

Beyond Engagement: Monetisation Conversion in TikTok LIVE Among Malaysian Celebrities and Influencers

MOHD NASRUL FAIZ ABU AZAL*
ABDUL LATIFF AHMAD
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between audience engagement and monetised participation within TikTok LIVE sessions involving Malaysian celebrities and social media influencers. While previous research has examined livestream engagement, parasocial interaction and virtual gifting motivations, less attention has been given to why high engagement does not always coincide with stronger economic participation. Guided by Affordance Theory, the study uses an affordance-informed engagement-to-monetisation framework to examine how interactional and platform conditions are associated with different monetisation patterns. Using qualitative content analysis, 20 publicly accessible TikTok LIVE sessions recorded between 6 and 11 April 2026 were analysed. The analysis focused on observable session-level patterns of audience interaction, gifting activity, emotional and competitive interaction, host acknowledgement and alternative monetisation channels. The findings show that high engagement could remain primarily social, with several highly interactive sessions recording relatively low gifting activity. Higher gifting was more frequently observed during emotionally charged and competitive PK battle interactions involving urgency, public visibility and host prompting. Host acknowledgement was also closely associated with the visibility of gifting, particularly for higher-value contributions. In addition, low TikTok gifting did not always indicate an absence of monetisation, as some sessions incorporated external tipping systems or product-oriented economic participation. The study contributes by distinguishing audience engagement and monetised participation as related but analytically separate forms of livestream participation. It highlights the need to interpret engagement metrics and monetisation outcomes separately within contemporary livestream environments.

Keywords: *TikTok live, virtual gifting, livestream monetisation, audience engagement, creator economy.*

INTRODUCTION

The creator economy has expanded alongside livestreaming platforms such as TikTok LIVE, where audience interaction and monetisation increasingly take place within the same real-time environment. Virtual gifting has become one of the most visible monetisation mechanisms, allowing audiences to provide financial support to creators during livestream sessions. Beyond its transactional function, virtual gifting also reflects broader forms of audience participation, social interaction and platform-based monetisation within a wider creator economy (Volkmer & Meißner, 2024). This context is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where internet use reached 98.3% in 2025 and 99.7% of internet users reported participating in social networking platforms (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2026). These figures indicate a highly connected digital environment in which livestream interaction and monetisation have become increasingly relevant.

*Corresponding author: p151496@siswa.ukm.edu.my

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Audience engagement is central to how livestream platforms function, but it can take different forms. Existing research shows that livestream participation is shaped by social interaction, entertainment, emotional connection and a sense of community (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). Viewers can participate continuously through comments, reactions, likes and other forms of real-time interaction. Interactive communication can also support monetised behaviour, including virtual gifting, although the relationship is not automatic (Yang et al., 2023). Livestream engagement can therefore support monetisation without being equivalent to monetised participation.

Virtual gifting has received growing scholarly attention as a monetised form of audience participation. Research suggests that gifting is shaped by emotional, relational and socially visible motivations rather than by financial exchange alone. Enjoyment, emotional attachment, parasocial interaction, social recognition and community participation have all been associated with viewers' willingness to send virtual gifts (Tang et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Lin & Lee, 2024). Competitive environments, virtual badges and public visibility can further strengthen gifting participation by making contributions more noticeable within the livestream (Hsieh et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). Together, these studies position virtual gifting as both an economic contribution and a socially meaningful form of participation.

However, the relationship between audience engagement and monetised participation remains less clear. Existing studies identify several conditions associated with gifting intention or behaviour, including social interaction, emotional satisfaction, competition and platform visibility (Yang et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2022; Archer et al., 2025). These findings show that engagement-related conditions can support gifting, but they do not establish that high audience engagement will necessarily produce monetised participation. Audiences may remain highly active through comments, reactions and relational interaction without contributing economically. This points to an engagement–monetisation gap in which social and economic participation may occur within the same livestream without developing in parallel.

In this study, monetised participation refers primarily to observable audience economic contribution through virtual gifting. Alternative channels, including external tipping and product purchases, are treated as related forms of monetisation where visible within the livestream. The term “conversion” is used as an analytical description of session-level patterns in which monetised participation becomes more visible alongside particular forms of audience engagement and interaction. It does not refer to a confirmed behavioural transition by individual viewers. The unresolved question is therefore not simply why audiences engage or why they send gifts, but under what interactional conditions engagement is associated with stronger monetised participation and when it remains non-monetised.

The Malaysian context is analytically relevant because TikTok participation increasingly intersects with influencer culture, livestream commerce and audience–creator interaction. Malaysian studies show that social media influencers have become visible actors in digital communication, with audience responses shaped by relatability, authenticity and credibility (Hamid et al., 2022; Li & Chan, 2025). Research published in JKOM also highlights the role of TikTok influencers and internet celebrities in shaping trust, audience response and purchase-related behaviour in Malaysia (Arfan et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023). TikTok livestreaming has also developed as a local commerce and interaction space where creators, audiences and monetisation practices overlap (Ariffin et al., 2024).

