Being Young and Political:
The Influence on Instagram Activism of Indonesian Female Activists Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic

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コロナ禍による行動規制もあって、アジア各国でもSNSで政治・社会的な発信をする若者が増えている。インドネシアの若き女性インフルエンサーたちを例に、その影響力を検証した。

Abstract

The notion of influencer has attracted plenty of academic responses over the last decade. Since the rise of the internet and social network in the digital world, people have finally found a more accessible and open medium for opinion and speech through their posts, tweets, or captions. The rise of social media facilitates social interaction and political discussion. It has the function of the public sphere as a network for communicating information and points of view (Habermas in Kellner, 2000), especially during the pandemic of Covid-19. The objects of this study are three notable millennial female influencers from Indonesia where they actively contribute their political activism that is also related to certain political parties and governments. Moreover, they have been gaining popularity from their post-sharing and political activism on Instagram.

By investigating these influencers based on their Instagram's contents, this study explores how political discussions flow and their activism which they have contributed and shared to the audience and society. Thus, their influences amidst the pandemic are visible in moving youths more aware and critical by contesting specific social issues, especially in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords	Influencer, Instagram, Politics, Pandemic, Youth Movement

Introduction

Indonesia's social and political landscape has undergone a significant transformation after the downfall of President Soeharto's 32-year-long authoritarian regime, the New Order in 1998 (Beta, 2019), as there was minimal freedom of expression and people could not challenge and disapprove the government. Nowadays, the challenge of direct communication in new democracy is to aggregate public opinion (Papacharissi, 2010), which means that digital technologies make it possible for new players, such as average citizens, to become involved in political decisions (Dubois and Gaffney, 2014).

Although most of the time, citizens only have opportunities to participate in political deliberation by discussing the current issues and policies or regulations created by the government. Social media, generally, has been the platform to express opinions and share information regardless of their intentions which can be either for entertainment only or aiming particular ideas and agenda. A number of studies have argued that digital media have played essential roles in coordinating, mobilizing, and organizing social and political movements (Suwana, 2019).

The reform movement of 1997–98 saw the first substantial formation of an information society in Indonesia, using new media and the Internet (Hill & Sen, 2005; Holik, 2011; Lim, 2011; Nugroho, et al., 2011; Romano, 2005; Suwana, 2019). Furthermore, Instagram - which emphasizes photos and videos – has been the most popular social media (Rahardjo, 2020; Mulyani, Mikarsa, &

Puspitawati, 2018; Solomon, 2013). It has also just reached one billion active users, which is projected to increase to two billion in the next five years (Rahardjo, 2020; Kurnia, 2018).

Digital Activism in Indonesia

By talking about digital activism in the first phase, it actually remarks the appearance of independent news websites, mailing lists, and hacker activists (hacktivists) that brought the issue of struggle against power domination of formal or non-conventional institutions (Paskarina, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2017). In the second phase, digital activism became freer through social media networks to mobilize an even broader audience (Paskarina, 2020: Gerbaudo, 2017). Lim (2013) argues that social media does not always aim to advance and deepen democracy; however, these contested spheres allow individuals to have greater participation culturally and socially.

Moreover, it facilitates social interaction and political discussion and has the function of the public sphere as a network for communicating information and points of view (Habermas in Kellner, 2000). Even though social media has been touted to increase political participation, it is equally possible that in an era of *hyperpartisanship*, experiences on social media could also drive people away from politics (Tucker, et al, 2018). Thus, when it comes to the political campaign, many political candidates use social media by endorsing celebrities or influencers, paying buzzers to win the elections, and persuading people to join in some movements.

This research aims to analyze three remarkable female influencer/activists: Kalis Mardiasih, Anindita Fiserly Utami, and Ayu Kartika Dewi. They have been gaining popularity from their post-sharing and political activism in Indonesia. Even though each of them comes from different backgrounds, they have similarities: they are young, urban Muslims, and share the contents which mostly explore topics related to feminism, politics, tolerance, and environment on Instagram.

Moreover, they are also well-known for their political activism; First, Mardiasih has conducted gender classes for the public and is an author of Muslim-feminist books. Second, Utami has her own Youtube channel where she discusses her political views, and she is also a co-founder of an organization that gathers youngsters to educate them in politics. Last, Dewi is an activist who mostly speaks up about tolerance and feminism. She is currently working as a member of "special staff", young people who work for and assist President Joko Widodo in discussing the draft proposal of law bills.

