



# Instagram influencers as an alternative persuasion in the new era of media (Influencers' role in educating society during the COVID-19 pandemic)

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## ABSTRACT

The emergence of the novel coronavirus at the end of 2019 significantly affected the whole world, including Indonesia. The way of life and socialising were drastically changed where new practices such as washing hands frequently, maintaining distance, using masks and staying confined at home became the norm. As an Asian country that is inherently collectivistic, the Indonesian society is certainly not used to being individualistic. Social restrictions certainly have had a significant impact on the lives of Indonesians who uphold social values highly. Thus, it is pertinent to help the community understand these restrictions so as not to cause misperceptions and panic. This paper looks at influencers and their role in educating society during the COVID-19 pandemic, using data from literature. The collected data were categorised and analysed using data triangulation and supporting theories. Research findings show the role of influencers as an extension of the government in educating the public, using persuasive communication, to increase awareness or drive changes in public behaviour towards a healthy lifestyle in the midst of a pandemic. The very wide scope of social media is one of the determinants in the role of influencers as educators, plus the social media audience is dominated by generation Y and generation Z. Led by the National Disaster Management Authority (BNPB), the Indonesian government pushed for changes and new norms to cope and endure the recent pandemic. While there continues to be abundant issues that need to be addressed, the involvement of influencers in this social education program has helped build social awareness amongst Indonesians towards a healthier lifestyle.

**Keywords:** *Influencers, persuasive communication, Instagram, COVID-19, pandemic, new media, coronavirus*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the world was brought to a halt with the rapid spread of a novel coronavirus after the initial outbreak in Wuhan, China. Within months, the virus had spread to the entire world, regardless of developed, developing, or poor countries. Every country grappled with the ferocity and rapid spread of this virus, including Indonesia. COVID-19 is the respiratory disease caused by this virus. Although the death rate is not as high as tuberculosis sufferers, the rapid and widespread transmission of the virus resulted in COVID-19 being declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020.

To contain the spread of the virus, WHO called for safety protocols and precautions to be adhered to. Personal hygiene habits including washing hands routinely, sneezing properly, or wearing a mask in public areas were acknowledged by health experts to be quite effective in breaking the virus' chain of infection (Lin et al., 2020). Other precautions included social distancing as well as bans on public gatherings and travel. Even if the general public disagrees or disapproves these measures, they are necessary to help the government to successfully reduce the number of cases and contain the virus spread.

According to Worldometer (2023), there were 2,995,244 COVID-19 cases globally, with 881,557 recovered cases, and 207,009 death cases in 2020. The United States had the highest number of cases with 987,322, 118,781 recovered cases, and 54,415 deaths. It was followed by Spain with 226,629 cases, 117,727 recovered cases, and 23,190 deaths. Meanwhile, 197,675 cases of infection and 64,928 recovered cases were reported in Italy. At the time of writing, the virus was still spreading rapidly while the medical research community raced to produce a vaccine.

Indonesia is one of the Asian countries that has a collectivistic culture. A collectivist society refers to a society that is more concerned with the values and goals of groups, instead of the individual. Collectivist societies always aim to maintain harmonious relationships with others (Alfaeni & Rahmawati, 2023)

Social distancing as well as social gathering bans were a challenge because the Indonesian community is used to smiling, saluting, and greeting each other. The pandemic restrictions placed a lot of pressure on the Indonesian society and their way of life. Moreover, emergency statuses continue to be declared by a number of regional heads from Governors, to Regents and Mayors throughout Indonesia. The management of the pandemic in Indonesia was tasked to the COVID-19 Task Force, which periodically delivered updates and latest developments from time to time to the whole nation.

Based on the National COVID-19 Task Force website, as of June 10, 2020, 34,316 cases were reported in Indonesia, with 12,129 recovered cases and 1,959 deaths. In addition to handling the increasing the number of cases, the Task Force shoulders the responsibility of declaring safety protocols or plans to contain the transmission of the coronavirus, accordingly. However, getting the Indonesian public to cooperate and adhere to the safety protocols and restrictions has not always been easy or successful. This substantial transformation in the way of life requires emotional approaches. In this context, the present study explores persuasive communication, which aims at a change in behaviour of the target audience.

Each individual tends to have internal and external motivations to behave. The internal source comes from within the individual, while the external motivation is usually associated with outside sources such as influencers. This could be one of the reasons why the COVID-19 Task Force appointed Dr. Reisa Broto as its public communication representative. In addition to being a doctor, Dr Reisa is also a celebrity with over

1.5 million followers. It is believed that it is easier for influencers with large social media accounts to drive attitude and behaviour change for the millennial generation towards healthy living habits.

