



Inclusivity and Social Status Representation in Rucas's TikTok Content as a Branding Strategy

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ABSTRACT: Despite the growing scholarly attention to TikTok as a branding platform, there remains a gap in understanding how local fashion brands construct inclusivity through visual representation of marginalized social groups—particularly informal workers. This study addresses this gap by examining @rucas.official, an Indonesian fashion brand whose transformation content has attracted 1.9 million followers and 129.6 million likes, making it a significant yet underexplored case of emotional branding through social representation. Using Stuart Hall's encoding–decoding model, this article analyzes how Rucas constructs meanings of inclusivity and social status in transformation videos featuring waste pickers and parking attendants, and how audiences interpret those meanings. The analysis draws on visual observation of selected TikTok videos, documentary data, and public comment analysis. Findings reveal that Rucas encodes inclusivity through three structured phases: the before phase (social reality), the process phase (dignity and care), and the after phase (identity transformation through streetwear aesthetics). Audience responses reflect dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. The study concludes that inclusive branding on short-form video platforms can deepen emotional engagement, but must be accompanied by ethical transparency regarding consent, compensation, and long-term well-being of the subjects portrayed.

Keywords: Branding; encoding-decoding; inclusivity; Rucas; Social Status Representation; TikTok

1. Introduction

Brands increasingly use inclusivity as a branding strategy in the digital era, particularly on TikTok, to build closer relationships with their audience [1, 2]. Short-form video has become a strategic tool for shaping brand identity, perceptions, and social values, rather than merely serving entertainment purposes. With its emphasis on visuals, music, and viral trends, TikTok has emerged as an effective platform for capturing audience attention, particularly among Gen Z and millennials [3]. Within the fashion industry, historically associated with exclusivity and specific class standards, a growing number of brands now feature individuals from diverse economic backgrounds as part of their identity-building strategies. Research consistently shows that younger consumers are more engaged with brands that reflect values of diversity

and inclusivity [4, 5], and that inclusive branding enhances emotional connection and consumer trust [6].

A critical research gap exists, however, at the intersection of inclusivity representation and emotional branding in short-form video content: while existing studies have examined brand loyalty, purchase intent, and audience reception of Rucas's content [8, 9–13], none has systematically analyzed the semiotic and representational mechanisms through which inclusivity meanings are constructed and decoded. This gap is significant because representation of lower socioeconomic subjects in commercial content raises questions about meaning construction, ethical framing, and potential commodification of social identity.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Rucas (@rucas.official), a local Indonesian fashion brand, constructs and communicates meanings of inclusivity through its TikTok transformation videos. The central research question is: how does Rucas's encoding process construct representations of inclusivity and social status in TikTok content as a branding strategy? The study aims to: (1) analyze the visual and semiotic codes used across the three phases of Rucas's transformation content; and (2) map potential audience interpretations using Hall's decoding framework.

As of May 2026, @rucas.official had accumulated 1.9 million followers and 129.6 million total likes on TikTok (Figure 1). The account's content strategy prominently features individuals from the informal workforce, such as waste pickers and parking attendants, as subjects in makeover videos. Its three-stage formula (before, process, and after) constructs a consistent narrative of social transformation through fashion.

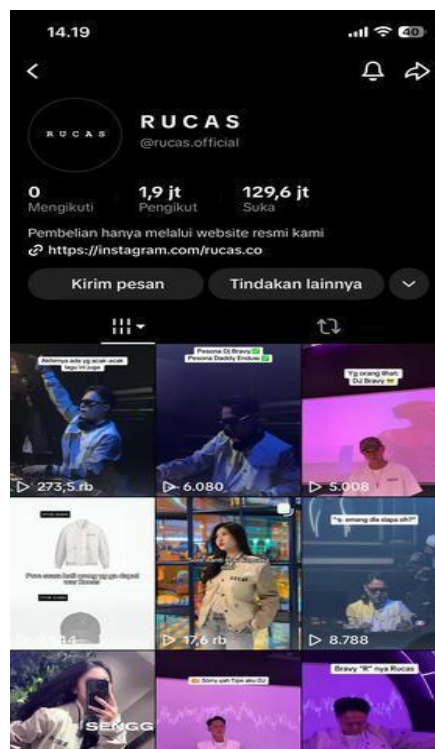


Figure 1. Official TikTok account of Rucas (@rucas.official), illustrating follower count and total engagement metrics as of May 2026. Source: TikTok (@rucas.official).