The sample includes both mainstream celebrities and social media influencers. Mainstream celebrities are public figures whose visibility was established primarily through traditional entertainment or media industries, while influencers are creators whose public visibility was built mainly through digital platforms. Although these categories may overlap, Malaysian research distinguishes them in terms of perceived credibility, relatability and audience response (Li & Chan, 2025; Lim et al., 2023). This distinction is relevant because livestream interaction may operate differently across creator types even when both occupy highly visible positions within the platform environment.

Affordance Theory provides a useful lens for examining the engagement–monetisation gap because platform features create possibilities for action without determining how users will respond to them (Evans et al., 2017). Within TikTok LIVE, audiences may comment, react, compete, gain visibility or contribute economically, but the availability of these possibilities does not mean that social participation will necessarily be accompanied by virtual gifting. Research on livestream affordances similarly shows that platform-enabled interaction can support gift-giving and purchase intention, although outcomes depend on how users engage with the possibilities available to them (Lu et al., 2023). An affordance perspective therefore allows engagement and monetised participation to be examined as related but distinct forms of participation.

Against this background, the study examines the relationship between audience engagement and monetised participation in TikTok LIVE sessions involving Malaysian mainstream celebrities and social media influencers. Rather than treating “conversion” as a confirmed shift in individual viewer behaviour, the analysis focuses on observable session-level patterns and the interactional conditions associated with stronger or weaker monetised participation. Particular attention is given to emotional interaction, competitive structures, host responses and the monetisation systems visible within each livestream context. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does audience engagement relate to monetised participation across TikTok LIVE sessions involving Malaysian celebrities and influencers?

RQ2: Under what interactional and platform conditions is audience engagement associated with stronger or weaker monetised participation?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to clarify why high audience engagement may remain non-monetised in some livestream contexts while stronger economic participation is observed in others. It extends existing discussions of livestream engagement and virtual gifting by focusing on the conditions that distinguish social participation from monetised participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Livestreaming platforms enable audiences to participate in real time through comments, reactions, likes and direct interaction with hosts. As livestreaming becomes more closely integrated with platform economies, these forms of participation have become important not only for audience engagement but also for creator visibility, community-building and monetisation (Volkmer & Meißner, 2024). Research on livestream participation consistently points to social, relational and emotional motivations rather than entertainment alone. Social interaction, community belonging and interpersonal connection can sustain participation,

while social presence and emotional involvement may also make audiences more responsive to hosts and other viewers (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2023; Lin & Lee, 2024).

Taken together, this body of work suggests that livestream engagement develops through continuous interaction between hosts and audiences. Sustained communication can strengthen attachment and encourage longer-term participation, particularly when audiences perceive the livestream as socially meaningful rather than purely transactional (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2020). However, relational engagement and economic participation should not be treated as equivalent outcomes. Social connection may deepen audience involvement without necessarily explaining when that involvement becomes monetised.

Virtual gifting represents a distinct form of monetised participation because it involves direct economic contribution rather than ordinary interaction such as commenting or reacting. Within the creator economy, however, gifting is not purely transactional. Existing studies point to emotional, social and symbolic motivations including enjoyment, social recognition, perceived fairness, parasocial attachment and the desire to support or be noticed by creators (Tang et al., 2024; Archer et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2024). Virtual gifts therefore carry both financial and social meaning within visible livestream environments.

Relational and emotional conditions appear particularly important in shaping willingness to contribute financially. Social presence, emotional closeness and positive viewing experiences have been associated with stronger gifting intentions, suggesting that monetised participation may become more likely when audiences are emotionally involved in the interaction rather than simply present within it (Lin & Lee, 2024; Liu et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023). Host communication can further strengthen audience attachment and responsiveness during livestreams (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2020). Across these studies, gifting can therefore be understood as an interactional form of economic participation embedded within ongoing host–audience relationships rather than as an isolated purchase decision.

Platform structures can also shape the visibility and social significance of gifting. Competitive environments, virtual badges, public rankings and visible interaction systems can link economic contribution to recognition, social comparison and competitive participation (Hsieh et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). More broadly, social media engagement features acquire value through how users engage with them rather than through their technical availability alone (Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023). This suggests that emotional involvement, host interaction and platform visibility may combine differently across livestream contexts, making monetised participation more salient in some situations than others.

Despite growing research on livestream engagement and virtual gifting, the relationship between engagement and monetised participation remains underexplained. Much of the literature focuses on gifting intention, motivation or factors associated with spending rather than on differences between highly engaged sessions that generate strong gifting and those that do not (Yang et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024; Lin & Lee, 2024). Existing findings nevertheless suggest that the relationship is conditional: emotional satisfaction, interaction quality and sustained relational communication may matter beyond interaction frequency alone (Liu et al., 2022; Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2020). What remains less clear is why comparable levels of audience activity may be accompanied by different monetisation patterns across livestream contexts.

