The Tumbler Phenomenon as a Symbol of Green Communication Skills Among Generation Z Social Media Users

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Abstract. Climate change is a global issue and the greatest challenge humanity must face. The issue of climate change is a significant challenge for Indonesia, requiring significant responsibility to address it. To reduce plastic waste, the public is encouraged to use environmentally friendly products, such as tumblers. This research explores the meaning, motivations, and communication processes of green skills symbolized through tumblers on Generation Z's social media. This research uses an interpretivist paradigm that views social reality as subjectively constructed by its participants. The approach used is qualitative, using phenomenological methods, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This research enriches and expands the theoretical framework of symbolic interaction and social identity by introducing new concepts relevant to the digital communication ecosystem.

Keywords: Tumbler Phenomenon, Green Communication, Generation Z, Social Media.

1 Introduction

Climate change is a global issue and the greatest challenge humanity must face. It is causing serious changes, such as rising global temperatures, increased frequency of natural disasters, and rapid ecosystem changes. Indonesia is currently experiencing the direct impacts of climate change. This is reflected in extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and the decline of forest and marine ecosystems. [1]

The issue of climate change is a significant challenge for Indonesia, requiring significant responsibility to address it. The primary factor causing climate change is humans. Humans can have a significant impact on climate change, which is caused by their continuous environmental damage. Environmental damage that is often seen is pollution, such as air, land, and water pollution, as well as the accumulation of waste or garbage [2]. The increase in the number of human births is closely aligned with dependence on the environment.

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The accumulation of plastic waste is a problem that threatens the planet's sustainability. One of the largest contributors to plastic waste is the use of single-use drinking water bottles. To reduce plastic waste, the public is encouraged to use environmentally friendly products, such as tumblers [3]. To respond to the challenges of environmental issues, such as plastic waste, the concept of green skills emerged, namely knowledge, values, attitudes and behavior that enable individuals and communities to live and work sustainably [4]. However, currently not all individuals know, instill values, and behavior for pro-environmental attitudes, especially the younger generation, namely generation Z. Generation Z is a young age group born between 1997–early 2010. This generation grew up in the era of information technology, especially social media that easily accesses global issues, including the environment. They are active users of social media such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X. The purpose of accessing social media is not only as a means of entertainment, but as a space for identity formation, value expression, and social communication.

We Are Social data (2026) shows that 286 million Indonesians, or 62.9% of the total population, actively use social media, with an average of 21 hours and 50 minutes per week. The most frequently used platforms are WhatsApp (90.8%), Instagram (82.4%), and Facebook (81.0%). These figures reflect the pervasiveness of social media in the daily lives of Generation Z, who grew up within the digital ecosystem. [5]

Schönherr & Pikkemaat revealed that the pro-environment attitudes formed by generation Z were influenced by social media which had the intention of maintaining cleanliness and reducing waste [6]. One interesting phenomenon developing among Gen Z is the trend of using tumblers or refillable drinking bottles as a symbol of an environmentally friendly lifestyle, which is then communicated massively through social media.

A survey of 446 students at an Australian University in September 2021 and April 2022 showed that climate change is the top environmental concern for Generation Z, with 81% very concerned and many experiencing serious climate anxiety [7]. Research conducted by the Communication Studies Program at Multimedia Nusantara University shows that Gen Z's climate change awareness score is >80%. However, this does not correlate strongly with their conative awareness. [8]

One phenomenon of tumbler use, encompassing a wide range of products, from simple to premium, has acquired extraordinary significance. Tumblers have now evolved beyond functional equipment to become communication artifacts imbued with symbolic meaning. Uploading photos or videos of tumblers on social media is not simply about displaying an object, but rather conveying a message about identity, group affiliation, and commitment to sustainable values.

This phenomenon is relevant to study from a communication science perspective, particularly through the lens of symbolic interactionism theory, which emphasizes that the meaning of an object is constructed through social interaction. However, a critical question arises: does the use and display of tumblers on social media by Gen Z truly reflect

an authentic internalization of green skills, or is it more of a social performativity driven by the pressures of digital conformity? This question serves as the background to this research. This research explores the meaning, motivations, and communication processes of green skills symbolized through tumblers on Generation Z's social media.