In the science of communication, influencers are defined as influential persons who have a large number of followers and exert a strong influence on their followers. In fact, many campaigns have used this approach to influence audiences. It is widely acknowledged that an individual will quickly imitate a person he/she idolises, including healthy practices or habits for a healthy lifestyle. Currently, numerous influencers sell products or advocate for a cause. Celebgrams, for example, are ordinary people who have many followers on Instagram and are endorsed by many online shops. They can indirectly influence their followers in their choice of clothing styles, cosmetics, and lifestyle as they wield a strong influencing power.

In the wake of the pandemic, many Indonesia influencers stepped forward to share vital information or updates about COVID-19 and call for changes in lifestyle habits. The influencers come from various backgrounds such as artists, doctors, scholars, and celebrities, each a prominent figure in their own field or industry. BNPB, which is Indonesia's National Disaster Management Agency, made it a point to involve influencers to help them educate the public on safety and health precautions. BNPB ensured that all information disseminated by the influencers were based on data and facts. Further, BNPB coordinated all the COVID-19 campaigns so that the information disseminated did not cause confusion or alarm (Sukma, 2020).

The Indonesian government collaborated with influencers to disseminate information on COVID-19 as a persuasive campaign to get the public on board its response and containment programme. The current generation, especially those could be asymptomatic carriers of the virus, tend to emulate and follow the recommendations of their idols. Thus, the delivery of information should be based on the characteristics of the target audience and technological advancements. While influencer involvement in persuasive communication remains an ongoing debate, the Indonesian government continues this endeavour towards making healthy lifestyle its new culture.

Block et al. (2020) outlined a set of strategies on how individuals can make local decisions that can stop the spread of the virus. Minimising contact is the most effective long-term measure to keep infection rates low. The spread of a virus is unlikely to occur in remote areas that do not have high mobility. On the other hand, for a society that has abundant activities as well as has an active social environment where large groups gather, the number of infections rises quickly. As such, rapid spread of infections can be prevented through social distancing measures (Block et al., 2020). Block et al. (2020) also contended that the social tendencies to interact depends on similar characteristics, such as demographic and age, and also social networking features.

Additionally, Shah et al. (2019) stated that public engagement can help assess the local acceptance of new norms, maximise transparency by responding to community concerns, and explain the potential effects of research to society. Therefore, the public engagement for COVID-19 must be planned and designed early, conducted efficiently and continued even after the pandemic. Public engagement activities should include dialogues between scientists, ethicists, potential participants, and community representatives.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, more studies have focused on the health sector, specifically with regard to pandemics, for example COVID-19 in Elston's elderly patients (Fakhruroji et al., 2019), the use of digital technology in anticipating a global pandemic (Razai et al., 2020) and minimising the impact of pandemic on economy and politics.

This study is deemed crucial in understanding alternative ways of educating a society. This is particularly so, as breaking the chain of infection in a pandemic requires an in-depth understanding of how a society reacts and can be persuaded. This aspect is as significant as the discovery of vaccines and other treatments. Without building social awareness and obtaining support from the public, it will be difficult to reduce the transmission curve of a disease. In this context, this study also aims to examine the role of influencers in persuading and educating the public to adopt a healthier lifestyle during the pandemic. The findings will also enrich the existing literature in persuasive communication on the role of influencers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Influencer*

The new media era heralds an age where people are more inclined to surf social media as their social activity. Following the social media accounts of a popular figure is now considered normal. In addition to sharing snippets of their personal life, these influential figures review and recommend brands which their followers then adopt as well. These figures are called influencers. An influencer, according to Copley (2004, as cited in Mandjusri & Irfan, 2018), is a person who is influential in persuading others to a cause or to purchase something. In many cases, celebrities have become influencers. They are engaged as ambassadors by prominent brands on social media and have proven to be effective in influencing their followers to purchase the brand that they are endorsing. For this endorsement, they are paid on a contract basis by the brand or company of the product or service (Mandjusri & Irfan, 2018).

Nick Hayes (2008, as cited in Fransiska & Paramita, 2020) defined an influencer as “a third party who significantly shapes the customer’s purchasing decision, but may never be accountable for it.” Influencers are artists, celebrities, bloggers, or YouTubers, who have a large number of followers or audience on social media and they have a strong influence on their followers. Studies have shown that influencers can hype current trends, and demonstrate extensive knowledge on certain issues such as beauty product brands, fashion, and health, to name a few. There are four levels involved in changing audience behaviour, namely creating awareness, increasing knowledge, recommending products and finally, purchase (Chopra et al., 2021).

