Manufacturing Authenticity: The Rise of Micro-Celebrities on Instagram

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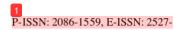aulia_rahmawati.ilkom@upnjatim.ac.id

Abstract

This paper interrogates the way in which Instagram, as one of the most famous micro-blogging participatory online media in the world, creates the production, consumption and articulation of the so-called micro-celebrity. The concept of micro-celebrity has been expanded to unearth the phenomenon of someone gained massive online popularity and followers based on their online-persona. Despite its burgeoning prominance, there is a lacuna of research addressing the emergence of micro-celebrities and the way in which Instagram facilitates such trajectories. This paper focuses on Instagram and how this platform helps to build celebrity online persona by examining what and how discourses have been embodied and reproduced by local (Indonesia) micro-celebrities. Using multimodal discourse analysis, this paper concludes that both discourses of authenticity and ordinariness are mostly prevailing in both Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad's Instagram accounts. Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad's rise to fame through online platform such as Instagram confirmed the digital 'myth' that Internet is the place of meritocracy where everyone can thrive without acknowledging the structural inequality towards those who are lack in access or knowledge in achieving the same level of success.

Keywords: Instagram, micro, celebrity, authenticity.

Introduction

This paper investigates the Instagram's micro-celebrities phenomenon in Indonesian context. The term micro-celebrities is used in this paper to define someone who were not a 'real' celebrities in a sense that they are not gaining prominency following the mainstream entertainment industry, but hence used their online platforms to catapult their stardom as well as capitalise their fame. Despite the relavant of subject and the burgeoning phenomenon, such topics is under reasearch. Hence, this paper seeks to accommodate this avenue by interrogating the way in which Indonesian micro-celebrities such Rachel Vennya and Marzuki Muhammad managed their online-persona to gained massive online popularity. Utilising multimodal discourse analysis along with closely

monitor the dynamic interaction with their followers, this paper addresses the following research trajectories, what kind of discourses prevalent in Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad's Accounts and how does Instagram facilitate such discourses?

Therefore, the following section emphasises the elaboration of the term micro-celebrities as a critical concept for this paper. The discussion begins with the history and trajectories of micro-celebrities concept and how it could be used to unearth the contemporary celebrity phenomenon within the realm of social media. Methodology section encompasses method being used to look at such phenomenon in the subsequent chapter. Multimodal disourse analysis is utilised to look at the discourse following visual and written texts of some of Instagram posts as the objects of this research. The discussion section then interrogates two critical discourses that are profoundly dominant from Indonesian micro-celebrities Instagram accounts, which are authenticity and ordinariness. Two prominent Instagram celebrities that are already aformentioned above, Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad are chosen as the objects of this research.

Micro-Celebrities: Being a Celebrity in Social Media Age

Instagram is the biggest digital participatory micro-blogging platform in the world, where written text and imageries along with the dynamic interplay within the account users and their followers allowed to take place in real time. Within the realms of online participatory dynamics, there exists the so-called micro-celebrities, the term which coined first by Senft (2008) to describes someone who gained prominency based on their online performance and the marketisation of self-presentation (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). In recent years, Instagram seemingly paved the new 'breed' of celebrities, micro-celebrities, those who gained prominence without 'traditional' definition of talents. This paper would focuses upon the way in which Instagram facilitates such phenomenon.

The development and rapid expansion of social networking sites (which more popular with catch phrase social media) enabled people not only to interract and communicate with each other in real time but also blur the distance between famous people and their fans. While mainstream media usually seen as distanced and mediated, social media bring benefit to cut these distance. Numerous research has been done to investigate the role social media has in mediating famous people and their fans (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Giles, 2017; Hall-Patton, 2014).

