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Digital benevolence: What drives TikTok users to donate to online beggars?

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Abstract--This study explores the motivations behind TikTok users' decisions to donate to online beggars, a phenomenon that has emerged as a form of digital charity on the platform. With TikTok's algorithm curating emotionally engaging content, users often encounter live streams where individuals solicit donations through personal narratives. Through in-depth interviews with seven TikTok users who have donated in the past three months, this research examines aspects of donation behavior, such as the role of empathy, social dynamics, impulsive tendencies, and perceptions of authenticity. Gendered patterns also emerge, with some users expressing a preference for supporting female content creators. The study delves into the interplay between emotional engagement, critical reflection, and cultural contexts in shaping these interactions, highlighting the duality of digital philanthropy as a space for both compassionate action and caution against exploitation. The findings also bring attention to questions surrounding transparency, authenticity, and user protection on platforms like TikTok, suggesting areas for further inquiry and discussion. This research contributes to the broader understanding of modern digital giving, focusing on the ethical and societal considerations social media platforms face in fostering meaningful charitable activities.

Keywords--Cultural Implications, Digital Philanthropy, Donation Behavior, Online Begging, TikTok.

Introduction

In recent years, social media has transformed how individuals share personal narratives, connect across borders, and, increasingly, seek financial assistance. This trend started in a pandemic when social distancing was implemented. [Rahmi \(2021\)](#), mentioned that the rise of e-philanthropy was established such as [kitabisa.com](#) and [amalsholeh.com](#) during the pandemic. Donations are made for people who need assistance to fulfill their daily needs when they can't work outside and earn money. Research shows that 87% of all charities globally are generated through social media (Charity Digital (2013) in [Mitchell & Hyde, 2024](#)).

Social media platforms like TikTok, initially designed for entertainment and creative expression, have become spaces where users solicit donations from strangers, a phenomenon commonly referred to as "online begging." Online begging has also emerged as a social phenomenon that poses a challenge in the digital society, as it can be viewed as a deviant social behavior from a social pathology perspective. [El Morabit \(2023\)](#), emphasizes in his research that online begging has evolved into a recognized profession, encompassing not only everyday individuals seeking monetary donations but also extending to social media influencers and even celebrities. This behavior often exploits vulnerable groups, including the elderly and, in some cases, children ([Çelik & Atilla, 2024](#)). Online begging on TikTok represents a new, digitally mediated form of charity where individual needs are publicized and supported in real time, creating a unique mix of personal storytelling, audience interaction, and spontaneous giving. This trend raises questions about the motivations and psychological underpinnings behind users' decisions to donate to these requests. The content creators frequently frame their live streams with messages of hardship, creating a narrative that elicits sympathy from audiences. TikTok's algorithm amplifies such content, pushing it to broader audiences through features like hashtags, trending pages, and For You Page (FYP) placements ([Shahana et al., 2023](#)). The popularity of online begging on TikTok has surged as the platform's short-form video format allows creators to share emotional, impactful stories in a brief, visually engaging way ([Alfatih et al., 2024](#)). Earlier case, [Manggala et al. \(2023\)](#), conducted research that discussed the recent trend of elderly individuals participating in mud bath live streams on TikTok, specifically through the account [@Intan_Komalasari92](#). It explores how such presentations, perceived as a form of online begging, reflect deeper societal issues of exploitation and poverty ([Kawaf & Istanbulluoglu, 2019](#)). The study highlights how TikTok allows users to earn money through virtual gifts from viewers, prompting content creators to exploit elderly participants to garner sympathy and financial support. Ultimately, the phenomenon raises ethical concerns regarding the commodification of vulnerable populations in social media contexts.

Prior research on charitable giving has typically focused on donations to established organizations, yet the motivations for individual users to donate directly on platforms like TikTok may differ significantly. Factors such as empathy, social influence, digital identity, and perceived authenticity are likely to play roles in these spontaneous donations ([Manggala et al., 2023](#)). Moreover, the transient nature of TikTok interactions and the perceived proximity to the recipient may foster unique emotional and psychological experiences for donors.

Understanding these motivations can provide insight into modern digital giving and the social dynamics shaping this phenomenon.

Digital trust, a concept emerging in the digital age, combines cognitive trust (reliability, honesty, and commitment) and emotional trust (likability and belief) (Guo, 2022). Rooted in Trust Theory and Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT), digital trust depends on user satisfaction, shaped by the alignment between user expectations and actual experiences (Guo, 2022). Key factors influencing digital trust include user perception (security, efficiency, and quality), user expectations (ease of use and utility), and satisfaction, which mediates their effects on trust (Guo, 2022).