Kosasih (2019) explained that influencers are individuals who have a strong influence on a person’s purchasing decisions because they have the authority and expertise, as well as maintain a strong relationship with their followers. Additionally, influencers also increase the awareness of a brand using authentic marketing. The use of influencers has become increasingly popular among businesses in Indonesia. Kosasih (2019) divided influencers into two groups, namely macro-influencers and micro-influencers. A macro-influencer has followers from 100,000 to over 1 million and a 5–25% engagement rate spanning a wide range. Engagement here refers to how frequently followers view stories on their idol’s social media accounts. This type of influencer is good for visibility and awareness and to obtain an authentic impression. However, the costs of hiring them are relatively expensive.

Meanwhile, micro-influencers have followers of 500–100,000. However, their engagement rate is stronger than macros at around 25–50%. Because there are fewer of them, micro-influencers are seen as more real. However, their range is not wide enough and is not effective for increasing visibility and awareness of a brand or cause. Their rates

are also cheaper. Influencer marketing can take the form of blog posts, videos, or images on the influencers' social media channels, which means collaborative content, and also content for a company marketing campaign.

### *Persuasive communication*

According to Devito (as cited in Firmansyah & Pranawukir, 2021), persuasion is a technique of influencing individuals by utilising or using psychological and sociological data and facts. Persuasive communication is communication that aims to change or influence a person's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour so that they act according to what the communicator expects. Meanwhile, Perloff defined persuasive communication as a symbolic process in which the communicator tries to convince others to change their attitude or behaviour on an issue by sending messages in a free-choice situation (Aristyavani, 2017).

According to Silviani (as cited in Rizky & Syam et al., 2021), persuasive communication can be carried out in six ways, namely association technique, integration technique, pay-off, fear-arousing, icing technique and red-herring. Firstly, the association technique concerns presenting messages by superimposing messages on an object or event that is of public concern. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, people were asked to practise social distancing and lead a healthy lifestyle to avoid being infected. Second, the integration technique is a communication technique that expresses messages using both verbal and nonverbal cues. For example, communicators present verbal and nonverbal messages by displaying text, photos or videos on their Instagram social media accounts.

The third pay-off technique involves giving hope to the target audience. The fourth icing technique concerns arranging messages with emotional rewards in order to attract the attention of target audience. The fifth technique, namely fear arousing, is a technique of presenting a message that creates feelings of anxiety, worry or fear, depicting bad consequences. The last technique is called red herring. This technique is usually used by a communicator who is under pressure and aims to achieve victory in a debate by avoiding arguments that are considered weak.

### *Social media*

Phillip Kotler and Kevin Keller (as cited in Walid, 2018) stated that social media is a means for consumers to share text, image, video, and audio information with each other, with businesses, and vice versa. Social media is a platform that allows users to create content, disseminate it and interact with other users. This platform also allows the creation of real-time communication, which enables the active participation of users. Another advantage of social media is the wide audience reach (Puri et al., 2020).

Social media has made it easy for a society to disseminate content. People can post on a blog, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or YouTube which can then be shared or posted again and again to be viewed by millions of people for free. As a result, advertisers do not have to pay a lot of money to publishers or distributors to place their ads because they can now create content that is interesting and make it available to as many people as possible (Zarella, as cited in Awaluddin et al., 2019).

In recent years, social media become a potent force in shaping behaviour patterns and norms of social lives. In other words, social media now has a huge influence on our lives. Among others, social media has enabled content users to become content creators, expanded human social interactions, and transformed one-way communication into two-way dialogue.

Similar to direct communication, the content on social media has many formats as well. Social media users can share content in the form of text, images, sounds, or images

and sounds. This has enabled major changes in various fields. For example, with regard to personal branding, social media can substantially affect its formation and maintenance (Juliastuti & Witarti, 2020).

On social media, a person can establish how he or she wants to be portrayed and seen by other users (Jacobson, 2020). If someone successfully creates a popular personality on social media, this is akin to personal branding. Not to mention since the influence of social media that can reach a wider audience, any information or content shared can reach far and wide, and achieve a high engagement rate.