On the other hand, social media has also becoming new platform to fame discoveries through the lens of ordinary people. Theresa Senft (2008) in her pivotal research around the popularity of *camgirls*, signified the shift of celebrity culture, when one does not need to have an appeal and extraordinary talent to carved popularity in traditional sense of entertainment industry (i.e: singing or acting) , but to have an ability to communicate and engage with the online audience. Senft (2008) focused her research upon the emerging of *camgirls*, which predominantly young, white and middle-class females who set up their web-cams and talked thorugh their audiences on a daily basis about the most mundane activities. Based on her ethnographic research, she then coined the term micro-celebrity which defined as,

> "a new online performance in which people employ webcams, video,

audio, blogs and social networking sites to 'amp up' their popularity among readers, viewers, and those to whom they are linked online" (Senft, 2008: 25).

Furthermore, Senft extends her research on how social network in a sense of 'democratise' the way celebritiness is made and measured. Celebrities are no longer been defined by their extra ordinary talents through mediated consumption of traditional mass media like films, television and magazines, but rather based on their ability to transcend emphatic communication skills and transform their ordinariness into somewhat appealling to their online fans and followers (Senft 2008; Jersley & Mortensen 2013; (Evans et al., 2017; Francis et al., 2018; Fitrianti et al., 2020).

The likeability of 'ordinary people' is also the reality television formulaic narratives (Burke & Ruppel, 2014; Borges-Rey, 2015;Choi & Lewallen, 2017; Bonilla et al., 2019). As Biressi and Nunn (2008) argue, reality television has a similar narrative which revolves around "personal triumph over ordinary obstacle". The Kardashian families, as an example, amped up their super stardom from the basis of their no-apparent talents, other than capitalising personal and sometimes domestic narratives and family dramas into reality television. Such narrative of ordinary women doing ordinary things is also strongly emerged in ethnographic research on Muslim women bloggers (2016). Not only attracted to glamourness of the lives of Muslim fashion bloggers, blogs' readers also seemingly love the aspect of ordinary lives from their favourite fashion bloggers such as pregnancy and motherhood and all that related to domestic spheres of ordinary citizens (Rahmawati 2016).

Instagram is one of the biggest micro-blogging and photo sharing, where one control and produce their own self-personaes and whereas social and economy capital is gained through how many times does one picture gained 'attention'. Ahmed (cited in Zulli 2018) suggested that since being sold to Facebook in 2014, Instagram has 150 million active users with 55 milions photographs posted each day and 1.2 billions likes each day. Specifically focusing upon Instagram, numerous research has been done on the way in which Instagram make its way of tranforming the lives of ordinary people into fame by capitalisation of online followers (Hall-Patton, 2014; Giles, 2017; Khamis, Ang & Weling, 2017; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). Research by Djavarova and Trofimenko (2018) on young female Instagram users in Russia suggested that micro-celebrities' credibilities can be measured by text and interesting visual images. Djafarova and Trofimenko (2018) also used the term 'instafamous' to signify the emergent trend of Instagram celebrities to differentiate them from celebrities in a more traditional sense.

Khamis, Ang and Welling (2017) exemplified the relation of micro-celebrities and self-branding, a concept that already been around for the last 20 years following the globalisation process. They argued that the marketisation of the self, or the late capitalism logic that "everybody should perceived themselves as brands" is being intensified by the expansion of online participatory culture. Social media or social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram ought to be seen as global marketplace where self could be marketed as commodity (2017, 201). Furthermore, they argues that the success formula for micro-celebrities usually revoles around "a promise of authenthicity" (Marshall, 2010; Ingleton, 2014; Franssen, 2019; Ingleton & York, 2019; Kalika & Ferrucci, 2019;

Kaymas & Yakin, 2019; Mohamad & Hassim, 2019).

The promise of authenticity was achieved by the exposure of the true self and crafted identity through online conversation (Marshall, 2010). Based Senft's study (2008) on cam-girls, cam girls often talked to their fans as confessional online diaries about their daily mundane lives including eating disorders and stress-related problems. The wilingness of open up to their followers about the upside down of human lives are somewhat makes ordinary people gained prominency as micro-celebrities. This is also the online strategy that often exemified by the so-called lifestyle bloggers, who often take their fans and followers to bear witness the glimpse of their lives and trancend such level of closeness and intimacy that surely could not be achieved by more traditional media (Rahmawati 2016, Berryman & Kavka 2017; Octaviana, 2016; Pan & Zeng, 2017; Pöyry et al., 2019).