Before donating, trust must be enabled. Digital Trust is established through three key components: ability, willingness, and integrity. Ability encompasses reliability, accountability, assurance, security, safety, predictability, and privacy, all of which build confidence in an organization's competence to manage tasks and safeguard user information (Paliszkiewicz & Chen, 2021).

Fostering digital trust is vital for user retention for TikTok (Guo, 2022). This can be achieved by ensuring cognitive trust through robust data security, transparent policies, and consistent user experiences (Guo, 2022). Emotional trust can be enhanced by creating a supportive community, moderating content effectively, and offering personalized content that resonates with users (Guo, 2022). Managing user expectations through clear communication about features and data usage while responding promptly to concerns helps strengthen satisfaction and trust (Guo, 2022).

The study aims to explore the motivations behind TikTok users' decisions to donate to online beggars, examining the dynamics of this emerging form of digital benevolence. By focusing on donors' experiences and perceptions, the research delves into the underlying motivations, emotional engagements, and cultural dimensions that shape financial contributions to individuals on the platform. Attention is given to the roles of empathy, social dynamics, and digital culture in influencing generosity, while also considering the implications for the evolving landscape of charitable giving in the digital age. Through in-depth interviews with TikTok users who have engaged in this practice, the study offers insights into the interplay between social media, emotional connection, and expressions of digital generosity (Wang, 2020; Harriger et al., 2023).

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research design to explore the motivations behind TikTok users' decisions to donate to online beggars (Shahana et al., 2023). This approach allows for an in-depth examination of individual behaviors and the nuanced factors driving them with seven TikTok users who have engaged in online giving. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select participants, ensuring a diverse range of experiences with online begging on the platform (Campbell et al., 2020). Criteria of the participants are experienced in donating money through coins and gifts within the last three months. They also have to

donate based on their own willingness to the people who are asking and or begging for money by doing specific activities in their live sessions.

Participants are selected through purposive sampling, which strategically targets individuals with relevant experiences in the phenomenon under study (Campbell et al., 2020). The criteria for participant inclusion include recent activity within the last three months of donating monetary gifts, either through TikTok's virtual coins or other gifting mechanisms. Furthermore, participants must have made their donations willingly in response to live-streaming content where individuals request financial assistance through specific activities or narratives. This selection ensures that the sample reflects a diversity of experiences while maintaining relevance to the research objectives (Smith et al., 2018).

Thematic analysis is employed to systematically analyze the collected data, identifying and interpreting recurring themes and patterns within the responses (Naeem et al., 2023). This analytical method is particularly suited to capturing the complexities of digital benevolence as it manifests on TikTok. The thematic approach allows for a detailed exploration of how emotions, cultural factors, and social interactions shape users' motivations and attitudes toward giving (Naeem et al., 2023; Nowell et al., 2017).

The approach seeks to explore not only the patterns of individual donation behaviors. By focusing on donors' perspectives, the research not only uncovers the patterns underlying individual behaviors but also examines the wider social implications of online begging in the digital age. The dual focus aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the relationship between social media, emotional reactions, and acts of generosity within virtual charitable contributions (Ye et al., 2015; Verhaert & Van den Poel, 2011).

Results and Discussion

Deep interviews were conducted with seven informants. It shows an interesting point of view of TikTok users' diverse motivations and behaviors regarding donations to online beggars, drawing insights from in-depth interviews. The findings illuminate the complex interplay of emotional engagement, gender biases, impulsive giving, skepticism about authenticity, and cultural implications surrounding digital charity on the platform (Gainer & Padanyi, 2005; Henrich, 2009).

The informants in this study represent diverse backgrounds. The informants are: (1) informant 3 is a 23-year-old man who is a fresh graduate. He uses TikTok primarily for live game streaming and occasionally donates to online beggars or streamers with few viewers, driven by empathy and a desire to help. He also participates in gamified interactions like having his name written in sand for donations. Before contributing, he evaluates the streamer's account for authenticity and transparency; (2) informant 4 is a 22-year-old female university student. She is a frequent TikTok user who enjoys browsing content for travel and viral food recommendations. She actively engages in live streams, donating to streamers they like or know personally. The respondent is cautious when donating, especially to "online beggars." She evaluates factors such as the