The uniqueness of Rucas' marketing strategy lies in its three-stage content pattern for appearance transformations. These stages comprise the subject's initial condition in their everyday context ("before"), the grooming process, and the final aesthetic outcome after

wearing Rucas products ("after"). This tripartite structure serves as a consistent content formula that projects inclusivity while fostering emotional proximity with the audience. In this context, the representation constructed by Rucas functions not merely as a reflection of social reality, but as a semiotic construction of meaning formed through visual language, symbols, and signs [8]. Consequently, this study employs Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model as an analytical framework to examine how the meaning of inclusivity is constructed within Rucas' TikTok transformation content.

Extant literature on Rucas predominantly focuses on audience reception, brand loyalty, and the efficacy of emotional branding [3, 8–12]. Prior research demonstrates that Rucas' collaborative content featuring members of the general public, such as parking attendants and waste pickers, establishes profound emotional connections with the audience through deliberate collaborator selection, vivid visualizations, and humanistic storytelling [12]. Concurrently, previous findings indicate that Rucas' emotional branding strategy significantly enhances consumer purchase intent [13]. This article analyzes Rucas' encoding process in constructing the meaning of inclusivity through visual elements, subject selection, and narratives of transformation, while mapping the potential interpretive positions of the audience using Hall's model. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question: *How does Rucas' encoding process construct representations of inclusivity and social status in TikTok content as a branding strategy?* This investigation is necessitated by contemporary shifts in social media branding, which no longer focus exclusively on product promotion but increasingly involve constructing social values, identities, and representations of marginalized groups within digital spaces.

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks: Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, theories of inclusivity and social status representation, and the emotional branding approach within visual communication. Originally developed as a critique of linear communication theories that treat messages as stable objects with fixed meanings, the encoding-decoding model conceptualizes communication as a dynamic process [14]. Within this framework, encoding refers to the process by which a message creator produces meaning through cultural codes, signs, and symbols embedded within a specific social context. Conversely, decoding represents the process by which the audience interprets these messages—an interpretation that frequently diverges from the encoder's intended meaning due to the audience's distinct cultural backgrounds, social experiences, and ideological positions [15]. Hall identifies three interpretive positions within the decoding process: a dominant/hegemonic reading, wherein the audience fully adopts the encoder's intended meaning; a negotiated reading, wherein the audience accepts the broader dominant narrative but adapts it to personal circumstances; and an oppositional reading, wherein the audience rejects the dominant meaning entirely, replacing it with an alternative, opposing interpretive framework [16].

Hall's model is highly salient here because the subjects selected for Rucas' content directly intersect with issues of inclusivity and social status. Inclusivity in communication entails ensuring equitable representation for individuals across diverse social, economic, or cultural backgrounds [17, 18]. While media representations of social status traditionally reinforce socio-economic hierarchies, an inclusive approach seeks to democratize representation by highlighting subjects rarely featured in mainstream fashion narratives [19]. Thus, the meanings derived from these inclusive representational choices constitute a non-

neutral, ideological statement by the brand regarding the intersection of fashion, identity, and social status. The emotional dimension of meaning construction in Rucas' content can be operationalized through the frameworks of emotional branding and emotional investment. Literature suggests that emotional branding transcends mere product attributes to focus on the values, experiences, and affective connections forged between a brand and its consumers [20]. Within this paradigm, content serves as a mechanism to cultivate affective closeness through narrative structure, visual aesthetics, and the engagement of social issues.

This perspective is further reinforced by the concept of emotional investment, which denotes the audience's psychological engagement with media content, manifest in the attention, empathy, and emotional energy they expend while processing a message [21]. Scholars emphasize that the efficacy of media content relies not only on information transmission but also on its capacity to generate emotional resonance [22]. When viewers experience a connection with the depicted subject and narrative, they exhibit a greater cognitive capacity to comprehend the message, retain the visual experience, and engage behaviourally, whether through digital interaction, brand advocacy, or social reflection. In Rucas' TikTok strategy, emotional investment is generated through transformation narratives anchored in socio-economic realities. The selection of marginalized subjects, the depiction of their initial circumstances, the grooming intervention, and the final reveal collectively form an emotional arc designed to optimize audience engagement. This content shifts the focus from mere alterations in physical appearance to an affective experience rooted in recognition, dignity, and self-actualization. Consequently, consumers perceive the product not merely as apparel, but as an artifact within a broader narrative of human transformation.