Recent research also points to a broader diversification of creator monetisation. Social media gifting studies remain fragmented across platform monetisation, fandom, audience participation and creator economy research (Volkmer & Meißner, 2024), while creators increasingly rely on multiple revenue streams across platform environments (Rieder et al., 2023). Payment systems themselves may also shape how monetisation is organised and experienced within livestream environments, suggesting that economic participation cannot always be reduced to virtual gifting alone (Yao et al., 2025). Together, these studies indicate that monetisation may take different forms depending on the platform structures and revenue mechanisms available.

Within Malaysia, recent studies have examined TikTok influencers, audience trust, internet celebrity culture and livestream commerce (Arfan et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023; Ariffin et al., 2024). These studies establish the growing importance of creator–audience interaction and commercial activity in the local digital environment, but they do not directly explain why highly engaged livestreams may produce different levels or forms of monetised participation.

The present study addresses this gap by examining session-level patterns between audience engagement and monetised participation across TikTok LIVE sessions involving Malaysian celebrities and social media influencers. Rather than assuming a direct transition from social interaction to gifting, the analysis focuses on the emotional, competitive, host-related and platform conditions associated with different monetisation patterns. It also considers whether economic participation remains within TikTok’s gifting system or appears through alternative channels visible during the livestream. In doing so, the study extends existing research beyond explanations of why audiences engage or why they may be motivated to gift towards a clearer understanding of when engagement remains non-monetised and when stronger monetised participation is observed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses Affordance Theory to explain how platform environments make particular forms of interaction and monetised participation possible without determining how users will act. Gibson (1979) conceptualised affordances as possibilities for action that arise in relation to an actor and the environment. Applied to digital platforms, this means that the presence of a feature does not by itself produce a particular behavioural outcome. Norman (2013) later extended the concept into human–technology interaction by emphasising how design can make possible actions more visible and recognisable. For TikTok LIVE, this distinction is useful because commenting, visibility and gifting may be available within the same environment while being used differently by audiences.

Within communication research, affordances are understood as relational rather than as fixed technological properties. Their significance develops through the interaction between users, platform characteristics and the context in which technology is used (Nagy & Neff, 2015; Evans et al., 2017). The same platform feature may therefore support different forms of action depending on how users perceive and use it. Social media research extends this view by identifying possibilities such as visibility and association while also stressing the need to distinguish between platform features, affordances and behavioural outcomes (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Ronzhyn et al., 2023). This distinction allows TikTok LIVE to be examined in terms of the possibilities it creates for interaction, recognition, competition and monetisation without assuming uniform outcomes across livestream contexts.

Recent research further shows that social and economic forms of participation can coexist within the same platform. Scharlach and Hallinan (2023) demonstrate that users may engage selectively with social media features such as liking, commenting and sharing, while Lu et al. (2023) show that livestream affordances can support gift-giving and purchase intentions. Together, these studies suggest that opportunities for interaction and economic participation do not necessarily produce the same user response.

Building on this perspective, the present study treats audience engagement and monetised participation as related but distinct possibilities within TikTok LIVE. Audiences may comment, react and participate actively without contributing through virtual gifts. In other contexts, emotional interaction, competition, visibility and host responses may coincide with stronger economic participation. Affordance Theory therefore helps explain why similar opportunities for engagement may be associated with different monetisation patterns across sessions, without assuming that platform features or audience interaction automatically produce gifting. This perspective provides the theoretical basis for the engagement-to-monetisation conceptual framework developed in the following section.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the reviewed literature and Affordance Theory, the study develops an affordance-informed engagement-to-monetisation framework to guide the analysis of TikTok LIVE participation. The framework was established before the findings were interpreted and serves as an analytical guide rather than an outcome of the analysis. Audience engagement may remain social and relational without becoming economic, while monetised participation may become more visible when emotional activation, competitive interaction and host reinforcement occur alongside opportunities for economic contribution. Platform affordances underpin these possibilities by shaping interaction, visibility, competition, recognition and monetisation within the livestream environment. Rather than treating monetisation as an inevitable outcome of engagement, the framework proposes that different monetisation patterns may occur under different interactional and platform conditions.