Method

This study employs qualitative research by collecting data from the contents and posts on Instagram created by the influencers above. As Beta (2018) stated in her study of the Da'wa community on social media, they discuss, engage with, and express how they "feel" about issues they are interested in. To show self-improvement and self-enterprise combined with religious self-cultivation, these influencer/activists also tried to move their followers to be aware and persuade them to act and react to the situations that are currently happening in Indonesia. For example, ask them to join the hashtag campaigns, invite them to attend their seminars or classes, or persuade them to react to current issues. This form of political activism endorsed by the influencers in digital media has become the ultimate way in moving society to react and act with the issues and policies made by the authority.

Thus, it can be measured by decoding the contents that appeared on Instagram. Hall's Encoding/Decoding model acknowledges that we are not simply free to interpret texts (or technologies) in just any way (Shaw, 2017). Through their Instagram's captions, the "message form" is the necessary 'form of appearance' of the event in its passage from source to receiver (Wodak, et al, 2014). Before the message can have an effect, it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningful decoded. This set of decoded meanings has an effect, influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade with very complex perceptual, emotional, ideological, or behavioral consequences (Wodak, et al, 2014). Therefore, this method fits to analyze how the shared contents of Instagram by influencer/activists influence and engage with youth political movements on social media in Indonesia.

Analysis and Discussion

1. The Female Influencer/Activist in Indonesia

When we are discussing the term "influencer" itself, it leads to the act of influencing and persuading others to a particular "movement." The influencers are people who exhibit some combination of desirable attributes— whether personal attributes like credibility, expertise, or enthusiasm or network attributes such as connectivity or centrality—that allows them to influence a disproportionately large number of others (Bakshy, *et al*, 2011). Influencers are also loosely defined as individuals who disproportionately impact the spread of information or related behavior of interest (Bakshy, et al, 2011). It is fascinating when these Instagram personalities effectively spread messages about new products, starting and popularizing new trends (Jin, et al, 2018). There is a strong relationship between the influencers and the audience; the influencer promotes and propagates about some issues while the audience becomes their "target" to join their movement.

Khan (2012) states that the internet does offer numerous avenues for political expression and several ways to influence politics and become politically active. Moreover, social media influencers represent a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media (Freberg, et al, 2011). However, it cannot be denied that some of them may have political affiliations or be endorsed by political parties and specific organizations. Therefore, the phenomenon of social media influencers who endorse or criticize specific political candidates and some of whom are highly educated young urban Muslim women, have become essential players in political activism in Indonesia.

Habermas' theory in the structural transformation of the public sphere has become the motivation in analyzing media and social changes. Many related studies contribute to the transformation in political discourse, notably after the rise of the internet and social media. Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) explain their research about an online discussion that facilitates exposure to political disagreement. They examine the types of online discussion spaces that create opportunities for cross-cutting political exchanges. Since Indonesia has the majority of Muslim population, many assume that democracy cannot exist with Islamism; it is more likely the opposite. In Malaysia and Indonesia, democratization went hand in hand with Islamization (Hamid, 2006). Although liberal and conservative Muslims have often been at odds with each other in their interpretations of Islamic morality, both have used the recently acquired freedoms associated with democratization to advance their interests (Brenner, 2011). Moreover, another research conducted by Parahita in 2019, explained a lot about the rise of feminist activism in Indonesia. She stated that social media had become a fertile site for the public to aspire their views and mobilize people for some causes, including social media accounts voicing feminist perspectives in Indonesian online sphere. Her study explained Indonesian digital feminism activists that have started with the agencies of the young women of Indonesia in the circle of senior feminists in Jakarta and feminists emerging from the Islamist network. In her research, she also stated that the specific aims of the activism are various, but their main goals remain to educate the public about sexuality, gender equality and feminism, and building solidarity.

In their Instagram posts, Utami focuses more on government policies that impact the environment and climate crisis; Mardiasih contributes more in Islam and Feminism, a discourse about the female body, patriarchy, and identity. Moreover, Dewi campaigns more about tolerance and multiculturalism among Indonesian youths. As influencers, they often create posts on Instagram and write down their thoughts on inviting their audience to engage in their topic discussion, especially during this Covid-19 pandemic. Three of them have similarities: young, reside in big urban cities (Jakarta and Yogyakarta), and express their opinions and activism towards the government's policies and social issues. Based on my observation, they also involve themselves in political activities, for example, they created their social community that mainly recruited and invited the youth to join in their program and become the speaker in webinars that discuss social issues.