Theoretical precedents indicate that content characterized by high emotional density and acute social relevance exhibits greater virality, as it compels audiences to feel personally implicated in the dissemination of the message [23]. This principle aligns closely with Rucas' transformation content, which synthesizes visual elements, social commentaries, and emotional appeals. In this context, visual communication operates as the primary vector for emotional branding. Elements such as image composition, facial expressions, proxemics, visual contrasts, and streetwear iconography function as cultural codes encoded by the brand and subsequently decoded by the audience [24]. Through this semiotic matrix, Rucas secures the audience's emotional investment, repositioning the commercial commodity as a symbol of transformation, empowerment, and social recognition. These three frameworks operate as an integrated analytical system: Hall's model clarifies how meaning is produced and negotiated; the concept of inclusivity defines the core socio-cultural values of the message; and emotional branding explicates how these narratives strategically cultivate consumer proximity. On TikTok, algorithmic architectures that optimize for engagement metrics and watch time inherently facilitate the propagation of emotionally and socially resonant content, allowing it to penetrate audiences far beyond the brand's immediate follower base [3]. These structural dynamics generate a digital ecosystem wherein local fashion brands can simultaneously drive brand awareness and emotional affiliation. Consequently, analyzing the encoding-decoding dynamics of TikTok content provides critical academic and practical insights for designing inclusive, commercially viable, and ethically responsible communication strategies.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research object and selection criteria.

The primary object of this research is the content hosted on the official Rucas TikTok account (@rucas.official), specifically its transformation video series featuring individuals from the informal socio-economic sector. To ensure analytical rigor, sample selection was dictated by three explicit criteria requiring that videos feature clearly identifiable subjects employed within the informal labor workforce, fully utilize the standardized three-phase narrative format of the "before" state, the grooming process, and the "after" reveal, and demonstrate high levels of audience engagement as a proxy indicator of heightened social relevance. Applying these criteria yielded two primary units of analysis. The first is a scavenger transformation video uploaded on February 25, 2026 (ID: 7416613716722076933), which garnered approximately 101,000 likes and 858 comments, while the second is a parking attendant transformation video uploaded in 2024, which generated approximately 744,900 likes. The longitudinal observation window for monitoring secondary engagement metrics spanned from February to May 2026, encompassing two distinct weekly upload cycles.

2.2. Data collection techniques.

Empirical data were gathered utilizing two complementary methodologies comprising systematic visual observation and documentary analysis [25]. The systematic visual observation involved granular analysis of the TikTok video content and chronological screenshots extracted from the official account, paying close attention to formal visual elements including pre- and post-transformation aesthetics, the subjects' facial expressions, sartorial transformations, spatial backdrops, composition, and proxemic body postures. Concurrently, the documentary analysis involved reviewing peer-reviewed academic journals, foundational textbooks, and prior empirical studies addressing media representation, inclusivity, corporate branding, and the encoding–decoding model. Additionally, qualitative audience comment data were purposively sampled from the comment sections of the selected videos to empirically substantiate the subsequent decoding analysis.

2.3. Data validity and triangulation.

To ensure methodological robustness and construct validity, this study implemented three distinct triangulation strategies [25, 26]. Source triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing primary visual codes with empirical audience comment data and existing literature evaluating Rucas' corporate messaging [8, 12, 13]. Theoretical triangulation was executed by intersecting multiple analytical frameworks, specifically Hall's encoding–decoding model, Barthesian semiotics, Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic visual grammar, and contemporary emotional branding theory, which ensured that qualitative interpretations were not contingent upon a single theoretical bias. Finally, visual data triangulation was conducted by comparatively mapping identical visual codes across the two separate transformation videos to verify the structural consistency of the brand's encoding patterns.