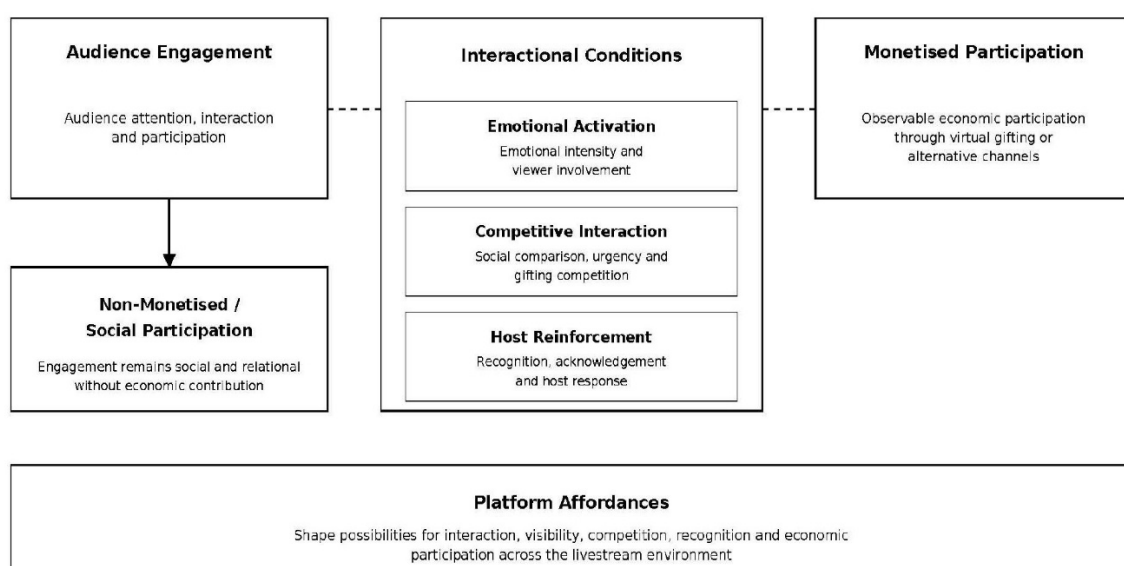


Figure 1: Proposed affordance-informed engagement-to-monetisation framework for TikTok LIVE

As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework treats monetisation conversion as a context-dependent pattern involving audience engagement and a set of interactional conditions within TikTok LIVE. Emotional activation, competitive interaction and host reinforcement are not presented as fixed or sequential stages. Instead, they represent conditions that may be associated with stronger or weaker monetised participation across livestream contexts. Platform affordances operate across the framework by shaping the possibilities available for interaction, visibility, recognition and economic participation. Audience engagement may therefore remain non-monetised, occur alongside virtual gifting or coincide with alternative forms of economic participation depending on the conditions present within a particular session. The framework guides the analysis of these varying engagement and monetisation patterns.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach using qualitative content analysis to examine the relationship between audience engagement and monetised participation within TikTok LIVE sessions involving Malaysian celebrities and social media influencers. Consistent with the study's definition of conversion, the analysis focuses on observable session-level patterns rather than tracking behavioural changes among individual viewers. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining context-dependent interaction and meaning within naturally occurring communication settings (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Qualitative content analysis provides the main analytical approach for systematically examining interaction patterns, gifting activity, host responses and other forms of participation observed during the livestream sessions. The approach allows both descriptive identification of recurring behaviours and interpretive analysis of how these behaviours relate across different contexts (Lindgren et al., 2020). This makes it suitable for analysing livestream environments where social interaction and economic participation occur together but may take different forms across sessions.

Affordance Theory informed the analysis by sensitising attention to possibilities for interaction, visibility, competition, recognition and economic participation within TikTok LIVE. The theory was used as an analytical lens rather than as a predetermined coding structure, allowing platform-related patterns to be considered alongside behaviours emerging from the data.

The primary unit of analysis was the recorded TikTok LIVE session. Within each session, the analysis also examined audience comments, gifting moments, host responses, leaderboard visibility, PK battle interactions and observable emotional or competitive exchanges. These sub-units were used to identify how different forms of engagement and monetised participation appeared within and across sessions.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select cases relevant to the study objectives. Eligible accounts were Malaysian mainstream celebrities and social media influencers observed conducting publicly accessible TikTok LIVE sessions during the data collection period. The inclusion of both groups was intended to capture different forms of public visibility and livestream interaction within the Malaysian digital content environment. A total of 20 TikTok LIVE sessions were selected for analysis. The final sample displayed variation in livestream formats, interaction styles, audience engagement and gifting activity. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, the emphasis was placed on the analytical relevance of

the selected cases rather than generalisation to all Malaysian TikTok LIVE creators (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Data were collected through screen recordings of publicly accessible TikTok LIVE sessions using smartphones and tablets. The recordings were collected between 6 and 11 April 2026. A total of 20 livestream recordings were included, with each recorded segment ranging from 15 to 30 minutes and a combined duration of approximately 8 hours and 26 minutes. The recordings captured audience comments, host interaction, gifting moments, visual interface elements and other observable monetisation-related activity.

The recordings consisted of selected segments from ongoing livestream sessions rather than complete broadcasts. Recording began when an eligible creator was observed to be live on TikTok, based on convenience and real-time availability rather than on the presence of gifting or other monetisation activity. The researcher then observed and recorded the session for 15 to 30 minutes. Segments were not selected on the basis of gifting or other monetisation activity. However, because the recordings captured only 15–30-minute segments of ongoing livestreams, some episodic gifting activity may have occurred outside the recorded period.

The researcher did not intervene in the livestreams or interact with hosts or viewers during data collection. The recordings therefore captured naturally occurring communication and observable behaviour within the public livestream environment.