authenticity of content and video quality before contributing. She typically donates around 50,000 IDR and prefers supporting women over men, believing women face greater employment challenges. Donations provide the respondent with a sense of relief and satisfaction, contributing to their overall feeling of making a positive impact; (3) Respondent 5 is a 32-year-old woman working as a Human Resources professional in a private company; (4) Respondent 6 is a 27-year-old woman employed as a staff member in the private sector; (5) Yohanna utilizes TikTok for daily entertainment, exploring funny videos, news, and trending content. She spends time scrolling from morning to night, particularly engaging with viral topics; (6) Aniesa is an active TikTok user who primarily uses the platform for browsing humorous videos, shopping, sharing content with friends, and keeping up with trending news. She typically accesses TikTok at night, often staying engaged until around 11 PM. Her feed frequently showcases live streams featuring individuals asking for gifts, such as a blind couple or performers engaging in unique acts. She also encounters content from rural settings, reflecting various aspects of life and entertainment; (7) Irwana Hidayat is an avid TikTok user, spending 2-3 hours daily. He enjoys DIY content, Sundanese cooking, and viral trends such as Indonesian Idol.

User Engagement Patterns

TikTok has become a pervasive platform for entertainment and social interaction, serving as a daily companion for millions of users worldwide (Najihah & Septiani, 2024). The platform's design, which emphasizes short-form videos tailored to users' preferences, creates a highly engaging and personalized user experience. Informants in the study highlighted their deep engagement with TikTok, demonstrating the platform's role as an integral part of their daily routines. For instance, Irwana, an avid TikTok user, reported spending 2-3 hours daily scrolling through content. His primary interests include DIY projects, traditional Sundanese cooking, and viral trends such as Indonesian Idol, showcasing the platform's ability to cater to diverse interests.

"Sometimes, if there are too many people giving, then I won't give as much. But if it's really quiet and there are only two visitors, for example, we can see who the visitors are. If only two visitors show up, I'd say, 'Wow, thank you so much, how are you? I hope you're always healthy.' And if I feel bad for them, I'll just give a tip right there. Yeah, it's just a tip." (Interviewed with Irwana, November 20, 2024 in Jakarta)

Similarly, Aniesa shared that her TikTok engagement peaks in the evenings, often lasting until late at night. Her activities include browsing humorous videos, keeping up with trending news, and exploring live streams.

"I gave it to the pregnant woman and the blind couple. Also to the ones who were dancing." (Interviewed with Aniesa, November 20, 2024 in Jakarta)

This substantial engagement with TikTok often brings users into contact with live streams featuring individuals requesting donations. These live streams are strategically placed in users' feeds, leveraging TikTok's advanced algorithm to ensure that emotionally impactful content reaches the right audience. Informants

noted that the platform effectively curates moments that evoke strong emotional reactions, such as live streams of individuals sharing personal hardships or performing unique acts to solicit financial support. This targeted content presentation not only captures users' attention but also creates opportunities for deeper emotional connections between the viewers and the streamers.

TikTok's algorithm plays a pivotal role in shaping this experience by analyzing user behavior, preferences, and interactions to suggest content likely to resonate on a personal level. For example, participants reported encountering streams that matched their viewing habits and emotional triggers, such as videos featuring elderly individuals seeking assistance or creative performers in rural settings. This algorithm-driven exposure amplifies the likelihood of users engaging with donation opportunities during live sessions, particularly when the content aligns with their values or sparks empathy.

The seamless integration of entertainment and philanthropy on TikTok underscores the platform's ability to blur the lines between passive content consumption and active participation in social causes. Informants described how these live streams not only entertained but also compelled them to reflect on their capacity to support others, transforming what begins as a leisure activity into a moment of meaningful action. TikTok's ability to foster this dual-purpose engagement highlights its influence in driving digital behaviors and creating a space where social connection and altruism intersect.

Drivers of Donation Behavior

Compassion and empathy emerge as dominant drivers behind users' decisions to donate on TikTok (Diwantari & Fahmawati, 2024), reflecting the profound emotional connections that the platform fosters between viewers and content creators. For many users, these emotions serve as the foundation of their philanthropic behavior, motivating them to engage in acts of generosity in response to the struggles and hardships portrayed in live-streamed content.

Yohana, a Key Opinion Leader (KOL) specialist, shared her perspective on the motivations behind her donations, emphasizing a deep sense of compassion for older women who face significant financial challenges. For her, contributing to these women through TikTok's gifting features is not merely a transactional activity but a heartfelt form of digital charity.

"I happened to give a gift to the pregnant woman for the first time because I felt sorry for her." (Interviewed with Yohana, November 20, 2024 in Jakarta)

Yohana described how seeing these women's resilience and vulnerability inspired her to take action, viewing her donations as a way to uplift those who might otherwise go unnoticed in society. Her experience highlights how TikTok transforms what might traditionally be considered passive content consumption into an opportunity for meaningful support and social impact.