### *Instagram*

Instagram is a very popular social media platform today. Instagram is composed of two words, namely “insta” which means instant and was inspired by the Polaroid camera at that time, which can instantly print photos. The word “gram” is taken from the term telegram. It means a medium for sending information that is very fast and efficient. The application, which was founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger several years ago in October 2010, was initially developed for photography connoisseurs and practitioners. Today, this application is utilised for various purposes, given that this application is a highly appropriate medium for sharing information, especially for promotion amongst users who more visually inclined. Instagram maximises its features to interact through visuals and videos (Hassim et al., 2020).

## METHOD

The present study reviewed literature that refers to journals, repositories, news in online media, and all reference sources that can be accessed online. Data collected were analysed using the triangulation technique. For this study, the underpinning theories were mass communication theories and persuasive communication theories.

To understand better the role of influencers in educating the public during the COVID-19 pandemic, data were collected on social media influencers, persuasive communication, social media and the pandemic. The data were then categorised based on related themes and also year of publication. For this study, data were collected from literature published between 2017 and 2023. A total of 22 articles were identified in accordance with the research objective to be analysed.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Persuasive alternatives in the new era of media*

There are numerous approaches for persuasive communication today, including influential figures. Actually, persuasive communication using public figures is not totally new. The world of marketing and advertising have long engaged ambassadors or influencers such as celebrities to promote a product or service. Today, the omnipresent digitalisation has spurred people and businesses to change their way of life and behaviour. For Indonesia, with one of the largest number of internet media users in the world, this new media has become the main source of information-seeking. Compared to conventional media, social media makes it easier to stay abreast with the latest world developments, including trending topics, obtain followers, and create virtual communities.

Given that influencers have many followers and can strongly influence them (Girsang, 2020), they can be very effective in popularising a particular message or issue.

This can be called a form of persuasive communication, because influencers can influence the behaviour of followers in accordance with the message or information spread by the influencer.

Celebrities who became influencers in the BNPB program are considered to have contributed positively in persuading people to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Of the 10 influencers analysed, their followers total on average, millions of people. The influencers' positive content has a far-reaching effect worldwide. Similarly, for their negative content. Social media enables followers to know the latest updates of their idols without having to meet face-to-face.

A survey conducted by APJII in 2019 revealed that internet users in Indonesia reached 196.71 million people out of a population of 299.91 million people. The APJII survey also showed that 51% of the respondents use the internet to access social media. This percentage was the highest among several other reasons such as media for exchanging messages, entertainment, accessing public services, online shopping, news information services and educational information services (Wicaksono Irawan et al., 2020). The high use of social media in Indonesia is an incentive for the Indonesian government to upgrade the telecommunications infrastructure and facilities for better coverage and speed. During the recent pandemic, online education and socialising became more pertinent as a result of physical distancing measures. Many celebrities and several well-known artists took part in public service announcements. Members of the general public tend to imitate the behaviour of public figures in social media. Even in mass communication, a hypodermic needle will form a strong hegemony in the audience. Thus, it is assumed persuasive communication will certainly be effective amongst social media users.

### *Bonding influencers and the millennial generation*

The Millennials (generation Y) are known as the generation that marketers and brands always seek. Millennials are digitally connected and unstable but they are potent as trendsetters. However, as much as they can strengthen a brand, they can also destroy it. This generation is characterised by those inescapable from the digital media. The Millennial generation comprises those born between 1981 and 1996. The fundamental difference between generation Y and previous generations is that generation Y is more influenced by popular media such as films, TV, magazines, and video games that will ultimately shape their perceptions and beliefs. Further, generation Y has access to computers and the internet. The most fundamental characteristic of generation Y is that they live with the internet and are highly competent in using it to obtain information about a product or service. In short, the internet is their main source of reliable information.

Generation Z (born 1995–2010) is also known as the i-Generation or net generation. While they share some common things with generation Y, a distinguishing characteristic is their ability to multitask digitally, as in they can tweet using a cell phone, while browsing a laptop, and listening to music using a headset. All their activities are mostly related to cyberspace. They have known technology since their childhood and are well-versed with sophisticated gadgets that indirectly affect their personality. Generation Z tends to strongly emulate their idols. It can be in the form of fashion styles or slogans from these celebrities. Generation Z is also deeply invested in the personal life of their idols. Due to the wide attention of generation Z on social media, it is not difficult for someone today to go viral.

Even though many regard the new media as a double-edged sword, the general consensus is that the implications are believed to be more positive than negative. Studies show that the bulk of social media users are generation Y and generation Z. Generation Y shows a strong preference for social networking sites, namely Facebook and Instagram

(Salehuddin Sharipudin et al., 2020) and similar to generation Z, the internet is most often used to access social media (APJII, 2022).