2.4. *Data analysis procedure.*

The qualitative data analysis was executed sequentially in two stages, beginning with an encoding analysis and concluding with a decoding analysis. The encoding stage isolated, cataloged, and interpreted the visual codes embedded across the three transformation phases, integrating Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to differentiate denotative and connotative meanings [27] alongside Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar focusing on spatial composition, participant gaze, and framing techniques [28], to systematically dissect how cultural codes construct representations of inclusivity and social status. Following this, the decoding analysis drew upon Hall's communication model [14] to theoretically map the three potential audience interpretive stances, namely dominant/hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings, which were then validated and contextualized using the purposively sampled audience comment data collected from the respective TikTok videos.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on systematic observations of the TikTok account @rucas.official, this study isolates two primary video units for qualitative analysis. The first is the "Scavenger Transformation Content," which chronicles an elderly male working within an urban informal waste management context. The second is the "Parking Attendant Transformation Content," which features a middle-aged male employed as an informal street-parking attendant. Both texts strictly adhere to a standardized tripartite narrative formula consisting of three distinct chronological phases: the "Before" phase (the baseline socio-economic condition), the "Process" phase (the grooming intervention), and the "after" phase (the aesthetic transformation achieved via Rucas products).

3.1. *Encoding analysis: three phases of meaning construction.*

3.1.1. *TikTok culture, transformation videos, and algorithmic visibility.*

Before analyzing the specific narrative phases of Rucas' content, it is conceptually necessary to situate this phenomenon within the broader landscape of TikTok's visual culture. The architectural algorithms governing TikTok disproportionately privilege media assets that optimize for high completion rates, acute emotional resonance, and rapid user shareability [3]. Transformation videos—fundamentally structured around a stark, visible before-and-after binary—align precisely with these algorithmic incentives by engineering suspense, psychological gratification, and social commentary within compressed temporal windows. Consequently, this format has crystallized into a distinct genre of short-video aesthetics characterized by accelerated editing rhythms, high-contrast visual juxtapositions, and affective auditory cues [1]. Within this digital matrix, Rucas' transformation content occupies a unique locus, synthesizing the established genre conventions of standard makeover media with socially resonant representations of the informal labor sector. This hybridization simultaneously amplifies user engagement and socio-cultural relevance, yielding texts that achieve high algorithmic velocity while functioning concurrently as forms of public social critique. Decoupling this dual functionality is essential to interpreting how notions of inclusivity and human dignity are semiotically encoded and subsequently decoded by the audience.

3.1.2. Before phase: representation of social reality.

The "Before" phase serves as the semiotic baseline of the encoding process, wherein Rucas constructs an authentic representation of the subject's immediate socio-economic reality. The visual codes deployed throughout this segment communicate a lower-income background without lapsing into overt melodramatic exploitation. Settings situated in public urban spaces, such as marginal sidewalks and congested roadsides, function as connotative signs that simultaneously signify urban marginality and raw authenticity [27]. Furthermore, the subjects' attire—comprising worn t-shirts, distressed shorts, flip-flops, or bare feet—operates as highly legible class markers within the cultural vocabulary of the Indonesian digital public. The subjects' body language, characterized by hunched postures, passive sitting positions, and neutral or flat facial expressions, encodes an internal state of restricted social agency and low self-confidence. Interpreted through Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic visual grammar, these bodily configurations manifest as "closed" vectors that visually communicate social withdrawal and vulnerability [28]. Rucas' strategic encoding choices here avoid presenting poverty as a voyeuristic spectacle, opting instead to portray a dignified human subject. This approach aligns with contemporary scholarship on mediated poverty, which advocates for representational frameworks that acknowledge structural socio-economic inequality while strictly preserving the human dignity of the subject [19, 29]. Consequently, the "Before" phase establishes an empathetic connection without reducing the subject to an object of pity, maintaining a critical ethical balance within visual communication practices [30].

3.1.3. Process phase: care as an inclusive action.

The "Process" phase constitutes the most distinctive ideological element of Rucas' encoding strategy. Diverging from conventional makeover media that hinges on an immediate binary jump from baseline to final reveal, Rucas explicitly foregrounds the intermediate grooming labor—including bathing and professional haircutting—as a core narrative driver. This phase encodes deliberate acts of care and the explicit recognition of human dignity, expanding the content's scope beyond mere commodity promotion. Viewed through the analytical lens of care ethics, the acts of bathing and grooming transcend basic hygiene to encode relational care, signaling that the marginalized subject is intrinsically worthy of dedicated attention, comfort, and human nurturance. This visual demonstration corresponds with Noddings' formulation of care as a morally significant act of focused attention and responsiveness [31]. Concurrently, the professional barbershop intervention encapsulates a public performance of emotional labor [32]. The specialized, highly focused attention externalized by the barber communicates to the viewer that the informal worker is entitled to the exact same tier of service quality typically reserved for affluent consumers. These visual codes construct dignity and inclusivity through active, observable conduct rather than abstract rhetorical assertions. This operates as a semiotic mechanism of motivated naturalization, wherein complex ideological statements regarding human equality are seamlessly encoded through the seemingly natural, matter-of-fact documentation of interpersonal care [27].