The differences between celebrities and influencers:

social media makes the possibility of solid engagement between an individual (in this matter, the influencer/ activist) and their audience (followers). Social media blurs the distance from one person to another and creates a sense of intimacy among people in another reality. Cochrane (2013) claims the current "fourth wave of feminism" is defined by technology: tools that are allowing women to build a strong, popular, reactive movement online (Darmon, 2014). Moreover, the role of political socialization and civic engagement programs, then, is to teach young people how to work with their governments and how to be good citizens rather than allowing them to continue to adopt non-standard approaches to participation that do not necessarily promote societal cohesion (United Nations, 2007; Taft and Gordon, 2011).

2. Instagram Activism during Covid-19 Pandemic: Experience, Charity, and Motivation

Since the early stage of Covid-19 spread, the Indonesian government was less aware and did not really pay attention to this situation. Not until the first case of Covid-19 appeared in March 2020, and not long after that the government applied the national lockdown to all provinces in Indonesia. There are various kinds of reactions from people on social media: blaming the government due to their lack of anticipation, supporting the lockdown regulation during Covid-19 crisis, and giving information to prevent getting infected from this virus.

Most Instagram users usually share different kinds of content, from their daily life, the reaction of trending issues, motivation, and others. During the first lockdown last year, Mardiasih, Utami, and Dewi shared their first lockdown experience and reaction. Mardiasih said on her Instagram post, "For those of you who are still struggling to explain the fatality of coronavirus to your parents or family, I hope you have enough patience…" (March, 2020), with the hashtag #LawanCorona (Fight Corona) and #SalingJaga (#TakeCareEachOther). Hashtag activism is a potentially beneficial method for increasing awareness advocacy efforts and "bypassing the gatekeepers" by giving arrangements of advocates, from everyday citizens to

multi-million dollar companies, an opportunity to get their messages out to others (Bennet, 2014; Stache, 2014). As Mardiasih stated there, she noticed many hoaxes on social media related to the cause or the spread of Coronavirus. Moreover, Indonesia is not the only country fighting hoaxes and false conspiracy on the internet, and many of them are distributed through social media, including Instagram.

Mardiasih is a Muslim feminist writer. She is pretty vocal in her activism to fight the patriarchal system. Her affiliation with the Gusdurian community (Jaringan Gusdurian, a notable community founded by the daughters of Gus Dur, a former president of Indonesia) explains her critical discussion on being a Muslimah, a Muslim-feminist, and women empowerment. During the lockdown of Covid-19, one of her posts asked her followers to donate money to Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School), helping to obtain swab test, medicines, and daily supplies as she collaborated with Jaringan Gusdurian to support Pesantren in the spread of Coronavirus.

Furthermore, Utami expressed her first reaction towards this crisis. She stated, "The part that seems so unfair and leaves me greatly dissonance, is that with all of the awful things/injustices that are happening in the world, I'm comfortably sheltered under these massive, abundant privileges, a stable income and job barely affected by the (Covid) crisis" (Utami, Mei 2020). Many influencer activists bring up the privilege topic which relates with power and dominance. As in Indonesia, being a Muslim and living on Java that is mainly dominated by Javanese and Sundanese, middle class with a highly-educated background, and stable job. Thus, she wanted to show that she is embedded with many privileges less affected by the pandemic. She wanted to be objective about her privilege and asked her audience to be honest with theirs, too. Understanding their privileges will build a collective identity that leads to solidarity to others who do not have similar privileges. As many scholars said, solidarity puts the needs and agenda above all others in order to accomplish the movement's goal (McDonald, 2002; Chavez, 2012). She intends to build this solidarity to help other people who were

struck by the pandemic crisis: the vulnerable and poor ones. As she stated, "Like many of you, I try to take my part in 'redistributing' some of these privileges through donating or promoting local shops, but I am still grappling with the fact that we live in a society with so much inequality." She posted this invitation to her audience for raising funds in collaboration between her online community organization @thinkpolicyid and @bagi.rata, a charity organization.

