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Framing Digital Ethics in Participatory Media: A Qualitative Analysis of the AI Face-Swap Challenge on TikTok

Audhiandra Okviosa* , Nathalia Gunarian, Suci Marini Novianty, Lely Arrianie
LSPR Communication & Business Institute, Indonesia
Email: gunarian.nathali@gmail.com

Abstract:
This study investigates how ethical concerns surrounding AI face-swapping are framed in digital discourse, using the case of the viral TikTok Face Swap Challenge. While such content is often perceived as playful and innovative, it raises significant issues related to consent, identity manipulation, and platform accountability. Employing Entman's (1993) framing theory, this qualitative research analyzes user-generated TikTok videos, Indonesian and international media coverage, and expert interviews to explore how different actors construct meaning around this emerging technology. Using thematic framing analysis, the study identifies four dominant frames: (1) Innovation as Disruption, which celebrates novelty and creativity while minimizing risks; (2) Consent and Deepfake Risk, which highlights ethical concerns around impersonation and agency; (3) Ethics as Afterthought, reflecting how users and platforms sideline moral reflection for engagement; and (4) Platform Responsibility, which shifts focus to systemic enablers of virality without accountability. These frames often intersect, revealing the complex ways that ethical meaning is negotiated across participatory and institutional actors. The findings contribute to framing theory by extending its application to social media ecosystems, where users, media, and experts co-construct public narratives. The study also highlights the ethical vacuum often left by rapid innovation and offers practical implications for digital governance, media literacy, and algorithmic accountability. By mapping how public discourse shapes ethical understanding, this research underscores the urgent need for frameworks that balance technological advancement with robust moral consideration in platform-based communication.
Keywords: *framing theory, AI face swap, TikTok, digital ethics, deepfake*

E-mail: gunarian.nathali@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly reshaped the way people interact with digital content, particularly on social media platforms (Sadiku, Ashaolu, Ajayi-Majebi, & Musa, 2021). Among the most controversial developments is the emergence of AI-generated face-swapping, a form of synthetic media that enables the replacement of one person's face with another in photos or videos using generative algorithms (Goyal et al., 2025). This technology—commonly categorized under deepfakes—has become increasingly accessible to everyday users, sparking both fascination and concern. While these innovations offer creative and entertaining possibilities, they also introduce pressing ethical dilemmas related to misinformation, consent, identity manipulation, and visual deception (Williamson & Prybutok, 2024). Chesney (2019) warned of deepfakes' potential to undermine democratic trust and spread falsehoods at scale. Separately, O'Neil (2016) emphasized how algorithmic systems, especially those fueled by opaque logics, can amplify bias, perpetuate harm, and erode accountability in digital environments.

In the Indonesian context, these concerns have taken on a local urgency as social media usage intensifies (Lim, 2017). TikTok, in particular, has emerged as a dominant platform among Indonesian youth, with over 106 million active users in 2024 alone (Statista, 2024). The

platform's algorithm is designed to prioritize highly engaging, visually striking content—conditions under which AI-generated face-swapping flourishes. One viral phenomenon that exemplifies this is the "AI Face-Swap Challenge," in which users employ AI tools to generate hyper-realistic videos that digitally place themselves in the likeness of celebrities, fictional characters, or even historical figures. At first glance, the challenge may seem like harmless digital play, but its popularity raises critical questions about the normalization of deepfake culture, the erosion of visual trust, and the ethical responsibilities of users and platforms alike. As these trends become embedded in popular culture, it becomes crucial to interrogate how such technologies are socially and ethically framed—especially in participatory media environments where content is co-created, circulated, and contested by a multitude of actors.

Scholars have increasingly explored the technological, legal, and psychological implications of deepfake media (Yadav et al., 2025). For instance, Singh and Dhiman (2023) examined the ways in which AI-generated media contributes to misinformation and identity fraud. Kosarkar and Sakarkar (2024) provided a comprehensive overview of deepfake advancements, emphasizing both their creative potential and ethical challenges. Meanwhile, Brigham et al. (2024) highlighted public concerns surrounding the non-consensual use of AI-generated intimate imagery, especially regarding bodily autonomy and psychological harm. These works contribute valuable insights but tend to focus either on technical detection, legal regulation, or the psychological impacts of deepfakes (Alanazi, Asif, Caird-daley, & Moulitsas, 2025).

However, despite the growing body of research on synthetic media, there remains a limited understanding of how these technologies are constructed and contested within public discourse, particularly in the global South (Berry, 2025). Most existing studies are situated in Western contexts and rarely account for culturally specific values, digital literacies, and regulatory environments in countries like Indonesia (Livingstone et al., 2022). Even more critically, few studies apply communication theories—especially framing theory—to analyze how ethical concerns surrounding AI face-swapping are constructed in digital environments such as TikTok.