It is also worth noting that the 'traditional' celebrities also follow the social media path, since mainstream media is no longer viable as a sole medium for celebrities' popularities management (Marshal 2010; Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2015; Macisaac, Kelly & Gray 2017). Fans are no longer satisfied looking through their celebrity darlings only from magazines or other periodicals solely. Similar research on traditional celebrity who embraced social media to reach to wider audience for example by Click , Lee and Holladay (2013) that signified the importanceof embracing social media for the already established artist such as Lady Gaga. With 29.3 millions of Instagram followers who famously identified themselves as 'little monsters', Lady Gaga is not only establish herself as the cultural icon of global popular music but also to amplifies her message around the importance of self-acceptance and respect for others, including her campaign against scholl bullying and homophobia (Click et.al, 2013). Social media, in this sense, not only pave the way of ordinary people to gain instant fame, but also to navigate and serves as popularity booster for the already famous celebrities. Such democratisation of fandom makes way for more complex and ambivalent relationship between celebrities and their fans and thus it is imparative for more nuanced definition of what it means to be celebrity and their fans in the digital world (Giles 2017).

Methods

This research employs multimodal discourse analysis, to look at how two local (Indonesian) micro-celebrities constructed their self-personae through their Instagram accounts and the commentaries from their followers over certain posts. Two celebrities who are very popular in Indonesia were chosen as the object of this research, they are Rachel Vennya (IG: Rachel Vennya) and Arief Muhammad (IG: ariefmuh). Those two are amongst Indonesian *selebgram* (Instagram celebrities) that gained over than 1 Million followers and always make the list of ten most popular Indonesian Instagram celebrity lists. Those two also gained prominent solely because of their online media presence, and not through more traditional pathway in entertainment industry.

Multimodal discourse analysis, derived from semiological and discourse tradition especially the ones developed by MAK Halliday, intends to look at the relation between language, text and context within the popular culture spheres. For years, scholars in media

and cultural studies interrogates how the combination of pictures, sounds, images and text make meaning (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Furthermore, such study also looked at how language plays an important part on the meaning-making process and thus sign system derived from the combination of visual, text, sounds being treated as the more complex and nuanced system (Rahmawati & Febriyanti, 2012). Multimodal discourse analysis offers more sytematic tool to interrogates the way media texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012) which in this case Instagram text conveyed meaning and constructed the discourse system. Multimodal discourse analysis has been profoundly used not only in tradiotional media text, but also in the digital media texts such as government's website such as study of Chiew (cited in O'Halloran, 2004).

Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad are chosen as the perfect example of micro-celebrities phenomenon. Rachel Vennya started her 'online' presence from Ask.fm and then widens her pathway to Instagram following her popularity in Ask.fm. Hitherto, her Instagram has 2.6 Millions followers who bear witness to her rites of passage from single, to marriage and motherhood. While Rachel Vennya has been clear promoting her true identity from the very beginning, Arief Muhammad had some interesting start. His online presence was started from being widely popular and hilarious anonymous Twitter account (@Poconggg). It took several years for him to reveal his true identity before using Youtube and Instagram as his main platforms. Arief Muhammad has 1.2 Millions Instagram followers while also managing his content creator business through Youtube and other business endeavours such as culinary (*cakekekinian* and *miebangcad*). Muhammad's followers also bear witness his rites of passage from college student, bachelor and now, a newlywed. The next section focuses upon the way in which microcelebrities develop their online personae through their Instagram visual images.

Results

The last section has implied that two Instagram account of Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad are chosen as visual texts for the purpose of this research. First picture was taken from Rachel Vennya's Instagram post documenting the birth of Xabiru's birth (her first child). The combinantion visual image and videos in black and white aesthetically signified tha big 'living moments' of precious birth.

