The Sexy Self-Representation of Indonesian Internet Influencer on Social Media

Yusuf Kurniawan[1], Diah Kristina [2], Fitria Akhmerti Primasita[3], Karunia Purna Kusciati[4], and Dike Kusuma Wardani[5]

[12345]Universitas Sebelas Maret Surakarta
[*]Corresponding Author: yusuf@staff.uns.ac.id

This research aims to examine the self-representation of sensuous female influencers in Indonesia, specifically a 20-year-old female Javanese influencer who lives in Surakarta, on Instagram, and how the influencer publicly presents herself in front of the audience. Relying on Goffman's Dramaturgical approach, this study provides thorough insights into the frontstage and backstage behavior of the sensuous female influencer and the representation of the influencer on the frontstage. Employing Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic triadic model (1931), the data obtained from Instagram were analyzed by understanding the representamen, the interpretant, and the object of the data. Then, to gain a more detailed understanding, the data collected from in-depth interviews were also scrutinized. This study shows that there is an act of rebellion of being against society's norms of modesty as the influencer constantly acts in a sexualized manner in public and daily activity. While previous studies mostly examine the phenomenon of the sexualized manner of women in hyper-sexualized cultures/Western cultures, this study provides an understanding of the sexualized manner of a sensuous Javanese female influencer in the area where people do not find self-sexualization behavior as common or prevalent.

Introduction

In recent years, as people have already been both familiar with and used to using several social media platforms, social media have become a hub for applying some modes of communication containing visual elements: images and videos. Social media users, like Instagrammers, often make use of pictures to present who they are, how they live their lives, and their preferences (Lee et al., 2015). Communities that have emerged on posting pictures or videos as self-representation are influencers—Individuals who gain a great

number of followers on their own social media accounts and could be anyone, ranging from someone who shares content relating to fashion on Instagram, a wedding photographer who shares their clients' photograph result, to a cyber-security expert on Twitter (Chopra et al., 2021).

The portrayal of influencers actively emerging in social media happens as in the past few years, the popularity of social media influencers has been rapidly soaring (Vrontis et al., 2021). In addition to the popularity of social media influencers, many young to adult female influencers have devoted their passion and energy to making sexualized content. The criteria of content that is considered sexualized includes photos that mainly show the body part and skin, namely poses featuring individuals in bikinis or underwear, close-up photos focusing on the legs, belly, breast, or lips, trousers open, and other photos that mainly show the body part and skin (Bussy-Socrate & Sokolova, 2023).

Along with the sexualized influencer phenomenon, the potential of getting income on social media platforms plays a role in getting sexualized female influencers more emerge on some social media platforms. Social media has been beneficial enough in gaining profit by engaging the target audiences through the promotion of businesses' brands on an influencer's social media account (Ye et al., 2021). Chopra et al (2021) also acknowledge that Influencers could serve while being facilitators to construct relationships, empathy, and connections with online customers. Furthermore, the content of sexualized images could maintain an engagement and connection with followers (Connective Labour) for monetization purposes on social media (Drenten et al., 2020).

Content created by sexualized female influencers either for marketing purposes or not might also be considered a form of self-representation, as it involves intimate information about themselves. Rettberg (2018) has likewise discussed three modes of self-representation in social media: visual, written, and quantitative. (1) Visual self-representation can be the form of a selfie, other images like photos we choose to share on Facebook, and the way we edit the Tumblr page. (2) Written self-representation includes blogs, online diaries, or status updates. (3) Quantified self-representation indicates the way people represent themselves through numbers and graphs by measuring or tracking one's life aspects. Rettberg (2018) believes that self-representation in social media has now embraced the visual form. This author also defines how self-representation is carefully staged and may not reflect the reality of ourselves, and states that before uploading content, people often choose what to share and determine which self-representation is appropriate to show to other people. A study by Tiggemann & Anderberg (2020) argues that social media like Instagram is not real, and observes that the kind of photos showing unrealistic beauty standards Impacted female body image which leads to experiencing an increase in body dissatisfaction as women engaged in more appearance comparison.