3.1.4. After phase: construction of a new identity through fashion.

The "After" phase represents the culmination of the brand's encoding process, deliberately re-engineering the subjects' external identities through the deployment of Rucas streetwear

products. The stylistic convergence of minimalist t-shirts, contemporary hoodies, tailored pants, and sunglasses constructs a highly legible modern urban streetwear aesthetic. The sudden transition in the subjects' body language—shifting from passive to active, and from closed to open configurations—serves as the primary visual code denoting a psychological transformation in self-actualization. Applying Hall's theory of representation, Rucas orchestrates this identity shift through three distinct layers of visual codes [14]. First, product codes utilize clean, modern sartorial cuts to encode a democratization of style, framing contemporary fashion as an accessible resource rather than an elite luxury. Second, accessory codes utilize sunglasses as a widespread signifier of subcultural capital and "coolness" within Indonesian popular culture. Third, behavioral and postural codes manifested as an upright spine, a confident forward stride, and a calm, self-assured facial expression, introduce "open" body vectors that denote newfound social presence and empowerment [28]. The profound visual divergence from the initial baseline constitutes the core semiotic operation of Rucas' strategy: the immediate before-and-after juxtaposition effectively deconstructs the traditional sociological link between structural social class and fashion desirability.

3.1.5. Visual narrative and transformation grammar.

The three phases function collectively as a grammar of transformation—a visual narrative structure analogous to what Kress and van Leeuwen [28] describe as “narrative representations,” in which vectors of action and change connect participants across visual frames. As summarized in Table 1, the transformation process is communicated through consistent shifts in spatial composition, camera framing, and body posture. Spatial composition progresses from confined, ground-level environments in the *Before* phase to open, well-lit spaces in the *After* phase, creating a visual metaphor for social mobility. Camera framing follows a similar trajectory: close-up shots emphasizing the subject's face, work tools, and daily environment in the *Before* phase transition into full-body shots highlighting posture, clothing, and confident movement in the *After* phase. Likewise, body posture evolves from inward, restrained vectors to outward, expansive vectors, visually encoding the brand's central claim that fashion can serve as a vehicle for dignity, confidence, and self-expression. This visual grammar is not neutral. Rather, it draws upon deeply embedded cultural codes related to appearance, cleanliness, social aspiration, and self-presentation. Rucas strategically mobilizes these codes to construct a preferred meaning of inclusive transformation. Consequently, the grammar of transformation functions as an ideological statement that challenges conventional fashion hierarchies and promotes the idea that style, dignity, and self-expression should be accessible across social classes.

3.1.6. Synthesis: encoding analysis.

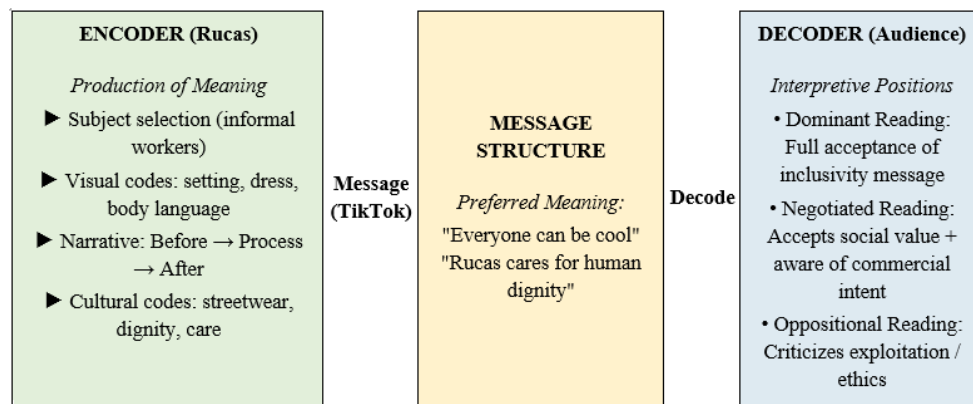
The findings of the encoding analysis are summarized in Table 1. Across the three phases, Rucas constructs a coherent narrative that links inclusivity, care, and personal transformation to the brand identity. Through the strategic use of visual elements and cultural symbols, the content encodes a dominant message that fashion can act as a medium for recognition, dignity, and social visibility.