Pict 1. Rachel Vennya's Instagram post on Dec 13, 2017

One post was taken from Rachel's Instagram posts on December 13, 2017 followed by a very detailed description on how she went into labor. The post (part 1) was also followed by one minute birth video (part 2) that captured minutes of Rachel's delivery. Both posts (part 1 and part 2) have been liked by 400,000 followers and viewed by more than 4 Millions followers respectively. Labor Part 1 was about moments after the baby was delivered and rested in Rachel's breast, while she and her husband were captured in happy tears following the successful delivery. Part 2 was about the birth video following Rachel's primal moments just after she arrived at the hospital, the birthing moments and shortly after the baby's delivery. Both posts (part 1 and 2) were intentionally made in black and white imageries.

Comments were overwhelmingly positive and filled with congratulatory celebrations to the new parents. The authenticity and rawness were captured perfectly by the experienced photographer and birth-specialist videographer whom in the end of the post were mentioned and thanked. While Senft (2008) equated *camgirls* phenomenon as theatrical authenticy, I would prefer to use the term manufactured or staged authenticity by the use of 'professionals' behind such personal experience. It offers some degree of openness in comparison to other celebrities who choose not to share their birthing experiences, however it also being manufactured in a sense of the inclusion of professional workers to deliver such 'authentic'moments.

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Pict 2. Arief Muhammad's Instagram Post on Feb 3, 2016

Comparing both posts from Rachel and Arief, the sense of ordinariness were also prevalent. In picture 2 above, Arief documented his another big living moments manifested in the engagement ceremony to her then-wife, Tiara Pangestika. Despite also documenting the 'more serious look' of his engagement, Arief also posted the 'cheeky' part oh his engagement, projecting by picture 2 above. A very simple picture of Arief and Tiara sat with leaves background with the wrath of Jasmine hanging above the bride and groom to be (traditional or Indonesian culture of wedding often symblised by Jasmine). Similar with those of Rachel Vennya's, comments were overwhelmingly positive. Most audience praised Arief for finally stepped into another phase of his life and made the right decision for wed Tiara.

There is a quite brief text accompanying the visual "alhamdulillah, the engagement ceremony went well. Thanks for your prayers and wishes until the wedding day." In another post, engagement rituals were documented in such meticulous details, with professional crews. Such professional production of ordinary live events of Arief Muahhamd, again, blurring the boundaries between Arief as ordinary man, and Arief as micro-celebrity. The elaboration and discussion upon the ordinariness and authenticity of micro-celebrities is elaborated in the next section.

Discussion

This section looks at the way the micro-celebrities build their online personaes by navigating two pertinent factors, authenticities and ordinariness manifested through their posts. Some posts that have been generated for the purpose of this research has been taken from both Instagram accounts of Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad, which already been discussed in the last section. Each picture from both Instagram accounts is being analysed while simultanously such language towards the written texts following the visual imageries also being taken into consideration. Distinctive commentaries from their followers are being generated to overlook the discursive contruction of Instagram's visuals and textuals. Within the plethora of visually striking imageries in their posts, two imperative discourses inherently dominant which is the way authenticity and ordinariness were being constructed. The following section investigates both discourses in great length.

Manufacturing Authenticity

Quoting the TV interview of Jennifer Ringley who became one of her research participants on the rise of camgirls the late 1990s, Senft (2008) stated the 'realness' in the forms of confessional diaries is one factor that makes camgirls a phenomenal micro-celebrity case during the peak of their time. Senft (2008: 16) argued that webcams oozes authenticity and humanness far more believable rather than conventional celebrities, whom Ringley described as having "perfect hair, perfect friends and perfect lives". Senft (2008) later also described Jennifer Ringley herself is also the epitome of beauty by Western standard with her tall, young and slender bodies.