Comparing one's appearance to others on social media, specifically on Instagram, influences the relationship of how using social media frequently is linked to greater self-objectification (Fardouly et al., 2018). Objectification theory by Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) defines self-objectification as the way women internalize the idea of how their sense of worth and value depend on their appearance and how sexually attractive they are to others. According to Johnson & Yu (2023), the outcome of self-objectification, which is increased body surveillance, influenced women to implement self-sexualizing behavior. The more women engage in body surveillance, the more they present themselves in sexualized profile photographs on Social Networking Sites (SNSs) (Ruckel

& Hill, 2017). Self-sexualization refers to the intention or voluntary act of females to emphasize their attractiveness by appearing in a sexualized manner (Choi & DeLong, 2019). The definition of self-sexualization itself fully portrays and is in line with the behavior of sexualized female influencers in presenting themselves on social media nowadays.

Studies on the self-sexualization of females have been thoroughly examined by several scholars. Johnson & Yu (2023) do not merely indicate that the precursor of self-sexualization is increased body surveillance—the yield of self-objectification—, yet there are other three precursors: exposure to media, need for attention or popularity, and internalization of sexualization. An analysis of the influence of media consisting of contents objectifying women in a sexual way by Ward et al (2016) elucidates that reality TV programs contribute to US undergraduate students' self-sexualization. Ramsey & Horan (2018) have asserted that seeking attention has got women to post sexualized photos since those photos gained more likes and followers on Instagram and Facebook. In addition, sexualized attention from men is likewise associated with the reason why some females act in a sexualized way, which is linked to positive outcomes: higher sexual esteem and lower sexual depression (Barnett et al., 2018).

Women in a hyper-sexualized culture tend to self-sexualize themselves (Choi & DeLong, 2019). Women living and raised in environments with cultures and societies that categorize sexually objectifying messages as prevalent things find being sexually attractive a crucial part of their lives (Johnson & Yu, 2023). For instance, in Western cultures, messages sexually objectifying women are seen to be a usual and common thing, even in a youth environment (Bigler et al., 2019). The yield of a qualitative study by Papageorgiou et al (2023) indicates that according to the statement by the adolescent girls from the Student Edge youth research panel, an Australian student membership organization, female sexualized behavior is seen as normalized, and they believe girls have the right to self-sexualize themselves on social media.

As several studies have conducted research on the sexualized manner of female influencers on social media, in which this behavior is well-known by many scholars as self-sexualization, many previous studies have found that self-sexualization emerges with its intentions and precursors. However, most of the previous studies merely scrutinize the phenomenon of self-sexualization of women in hyper-sexualized cultures/Western cultures. Therefore, the research purpose of the present study is to conduct an in-depth interview with a Javanese female influencer who engages in self-sexualizing behavior, in which the influencer is surrounded by people who do not consider self-sexualization behavior as common or prevalent. As this study applies the Dramaturgy framework by Erving Goffman, which examines social interaction and human behavior, this study intends to analyze the frontstage representation of the Influencer on Instagram, how the influencer presents herself in public (her Instagram account), and the backstage behaviour. It is necessary to apply the theoretical framework of Charles Sander Peirce's semiotic triadic model (1931) to examine the meanings in a text while analyzing the representation. Charles Sanders Peirce offered a triadic (three-part) model, which consists of a *representamen*, an *interpretant*, and an *object*. The representamen refers to how the sign is represented. The interpretant is how the sign is presented, and meanwhile, the object is what is presented (Chandler, 2007).

Method

The type of research employed in this study is qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of the influencer's representation on social media (Instagram), the way influencer builds their identities on social media, and the behavior when the influencer behaves backstage (not in public). Specifically, this study applied the Dramaturgy framework by Erving Goffman (1959), which allowed us to scrutinize complex human behavior and social interactions. In addition to the Dramaturgy approach, this study also integrated Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic triadic framework into the methodology. This study only had one informant to interview and was conducted in Surakarta, Indonesia. The interview was done with a 20-year-old Javanese female influencer who had been chosen as the participant for this research since this study used purposive sampling or non-random sampling to select the specific individual who meets the characteristics or criteria needed in the study. The criteria for the participants of this study are Indonesian-speaking female influencers posting photos and videos on social media that depict sexualized manners.