The coding process combined deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding was informed by existing literature on livestream engagement, virtual gifting, emotional interaction, social participation and monetisation, while inductive coding allowed additional patterns to emerge from the recorded sessions. Affordance Theory sensitised the analysis to platform-related possibilities for interaction, visibility, competition, recognition and economic participation, but it was not used as a fixed coding template. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the recordings and coded recurring interactional and monetisation-related behaviours. Coding was conducted manually using Microsoft Excel to organise codes, categories and cross-case comparisons across the 20 livestream sessions. Although the sample size of 20 sessions was predetermined, recurring patterns became increasingly evident during the analysis and later cases yielded limited new analytical categories. Saturation was not used as a formal stopping criterion, but increasing recurrence across later cases indicated that the main analytical patterns had become relatively stable. Initial codes included engagement intensity, gifting activity, emotionally charged interaction, competitive interaction, host acknowledgement, passive participation and audience visibility.

Qualitative content analysis served as the main analytical approach, with codes progressively grouped into broader categories through comparison across cases (Lindgren et al., 2020). These categories included passive engagement, emotional and competitive interaction, host reinforcement and alternative monetisation patterns. Thematic analysis principles were then used to organise and refine these categories into broader patterns of meaning rather than as a separate analytical method (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This process involved repeated familiarisation with the recordings, review of coded material, comparison across sessions and refinement of the final themes. The analysis therefore moved from descriptive coding of observable livestream behaviour towards interpretive comparison of engagement and monetisation patterns across the dataset.

Trustworthiness was supported through repeated viewing of the livestream recordings, systematic coding and cross-case comparison across different creator types and livestream formats. Interpretations were checked against the recorded material and

compared across cases to ensure that the themes remained grounded in observable interaction rather than isolated examples. As the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, intercoder agreement was not used as a measure of reliability. Instead, analytical consistency was supported through repeated review of the recordings and consistent application of coding categories across the dataset. These procedures strengthened the transparency and credibility of the analysis while recognising the interpretive role of the researcher in qualitative content analysis (Lindgren et al., 2020).

The study used publicly accessible TikTok LIVE content and involved no interaction with hosts or viewers. No private or sensitive personal information was used in the analysis, which focused only on observable interaction and communication within the recorded livestream sessions.

Engagement and gifting intensity were classified using qualitative ordinal categories ranging from Very Low to Very High. Engagement was assessed using three observable indicators: the speed of audience comments, the frequency and volume of comments and the frequency of host–viewer interaction. Gifting intensity was assessed based on the frequency of gifting events, the number of gifts observed and the visible value of gifts where this information was available. The classifications were based on the overall pattern of these indicators within each recorded segment rather than on predetermined numerical cut-off points. Categories were assigned comparatively across the 20 sessions to distinguish relatively lower and higher levels of engagement and gifting activity.

Table 1 provides an overview of the 20 TikTok LIVE sessions included in the analysis, including livestream type, interaction style, engagement level, gifting intensity and the observed monetisation pattern in each case.

Table 1: Overview of TikTok LIVE cases and observed monetisation patterns

Case	Type of LIVE	Interaction Style	Engagement	Gifting	Observed Monetisation Pattern
C1	Singing Performance	Relaxed	Moderate	Low–Moderate	Micro-gifting participation
C2	Casual Interaction	Low-interaction	Low–Moderate	Low	Limited monetised participation
C3	PK Battle	Competitive	Very High	High	High gifting during competitive interaction
C4	PK Battle	Competitive	Moderate–High	Moderate	Moderate gifting during competitive interaction
C5	Casual Q&A	Relaxed	High	Low	High engagement with low gifting
C6	Casual LIVE	Low-interaction	Very Low	Very Low	Minimal monetised participation
C7	PK Battle	Competitive	Moderate	Low	Low gifting during competitive interaction
C8	PK Battle (3 Hosts)	Highly competitive	Very High	High	High gifting during multi-host competitive interaction
C9	PK Battle	Emotionally charged	Very High	High	High gifting during emotionally charged interaction
C10	Casual Interaction	Relaxed	Moderate	Low	Low-level micro-gifting
C11	Gaming LIVE	Performance-focused	Moderate	Very Low	Very low gifting during gaming interaction
C12	Gaming LIVE	Performance-focused	Moderate	Low–Moderate	Low–moderate gifting during gaming interaction
C13	Promotional LIVE	Commercial	High	Low	High engagement with low gifting during promotional LIVE
C14	Casual Q&A	Relaxed	High	Low	High engagement with low gifting

C15	Gaming + Entertainment	Humorous	High	Low	External monetisation observed
C16	Gaming LIVE	Event-focused	Moderate	Very Low	Very low gifting during event-focused interaction
C17	Skill-sharing LIVE	Informational	High	Low	High engagement with low gifting in informational interaction
C18	Family LIVE	Intimate	Very High	Low	Very high engagement with low gifting
C19	Casual Celebrity LIVE	Relaxed	Very High	Low–Moderate	Very high engagement with low–moderate gifting
C20	High Visibility LIVE	Relaxed	Very High	Low–Moderate	Very high engagement with low–moderate gifting

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis identified four recurring patterns in the relationship between audience engagement and monetised participation across the 20 TikTok LIVE sessions. Table 2 summarises the main themes, key interaction characteristics, representative cases and the main analytical patterns observed across the dataset.