Senft (2008) concluded that such authenticity is theatrical authenticity, to compare the practice of *webcam* girls that utilise the advancement of technology such as computer screen, camera and microphone to those of theatrical shows. She (2008: 16) also compared the realness and authenticity of webcams to reality television, which usually more "contrieved" and "scripted". The rise of micro-celebrities in many social media and networking platforms seemed following the same logic, that the sense of authenticity and realness becoming the fundamental aspect of its rise and continuity. The same sense of realness and authenticity are also prevalent in both Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad Instagram accounts.

Birth and delivery stories have often being seen as private matters, that most people choose not to shared such personal experience online. However, social networking sites changes this, by the numbers of women who opted to share their birth stories online, especially through Youtube (Mack 2016, Baraitser 2017, Das 2018). Mack asserted that although seemingly natural and authentic, posting home-birth videos through Youtube should be seen as self-efficacy in the age of digital neoliberalism (2016: 62). At first, Youtube and other online platform often taught as spaces of citizenship, where ordinary people can offer their ways of seeings and doing things, the way maintream media couldn't fathom. However, although, online digital media such as Youtube has its potential to challenge the dominant narrative of motherhood (often in parenting and

glossy magazines where motherhood and birthing events are overtly glamorised), her research towards numerous home-birth videos on Youtube negate this. More often, such Youtube birthing videos constructs women on their familial dan domestic setting and also represent birth as glamorous events, celebratory moments with staged home-birth videos by profeesionals (2016: 62-63). The potentiality of digital media as spaces of resistance for the 'other' voices of motherhood has been deflected by the rise of neoliberal motherhood which centred around the promotional aspect of selves which still in line with the dominant narrative of motherhood (Das 2018). Rachel Vennya's posts are entertaining and warm, for sure. However her subject position as micro-celebrities in the digital age whose identity centred around consumerism and digital entrepreneurship does not offer alternative view of womanhood and motherhood. Rachel's authentic stories on her labour process are staged and meticulously crafted which being made through the eyes of professional videographer and photographer. This paper thus concludes that authenticity in Rachel Vennya's account is being made into the glamorous image of motherhood within 60 seconds of Instagram images or picture snap of her birthing moments. There are almost none real and raw moments of Rachel as mother which could potentially be an authentic look into the way motherhood is supposedly portrayed. Rachel's Instagram page is almost as glossy as any parenting and women's magazines, brought and presented by her assemble social media team. The other carefully crafted imageries of authenticity also works alongside the narrative of ordinariness. This also deeply occurs within Rachel Vennya's Instagram account, as the next section is focused upon.

The Narrative of Ordinariness

There is nothing ordinary with Arief Muhammad's lives. His online meteoric fame derived first from his funny and well-liked Twitter account (@Poconggg). After being anynymous through his Twitter account, finally he revealed his identity and made a lucrative business across social network platforms such as Instagram and Youtube. He wed another social media influencer, Tiara Pangestika (Tipang) in 2017 and together they managed various business online and offline (culinary etc). As it has been said earlier, there is nothing ordinary in Arief Muhammad Instagram posts. His posts filled with beautiful, strikingly manufactured and professionally edited travel photography where Arief and Tiara had gone on a daily basis. They also often posted two different travel destinations in under a week, suggesting the rich and young couple almost travelling abroad every week. Arief has cultivated a successful digital entrepreneurship, that many vlogger and bloggers dreamt of.

Hence, within the plethora image of travel and holidays which filled his Instagram posts, he also constructs some sense of ordinariness. As Biressi and Nun (2008) suggested that the popularity of reality television is derived from the way the already famous or non-famous person being constructed doing ordinary things. The rise of various reality television formats such docudrama, competition driven reality such as Big Brother or Dancing with the Stars changes the way talent and education as the prominent factors of being a celebrity. Biressi and Nunn (2005: 144) asserted that the new 'generation' of reality stars cultivate fame, wealth and prominence without having acquired specific talents from their educational backrground, business endeavours or any other talent, but merely and solely through reality TV. Sometimes reality TV stars acquired fame and

wealth through scandals and controversy for example Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian that although they are coming from well-off families, getting much attention by recording their sexual activities.