As a basis for conducting analysis, the data was obtained through in-depth interviews and analysis of photos and captions from Instagram. The interview is only carried out by two parties, namely the interviewer (the researcher) and the interviewee. The interview questions were constructed by paying attention to some aspects related to the main topic of this research representation. Before conducting the interview, the researcher had prepared a research instrument in the form of research questions about Instagrammers' self-representation. The data obtained was the interview transcript and visual and textual representation of the influencer on Instagram. The informan's Instagram account had a total of 38 posts during the month of July 2023, and out of 38 pictures, only three data analyzed since the three posts have represented the majority of posts that show sexualized pictures in informan's Instagram account. The obtained data was then analyzed utilizing the dramaturgy approach to examine the representation and presentation of the influencer on social media by applying the key concepts of the Dramaturgical approach: the frontstage and backstage (Goffman, 1959) and Triadic model of the semiotic framework by Charles Sanders Pierce, that is to enable analyzing the meanings conveyed within the data. This semiotic triadic model also includes the concepts of the *representamen* (a form which the sign takes), an interpretant (the sense made of the sign), and an object (a referent) (Chandler, 2007).

Result and Discussion
Results

This section reveals the frontstage representation of the influencer on Instagram, how the influencer is represented in the frontstage, and the influencer's backstage behavior. Frontstage is where the influencer presents herself in front of the audience (Goffman, 1959).
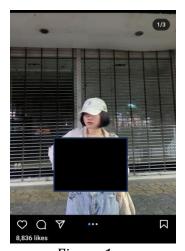
Figure 1
Source: Informan's Instagram account
(The username of the Instagram account is not attached)

Figure 1 itself as the *representation* reveals the self-representation on Instagram (public space) of her wearing a tight crop top clothing which shows some of her body (breasts and belly) and her skin and shapes the curves of some of her body parts (waist and breasts). The *object* of Figure 1 is the influencer's personal brand, and her public persona depicts sexuality. However, the influencer as the interviewee herself states in interview 1: (interview 1 in Indonesian) *"Kalau menurut saya tidak. Karena saya melihat foto itu lucu. Sebelum posting sesuatu saya sering tanya ke teman saya apakah fotonya lucu dan teman juga bilang lucu lucu jadi saya mikirnya lucu. Tapi mungkin karena bentuk tubuh saya, orang berpikir kalau sexy banget,"* (interview 1 in English) *"for me it doesn't depict sexuality, but I find it cute. Before posting something, I often ask my friends whether my photo is cute or not. My friend said so, and that is why I find it cute as well."* The interviewee doesn't find her photos depicting sexuality, but rather cute ones. Meanwhile, she acknowledges that her photos can be perceived as sensuous because of her body shape. She consults with her friends before posting her photo and video whether her image is cute or not, meaning that she wants to be perceived as "cute", not "sexy". Her friends play a crucial role in shaping her online image by helping her decide what is "cute".

The *interpretation* of Figure 1 is a personal expression of her choice of clothing as she dresses up very fashionably. This could be seen as her embracing modern fashion trends and expressing her freedom and confidence. The influencer in the interview says: (interview 2 in Indonesian) *"Sebenarnya tidak ada motivasi apa apa karena memang Instagram tempat untuk posting foto, jadi menurut saya foto saya itu bagus, entah itu outfit saya. Saya juga suka pamer outfit saya,"* (interview 2 in English) *"actually, I do not have any motivations because Instagram is a place for posting my picture. Therefore, I find my photo good, whether it is about my outfits. I like to share my outfits".* The interviewee declares that she has no particular intention to post her photo on Instagram, however, she posts photos or videos that she thinks they look good and likes to share her outfit on social media. She believes that Instagram is a platform for sharing photos without a specific motive or deeper meaning. There is a statement from the influencer saying: (Interview 3 in Indonesian) *"Saya mau nantinya konten saya tentang outfit mix and match. Lebih ke baju-baju dan outfit-outfit lucu karena cewe-cewe di akun saya sering bertanya*