Framing theory, first developed by Goffman (1974) and later refined by Entman (1993), provides a powerful lens to investigate how media texts and discursive actors define problems, diagnose causes, make moral evaluations, and suggest remedies. Entman (1993) argued that framing is an inherently selective process, involving the inclusion and exclusion of particular elements to shape how an issue is understood. Although widely used in journalism, political communication, and crisis communication, framing theory has been underutilized in social media research (Almakaty, 2025). López-Rabadán (2022) observes that most framing analyses remain "media-centric," focusing on institutional news narratives while neglecting how frames are co-constructed in participatory digital spaces. This research gap is significant, as social media platforms like TikTok allow not only news organizations but also influencers, users, and algorithms to shape ethical meanings through hashtags, captions, remixes, and comment threads.

Moreover, social media is not merely a space for information flow; it is also a site for meaning negotiation, emotional alignment, and moral signaling. Users are not passive

recipients but active framers of issues. They share, comment, remix, and amplify narratives, often infusing them with personal and affective investments. According to Khamis et al. (2017), the affective dynamics of social media mean that public reaction to a digital controversy is often shaped more by emotional cues than rational argument. When influencers or celebrities condemn AI face-swapping as unethical or disturbing, their affective expression can trigger widespread concern, increasing the visibility and moral urgency of the issue.

This participatory framing process becomes especially complex when considering TikTok's algorithmic infrastructure. As Bucher (2018) explains, algorithmic curation dynamically prioritizes certain content over others, shaping what users see and how trends unfold. The viral spread of the AI Face-Swap Challenge thus reflects not only organic user interest but also platform-mediated amplification that may prioritize engagement metrics over ethical reflection. These dynamics blur the lines between individual agency and systemic design, requiring a more nuanced analytical framework.

Given these theoretical and contextual considerations, this study seeks to fill the existing gap by applying framing theory to the case of the AI Face-Swap Challenge on TikTok in Indonesia. It asks: How are ethical issues such as consent, identity, and authenticity framed in TikTok content related to AI face-swapping? Who are the key actors constructing these frames, and what ethical logics underpin their narratives? How does the platform's participatory and algorithmic structure influence the visibility and reception of these frames? To explore these dynamics, the study employs a qualitative case study design informed by framing theory.

By focusing on Indonesia as a digitally dynamic but under-researched context, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how AI ethics are negotiated in everyday social media practice. It also extends the application of framing theory beyond its conventional domains, highlighting its relevance for analyzing emerging digital phenomena shaped by participatory and algorithmic cultures. In doing so, the research not only contributes to theoretical development in media and communication studies but also offers practical insights for policymakers, platform designers, educators, and civil society actors who seek to foster more ethical and accountable uses of generative AI technologies.

Ultimately, the study argues that the framing of AI face-swapping is not a neutral or incidental process—it is a socio-communicative act that shapes how societies interpret and respond to new technological realities. In contexts where regulatory frameworks lag behind technological advancements and where digital literacy remains uneven, understanding how ethical meanings are constructed is essential for ensuring informed public discourse and responsible innovation.

Based on these theoretical and contextual considerations, this study aims to analyze how ethical issues such as consent, identity, and authenticity are framed in TikTok content related to the AI Face-Swap Challenge, as well as identify the key actors and ethical logic that underlie their narratives. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of ethically minded digital media literacy, input for platform designers in creating more responsible algorithms, and become a consideration for policymakers and educators in formulating digital governance frameworks that are responsive to participatory dynamics and local culture.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative interpretive case study approach to explore how the *AI Face Swap Challenge* was socially framed and ethically negotiated across multiple discursive spaces. Rather than quantifying frequencies or generalizing attitudes, the goal was to understand meaning construction—how users, media actors, and experts assigned significance to the technology and embedded it within ethical and cultural narratives. Framing theory, particularly Entman's (1993) framework, guided the analysis, using its four core functions: problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation to interpret patterns of meaning across a diverse dataset.

The study drew from three primary data sources collected over six months (January–June 2025). First, a purposive sample of 30 publicly accessible TikTok videos was selected using hashtags such as #faceswap, #AIchallenge, and #deepfake. Selection criteria included virality (over 50,000 views), cultural relevance (content involving celebrities or public figures), and language (Bahasa Indonesia or English). These videos represented popular user-generated expressions of the challenge along with their original captions. The analysis focused exclusively on video content to maintain depth and minimize interpretive ambiguity.