The same assertion which captured perfectly with the term micro-celebrity by Senft (2008) could have been applied into the meteoric rise of Arief Muhammad's fame. Just like the way Rachel Vennya depicts her authenticity, Arief Muhammad also offers his followers a glimpse of his life, though extraordinary with his globetrotting holidays, still offers a degree of being an ordinary man. It is difficult to find his posts that are not being a publicity endorsement. Almost every Muhammad's Instagram post is a paid product placement from Tokopedia to mobile phones to home utensils. However, within the plethora of product placement, Arief's smartly creafted his personal experience into such endoresement. For example, one of his Instagram video post is about a surprise party for his wife which he gave her a diamond jewellery set. While he also mentioned the jewellery shop by the end of his post, Muhammad gave a heartfelt back story that he is now rich enough to buy his wife a set of jewellery. It was his promise since he could not afford to provide such luxury product for her on their wedding day. His mother-in-law lent him some jewellery to avoid embarassement in front of his extended family on their wedding day. His deeply personal story following the product endorsement cemented the idea of ordinary hardworking man that finally achieves his dream to provide for his family. Such post have been liked and commented by thousands of his followers, mostly praised him for being such a good husband.

Other posts also showed his 'ordinary' problems such as Muhammad and his wife were doing their weekly grocery shopping or looking for a housemaid to work in their home. Arief Muhammad and his wive do not hessitate to post their difficulty in finding the housemaid through Instagram posts in the hope of information provided by their followers of finding the right one. While housemaid is often being seen as an expensive labor, typical middle-class Indonesian families employ part-time or full-time housemaids to help with the domestic chores. Thus, for typically middle-class Indonesians, looking for housemaids is often being seen as 'ordinary' problems, especially for working mothers. Arief Muhammad and Tiara Pangestika are no exception. Arief Muhammad is one of the most successful digital entrepreneurs in Indonesia and yet his posts conveying message that somehow he is ordinary. His narrative is carefully constructed to portray him as the face of every digital entrepreneur's dream, that is an ordinary man who achieves financial success through the digital labor. While posted his luxury holiday destinantion, Muhammad also portrayed the ordinary side of his lives, such as past financial hardship and domestic issues such as looking for the right housemaid.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the way micro-celebrity works in the age of social networking sites by investigating what kind of discourses prevalent in Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad's Accounts and how does Instagram facilitate such discourses. It follows closely the work of Theresa Senft (2008) who coined the term micro-celebrity to encapsulates the rise of online fame by ordinary people who has the ability to have

emphatic communication skills online. This terms is extended to look at the way micro-celebrities works with Instgram being the case study.Two Indonesian micro-celebrities, Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad's Instagram accounts are being investigated using multimodal discourse analysis. Both discourses of authenticity and ordinariness are mostly prevail in both Vennya and Muhammad's Instagrams. Rachel Vennya's authenticity has been mostly about her rites of passage journey from single to married woman and now, a mother. Posts during the moments of her birthing delivery is analysed and concluded that Vennya's has crafted her authentic selves within the realms of successful motherhood. Her authentic selves is being manufactured by the use and the help of professionals behind the camera i.e photographer and videographers whom quite obvious especially during her labor videos. Arief Muhammad on the other hand, offers narrative of ordinariness behind his posts which mostly about product placements and advertisements. Despite being one of the most successful digital entrepreneurs in Indonesia nowdays, the written posts are utilised to tell the background stories of Muhammad's personal triumph from ordinary man to successful entrepreneur. Rachel Vennya and Arief Muhammad's rise to fame through online platform such as Instagram confirmed the digital 'myth' that the Internet is the place of mertitocracy where everyone can be successful without acknowledging the structural inequality towards those who are lack in access or knowledge in achieving the same level of success.

Conflict of Interest

We certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial, personal, or other relationships with other people or organization related to the material discussed in the manuscript.

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