Table 2: Summary of main findings and monetisation patterns

Theme	Key Characteristics	Representative Cases	Main Analytical Insight
High Engagement Does Not Guarantee Monetisation	High interaction, active commenting and strong audience visibility with limited gifting activity	C5, C18, C19, C20	High audience engagement may remain social and relational without corresponding high levels of gifting.
Emotional and Competitive Interaction Associated with Higher Gifting	PK battles, emotionally charged exchanges, urgency and coordinated audience participation	C3, C8, C9	Higher gifting was observed in sessions where emotional intensity and competitive interaction were prominent.
Host Reinforcement and Monetised Participation	Host acknowledgement, emotional response and repeated recognition of gifting viewers	C1, C3, C12	Host recognition was observed alongside continued gifting activity in several sessions.
Alternative Monetisation and Platform Alignment	External tipping systems, product-selling activity and limited reliance on TikTok gifting	C11, C13, C15, C16	Economic participation was not always concentrated within TikTok gifting and, in some sessions, was associated with alternative monetisation channels.

The following sections examine each pattern in greater detail through cross-case comparison of interaction, gifting activity and other observable forms of monetised participation.

a. High Engagement Does Not Guarantee Monetisation

The first recurring pattern was a mismatch between high audience engagement and relatively low gifting activity. This pattern was observed across Cases C5, C18, C19 and C20, where active commenting and host–viewer interaction were visible but gifting remained low or low–

moderate. These cases show that high audience participation did not necessarily coincide with high monetised participation.

In C18, an ex-reality television celebrity conducted a family-oriented livestream characterised by intimate and conversational interaction. Viewers participated actively through continuous comments and exchanges with the host. Despite this high level of engagement, gifting remained low throughout the recorded segment. A similar pattern appeared in C5, a casual question-and-answer session that recorded high engagement but low gifting. In both cases, active interaction occurred without a comparable level of economic participation.

Cases C19 and C20 showed the same pattern at an even higher level of engagement. Both recorded very high engagement while gifting remained low–moderate. Viewers participated actively through comments and repeated interaction, but the gifts observed were predominantly small and repetitive. Across C5, C18, C19 and C20, differences in engagement intensity were therefore not consistently matched by equivalent differences in gifting intensity.

This pattern qualifies earlier research linking social interaction, emotional involvement and parasocial connection with participation and gifting (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024; Lin & Lee, 2024). The present cases do not contradict these relationships, but show that such conditions were not sufficient on their own to produce high gifting. From an affordance perspective, audiences could actively use possibilities for interaction and visibility without using monetisation possibilities to the same extent (Evans et al., 2017; Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023). At the session level, social participation and monetised participation therefore appeared related but distinct.

b. Emotional and Competitive Interaction Associated with Higher Gifting

In contrast to sessions where high engagement coincided with limited gifting, Cases C3, C8 and C9 showed higher gifting during emotionally charged and competitive PK battle interactions. Across these cases, gifting occurred alongside urgency, visible competition, host prompting and coordinated audience participation. These patterns suggest that emotional and competitive conditions were associated with stronger monetised participation than engagement alone.

In C3, the host repeatedly instructed viewers to coordinate gifting during time-sensitive booster periods. During one sequence, the host stated, “Triple point kita masuk, baling dekat situ” (“When the triple points start, send the gifts there”), directing viewers towards a specific point in the PK battle. Higher gifting activity was observed during these periods of host instruction, countdown pressure and visible competitive scoring. Leaderboard visibility and booster functions were also present, making audience contributions publicly visible within the competitive structure of the session.

C8 displayed a similar pattern within a multi-host PK battle characterised by playful conflict, punishment mechanisms and competitive exchanges. During one high-intensity moment, a host responded to receiving a high-value gift by stating, “Yay dapat KLCC, kau ada? Aku berkuasa now!” (“Yay, I got a KLCC gift, do you have one? I’m the powerful one now!”). Gifting remained high during these competitive exchanges, where gifts were publicly acknowledged and incorporated into the interaction between hosts. The session therefore showed how gifting could become part of the visible performance of competition rather than remaining a separate economic activity.

C9 involved a more confrontational form of competitive interaction. During the PK battle, the host challenged the opposing audience by stating, “Lu diam boleh tak? Followers you miskin” (“Can you just stay quiet? Your followers are poor”). High gifting was observed alongside the emotionally charged exchanges that followed. Within this setting, gifts were publicly visible and became part of the ongoing competition between hosts and their audiences.