Second, 10 online news articles from Indonesian and international media outlets were analyzed, chosen for their coverage of AI face-swapping, deepfake ethics, or the TikTok challenge. These articles illustrated how institutional media framed the issue within broader technological and moral debates.

Third, expert commentary was collected to triangulate frames identified in user and media discourse. This included two op-eds from digital ethics scholars, one feature interview with an AI engineer, and two virtual interviews with communication professionals specializing in media ethics and digital culture. These perspectives helped identify normative tensions and reflect on platform accountability.

This multi-perspective design enhanced the credibility of the findings and reflected the complex ecology of meaning production in contemporary digital spaces.

Table 1. Primary data sources

Data Source	Type	Criteria / Description	Quantity
TikTok Videos	User-generated content	Public, >10K views, hashtagged #faceswap / #AIchallenge, in English or Bahasa	30 videos
News Articles	Institutional discourse	Indonesian and global news coverage of AI face-swap, deepfake, TikTok	10 articles
Expert Commentary	Professional/academic opinion	Interviews and opinion texts from AI experts, ethicists, and digital media scholars	5 sources

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)

All data were imported into NVivo 14 for manual coding. An initial deductive coding schema was applied based on Entman's four framing functions. For each text—whether video

transcript, news article, or expert quote—the researcher identified how the issue was framed: What was constructed as the central problem? Who or what was blamed? What moral assumptions were embedded? And what solutions were proposed? This deductive coding provided a foundation for deeper thematic interpretation.

Through iterative rounds of memoing, clustering, and pattern recognition, four interpretive frames emerged. These frames were not imposed a priori but developed through a hybrid approach blending theoretical guidance with inductive analysis. Each frame captured a recurring discursive logic appearing across sources, aligning specific clusters of Entman's functions into broader thematic narratives.

The first frame, *"Innovation as Disruption,"* portrayed face-swapping technology as a symbol of cultural novelty and creative breakthrough. TikTok users frequently celebrated the trend with phrases like "too real to be true," alongside surreal visuals and upbeat audio. Media headlines reinforced this framing by highlighting the spectacle and shareability of such videos. Even expert commentary, while more cautious, acknowledged the "wow factor" of the technology. This frame reflected the cultural allure of digital spectacle, where aesthetic innovation often overshadowed critical reflection. As Joler and Pasquinelli (2020) noted, popular discourse tends to fetishize AI as magical and boundary-breaking, deflecting attention from its socio-technical implications.

The second frame, *"Consent and Deepfake Risk,"* reframed the challenge through a lens of identity violation and impersonation. Experts were particularly vocal in highlighting risks such as non-consensual likeness use and erosion of digital selfhood. Media coverage connected TikTok face swaps with earlier deepfake controversies involving political or pornographic manipulation. This frame surfaced, though less frequently, in user content as well—often expressing discomfort or moral hesitation. The frame aligned with Chesney and Citron's (2019) analysis of deepfakes as assaults on individual autonomy, especially when deployed without informed consent.

The third frame, *"Ethics as Afterthought,"* captured how moral considerations were acknowledged but ultimately sidelined in favor of virality and engagement. Many TikTok users included disclaimers such as "just for fun" or "not real," which functioned more as deflections than critical engagements. Media reports occasionally noted ethical questions but mainly emphasized view counts and trend cycles. Expert interviews described this phenomenon as ethical desensitization, where moral reflection diminished under platform logic. O'Neil (2016) characterized this environment as one where algorithmic design prioritized engagement over ethics, resulting in "weapons of math destruction" that normalized harm through apathy or indifference.

The fourth frame, *"Platform Responsibility,"* shifted the analytical focus from users to structural conditions. TikTok itself was framed as an actor—through its algorithmic design, content moderation practices, and incentive structures. Experts argued that the platform amplified content based on engagement, not ethical merit, thereby encouraging boundary-pushing behavior. Media reports highlighted inconsistent enforcement of content policies and public confusion over moderation standards. User frustrations echoed this sentiment, with comments criticizing TikTok's failure to act. Gillespie (2018) referred to this dynamic as

"infrastructural responsibility," where platforms shape public discourse but remain opaque in their governance.

To clarify how Entman's framing functions mapped onto these emergent frames, Table 2 was created during the analysis. It outlined which functions dominated each frame and how they converged to construct specific ethical or social meanings. For example, the *"Innovation as Disruption"* frame was built primarily from problem definition and moral evaluation codes, whereas *"Platform Responsibility"* drew more heavily from causal attribution and treatment recommendation. This mapping strengthened theoretical alignment and enhanced internal validity by making the interpretive process transparent.