tentang outfit saya," (Interview 3 in English) *"I want my content to be about how I mix and match my outfit, about some cute outfits since my female followers always ask me how I mix and match my outfit,"* Emphasizes that she wants her Instagram account will be filled with the content of her sharing of her outfit styles to her followers since her female followers constantly ask about her outfit.

Despite that, given that she lives in an area where Javanese culture is highly valued, *the interpretation* of Figure 1 could also be a statement or challenge to traditional norms (rebellion). By choosing to wear a revealing outfit, she might be pushing against these cultural expectations and sparking conversations about personal freedom, body positivity, and the evolution of cultural norms in public—in contrast with how other people might present themselves to the audience based on cultural expectations.

Figure 2
Source: Informan's Instagram account
(The username of the Instagram account is not attached)

Figure 2, as the second post posted on the influencer's personal account, shows that the *representament* shown is a photo of her self-representation with a pose by angling her body to highlight specific body parts—her breasts—and wearing a black dress that is almost similar to lingerie. The *object* of Figure 2 refers to what it represents; a sexualized influencer engages a customer in her own Instagram account by promoting the endorsed product or brand she collaborates with. There are some *interpretations* regarding this post. It has become a common thing to encounter some business brands collaborating with influencers to get users' attention on social media. In addition, the brand she advertises doesn't align with the image she is portraying in the photo. Hence, what might be interpreted from this photo is that she uses her representation on Instagram as a marketing tool to engage her audience/followers for monetization purposes, as the interviewee says: (Interview 4 in Indonesian) *"Untuk sekarang, saya sering posting untuk kerjaan, posting foto foto saya, chat dengan teman saya, dan untuk menambah relasi,"* (Interview 4 in English) *"for now, I often post for work purposes, post my photos, chat with my friends, and meet some new people."* She mentions that she utilizes her social media account and posts photos to work (endorsement), posts her photos, directly messages her friends, and gains relationships with other users.
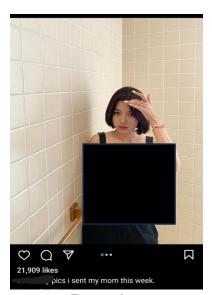
Figure 3
Source: Informan's Instagram account
(The username of the Instagram account is not attached)

Backstage is where the people's behavior or aspects of identity are only visible to limited people, including their close family members; they choose not to display it in the frontstage (Goffman, 1959). The influencer's Instagram caption on Figure 3 provides a glimpse into her backstage because she reveals her relationship with her mother and that she sent her mother some of the sensual pictures she used to share publicly. The *representament* is the caption on Figure 3 of one of the posts in the influencer's Instagram account that says, "pics I sent my mom this week" below the sensual photo of the influencer. The *object* is the act of the influencer sending her photos, publicly posted on her Instagram account, to her mom.

The Interpretant: in the context of Javanese culture, at a very young age, children are often taught by their parents to uphold modesty (how to communicate and behave with others around them), and it also includes how they dress; they must dress that covers fully or some of part of their body, and wear some loose clothes. The caption in Figure 3 could be interpreted that her mother might not have adjusted the rules of clothing for her daughter, as the influencer casually sent her mother some photos of hers that do not align well with the Javanese cultural values in clothing. This phenomenon indicates that the influencer's sensualized behavior is being acknowledged by her mother and there seems to be nothing hidden between the influencer and her mother as the influencer comments during the interview when asked about whether her parents permit her self-sexualization behavior or not and whether she worries about how her other relatives and neighbor will react when encountering her content: (interview 5 in Indonesian) *"Enggak, sih. Saya bukan tipikal orang yang peduli dengan orang lain. Kalau mama papa saya membolehkan berarti saya boleh,"* (Interview 5 in English) *"Not really. I am not the type of person who cares about other people's opinions. If my parents allow me, it means I could post that."* This statement means that the influencer does not care about others' perception of her posts on the Internet and her parents welcome her daughter to post photos in a sexualized manner. The influencer also mentions that there are no differences in her appearance in frontstage and backstage: (Interview 6 in Indonesian) *"Kalau tata cara berpakaian, saya memang berpakaian seperti itu," (Interview 6 in English)*