Moreover, Dewi's first reaction to Covid-19 was, "I'm not going to talk about Covid 19 data, but I'll talk about our attitudes. I have 3 points: maintain personal hygiene, increase immunity, do not transmit to people… do you have any suggestions?" (Dewi, March 2020). Dewi tried to engage with her followers about the spread of Coronavirus; thus, her first post about Covid-19 was commented on by many people as they added more suggestions on what should and should not do during the pandemic. This engagement between the followers and influencers commonly happened on social media. Dewi, the creator of many Non-Government Organizations, usually discusses all matters related to tolerance, mental health, women, and other social issues. Dewi, who works as special staff for Jokowi's presidency, became one of the youth icons that succeeded in bringing herself closer in discussing the draft of public policies with the president.

Like Mardiasih and Utami, Dewi has also persuaded her followers to do more charities and donate to vulnerable people during the pandemic. Although she did not really mention which organization she collaborated to raise funds, she shared it on her Instagram post, where a big national TV interviewed her about what people should do during the crisis. In addition, Dewi also shared her experience when she got infected by the virus. She shared the journey when she first contacted with Covid-19 until she fully recovered from it. Certainly, as an influencer and activist, she suggested that her audience follow the health protocol, choose medical masks instead of cloth masks, and speak about motivation and depression.

Those three influencer/activists did their activism in the situation of Covid-19 pandemic by showing their reaction, experience, and persuasive way to influence the audience to join in their activism. Most of their audience agree with their activism as they support and add more suggestions on what they should do to survive the pandemic. Some of them might ask questions related to health protocol and how to overcome and cope with the Coronavirus situation. However, Mardiasih, Utami, and Dewi are still active in their activism aside from sharing information and motivations during the pandemic crisis. Their engagement with their audience are helpful as they tried to bring the interaction up to persuade them to join in their charity movements. Moreover, they still discuss their usual activism. For example, Utami discussed how this pandemic is related to the environmental crisis, Mardiasih discussed the violence that happened to women during the pandemic. Meanwhile, Dewi shared more motivations to their audience: to be strong, obey the health protocol, and not easily trust false news on social media.

3. Hashtag Power to Influence Youth Activism on Instagram in Covid-19 Crisis.

A dramatic increase has been registered in the number of social media posts in photo form as well as in hashtag activism. Hashtags, which manifest thoughts and feelings clearly and concisely, originated on Twitter, where the length of a post is limited; their use, however, has expanded into other social media services, including Instagram (Kim et al, 2020). There are many famous hashtag activisms, such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. During this Covid-19 pandemic, several popular hashtags are widely spread on Instagram, for example #SalingJaga, #DiRumahAja, and #LawanCorona. Hashtags, which make it easy to find and express support for posts of interest, have been widely used for online activism, although they have been criticized for fostering confirmation bias (Kim et al, 2020).

Although, it is pretty unclear who started to use those hashtags (some of them are initiated by the government and some of them are created by some organizations or communities), however, these certain hashtags are powerful to influence the audience to be more aware with Covid-19 situations. According to Liu, *et al* (2017), these

movements have the potential to counteract bias and enable social justice, and also show how engaging in "hashtag activism" can forge a shared political temporality (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). Therefore, in this case, influencer activists always put hashtags to portray their opinion towards certain issues and influence their followers on Instagram to join in their movement or campaign.

Conclusion

Mardiasih, Utami, and Dewi are examples of young influencers in Indonesia who gained their popularity because of their political activism. By investigating these three influencer/activists based on their Instagram's contents, this study explores how political discussions flow and their activism which they have contributed and shared to the audience and society. Thus, their influences amidst the pandemic are visible in making youths more aware and critical by contesting certain social issues. However, my analysis here only focuses on their Instagram's contents during the early Covid-19 pandemic. It is shown that they did three main things to influence their audience to join their activism in fighting Covid-19. First, they conveyed their reaction and told their audience about their experience in coping with the pandemic situation. Second, they persuade their audience to donate to help vulnerable people affected by Covid-19. Third, they put hashtags that are related to the current pandemic situation. Furthermore, months after the shocking situation of the early period of Covid-19 pandemic, they return to discuss their usual activism. However, their Instagram posts which do not deliver the topics of fighting the Covid-19 pandemic are not discussed here.

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