

Motivation for Digital Activism on Instagram Among Postgraduate Students Amidst The Impact of Misinformation, Malinformation, and Disinformation

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ABSTRACT

The shift of activism from the real world to the digital world has intensified year by year, driven by social phenomena at both national and global levels. The existence of misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation certainly distorts the general public's ability to participate in digital activism activities. This study aims to examine the factors that motivate the educated general public to engage in digital activism activities on Instagram, as well as their discretion regarding the presence of misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation. Through a semi-structured interview process, it was found that the factors motivating individuals to participate in digital activism include the desire to increase public awareness or vigilance, as well as to educate the public about social issues considered important. In responding to non-credible information, the criticality and willingness of individuals to conduct research on social issues they wish to address play a crucial role.

Keywords: digital activism, digital activism motivation, Instagram, misinformation, malinformation, disinformation

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INTRODUCTION

There have been many resistance movements or demonstrations from various parts of the world, and their intensity is increasing (Lim, 2018). Starting with the Arab Spring in 2010, which sparked in Tunisia, the #MeToo movement that originated in the world of Hollywood entertainment, the Student Environmental Activist movement spearheaded by Greta Thunberg, the Black Lives Matter movement that was started by structured violence in the United States, and many others— all of them have succeeded in going global due to the amplification of the media that has connected everyone from different parts of the world. These initiatives are also known as *digital activism*, with the ability to inspire many parties and also provide tangible ripples of change (Lim, 2018; Mutsvairo, 2016).

Activism that was once common in the real world or in person has shifted towards the virtual or online world (Greijdanus et al., 2020; Mutsvairo, 2016). This shift has certainly occurred due to the rapid development of technology and information. According to Ferdinand (2000) in Mitu and Vega (2014), the internet can act as a forum that provides information directly and can gather people from different regions and groups. Thus, these movements can challenge or create resistance to the controls exerted by political institutions or certain issues. In Indonesia, itself, various kinds of activism in the digital realm have occurred frequently. From government regulations in the environmental realm (Anam et al., 2020; Gusti et al., 2016); social justice such as issues of sexual violence and harassment at the university level

(Adiyanto, 2020), demands for justice for government agency employees (Kholit & Nastain, 2021); to political issues that also intersect with many others (Sosiawan & Wibowo, 2019).

Of course, in *digital activism*— activities are not always isolated in the cyber realm alone. There is a correlation between issues and attitudes of activism in the offline and online realms, which occur in the real world and the virtual world (Chae et al., 2019; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). Moreover, according to Greijdanus et al. (2020), when there is activism in both online and offline contexts, activism in the digital world can stimulate individuals who participate in demonstrations in real life. The existence of digital media (including *social media*) in a demonstration or movement can again provide an impetus for the transition from online to offline by forming a social identity among its participants.

The many cases that set the backdrop for *digital activism* did not all end well. There are certain occasions where the credibility of the reasons for activism carried out by the general public is questioned and proven wrong. First, the case in the realm of education, namely *Justice for Audrey*. Indonesian people in the digital world were excitedly spreading the hashtag *Justice for Audrey* on social media, changing their social media profile photos, and expressing their anger over the alleged bullying and persecution of a junior high school student (Wardani, 2019). However, after being investigated, the confessions made about the persecution and bullying turned out to be mere lies (Ariefana, 2019).

The election process in Indonesia is often enlivened by the existence of fake news to bring down certain political figures. In a study conducted by Juditha & Darmawan (2024), it was found that there has been a significant increase in fake news since the 2019 election. One of the fake news items that was quite shocking during the event was about the persecution of Ratna Sarumpaet (Erdianto & Krisiandi, 2018). It should be understood that during this period, supporters of both camps, Prabowo-Sandi and Jokowi-Ma'ruf, were very active on social media in providing support to the champion candidate pair. The situation was so heated that the supporters gave each other nicknames, *Cebong* and *Kampret* (Tazri, 2019). Supporters of the Prabowo-Sandi candidate pair were also outspoken in providing support to Ratna Sarumpaet on social media. However, after the report was investigated, it turned out that the confession made by Ratna Sarumpaet was a false statement (Prasongko, 2018). As a result, Ratna Sarumpaet was sentenced to two years in prison for causing chaos and spreading false news (Anam M Kolopaking L. & A Kinseng R., 2020; Ananda & Fatanti M. N., 2021; Ariefana, 2019).

From the above cases, there are no clear sanctions for the general public who also spread the news. In fact, *digital activism* should not be understood solely as a superficial and instantaneous click-based ceremonial practice or *clicktivism*, but rather as a complex process that demands verification. According to Ozkula (2021), the reduction of activism to just an activity on online media is due to the neglect of social media users regarding the fact that what is done on social media can have a direct impact on the real world. In this context, a sense of understanding of the importance of reviewing the information to be disseminated as well as individual accountability needs to be emphasized.