"as for how I dress up, I always dress up like that." The influencer states that she dresses up the same way as on Instagram.

Discussion

This study aims to explore the representation of sensuous Javanese influencers on Instagram and the presentation both frontstage and backstage. The emergence of influencers in social media has been drastically rising (Vrontis et al., 2021), as time goes by, many influencers also devote their energy and time to providing sexualized content. The sexualized content mainly includes photos that portray some part of bodies, such as legs, belly, lips, and breasts (Bussy-Socrate & Sokolova, 2023). Our findings of the representation of the Javanese sensuous influencer on Instagram indicate that photos representing the majority of the photos posted on her account show some of her bodies are focused on her breasts, although in the influencer's opinion, she does not find any of her photos sensual at all.

Self-sexualisation comes with its intention and voluntary act (Choi & DeLong, 2019). There are three precursors of self-sexualization (exposure to media, need for attention or popularity, and internalization of sexualization), and previous studies have shown how seeking popularity or attention and sexualized attention from men get women to act in a sexualized manner (Johnson & Yu, 2023; Ramsey and Holand, 2018; Barnett et al., 2018). The data of this study shows that the intention why she posts content in the form of photos or videos that are more provocative and sensual is due to the urge to show off or share her outfit with her female followers on Instagram. This study suggests that the act of wearing tight and revealing clothes might not be considered as self-sexualisation but as a form of self-expression. However, the data shows that the influencer participates in self-sexualization to get the attention of the audience for monetization purposes, and it is in line with a previous study argument that states the content of sexualized images could maintain a connection with followers for monetization purposes and women sexualisation is a crucial part for financial success in an online platform (Drenten et al., 2020; Bussy-Socrate & Sokolova, 2023).

The representation of self in social media may not depict the reality of someone, and people tend to choose which self-representation is appropriate to show publicly, following the customs and rules of society (Rettberg, 2018; Goffman, 1959). On the other hand, this study shows the opposite; the data obtained from this study reveal how the influencer behaves in a sexualized manner in either the frontstage (public space) or backstage (private stage). The influencer may not choose to follow the norms of society in Surakarta, where this area highly upholds Javanese culture since the majority of her self-representation on Instagram doesn't represent modesty in clothing. This study, with its argument of the representation and presentation of female sensuous Javanese influencers, helps understand better how women present themselves in digital spaces and how the presentation of the influencer is influenced by cultural and societal norms. However, there is a limitation in this study; this study only has one participant, which leads to the lack of comprehensive understanding from the perspective of several individuals. This finding also may not generalize to a larger community. Therefore, future research regarding this topic is needed to reach a broader population.

Conclusion

Self-sexualization behavior of an influencer in social media, which is also considered a public space, can be perceived as the action of being against the cultural

norms and values when surrounded by people who highly uphold the norms of modesty, like Javanese culture. Meanwhile, as previous literature has scrutinized the phenomenon of sexualized practices of influencers in social media, the sexualized manner in Instagram benefits the influencer and the other side (the company) for monetizing the self-representation of sensual influencer since it is effective in getting the attention of the audience. From this study, it could be stated that the self-representation of someone in public like social media somehow also depicts the reality of the person while on the other hand, many researchers in existing studies point out that what's on social media is usually fake. However, this study has its limitations. The data of this study couldn't entirely generalize a larger community and has limited information since only one participant was scrutinized and interviewed. Therefore, further study is needed to reach more participants to get various perceptions.