Previously, there were numerous predictions that claimed new media would have a bad effect on adolescents. However, the internet was and remains the only medium suited for formal and informal activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The involvement of several influencers in the BNPB program certainly provided a wider coverage and uptake for COVID-19 information. Indra Bekti is one of those influencers. As a comedian and top host, he has 2 million followers on Instagram and 4.1 million followers on Twitter. Others include Rachel Venya, Taqy Malik, Tirta Mandiri, Olga Lidya, Akbar Rais, etc. In selecting influencers, one particular characteristic that is considered is that they should have a good public image in the social media users' perspective. This image is important to ensure that persuasive communication can be achieved. The higher the number of followers, the greater the chance that the influencer's content is viewed. Despite the strong influence of social media in our lives, it should also be noted that anonymity in cyberspace can be a hinderance for successful communication. Communication that is not face-to-face can lead to a low level of engagement between the communicator and target audience.

### *Changes in the way of communicating and shifting collectivistic values*

As the internet generation, Millennials have completely changed the communication style. Currently, they prefer to communicate behind anonymity without knowing who is on the side of the conversation. This generation uses social media and looks for the information they need instantly in almost every aspect of their life. The Indonesian society has also experienced a slight shift from collectivistic to individualistic. It is not difficult to find members of the millennial generation with devices. On the contrary, there is almost no generation that does not use gadgets. Moreover, this culture is boosted by the large adequate internet network into remote parts of this country. Thus, it can be said that face-to-face interpersonal communication style has and continues to be gradually replaced by virtual communication. Regardless, no matter how sophisticated a technology gets, it cannot be compared to the warmth of direct communication.

Digital communication, as defined by Lee and MWssweschmitt (1998, as cited in Ridwan et al., 2018) is the "transport of bit streams from one geographical location to another over various physical media, such as wire pairs, coaxial cable, optical fibre, and radio waves". The definition of digital communication can be expanded to communication that is multiplex, has multiple access, synchronic and used by many. This is because the internet not only cuts communication "costs" and distance, but encompasses all types of media. It is also called new media, which leads its users to a completely different culture of communication. Undoubtedly, technological developments has significantly changed activities and practices compared to the past. The shortcoming is that the internet generation will lose some of its identity as a social being because it prefers virtual activities to actual life. Even exercise or outdoor activities has been replaced by virtual activities or online games. Inadvertently, the interaction environment has shifted to a virtual world.

The characteristics of digital media also affect the engagement patterns of its users. The unprecedented and unexpected pandemic pushed everyone and every activity into the virtual world. The virtual world was the only option left, thanks to movement restrictions and social gathering bans during the pandemic. Confined to homes, many moved on to the virtual world to stay in touch with others, to teach and learn as well as to carry out work and businesses.

In this context, influencers played a significant role in communication and persuading the general public as they were part of the online community. Influencers persuaded the public to adopt safety and health precautions to contain the spread of the infection as part of the government's pandemic response plan. Furthermore, they also played a role in placating the general dissent and disapproval regarding the restrictions and bans imposed by the government such as travel bans and home confinement. Cultural differences certainly lead to different interpretations of a policy. Thus, with the help of influencers, the Indonesian government was able to contain COVID-19 infections in a society that supported and adhered to the regulations and restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

Without a doubt, the recent pandemic substantially changed the Indonesians' way of life. Almost all countries and industries were affected by this outbreak on an international scale. Similar with other countries, in grappling with the high numbers of COVID-19 infections, Indonesia embarked on massive prevention and containment efforts, encompassing health, economic, and even socio-cultural aspects. The country succeeded in its mitigation and response with good cooperation from all levels of society.

Influencers, who were roped into the government's COVID-19 campaigns posted positive content about the dangers of COVID-19 and preventive measures on their social media pages. The higher the number of followers, the more far-reaching the information was disseminated. These influencers' persuasive messages helped their followers with behaviour change. The potency of influencers in Instagram as an alternative communication approach cannot be underestimated. However, influencer credibility is also a significant factor that should be considered in this approach. Positive content displayed on Instagram media provides a strong hegemony, despite the anonymity of influencers and followers.

Persuasive communication, with the help of influencers, was pertinent to COVID-19 containment in Indonesia. Especially in getting Indonesians to support and adhere to all the safety restrictions imposed, such as bans on social gathering and movement restrictions. Awareness and education play a significant role in addition to medical treatment and recovery projects. Thus, persuasive communication can be regarded as a vital approach in driving a society to adopt healthy practices and habits.

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