Demographically, out of 278.7 million Indonesians, 139.0 million or about 49.9 percent use social media (We Are Social, 2024). Indonesian people actively use social media for up to three (3) hours and 11 minutes every day. Of the many social media platforms that exist, Instagram is a platform that is widely used by Indonesian people. Nurhayati-Wolff

(2025) shows that there are as many as 90.2 million Instagram users in Indonesia as of December 2024. Indonesia is the country with the largest Instagram user base in the world, and it is dominated by micro-influencers who have a range of followers from ten thousand to fifty thousand users (Ariel & Avidar R., 2015; Bräuchler, 2020; Bursztyn Cantoni D. Yang D. Y. Yuchtman N. & Zhang Y. J., 2021; Chae Lee S. & Kim Y., 2019; Chon & Park H., 2020). However, unfortunately, the use of social media is not always accompanied by adequate digital literacy and social media use ethics (Afrina et al., 2024; Limilia et al., 2022). The lack of critical thinking skills, education, and the use of social media limited to entertainment alone are the causes of the lack of digital literacy, which can lead to the rampant spread of fake news.

Given the high number of users and activities using social media, especially Instagram in Indonesia, and also the limitations of digital literacy and ethics among social media users, it is certainly interesting to study how the population, which is perceived as educated and has the ability to think critically, continues to carry out digital activism activities in the midst of the existence of misinformation, *malinformation*, and *disinformation*. In this context, post-graduate students are the research subjects who will be examined to understand how they voice social issues on Instagram social media pages. Additionally, this study aims to understand the motivations for participating in digital activism and how these individuals respond to the existence of misinformation, *malinformation*, and *disinformation*.

Previous studies have examined digital activism and its implications in the modern world. Mutsvairo (2016) explored the rise of digital activism and its ability to influence social change, emphasizing how social media amplifies activism and spreads global awareness. Similarly, Lim (2018) discussed the role of digital platforms in connecting movements worldwide, such as the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter campaigns, highlighting the power of online platforms in generating large-scale mobilization. However, these studies primarily focus on the overall impact of digital activism, without considering the challenges of misinformation, *malinformation*, and *disinformation*, which can hinder the effectiveness of these movements.

The objective of this study is to explore the motivations behind digital activism among post-graduate students in Indonesia, particularly focusing on their social media engagement in the face of misinformation, *malinformation*, and *disinformation*. The findings provide insights into the dynamics of digital activism and offer recommendations for improving digital literacy and the ethical use of social media. Furthermore, the study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of how social media can be effectively used for social change while mitigating the risks of misinformation.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a thematic analysis approach to understand and explain the diversity of contexts and dynamics of the research subjects. Thematic analysis is a flexible and systematic method to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning in a qualitative study based on information provided by informants (Christou, 2022). Specifically, it aims to explore the motivation of the research subjects in participating in digital activism activities, as well as to understand their position on the validity of the information they disseminate on Instagram *social media*.

In this study, data sourced from the exploration process of the research subject's experience in digital activism activities is needed. Therefore, the data collection process used is a semi-structured interview. Interviews are a data collection technique that involves verbal communication between researchers and research subjects. Mathers et al. (2002) explain that a semi-structured interview is an interview that uses a series of open-ended questions. By using a semi-structured interview technique, both the interviewer and the interviewee can discuss the topic being addressed in more depth and detail. In addition, the purpose of using this technique is to collect data related to personal experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of informants on the topic raised (DeJonckheere & Vaughn L. M., 2019).

Informants are also selected based on certain criteria to maintain the validity of the data provided. This interview was conducted with three informants who have met the following criteria: 1) they are post-graduate students; 2) they are active on Instagram *social media*; 3) they have an interest in social issues; 4) they actively voice social issues on *social media*; 5) they have previously engaged in traditional activism/demonstrations; and 6) they are not influencers. The rationale for the 6th point is to observe how individuals who use *social media* for personal purposes only, and for non-commercial purposes, engage with digital activism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Background of Digital Activism

Several actors can be classified as playing a role in the digital activism process. Of course, the first is the general public (including public figures) (Ananda & Fatanti, 2021; Bräuchler, 2020; Fuadi, 2020; Masduki, 2021; Suwana, 2020; Syahputra, 2021), non-governmental organizations (Bräuchler, 2020; Fuadi, 2020; Winarnita et al., 2020), marginalized groups (Winarnita et al., 2020), and politicians (Yilmaz & Barton, 2021). The amplification effect of activism carried out by each actor on an issue is certainly different, and will have an impact on the sustainability of the activities carried out (Chusna, 2021). In verifying the findings of the systematic literature review process above, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three informants. These informants are also grouped as the general public.