2 Theory and Literature Review

2.1 Green skills from a Communication Perspective

Green skills from a communication perspective demonstrate working effectively with others, including effective communication, teamwork, active listening, and conflict resolution to achieve shared goals. The communication process involves the ability to convey information clearly and effectively through speaking, writing, and nonverbal cues. Furthermore, green skills from a communication perspective are used to actively build and maintain relationships with others [9].

From a communication science perspective, green skills are understood as systems of meaning that are communicated, negotiated, and internalized through social interactions, both in the real world and in digital spaces. From a communication perspective, green skills are closely related to environmental communication, which plays a role in disseminating environmental information and shaping pro-environmental values, attitudes, and identities. Green skills also encompass a series of symbolic processes that occur within individuals in expressing, sharing, and producing sustainable meaning [10].

According to Herbert Blumer, the symbolic interaction process is intended to create meaning for everyone. Symbolic interaction encompasses three concepts: the meaning of basic human actions, language as a medium for creating meaning in interpretation, and thinking in understanding a problem between the individual and the social environment [11].

Thus, the tumbler in this research serves as a physical object with no inherent meaning. However, it is constructed and reproduced as a symbol of green skills through social interactions on social media, including uploaded content, comments, likes, shares, and user-generated narratives.

2.2 Performativitas Digital dan Identitas Hijau

The theory of digital performativity is the way people use language on the internet to perform actions that are actively produced in social reality. Digital performativity is a primary tool for individuals to manage their identities in digital spaces. Digital performativity has led to the emergence of the phenomenon of flexing culture, a more luxurious lifestyle that better represents success and credibility and reinforces symbolic inequality in digital spaces [12].

Digital performativity demonstrates consistency in an individual's image and can influence public perception of their identity. Performativity explains that identity is constructed through repeated actions and practices. Furthermore, performativity in digital spaces is used to understand communication practices in public spaces as symbolic acts that demonstrate identity and self-image. This can be achieved not only through text but also through style, visuals, consistency, and interactions with the audience. [13].

In the context of social media, green identity in generation Z is constructed and then maintained through several repeated performative actions: uploading photos related to environmentally friendly activities, using hashtags such as sustainability campaigns, participating in environmentally friendly challenges, and so on.

2.3 Generasi Z dan Media Sosial

Generation Z lives in an era of rapid technological development. Computers, smartphones, the internet, and gaming devices are familiar to this generation. With so much time spent online, this generation tends to spend a lot of time indoors. Therefore, this generation is often referred to as the "instant generation" [14].

Generation Z uses social media for identity and self-expression. For this generation, their self-image and construction need to be published in the digital space. The phenomenon of social media use among generation Z can give rise to a significant shift in communication patterns. Therefore, there is a degradation of face-to-face communication, namely face-to-face interaction is replaced by image, text and visual-based communication using digital platforms [15].

The high intensity of social media use among Generation Z has resulted in the emergence of the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) phenomenon, which is the relationship between the motivation to seek information and the desire to share, thus creating psychological and social dimensions in this generation's consumption patterns. In addition to FOMO, the adoption of new communication technologies has had a positive impact on this generation's consumption patterns [16].

3 Materials and Methods

This research uses an interpretivist paradigm that views social reality as subjectively constructed by its participants. The approach used is qualitative, using phenomenological methods, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) developed by Jonathan Smith. This method is a contemporary qualitative methodology for ascertaining the detailed phenomena of the experiences provided. [17]

This method aims to explore in depth how individuals interpret their life experiences, namely the experience of using and communicating tumblers as a symbol of green skills on social media among generation Z. The research subjects are generation Z aged 18–27 years with the following criteria:

a. Actively use at least one social media platform (Instagram and/or TikTok) for at least 2 hours per day.

b. Use a tumbler instead of a single-use plastic bottle for at least the past 3 months.

c. Post content related to tumblers on social media.

d. Have an awareness of environmental or sustainability issues.

The data collection technique used was in-depth interviews, using interview guidelines developed based on the theory used. However, these guidelines were flexible and based on the experiences of the informants. Furthermore, the researchers employed content observation techniques on social media to directly observe the uploaded tumbler content, interactions, and narratives developed.

4 Results and Discussion

Climate change is a global issue and the greatest challenge humanity must face. It is causing serious changes, such as rising global temperatures, increased frequency of natural disasters, and rapid ecosystem changes. Indonesia is currently experiencing the direct impacts of climate change. This is reflected in extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and the decline of forest and marine ecosystems. [1]

The issue of climate change is a significant challenge for Indonesia, requiring significant responsibility to address it. The primary factor causing climate change is humans. Humans can have a significant impact on climate change, which is caused by their continuous environmental damage. Environmental damage that is often seen is pollution, such as air, land, and water pollution, as well as the accumulation of waste or garbage.