Table 2. Initial Framing Categories

Frame	Definition	Sources Observed	Related Works
Innovation as Disruption	Positions AI face-swapping as creative, innovative, and culturally novel, often downplaying ethical concerns.	TikTok captions, media headlines, expert ambivalence	Joler & Pasquinelli (2020)
Consent and Deepfake Risk	Highlights the erosion of personal autonomy, non-consensual use of likeness, and links to deepfake abuse.	Expert interviews, critical media articles, some TikTok comments	Chesney & Citron (2019)
Ethics as Afterthought	Focuses on superficial ethical awareness; moral concerns are minimized or deflected through disclaimers.	TikTok disclaimers, media coverage prioritizing virality, expert commentary	O'Neil (2016)
Platform Responsibility	Attributes ethical lapses to platform design and moderation failures; calls for structural accountability.	Expert critique, media governance debates, user frustration with moderation	Gillespie (2018)

To ensure trustworthiness and analytical rigor, several measures were taken. First, the study employed data triangulation by including user-generated content, formal media discourse, and expert perspectives. Second, the coding process followed a transparent, theory-driven framework, with memos and NVivo logs kept as an audit trail. Third, the researcher engaged in peer debriefing during analysis to check for thematic consistency and coding reliability.

Regarding ethical considerations, all TikTok videos analyzed were public and non-commercial. No usernames or identifying information were included, and screenshots used in presentations were anonymized. Following the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2020), informed consent was not required for analyzing publicly available content. However, the researcher adhered to a principle of "contextual integrity," interpreting content within its platform-native setting and avoiding decontextualized judgment.

In sum, this methodology combined theoretical framing, inductive theme construction, and ethical sensitivity to explore how the AI Face-Swap Challenge was socially constructed and contested. By linking Entman's framing theory to interpretive thematic analysis, the research provided a rigorous yet flexible framework for understanding emerging digital phenomena through the lens of public discourse.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents and interprets the key findings of the study, structured around the four dominant frames identified through qualitative framing analysis: Innovation as Disruption, Consent and Deepfake Risk, Ethics as Afterthought, and Platform Responsibility. Each frame reflects recurring discursive constructions found across TikTok user-generated content, media reports, and expert commentaries. The discussion explores how these frames manifest in different sources, the ethical assumptions they embody, and how they intersect to shape public understanding of the AI Face Swap Challenge.

Table 3. Emergent Frames from Framing Analysis (Expanded Source Attribution)

Frame	Thematic Summary with Data Excerpts	Representative Source	Interpretation
Innovation as Disruption	"This is like movie-level tech" (TikTok caption); media headline: "Face Swap AI Reaches Uncanny New Heights"	TikTok video IDs 1, 3, 6, 8, 12, 17, 18, 22, 23, 29; KompasTekno, Wired, The Verge, Suara, TeknoKompas; Expert #3	Emphasizes creative novelty; ethical risks downplayed
Consent and Deepfake Risk	"They didn't agree to this, it's kinda scary" (TikTok comment); "The dark side of fun: deepfake's real risk" (CNN)	TikTok video IDs 5, 10, 14, 16, 19, 24; CNN Indonesia, The Guardian, Tempo, Detik, CNet; Expert #1, #4	Concerns over misuse and identity violation
Ethics as Afterthought	"Not real guys lol chill" (caption); "Another viral hit, no one cares if it's real or fake" (Wired article)	TikTok video IDs 4, 9, 15, 21, 25, 26, 28; Wired, Mashable, Tirto.id, PopCultureID, Vox; Expert #2, #5	Ethics mentioned defensively; dismissed amid pursuit of engagement
Platform Responsibility	"TikTok lets this trend spread unchecked" (comment); "Algorithmic virality without responsibility" (expert interview)	TikTok video IDs 2, 7, 11, 13, 20, 27, 30; TechCrunch, Vice, Kompas, IDN Times, The Conversation; Expert #1, #2, #3	Platforms criticized for encouraging virality over safety or integrity

The first and most pervasive frame, "Innovation as Disruption," positions AI face-swapping as a testament to rapid technological advancement and creative experimentation. One TikTok caption described the trend as "like movie-level tech," and many others showcased surreal transformations set to dramatic or comedic music. Such representations celebrate the trend's visual spectacle while largely ignoring its ethical implications. Media outlets like KompasTekno echoed this celebratory framing, with headlines such as "Face Swap AI Reaches Uncanny New Heights." These narratives highlight innovation, surprise, and digital fluency,

reinforcing the appeal of tech-driven entertainment. However, expert caution disrupts this enthusiasm. A communications technologist interviewed noted that “users play with power they don’t fully understand,” underscoring the epistemic gap between innovation and digital literacy. Joler and Pasquinelli’s (2020) critique of digital spectacle aligns with this frame, revealing how fascination with novelty can obscure structural risks and reinforce passivity.