The activism activities of the informants on social media Instagram were successfully classified on humanitarian, political, gender, financial, sexual harassment, and education issues. The three issues raised by the informants and intersect are education and politics. In the political realm, two out of three informants want to make education that is exclusive to certain circles easily accessible to the general public. George & Leidner (2019), also explained that one of the functions of digital activism is to amplify an issue, and educating is one of the key actions to amplify. In the political realm, the three informants have their own discretion to share information related to certain issues due to public sentiment. Therefore, the informants rethink the medium and methods they use in sharing the information.

Medium dan Metode Aktivisme Digital

Instagram is a medium of digital activism to voice various issues raised (Bräuchler, 2020; Chusna, 2021; Fuadi, 2020; Scott, 2019; Ratnasari et al., 2021; Winarnita et al., 2020; Yusuf & Wibowo, 2021). However, unfortunately, these literature has not been explained in more depth about what types and features are used in Instagram. Instagram itself has many features

that can be used by its users. Through interviews, information was obtained that digital activism activities were often carried out by the three informants using the Instagram Story feature, none of the informants used the Posts or Reels feature. Through Instagram Stories, informants often reshare Posts made by other accounts related to certain issues by voicing their opinions embedded in their uploads. One of the informants also used the TikTok platform to amplify the real-world activism activities he was working on. In addition, informants also expressed their preference to do more activism in the digital realm than in the traditional realm because they felt that it had more impact that could be directly felt by them as a spreader of social issues and also considering the increasing time of social media use.

Two of the three informants also added information that their preference to use Instagram Stories is not permanent (only lasts for 24 hours), unless the Instagram Story is included in the highlights on the profile.

"I prefer Instagram because it [Instagram Story] only lasts 24 hours, unlike Twitter where [the content] will last forever... I'm also afraid that the information I share will be spread to other platforms... because it has happened, [Instagram Story] has been misinterpreted on Twitter." (Informant 3, June 2022)

This is motivated by the fact that there is a lot of online persecution that occurs in Indonesia when individuals try to voice an issue, as has been explained by Danaditya (2021) and Masduki (2021). Another method used by informants is to use the Close Friends feature found in Instagram Stories. This feature restricts anyone who can see the content shared by users, and can be customized to the user's wishes. The separation of the content shared is also due to the deliberations of informants to separate the values they promote from their professional background.

One of the informants also built an account on Instagram dedicated to digital activism activities in the realm of international relations which includes politics, the environment, and humanity. It was also found that a collective identity had been formed on the accounts built by these informants. In accordance with what has been conveyed by the collective identity of Fuadi (2020) and Syahputra (2021), that through social media – when a group of people move in one goal, an identity will be formed. On the account created specifically by the informant, the informant managed to get more than 1,000 audiences and dozens of people with the same vision and mission to build the account.

Motivation in Digital Activism

In Suwana (2020), the motivation of individuals who participate in digital activism is divided into two, namely intrinsic and extrinsic. From his research, it was found that there are at least four (4) intrinsic motivations that encourage participation in digital activism, namely: 1) conveying honest information (truth) to the public; 2) maintaining the credibility of the agency; 3) trust to make social and political change; and 4) strive for a better political system for Indonesia. Meanwhile, for extrinsic factors that motivate individual participation in digital activism is the existence of rewards. As for the prize factor, it has been eliminated since the beginning of the selection of participants and it has also been reconfirmed in the interview process that the three informants never gained material benefit from the activism carried out.

It is undeniable that the four intrinsic factors and one extrinsic factor mentioned above have an impact as an individual's motivation in carrying out digital activism. From the

interviews with the three informants, it was found that the three had the goal of educating or sharing knowledge and increasing the audience's awareness. The three informants are also reluctant to participate if they have no interest in certain issues. In addition, external factors come from the environment of the informants – close friends and audiences on their respective social media. Dookhoo & Dodd (2019) stated that information seeking or the process of seeking information is not a motivating factor for individuals to participate in digital activism. Meanwhile, it was found that all informants were open and accepted information provided by their audiences, whether they were supportive, adding, or even criticizing.

Digital Activism and Active Audience Participation

The target of informants in their digital activism activities is generally their Instagram social media followers. In the context of Informant 1 who has a special Instagram account, he and his community are trying to reach and interact further. Not only stopping at his followers, but also to the audience who have not followed the account, because the goal is to educate the general public. Even more condensed, Informant 2 said that he chose people born in the late 90s to early 2000s as the target of his digital activism activities in the form of education. The reason is that people born in this range will occupy strategic positions in the next 20 years and are expected to have a positive impact on the country.