Reference

Barnett, M., Maciel, I., & Gerner, M. (2018). Enjoyment of Sexualization and Feminism: Relationships with Sexual Self-Schema and Psychosexual Health. *Sexuality and Culture*, *22*(3), 669–684. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-018-9515-5

Bigler, R. S., Tomasetto, C., & McKenney, S. (2019). Sexualization and youth: Concepts, theories, and models. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *43*(6), 530–540. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025419870611

Bussy-Socrate, H., & Sokolova, K. (2023). Sociomaterial influence on social media: exploring sexualised practices of influencers on Instagram. *Information Technology and People*. https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-03-2022-0215

Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics the Basics, Second Edition - 69249454-chandler-semiotics.pdf*. 29–30. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00176-5

Peirce, C. S. (1931). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Choi, D., & DeLong, M. (2019). Defining Female Self Sexualization for the Twenty-First Century. *Sexuality and Culture*, *23*(4), 1350–1371. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09617-3

Chopra, A., Avhad, V., & Jaju, and S. (2021). Influencer Marketing: An Exploratory Study to Identify Antecedents of Consumer Behavior of Millennial. *Business Perspectives and Research*, *9*(1), 77–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/2278533720923486

Drenten, J., Gurrieri, L., & Tyler, M. (2020). Sexualized labour in digital culture: Instagram influencers, porn chic and the monetization of attention. *Gender, Work and Organization*, *27*(1), 41–66. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12354

Fardouly, J., Willburger, B. K., & Vartanian, L. R. (2018). Instagram use and young women's body image concerns and self-objectification: Testing mediational pathways. *New Media and Society*, *20*(4), 1380–1395. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817694499

Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. (1997). Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *21*(2), 173–206. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City.

Johnson, K. K. P., & Yu, U. J. (2023). A Narrative Critical Review of Research on Self-Sexualization. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, *41*(2), 139–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X211004294

Lee, E., Lee, J. A., Moon, J. H., & Sung, Y. (2015). Pictures Speak Louder than Words:

Motivations for Using Instagram. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *18*(9), 552–556. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015.0157

Papageorgiou, A., Fisher, C., & Crossa, D. (2023). "It just Sends the Message that you're Nothing but your body" a Qualitative Exploration of Adolescent Girls' Perceptions of Sexualized Images on Social Media. *Sexuality and Culture*, *27*(2), 462–481. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-022-10022-6

Ramsey, L. R., & Horan, A. L. (2018). Picture this: Women's self-sexualization in photos on social media. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *133*, 85–90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.06.022

Rettberg, J. W. (2017). *Self % Representation / in / Social / Media /*. 1–30.

Ruckel, L., & Hill, M. (2017). Look @ Me 2.0: Self-Sexualization in Facebook Photographs, Body Surveillance and Body Image. *Sexuality and Culture*, *21*(1), 15–35. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-016-9376-8

Szmrecsanyi, B. (2006). *Morphosyntactic Persistence in Spoken English* (W. Bisang, H. H. Hock, & W. Winter (eds.)). Mouton de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110197808

Tiggemann, M., & Anderberg, I. (2020). Social media is not real: The effect of 'Instagram vs reality' images on women's social comparison and body image. *New Media and Society*, *22*(12), 2183–2199. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819888720

Vrontis, D., Makrides, A., Christofi, M., & Thrassou, A. (2021). Social media influencer marketing: A systematic review, integrative framework and future research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *45*(4), 617–644. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12647

Ward, L. M., Seabrook, R. C., Manago, A., & Reed, L. (2016). Contributions of Diverse Media to Self-Sexualization among Undergraduate Women and Men. *Sex Roles*, *74*(1–2), 12–23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0548-z

Ye, G., Hudders, L., De Jans, S., & De Veirman, M. (2021). The Value of Influencer Marketing for Business: A Bibliometric Analysis and Managerial Implications. *Journal of Advertising*, *50*(2), 160–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2020.1857888