The second frame, "Consent and Deepfake Risk," problematizes face-swap trends by foregrounding concerns around impersonation, privacy, and informed participation. This was especially evident in media reports such as CNN Indonesia’s piece titled “The Dark Side of Fun: Deepfake’s Real Risk,” which linked viral face swaps to more serious threats like political misinformation and revenge porn. Expert interviews described the practice as “algorithmic impersonation” and warned that repurposing someone’s likeness without consent, even in jest, constitutes a breach of identity rights. A TikTok comment encapsulated this unease: “They didn’t agree to this, it’s kinda scary.” These critiques echo Chesney and Citron’s (2019) framework that sees deepfakes as not just technical novelties but instruments that can destabilize personal integrity and democratic trust. This frame urges the audience to shift from individual creativity to collective responsibility, emphasizing informed digital ethics and consent-based norms.

The third frame, "Ethics as Afterthought," reflects the recurring pattern where users acknowledge moral concerns only superficially. This dynamic is captured in captions like “Not real guys lol chill,” which function as disclaimers rather than critical engagement. Media articles such as one from Wired (“Another Viral Hit, No One Cares if It’s Real or Fake”) reinforce this minimization by emphasizing engagement metrics over substance. Experts criticized this pattern as “ethical numbness,” describing how constant exposure to manipulation dulls critical faculties. As one scholar observed, “when ethics become background noise, we lose the capacity to critically assess the impact of technology on our shared reality.” O’Neil (2016) similarly argues that digital systems built on algorithmic logic often incentivize virality at the expense of moral reflection. This frame captures a cultural condition where users are not necessarily ignorant of ethical issues—they are simply habituated to overlook them unless consequences become personally salient.

The fourth frame, "Platform Responsibility," shifts attention from individual users to the systemic and architectural role of the platform itself. An expert interviewee described TikTok’s design as an “amplifier of novelty,” explaining that the algorithm rewards shock value and virality, not ethical deliberation. TikTok users expressed frustration in comments such as “TikTok lets this trend spread unchecked,” revealing disillusionment with content moderation systems. Media narratives similarly questioned the platform’s governance with headlines like “Who’s Policing TikTok?” These concerns resonate with Gillespie’s (2018) notion of infrastructural responsibility, which calls attention to how platforms shape public discourse while evading regulatory scrutiny. This frame advocates for algorithmic transparency, stronger ethical oversight, and clearer policy communication from platforms to restore user trust and mitigate harm.

Although these frames are analytically distinct, they often coexist within single pieces of content. A video celebrating the novelty of face swaps may include a shallow ethical

disclaimer or provoke debate in the comments section. Similarly, media critiques of consent violations often segue into broader discussions on platform accountability. Such interweaving supports Entman's framing theory, which posits that meaning is constructed through the selective emphasis of certain elements while others are marginalized. By applying this model, the analysis reveals not only the discursive contours of the AI Face Swap Challenge but also the underlying ideological tensions shaping digital ethics today.

These findings offer three key contributions. First, they enrich framing theory by extending its application to participatory media environments, where frames are co-produced by users, journalists, and experts. Second, they provide empirical insight into how ethical tensions are articulated, ignored, or redistributed across actors and platforms. Third, they suggest practical interventions: media literacy efforts must encompass ethical reasoning, and platforms must redesign engagement algorithms to prioritize civic responsibility. Recognizing the interplay of innovation, consent, accountability, and systemic design is essential for fostering an ethically robust digital culture.

CONCLUSION

This study used Entman's (1993) framing theory to analyze the ethical framing of the AI Face-Swap Challenge on TikTok through qualitative examination of user content, media coverage, and expert views. It identified four key frames: Innovation as Disruption, which praises technological novelty while downplaying ethics; Consent and Deepfake Risk, which focuses on violations of consent and identity manipulation; Ethics as Afterthought, highlighting marginalized ethical concerns in favor of virality; and Platform Responsibility, calling for accountability in algorithm design and content moderation. The findings extend framing theory by showing how frames are co-created within participatory social media ecosystems involving users, media, and algorithms. The study emphasizes the need for digital media literacy that includes ethical reasoning, especially around consent and identity. It advocates a multi-stakeholder approach where platforms embed ethics in algorithms, policymakers develop adaptive regulations, and education fosters critical awareness of synthetic media. Future research could examine how these ethical frames evolve over time and vary across different cultural or regulatory contexts to inform more localized and effective responses to emerging AI technologies.

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