Table 1. Summary of encoding analysis across the three phases of Rucas transformation content.

Phase	Visual Elements	Cultural Codes	Constructed Meaning	Preferred Meaning (Dominant Meaning Encoded by Rucas)
Before (Social Reality)	Tattered clothing, flip-flops or bare feet, roadside or street settings, neutral facial expressions, sacks and work tools	Authentic markers of lower socioeconomic status; marginalized urban environment	“This is the reality of the subject’s social condition,” creating empathy and authenticity without overt exploitation	Individuals from marginalized social groups possess inherent dignity and deserve recognition; Rucas positions itself as a brand that acknowledges and values those often overlooked
Process (Grooming and Care)	Bathing, haircuts, barbershop scenes, helping hands, grooming activities	Personal care as restoration of dignity; grooming as an expression of equality and respect	“Everyone deserves care and attention,” portraying Rucas as a compassionate brand	Rucas offers more than clothing; it promotes care, respect, and human dignity as core brand values
After (New Identity)	Rucas apparel (T-shirts, hoodies, pants), sunglasses, upright posture, confident walking style	Streetwear as a universal form of self-expression; fashion as social empowerment	“Everyone can be stylish and confident,” presenting fashion as a means of identity transformation	Rucas products function as vehicles of self-expression and transformation accessible to all social groups, reinforcing inclusivity as both a social and commercial value proposition

3.2. Decoding analysis: mapping potential audience interpretations.

Based on Stuart Hall’s encoding–decoding model, audiences may adopt three interpretive positions when engaging with Rucas’s transformation content. Before discussing these positions, it is important to outline the analytical framework used in this study. Figure 2 illustrates the encoding–decoding process as applied to Rucas’s TikTok content, demonstrating how the brand constructs meaning through visual and cultural codes and how audiences may decode those meanings from different ideological perspectives.

**Figure 2.** Application of Stuart Hall’s encoding–decoding model to Rucas’s TikTok transformation content.

3.2.1. Dominant/hegemonic reading.

Audiences adopting the dominant or hegemonic reading fully accept the preferred meaning encoded by Rucas. From this perspective, the transformation content is interpreted as an inspiring inclusivity campaign that recognizes the dignity of informal workers and demonstrates that social status should not limit self-expression through fashion. Accordingly, Rucas is perceived as a brand that genuinely values social equity and promotes the idea that “everyone can be cool.” This interpretation aligns with previous studies indicating that many Gen Z audiences perceive Rucas’s content as a positive representation of social equality and inclusivity [8]. As shown in Table 2, audience comments strongly support this reading position. Highly engaged comments include statements such as “Rucas never fails to find a model... this is character” (28,600 likes) and “This is the definition: everyone can be cool if their needs are

met” (21,300 likes). Several comments also emphasize themes of humanity, respect, and appreciation for ordinary people. Notably, phrases such as “the real humanization of humanity” emerged organically across audience responses, suggesting that viewers had successfully internalized the preferred meaning encoded by the brand. In Hall’s terms, this reflects a successful uptake of the dominant meaning intended by the encoder [14].

Table 2. Supporting comment data for decoding analysis: seventeen purposively selected comments from @rucas.official TikTok Content (October 2024).