Karel Danaghis, Atika Nabila, and Salsabila Nazelina D. Putri have been selected as resource persons. The third is generation Z students who actively use tumblers and social media. Based on the results of interviews with the three sources, there are main themes in interpreting tumblers, namely reducing plastic waste which is a form of concern for the environment, part of a lifestyle that is represented by the color of the tumbler, as well as interest in works of art from the images displayed on the tumbler.

4.1 Tumblers as a lifestyle

The use of tumblers tends to indicate that individuals behave efficiently and have environmental awareness through their daily actions. "Currently, tumblers are not only functional as drinking vessels, but have also become part of lifestyle and identity on social media. Many people share photos or videos featuring certain tumblers as part of personal branding" (Respondent P, 20 years old). Currently, tumblers are experiencing

a shift in function, namely no longer just drinking bottles, but also a sustainable lifestyle for Generation Z. [18]

Nowadays, eco-friendly products have become a symbol of personal and social identity. Similarly, tumblers are depicted as having ecological, social, and cultural values. The use of tumblers demonstrates an increasing understanding of environmental protection among Generation Z. Therefore, there is a positive relationship between tumbler use and ecological awareness. This is one of Generation Z's habits in implementing eco-friendly habits to realize a zero-waste lifestyle that has a positive impact on minimizing plastic bottle waste and reducing environmental pollution.

According to informants, the use of tumblers can indicate affiliation with a particular community or company and as a marker of social status based on the brand of tumbler used. Some brands such as Stanley, Corkcicle, and Owala can show social identity. Corkcicle is considered a tumbler in the premium segment and shows a symbol of a well-established, neat lifestyle, and prioritizes visual aesthetics. Stanley is considered a brand with a modern lifestyle because it has a high price. Meanwhile, Owala is a cheerful tumbler because it has an aesthetic design and has an attractive color choice, making many Generation Z, especially women, want to have a collection..

Previous research shows that a tumbler brand can be trusted to guarantee a reliable product. Furthermore, people can identify a tumbler based on the brand's promotional strategy. Generation Z prioritizes brand quality and reliability when consuming sustainable products. [19]

However, the interviewee also assessed that Generation Z users who use tumblers are not 100% environmentally conscious. This is evidenced by previous research that found that Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has a positive influence on purchasing and using tumblers. FOMO can drive purchases through psychological incentives [20]. One informant stated that FOMO can be a positive factor in gradually reducing plastic waste and starting a healthier lifestyle. While tumblers are often seen as merely reflecting a person's lifestyle, this doesn't necessarily matter if you can reduce the amount of plastic you consume, even if your initial motivation is different.

4.2 Tumblers as a Green Communication Skills in Social Media

The viral potential of social media content is closely linked to users' emotional engagement and personal relevance. When using social media, individuals are more likely to engage with and share content based on their preferences, content interactions, and user experience [21].

In this study, Generation Z demonstrated a concern for the impact of plastic waste on the environment. This is evidenced by their awareness on social media to demonstrate to their audience and the wider community. For the informants, this is a responsibility

and a tangible manifestation of ecologically responsible consumption. One informant said that he expressed his concern for starting a healthy lifestyle by carrying water in a tumbler to reduce plastic waste and posting it on social media. Content on social media uploaded by users can act as a form of self-presentation that represents an individual's identity as a person. This can be linked to tumbler uploads on social media that show that the individual is implementing a healthy lifestyle, with the use of the tumbler as a symbol that strengthens this image.

Self-presentation on social media can be used by teenagers and young adults to present themselves as they are (real self) in accordance with the desires or expectations of others (ideal self) and to show differences from what they do every day (false self-deception). Self-presentation is one way that teenagers and young adults explore new things [22].



Fig. 1. Content invites the audience to use a tumbler

The image above shows that the tumbler used by one of the speakers is quite durable, making it a viable option for the audience. According to him, using a tumbler is a tangible form of environmental concern that is consistently practiced in everyday life. However, content provided on social media does not necessarily indicate whether a person truly cares about the environment because the content can only be seen as a

medium for following trends. What makes the difference is the consistency between what is displayed on social media and habits carried out in real life.

