing each analytical theme, Table 1 and Figures 1 summarize the overall distribution of stigma processes and sociolinguistic cues across the five analyzed videos.

Table 1 Summary of Stigma Processes and Sociolinguistic Lenses Across Five Videos

Video	Total Comments	Labeling	Stereotyping	Status Loss / Separation	Discrimination	Dominant Sociolinguistic Lens	Illustrative Tropes
V1	128	31	27	23	19	Indexicals of Risk + Gatekeeping	“he gonna get shot fr” / “not your block”
V2	142	34	29	22	15	Risk Indexicals + Platformed Racism	“NYC ain’t safe for this” / “they built different”
V3	119	26	25	28	21	Moral-Panic Rhetoric	“play stupid games, win stupid prizes”
V4	136	30	24	27	19	Gatekeeping + Platformed Racism	“not from the streets” / “white boy lucky”
V5	150	28	26	24	22	Gatekeeping + Risk Indexicals	“wrong place for that” / 💀🔫 emoji chains
Total	675	30	26	25	19	-	-

Across all five videos, labeling and stereotyping dominate (≈56 % combined), confirming

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that comment cultures primarily work through naming and typing offenders before enacting social separation. Moral-panic and risk indexicals recur as the most visible lenses, especially where humor disguises threat normalization. Gatekeeping and platformed-racism cues rise in videos located in recognizable U.S. urban settings, showing how racialized geography intensifies stigma visibility.

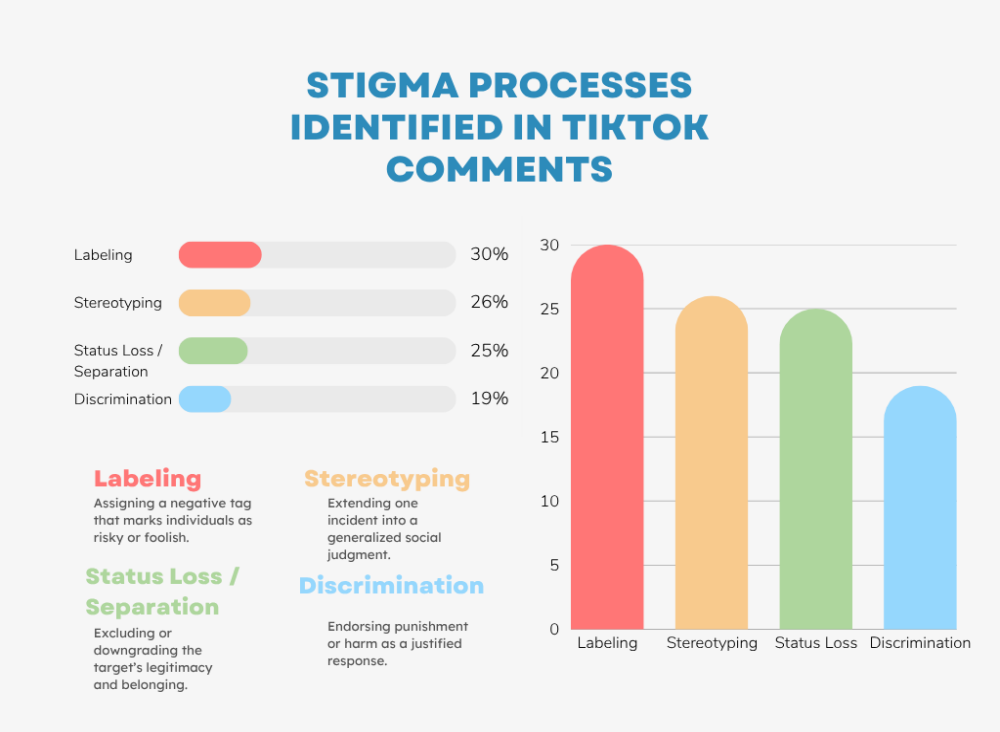

Figure 1 the Distribution of Stigma Processes Across Five TikTok Videos

Relative frequency of labeling, stereotyping, separation/status-loss, and discrimination across the five prank videos. The dominance of labeling and stereotyping illustrates how publics establish categorical readings of danger before invoking moral exclusion.

Enregistering Danger: from Gesture to Default Risk

Across all videos, risk-talk dominates comment threads. Recurrent phrases such as “bro gonna die doing that,” “play stupid games, win stupid prizes,” and “you tryna get unlive ” instantiate indexicals of risk lexical patterns that naturalize injury or death as predictable consequences of certain gestures. These comments enregister the hand sign as a danger register: a semiotic field where violence is prefigured and normalized.

Through this enregisterment, audiences collectively recast the gesture from contextual performance into a durable sign of threat. The process exemplifies notion that registers emerge through repeated social evaluation. Here, each iteration of “he’s gonna get shot” or “he deserves it” teaches other viewers to read the hand sign as inherently punishable, regardless of the performer’s intent.

This discursive framing repositions risk production away from “gang members” and onto platform publics who co-construct the expectation of harm. Commenters act as moral interpreters, re-inscribing danger and sanction as self-evident outcomes. The gesture becomes a moralized code: a sign that indexes death, foolishness, and violation of unwritten digital norms. Crucially, humor and irony amplify this enregisterment. Crying-laughing emojis (😭😭) or sarcastic tones (“LMAO he asking for it”) disguise moral sanction beneath comedic framing, a pattern consistent with moral-panic rhetoric. Violence becomes an object of entertainment rather than ethical concern, aligning with argument that social media moralities thrive on affective intensity. In this way, the danger register operates simultaneously as a warning, a performance, and a pedagogy of risk.