Gender Bias in Charitable Contributions

A pervasive gender bias surfaces in users' donation behaviors. Informants such as This tendency is echoed in Respondent 4, who feels less inclined to donate to male creators, believing they have better access to conventional employment opportunities. This gender bias demonstrates how societal norms regarding economic vulnerability and gender roles influence decision-making processes within online philanthropic activities, revealing a tendency to associate neediness more closely with female presenters.

"It's like, she should have kids by now. I feel sorry for her because, as a woman, it's harder to find a job, like for pregnant women or elderly women, you know? Imagine that. There's no way her man could just be on his phone and live streaming. If it's a man, why isn't he working? Right?" (Interviewed with informants 4, November 20, 2024 via WhatsApp)

Impulsive Giving and Emotional Dynamics

Impulsivity represents a significant aspect of users' giving behaviors, as evidenced by Yohana's tendencies to contribute to captivating live streams without extensively verifying the authenticity of the creators' circumstances. Irwana corroborates this, highlighting that his donations often arise during emotionally charged moments, underscoring the compelling nature of engaging content that triggers an immediate emotional response. This impulsivity reflects a larger trend in digital giving—one where the immediacy of online content and emotional appeal can overshadow critical assessment of the recipient's actual needs.

Respondent 6's impulsive giving is associated with a detached emotional outlook towards their donations, focusing on immediate action driven by logic rather than altruism, while Respondent 7 experiences a more complex emotional landscape marked by compassion and a genuine desire to help, resulting in a fulfilling emotional aftermath. The differences in their approaches highlight the varying motivations and emotional engagements that users on platforms like TikTok can exhibit in response to online begging and charitable acts.

Authenticity, Skepticism, and Critical Evaluation

Despite their emotional motivations, participants expressed acute skepticism about the authenticity of online begging. Many informants, including Aniesa and Respondent 4, reported proactive measures to assess the credibility of content creators by scrutinizing the quality of the video recording. High-quality video recordings are assumed to indicate the ability to own good gadgets, suggesting that the beggar may not truly need assistance. Past videos that are being uploaded to their profile also become important decision-makers. Respondent demonstrated this by investigating profiles and contextualizing donation requests, indicating a mindful approach to ensuring her contributions serve a genuine need. This skepticism is pivotal, revealing a duality where users simultaneously engage in altruism while being wary of potential exploitation within the TikTok ecosystem.

Cultural Reflections and Social Responsibility

Users voiced concerns regarding the cultural implications of a gift economy fostered by platforms like TikTok. Informants articulated the risk that such environments may cultivate a dependency culture, where individuals might opt for digital begging over traditional employment avenues. Both Yohana and Irwana noted that the visible nature of online asking could perpetuate attitudes toward easy money acquisition, thereby encouraging a mindset counterproductive to developing sustainable livelihoods. This concern suggests a broader commentary on how digital economies can reshape societal values and individual priorities regarding work and charity.

The gift economy from TikTok donations also can lead to criminal attempts. Findings mentioned that around \$82 million was transferred to TikTok users in Türkiye, with some accounts suspected of money laundering and financing terrorism, according to the Financial Crimes Investigation Board (Agencies, 2022). A similar effort of watching and investigating virtual money circulated by the Australian government to avoid the scams and criminally potential fraud happened (Bonyhady, 2024). In Indonesia, issues of massive donations to TikTok streamers are on the rise. Musthafa (2024), mentioned that @sadb0r86 TikTok account generates on average Rp700,000 per day. After specific investigation, it's also found that the top contributors of the donations are linked to online gambling affiliations that are illegal in Indonesia. Haryo (2024) in Musthafa (2024), also mentioned that this phenomenon could be an easy target for money laundering schemes since there are no regulators and donations can be anonymous.

Regulatory Perspectives

A consistent call for enhanced regulation regarding donation-related content emerged from Informants. Participants voiced the belief that TikTok ought to implement clearer guidelines and accountability measures to mitigate risks associated with potential scams and the exploitation of well-meaning donors. They recognized the platform's dual role in fostering community interactions while necessitating a responsibility to protect users from misleading narratives. This perspective aligns with ongoing discussions about ethical obligations in digital spaces, stressing the importance of fostering transparency and trust.