In this part, interactivity between the audience and informants often occurs on social media. Interactivity itself is defined as the process of transferring information from one participant to another (Ariel & Avidar, 2015). In the process of sharing information, the informants revealed that they often get interaction from the audience and feel open to the comments given. Although not all audiences responded, active interaction was still obtained by the three informants in different forms. On the Instagram platform in the Instagram Story feature there are options to like, react, and respond, the three informants said that they often get these three interaction options. As found in the previous section, informants often receive supportive responses, dig up information, and also criticize.

These interactions also shaped the understanding of informants and audiences, the informants explained that they also received constructive criticism and input related to their activities in digital activism. In addition, it also provides a new understanding for the audience and informants when discussions occur. According to (Bursztyn et al., 2021), interaction in social media also influences political understanding and preferences. However, there are times when the informants receive negative responses from the audience, Informant 1 has concerns that the friendship between him and the responder will be strained. Meanwhile, Informant 3 tends to be indifferent when there is a negative response (Aminulloh Artaria M. D. Surya Y. W. I. & Zajackowski K., 2021; Anam M Kolopaking L. & A Kinseng R., 2020). In terms of digital activism, informants are required to be open to views that are contrary to what they hold dear. Because the medium they use does not move one-way and is flexible, the information they share can always be updated in view and content. In contrast to real-world activism which generally moves from one direction only, where demonstrators gather in one place and give the same voice without getting a direct confrontation of opposing views.

Discretion in the Midst of Information Uncertainty

One of the challenges of digital activism activities that are synonymous with the utilization of technology and information is the existence of fake news, or in detail it can be classified into misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation. The existence of fake news or also known as hoaxes is often encountered on various issues, such as in political events that are filled with acts of misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation to impose opinions (Aminulloh et al., 2021). Also at a time when the world is being hit by the COVID-19 pandemic (Muzkyant et al., 2021). The rampant spread of inappropriate information can affect digital activism activities, the existence of wrong information can be counterproductive if it is used in these activities.

From interviews with the three informants, it was agreed that one way to obtain the validity of information is to conduct a verification and research process regarding information before sharing or after receiving information. In the process of preventing information uncertainty, the responsibility is not only imposed on the government and social media providers; but also to its users (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022). In line with the opinions of the informants, Muhammed & Mathew (2022) also said that prevention can be done by improving the cognitive and literacy levels of social media users.

In addition, the informants also have validation techniques through profiteering sources from experts or professionals who are indeed engaged in the issues they promote. Because basically, good activism should also use good methods (Suwana, 2020). Informants state that they always strive to provide information honestly based on valid sources, and the informant's knowledge and field experience in the field discussed. Digital activists who want to create change, should not just want to create change in any way that exists, but they want to disseminate accurate and correct information (Suwana, 2020), and hope that this information can be a spark for change.

However, there are times when individuals who participate in digital activism activities also spread news whose validity is questionable. The informants admitted that they had – unintentionally – shared information whose validity was questionable.

"Yes, so I was sharing news about oil regulation at that time. In the headline, it was written that if you were required to use an ID card if you wanted to buy cooking oil, my emotions were gone. I shared it on IG Story. But, it turned out that after the cave study, it was false news. There is indeed such a discourse, but it is for distributors, not for the general public. After knowing it, I immediately went to the takedown." (Informant 2)

"... If the incident happened, I immediately apologized, immediately clarified because yes.. I think it is important to have a credibility in the cave. At that time, I accidentally shared a piece of news, and then I was reprimanded by my coworker "eh mba that's [fake news], you know". Then I reposted the post and clarified." (Informant 3)

Fake news is a threat to democracy because political democratization depends on the circulation of correct information (Suwana, 2020). On occasions where informants spread false news, according to the explanation from Turčilo & Obrenović (2020), informants are still at the misinformation stage, namely spreading false information without any intention to harm certain parties. However, after the informants realized and verified that the information disseminated was false news, the informant also tried to delete the content that had been

disseminated and also tried to provide clarification on their social media regarding the error. This shows that there is accountability for informants to provide factual information.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that, in the face of rampant misinformation, *malinformation*, and *disinformation* on *social media*, post-graduate students continue to use *social media*, especially Instagram, as a forum to voice social issues, with the main motivation of educating audiences and increasing public awareness. The informants demonstrate a critical understanding of the validity of information and show accountability through their actions when spreading false information. *Digital activism* in this context is not just a mere ceremonial action, but a reflective process that involves ethical considerations, personal narratives, and risk management of individual reputations on *social media*. These findings reinforce the position that meaningful forms of *digital activism* emerge from non-commercial individuals driven by intrinsic motivations and sensitivity to digital public spaces that are vulnerable to information distortion.

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