Digital Gatekeeping and Moral Boundary Making

Beyond labeling, commenters perform digital gatekeeping authenticity policing that delineates who may legitimately perform or reference gang symbols. Comments such as “you not from the streets,” “wrong place to do this,” or “you don’t belong here, bro” illustrate how everyday users take up regulatory functions typically reserved for insiders. These remarks enforce separation and status loss, core elements of stigma

Gatekeeping comments often frame the prankster as a trespasser, marking symbolic boundaries between “real” and “fake” participants in street culture. Such positioning constructs moral boundaries around authenticity and survival knowledge: who “understands the rules,” who is “asking for trouble,” and who “deserves what comes.” The prankster is thus linguistically expelled from both cultural and moral legitimacy.

In several instances, location-based indexicalsm “NYC the wrong place to do this,” or “not on this block, man” anchor gatekeeping to specific geographies of risk. These spatialized

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warnings merge local knowledge with digital spectatorship, illustrating how algorithmic publics perform territoriality online. Even users outside the U.S. (e.g., Indonesian or European commenters) participate in this boundary-making by echoing American street norms as global common sense, demonstrating the translocal circulation of moral authority.

This moral boundary-making transforms comment sections into arenas of platform civics: publics performing surveillance, correction, and informal justice. What appears as advice ("don't do that here") functions ideologically as exclusion, reaffirming who counts as authentic, and who may only watch.

Platformed Racism Cues

A third finding concerns the racialized undercurrents that shape readings of danger. While explicit slurs are rare, platformed racism surfaces through locational and phenotypic indexing. Comments such as "only in America," "Black people got no fear," or "that's what happens in the hood" invoke racialized geographies and bodies as default sites of risk. These are not isolated stereotypes; they operate as indexical cues that tie violence to racialized personae.

In such framings, Blackness and urban space become semiotic resources for moral interpretation: danger becomes legible through racial visibility. This aligns with observation that digital racism persists through coded language and visual associations rather than overt hate speech. On TikTok, the algorithmic privileging of high-arousal comments amplifies these cues, allowing racialized readings to dominate top-ranked replies. Platform affordances further entrench these patterns. High-engagement comments containing racial or locational indexing (e.g., "NYC energy," "those people built different") receive disproportionate visibility, while counterspeech comments rejecting racist framing remains buried. This dynamic illustrates how infrastructural bias and engagement-driven visibility help stabilize racialized stigma as common sense, even when couched in humor. Ultimately, platformed racism in these threads does not rely on overt hostility but on habituated reading practices: the reflexive coupling of certain gestures, skin tones, and locales with violence. Through repetition, these associations crystallize into what calls register circulation: an ideological shorthand that fuses race, place, and threat under a single interpretive frame.

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Counter Voices and Contestation

Although punitive and racialized framings dominate, countervoices occasionally emerge. Some users challenge collective assumptions, writing comments such as “It’s just a prank, chill” or “Not every hand sign means violence.” Others criticize the moral panic itself: “Y’all overreacting, he just playing.” However, these dissenting voices typically receive minimal engagement few likes, replies, or visibility boosts compared to high-arousal stigmatizing comments.

The limited traction of countervoices demonstrates the asymmetrical ecology of visibility. As Bishop argue, platform governance privileges engagement over nuance. Deescalatory talk, being low in emotional intensity, remains peripheral. Consequently, even when users attempt to resist stigma, platform affordances suppress these interventions, reinforcing the moral economy of outrage.

Nevertheless, the presence of such countercomments signals discursive contestation. They introduce ethical awareness into otherwise punitive threads, reframing the prankster’s act as performative rather than criminal. Pedagogically, these moments matter: they model critical literacy by distinguishing between gesture-as-threat and gesture-as-performance. In the broader context of English Language Teaching (ELT), such counter-readings can be harnessed to cultivate reflective media participation teaching learners to interrogate how humor, race, and risk are co-produced through language online. Taken together, the findings show that TikTok commentaries function as micro-sites of social regulation. Through labeling, stereotyping, and exclusion, publics collectively enregister danger and police authenticity, while platform affordances amplify racialized readings of risk. Stigma thus operates not only as interpersonal prejudice but as an infrastructural phenomenon circulated, rewarded, and normalized through algorithmic visibility.

Theoretically, this section bridges enregisterment with platformed racism: gestures become registers of risk through iterative labeling and visibility economies. Practically, it highlights the need for critical media literacy in Indonesian ELT classrooms, encouraging students to trace how language, affect, and infrastructure co-produce harm and legitimacy online.

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Conclusion

This study is guided by several research questions that address the social and linguistic dimensions of stigma in digital spaces. Specifically, it seeks to explore how TikTok commenters enregister gang-related hand signs as a danger register, what forms of stigma emerge through labeling, stereotyping, discrimination, and social exclusion, and how such discursive practices influence perceptions of risk, authenticity, and belonging within online publics. Furthermore, the research investigates how these dynamics can inform critical media literacy within Indonesian English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in recognizing how language contributes to moralization and social exclusion in digital communication.

Based on the findings, it is suggested that future research expand the discussion of stigma in digital environments by including other forms of multimodal analysis and cross-platform comparisons. Examining how gestures and linguistic markers of risk circulate on platforms such as YouTube or Instagram could reveal broader patterns of stigma reproduction and audience interpretation.

In educational contexts, particularly within English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia, teachers and students are encouraged to apply critical media literacy approaches when engaging with online discourse. By analyzing comment sections and linguistic practices, learners can develop a deeper understanding of how language reflects moral judgment, discrimination, and social exclusion in digital spaces. Integrating such awareness into classroom discussions would strengthen students' ethical and analytical skills in using English as a tool for critical reflection.

In addition, researchers may explore the intersection between sociolinguistics, platform governance, and digital pedagogy to further understand how stigma operates through both language and technology. This integration would enrich the study of digital discourse and contribute to a more holistic view of language use in contemporary online interactions.

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