No.	Username	Likes	Comment (Translated from Indonesian)	Decoding Position
1	aldi.sptr	28,600	“Rucas never fails to find a model... this is character.”	Dominant Reading
2	Rini Indah	21,300	“This is the definition: everyone can be cool if their needs are met. Great job, Rucas. Stay healthy, Dad.”	Dominant Reading
3	Meyy.	21,100	“Rucas should be the ambassador for the elderly, guys.”	Dominant Reading
4	Wulan Winardhi	22	“Their manners are extraordinary. From sitting side by side on the street, carrying sacks, wiping their hands before sitting down—so simple.”	Dominant Reading
5	I love you	7	“I always cry when I see models like this because they know how to treat people with humanity.”	Dominant Reading
6	sheilaa	2,860	“RUCAS is so cool. Thank you for including ordinary people. I’m so proud of you.”	Dominant Reading
7	H V A	18	“The real humanization of humanity.”	Dominant Reading
8	reskyananda_001	4	“Great. Business is going well, and it’s useful and helps others too.”	Negotiated Reading
9	hanna27ya	4	“Since I can’t afford it, I’d like to ask everyone to buy RUCAS products so there will be more models in the future.”	Negotiated Reading
10	nvmputraa	8	“Free advertising for Lifebuoy.”	Negotiated Reading
11	ulaaaa	505	“It’s not that I don’t want expensive celebrities; I want to prove that ordinary people deserve to look cool too.”	Negotiated Reading
12	Baby Ragnala	14	“Because of this brand’s kindness, I follow them wholeheartedly.”	Negotiated Reading
13	Farhan Saputra	0	“After that, the old man went back to collecting scrap; they were just looking for content, not helping people.”	Oppositional Reading
14	fayzz’	9	“The next day was just like the days before.”	Oppositional Reading
15	Djm	4	“After that, back to business as usual.”	Oppositional Reading
16	suka-skadimas	107	“Did they take the outfit back or give it to him?”	Oppositional Reading
17	FEER ALFAS	4	“Give him a decent job, bro.”	Oppositional Reading

3.2.2. Negotiated reading.

Audiences occupying the negotiated position generally accept Rucas’s message of inclusivity while simultaneously recognizing its commercial purpose. Rather than viewing the social and commercial dimensions as contradictory, these audiences acknowledge that both can coexist within the same content. This position reflects a relatively high level of media literacy, whereby audiences appreciate the social value of the campaign while remaining aware that it also functions as a branding strategy. Evidence of this interpretation can also be observed in Table 2. One commenter stated, “Great. Business is going well, and it’s useful and helps others too,” explicitly recognizing both the commercial success and social contribution of the brand. Another commenter encouraged others to purchase Rucas products so that similar

transformation content could continue in the future. Such responses indicate that audiences may support the brand’s commercial objectives when they perceive them as generating positive social outcomes. Consequently, negotiated readings represent a balanced form of audience engagement that combines appreciation, critical awareness, and continued brand support.

3.2.3. Oppositional reading.

A smaller yet analytically significant group of audiences adopts an oppositional reading. From this perspective, Rucas’s transformation content is interpreted as a form of poverty commodification or the visual exploitation of socially vulnerable groups. Although the content may appear empathetic, oppositional viewers question whether the representation ultimately serves the interests of the subjects or the commercial interests of the brand. As presented in Table 2, oppositional comments frequently challenge the permanence and authenticity of the transformation process. Examples include statements such as “The next day was just like the days before,” “They were just looking for content, not helping people,” and “Give him a decent job.” These comments raise several ethical concerns regarding the representation of marginalized individuals in commercial media. First, audiences’ question whether subjects provide fully informed consent regarding the commercial use of their image. Second, they question whether participants receive compensation proportional to the value generated by the content. Third, they challenge whether temporary appearance changes can be considered meaningful social intervention or structural support. These concerns are consistent with broader discussions regarding the ethics of poverty representation in digital media [30]. Although oppositional readings receive considerably lower engagement than dominant readings, they remain important from an analytical perspective because they reveal the ethical tensions embedded within inclusive branding practices. Their presence suggests that transparency regarding participant consent, compensation, and post-production welfare may be essential for maintaining the credibility and ethical legitimacy of socially oriented branding campaigns. From Stuart Hall’s perspective, Rucas successfully employs cultural codes widely understood by the Indonesian public: flip-flops as a symbol of the lower economic class, sunglasses as a symbol of coolness, and the haircut process at a barbershop as a symbol of aspiration. By placing subjects from the lower class within the context of these “cool” codes, Rucas deconstructs the association of class with fashion and constructs a new meaning that “cool” is a universal right.