Across C3, C8 and C9, higher gifting was consistently observed when competition, emotional intensity and public visibility were prominent within the livestream interaction. However, the observational design does not establish that these conditions directly caused viewers to send gifts. Rather, the cases show that stronger gifting activity coincided with interactional contexts in which host prompting, time pressure, competitive scoring and visible audience participation were particularly salient.

This pattern is consistent with previous research linking competitive arousal, public visibility and emotionally engaging communication with virtual gifting behaviour (Hsieh et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). It also supports the view that gifting may carry social and symbolic meaning within livestream interaction rather than functioning only as a financial transaction (Tang et al., 2024). In the present cases, gifts operated as visible contributions within an ongoing competitive interaction, allowing audience participation to become economically expressed within the PK battle environment.

From an affordance perspective, these cases illustrate how possibilities for competition, visibility and gifting can become more salient under particular interactional conditions. The platform features were available across TikTok LIVE, but higher gifting in these cases coincided with their use within emotionally intensified, time-sensitive and publicly competitive interaction. This pattern supports the conceptual framework’s distinction between general audience engagement and the interactional conditions associated with stronger monetised participation.

c. Host Reinforcement and Monetised Participation

A third pattern concerned the relationship between host responses and gifting activity. Across Cases C1, C3 and C12, gifts that received stronger acknowledgement from the host were generally more visible within the interaction, particularly when they involved higher-value contributions.

In C1, a casual singing livestream showed differences in how the host responded to gifts of different value. Smaller gifts often received limited acknowledgement, while higher-value gifts were accompanied by more visible verbal appreciation and emotional response. These moments occasionally interrupted the performance and redirected attention towards the gifting event.

A similar pattern appeared in C12, a gaming livestream. Smaller gifts attracted limited attention, whereas higher-value gifts were more likely to receive an immediate host response. The host temporarily shifted attention away from gameplay during these moments, increasing the visibility of the gifting event within the session.

In C3, host acknowledgement was particularly visible during competitive gifting. The host repeatedly recognised audience contributions, including the statement, “Kak terima kasih kak! Semoga Allah balas jasa awak” (“Thank you so much sis! May God repay your kindness”). Such acknowledgements occurred alongside continued gifting activity and made individual contributions publicly visible within the wider competitive interaction.

Across the three cases, higher-value or strategically important gifts tended to receive more visible host responses than smaller contributions. This pattern is consistent with research linking social presence, emotional engagement and public recognition with virtual gifting (Chen et al., 2024; Lin & Lee, 2024; Wang et al., 2025). The findings do not establish that recognition directly caused further gifting, but show that acknowledgement and monetised participation frequently occurred together. From an affordance perspective, gifting could therefore operate not only as an economic function but also as a publicly recognised form of participation within the livestream.

d. Alternative Monetisation and Platform Alignment

The final pattern showed that low TikTok gifting did not always correspond with an absence of observable monetisation activity. Cases C11, C13 and C15 contained alternative forms of monetisation alongside relatively low TikTok gifting, while C16 provided a contrasting case in which gifting remained largely episodic.

In C11, a gaming livestream recorded moderate engagement but very low TikTok gifting. The host gave greater attention to SocialBuzz notifications than to smaller TikTok gifts, making the external tipping system more prominent within the recorded interaction. TikTok gifting therefore represented only one form of monetised participation in the session.

A similar pattern appeared in C15, where a humorous gaming and entertainment livestream generated high engagement but low TikTok gifting. SocialBuzz activity was visibly incorporated into the interaction and received host acknowledgement, indicating that TikTok gifting alone did not represent the full monetisation environment surrounding the session.

C13 involved a different economic structure. The promotional livestream recorded high engagement but low gifting while product-related activity was integrated into the session. Monetisation was visibly organised around product promotion and purchasing opportunities rather than virtual gifting, demonstrating that commercial participation within TikTok LIVE can take different forms.

C16 differed from these cases. The gaming livestream recorded moderate engagement and very low overall gifting, although brief increases were observed during particular event-focused or emotionally heightened moments. No clear alternative monetisation channel dominated the recorded segment. Instead, gifting appeared intermittent rather than continuous.

Taken together, these cases qualify the use of TikTok gifting as the sole indicator of livestream monetisation. Previous research identifies virtual gifting as an important revenue mechanism while also showing that creators may operate across diversified monetisation systems (Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Tang et al., 2024; Rieder et al., 2023). The present findings similarly show that observable economic activity could occur through virtual gifting, external tipping or product-oriented monetisation. This does not establish that viewers consciously preferred one channel over another, but shows that multiple economic possibilities were visible across the recorded cases.

From an affordance perspective, the prominence of these monetisation channels varied according to how livestreams were organised and how hosts incorporated them into the interaction (Evans et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2025). Monetised participation should therefore not be assessed through TikTok gifting alone: low gifting could coincide with alternative monetisation activity, while in other sessions monetisation remained limited or episodic.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that audience engagement and monetised participation were related but distinct across the 20 TikTok LIVE sessions. High engagement could remain primarily social, while stronger gifting was more often observed in sessions characterised by emotional intensity, competition, host recognition or particular monetisation structures. This addresses the first research question by showing that audience engagement did not consistently correspond with the level of monetised participation observed across sessions.