Karel, one of the speakers, also promoted environmental stewardship. By using a tumbler and displaying it on social media, he indirectly encouraged his circle of friends to do the same. As a student intern who produces eco-friendly content for the Ministry of Environment and the Indonesian Environmental Management Agency, Karel also demonstrated the benefits of tumbler use for young people.

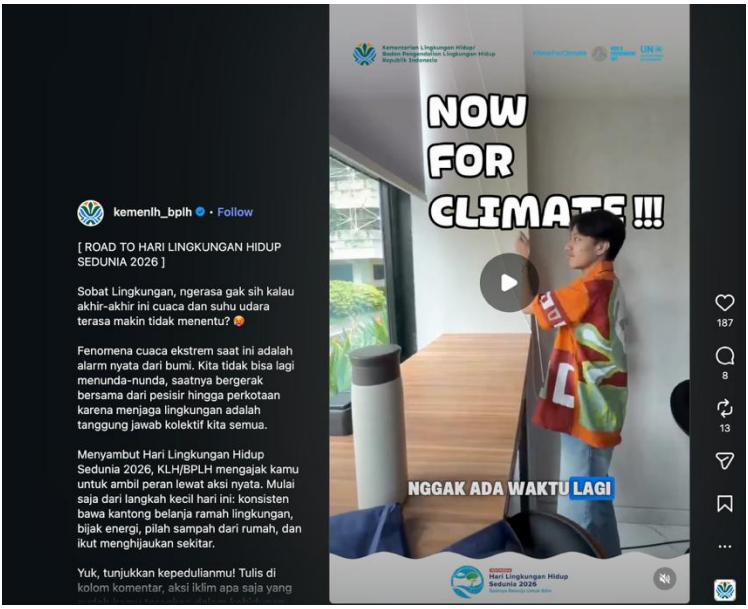


Fig. 2. Caring content through real action

In his World Environment Day 2026-themed content, Karel frames the use of tumblers as a sustainable lifestyle practice. Through a call to action that can be implemented daily, the content represents the use of tumblers as a form of individual participation in efforts to reduce plastic waste and support environmental conservation. The caption used in the content is one of the environmental communication strategies by emphasizing the importance of collective action in addressing climate change. With the content produced, Generation Z can become agents of change to make the earth a more habitable and beautiful place to live. “Tumblerization” can be a strategy to reduce plastic waste pollution, which is very dangerous for the sustainability of the planet Earth [23].



Fig. 3. Tumbler Upload with Oshikatsu on X

Additionally, one of the sources, Atika, stated that social media content includes information about tumbler collaborations with brands or other entities. The content uploaded aims to help audiences find a reference for purchasing locations. She uploaded content about the Tomori tumbler collaboration with Frieren. She informed the audience that there was only one remaining stock and encouraged the brand to collaborate again. This is known as Oshikatsu, an effort made by fans to support their favorite oshi, such as artists, anime or manga characters, or groups they admire and want to increase their popularity. [24]

Content that users find personally relevant and engaging, emotionally engaging, and especially if it aligns with their preferences, can trigger strong emotional responses and encourage social sharing. Therefore, the relationship between real-life experiences, emotional connection, and narrative novelty plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of viral content and its impact on brand perception and marketing potential in the digital age [25].

5 Conclusion

The phenomenon of tumbler use among Generation Z is not only related to environmentally friendly consumption behavior but also forms part of the communication process and identity formation on social media. Tumbler use is interpreted as a symbol of

concern for sustainability issues, reinforced through digital interactions, social media trends, and the influence of communities and influencers.

Through social media, Generation Z not only receives information about environmental issues but also actively disseminates sustainability messages through various forms of digital content. These activities contribute to raising public awareness of the importance of reducing plastic waste and a sustainable lifestyle.

However, this study found that tumbler use on social media is still influenced by symbolic aspects and the need for self-image. In some cases, tumbler use is carried out as part of a trend or representation of digital identity, so that sustainable values have not been fully and consistently realized in daily behavior.

Nevertheless, this phenomenon still demonstrates the great potential of social media as a means of environmental education and strengthening green communication among Generation Z. Therefore, a more educational, participatory, and sustainable communication strategy is needed so that environmentally friendly practices do not remain merely symbols or trends but become a tangible culture and collective awareness in people's lives.

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