Understanding the Phenomenon of Online Beggars from a Receiver Perspective

The interplay of user engagement patterns and motivations for donation on TikTok reveals the complex emotional and cognitive dynamics at play in digital philanthropy (Zannettou et al., 2023). As users spend considerable time on the platform, they are often drawn to emotionally charged content that elicits a strong response, ultimately driving their philanthropic actions. The findings underscore the critical role of emotional storytelling in catalyzing donations, suggesting that TikTok's algorithm effectively curates content that resonates deeply with its viewers. However, this emotional engagement is tempered by a prevalent skepticism regarding the authenticity of online begging. Users frequently evaluate

the quality and context of the content creators before contributing, highlighting a conscious effort to distinguish between genuine needs and potential exploitative scenarios. This critical lens on authenticity reflects broader anxieties surrounding the implications of a culture that increasingly normalizes digital begging.

Additionally, the gender bias observed in donation behavior signifies how societal norms shape charitable inclinations, revealing a dichotomy where empathy is often directed more toward female presenters perceived as vulnerable (van Rijn et al., 2019). It raises questions about the societal constructs of neediness and welfare, emphasizing the need to address these biases to foster a more equitable online community. Ultimately, the informants' calls for regulatory measures indicate a desire for greater accountability and transparency from TikTok, emphasizing the platform's role not only as a space for entertainment but also as a facilitator of ethical interactions in the digital charitable landscape. Collectively, these insights point to the necessity of developing frameworks that balance emotional appeal with critical evaluation, ensuring that digital philanthropy aligns with genuine social responsibility and fosters equitable support for all individuals in need (Patil, 2021; Huber & Mafi, 2013).

Digital Trust Theory (Guo, 2022) emphasizes the importance of digital trust in establishing secure and mutually beneficial relationships in the digital era. This theory integrates cognitive and emotional trust, which are built through user satisfaction (Guo, 2022). In the context of TikTok, applying this theory suggests that user satisfaction with transparency, authenticity, and platform experience significantly influences their digital trust in both content creators and the platform itself (Guo, 2022).

The findings on TikTok users' donation motivations reveal that digital trust plays a significant role in influencing their decisions to contribute. This can be linked to the three key components of Digital Trust: ability, willingness, and integrity. In the context of TikTok, the platform's ability to provide secure, transparent, and reliable features is crucial for building user trust in donation-related content. For example, users often evaluate the authenticity and quality of content before deciding to donate, reflecting the need for reliability and assurance of information security.

Users' willingness to donate is also influenced by their perception of the content creator's credibility. When users feel that the content reflects genuine needs rather than exploitation, they are more likely to participate. Furthermore, TikTok's integrity as a platform lies in its capacity to prevent misuse, such as exploitation or potential fraud, through effective content moderation and clear donation policies. By connecting these findings, it can be concluded that applying Digital Trust principles on TikTok not only enhances user confidence but also supports the sustainability of digital donations as a modern form of social engagement.

Connecting the implications of Digital Trust Theory for TikTok include the need to enhance transparency and clarity in donation policies, ensure that uploaded content can be verified for authenticity, and foster a supportive and secure community. TikTok can leverage this theory to build user trust by strengthening content moderation, providing a consistent user experience, and addressing

ethical concerns and risks of exploitation associated with donation activities on the platform. This approach can create a more equitable and socially responsible digital space.

Conclusion

The comprehensive insights gathered from interviews illustrate the nuanced dynamics of digital benevolence on TikTok. Users express a complex mix of empathy, impulsivity, and critical awareness, with a particular emphasis on gender biases in their charitable choices. The motivations to donate are deeply intertwined with emotional narratives, while skepticism about authenticity highlights the dual nature of contemporary online philanthropy. As the landscape of digital giving evolves, there is a pressing need for platforms like TikTok to balance entertainment with ethical responsibilities, ensuring that user contributions genuinely support those in need while safeguarding against exploitation. This study highlights that while the potential for digital philanthropy is vast, it remains imperative to navigate the challenges of authenticity and societal implications carefully. Regulatory aspects also have to be in place to avoid platform abuse that can lead to criminal actions.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of online begging is closely tied to user literacy and the responsible use of social media. Platforms like TikTok serve merely as tools—akin to a knife—where the impact largely depends on how individuals choose to engage with them. Social media reflects the thoughts and values of its users, translating their perspectives and intentions into action. Consequently, further research should explore the cultural implications of online begging and how it may foster a sense of dependency among individuals, leading them to rely on soliciting money rather than pursuing traditional employment. Additionally, investigating the influence of users' educational backgrounds on their engagement with online begging could provide valuable insights into the motivations and behaviors that drive this phenomenon. Ultimately, understanding the dynamics of online begging requires a nuanced approach that considers the interplay between personal accountability, cultural context, and the evolving landscape of digital interactions.

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