The second research question concerned the conditions associated with stronger or weaker monetised participation. Sessions involving PK battles, countdown pressure, emotionally charged exchanges and visible competitive scoring recorded higher gifting than many casual or relational livestreams. These patterns do not establish that such conditions directly caused gifting, but they indicate that stronger gifting frequently coincided with contexts in which competition, emotional intensity and public visibility were prominent. This is consistent with research linking emotional involvement, competitive interaction and public visibility with virtual gifting behaviour (Yang et al., 2023; Hsieh et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). Host recognition also formed part of the interaction surrounding monetised participation. Higher-value gifts were often accompanied by stronger acknowledgement, emotional response or temporary shifts in host attention. Although the findings cannot establish that recognition generated further gifting, they show that monetised participation could become more socially visible when incorporated into host–audience interaction. This supports previous work linking social presence, emotional engagement and recognition with gifting behaviour (Chen et al., 2024; Lin & Lee, 2024).

From an affordance perspective, these patterns illustrate that the availability of platform features does not determine how they will be used. Gifting, commenting, competition and visibility were available within the same platform environment, yet their prominence varied across sessions. Audience engagement could remain non-monetised, while gifting became more visible under particular emotional, competitive and recognition-related conditions. This supports a relational understanding of affordances in which platform possibilities acquire significance through their use within specific social contexts (Evans et al., 2017; Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023).

The Malaysian context was also visible in the language and references surrounding monetised interaction. Expressions such as “Semoga Allah balas jasa awak” connected gifting acknowledgement with a locally recognisable form of gratitude, while references to “KLCC” and the remark “followers you miskin” embedded local status references, humour and confrontation within competitive interaction. These examples should not be treated as representative of Malaysian livestream culture as a whole, but they show how locally meaningful language can become part of monetised interaction. The prominence of PK battles is also relevant to wider Malaysian discussion around virtual gifting and competitive livestream practices, which has attracted regulatory attention over concerns about spending on in-app gifts (Bernama, 2025).

A further contribution concerns alternative monetisation channels. In several sessions, low TikTok gifting occurred alongside SocialBuzz activity or product-oriented monetisation. TikTok gifting therefore provided only a partial view of economic participation in some livestreams. This is consistent with research showing that creators increasingly operate across diversified revenue streams and platform arrangements (Rieder et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2025). The findings suggest that monetised participation may occur through virtual

gifting, external tipping or commercial purchasing depending on how economic opportunities are incorporated into a livestream.

Taken together, the findings refine the study's affordance-informed engagement-to-monetisation framework. Audience engagement should not be treated as a fixed first stage that inevitably progresses towards monetisation. Social participation may remain non-monetised, stronger gifting may coincide with particular interactional conditions and economic participation may also occur through alternative channels. The theoretical contribution therefore lies in distinguishing engagement and monetisation as connected but analytically separate forms of participation within the same livestream environment.

The findings also have practical implications. For creators, high comment activity or audience visibility should not be treated as direct evidence of monetisation potential. Greater attention should be given to how recognition, gifting and other economic options are incorporated into interaction without assuming that engaged viewers will contribute financially. For platform operators, the findings highlight the importance of transparency around gifting, competitive features and alternative monetisation pathways, particularly in emotionally intense or time-sensitive environments. For researchers and digital strategists, engagement metrics should therefore be interpreted separately from observable economic participation.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study analysed 20 selected segments rather than complete livestreams, meaning that some gifting peaks or monetisation activity may have occurred outside the 15–30-minute recording periods. Second, the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, so intercoder agreement was not available. Third, engagement and gifting classifications were comparative rather than based on predetermined numerical thresholds. Fourth, visible gifting activity did not always provide complete transaction values, limiting precise comparison of economic contribution across sessions. Finally, the study examined session-level patterns rather than tracking individual viewers, so it cannot establish whether particular viewers moved from engagement to gifting or identify their motivations.

Future research could combine livestream observation with interviews, surveys or platform-level behavioural data to examine audience motivations more directly. Comparative studies across creator categories, platforms and cultural contexts could also clarify whether the patterns identified here are specific to TikTok LIVE or reflect wider developments in livestream creator economies.

Overall, monetised participation within TikTok LIVE was not an automatic extension of audience engagement. Engagement could remain social, coincide with virtual gifting or occur alongside alternative forms of economic participation depending on the interactional and platform conditions present within a session. By distinguishing these patterns, the study provides a more precise account of the engagement–monetisation relationship among Malaysian celebrities and social media influencers.

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BIODATA

Mohd Nasrul Faiz Abu Azal is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Research in Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia. His research interests include livestream communication, virtual gifting, creator economy, social media interaction and digital communication. Email: p151496@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Associate Prof. Dr. Abdul Latiff Ahmad is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Research in Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia. Email: alba@ukm.edu.my

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