3.3. Summary of audience decoding positions.

The findings of the decoding analysis are summarized in Table 3. Overall, the audience responses indicate that the dominant reading position received the greatest engagement, particularly in terms of likes and positive sentiment. Negotiated readings reflected a more critical yet supportive stance, whereas oppositional readings represented a smaller but analytically important segment of the audience that raised ethical concerns regarding representation and social impact.

Table 3. Summary of audience decoding positions toward Rucas’s transformation content.

Decoding Position	Audience Characteristics	Typical Responses (Supported by Comment Data)	Implications for Branding
Dominant Reading (7 of 17 comments; highest engagement)	Fully accepts the preferred meaning; demonstrates high empathy and emotional involvement	Expressions of admiration, emotional responses, praise for the brand, and repeated use of phrases such as “humanizing humanity”; comments received the highest engagement levels (up to 28,600 likes)	Strong emotional connection, increased brand loyalty, positive word-of-mouth promotion, and reinforcement of brand identity
Negotiated Reading (5 of 17 comments)	Accepts the inclusivity message while recognizing the brand’s commercial objectives; critically supportive	Appreciation of the social message combined with awareness of marketing intentions; some comments explicitly encourage product purchases to support future initiatives	Development of a rational yet loyal consumer base; sustained support for the brand’s commercial ecosystem
Oppositional Reading (5 of 17 comments; relatively low engagement)	Rejects the preferred meaning; questions ethical aspects of representation and the sustainability of social impact	Criticism regarding potential exploitation, concerns about participant compensation, and skepticism regarding the long-term effects of the transformation	Provides valuable ethical feedback and highlights the need for greater transparency regarding consent, compensation, and participant welfare

To further illustrate the positive audience reception associated with the dominant reading position, Figure 3 presents examples of transformation content that generated exceptionally high engagement. The videos received 744,900 and 1.2 million likes, respectively, indicating the strong emotional resonance of Rucas’s transformation narratives among TikTok users.



Figure 3. Examples of “After” transformation content published by @rucas.official on September 6, 2024, generating high audience engagement (744,900 Likes and 1.2 Million Likes). Source: TikTok (@rucas.official).

The encoding–decoding analysis demonstrates that Rucas’s transformation content functions as a structured representational system. The *Before* → *Process* → *After* formula is not merely a content format but a three-act visual narrative that reconstructs social hierarchies through fashion. The strength of this representation lies in the authenticity of its encoding: Rucas does not rely on professional models, does not conceal the subjects’ social conditions,

and explicitly presents care as a humanistic act rather than merely an aesthetic device. Rucas's encoding process operates through two interconnected layers of meaning: inclusivity and commercial interest. Rather than being contradictory, these dimensions exist in productive tension, generating the diversity of audience responses reflected in the three decoding positions. The presence of negotiated and oppositional readings confirms that representations of inclusivity in digital media are interpreted in diverse ways rather than being received uniformly. Furthermore, the ethical concerns raised by oppositional audiences—including issues of compensation, informed consent, and the long-term impact on participants—are significant and should be proactively addressed by Rucas through more transparent, ethical, and socially responsible communication practices.

4. Conclusions

Rucas's TikTok transformation content constructs representations of inclusivity through three structured encoding phases: the Before phase builds empathy through authentic social representation; the Process phase encodes dignity and care through grooming acts; and the After phase constructs a new identity through streetwear codes accessible to all. Together, these phases form a visual narrative that deconstructs fashion's class associations and encodes the preferred meaning that "anyone can be cool." Audience decoding reveals three interpretive positions: dominant reading (full acceptance of the inclusivity message), negotiated reading (acceptance of social values with awareness of commercial intent), and oppositional reading (ethical critique of representation and impact sustainability). These findings affirm Stuart Hall's encoding–decoding model as a productive framework for analyzing social representation in digital branding and demonstrate that TikTok's algorithmic environment amplifies emotionally resonant inclusive content. Practically, Rucas's three-phase formula offers a replicable model for local fashion brands. However, ethical obligations regarding subject consent, fair compensation, and post-production well-being are as critical as aesthetic effectiveness. Future research should develop empirical reception studies through interviews and focus groups, incorporate subjects' own perspectives, and conduct comparative analysis of inclusive branding strategies across local fashion brands.

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Author Contribution

Rahmadina Aulia: conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, writing (original draft), editing. Rocky Prasetyo Jati: writing (methodology, data collection), editing.

Competing Interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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