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ONLINE MEDIA AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES IN INDONESIA

Rizki Briandana[1*], Muhammad Raqib Mohd Sofian[2]

[1] Universitas Mercu Buana, Jl. Meruya Selatan No.1, RT.4/RW.1, Joglo, Kec. Kembangan, Kota Jakarta Barat, Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta 11650, Indonesia
[2] Universitas Sains Islam Malaysia, Bandar Baru Nilai, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia
[1*]rizki.briandana@mercubuana.ac.id, [2]m.raqib@usim.edu.my

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This research examines the digital mobilization initiatives undertaken by online collectives in Indonesia, with particular emphasis on the Sahabat Ibu Pintar network. The investigation delves into participants' contributions and engagement patterns within this collective as components of female advancement strategies. Netnography serves as the methodological framework, utilizing dialogue-based inquiries and systematic monitoring for data acquisition. Research findings suggest that financial enhancement constitutes the principal catalyst for participation within this digital collective. From a structural perspective, the Sahabat Ibu Pintar network represents a collective established through institutional backing to implement advancement initiatives. To foster financial enhancement, this network facilitates employment opportunities for its participants, while

concurrently organizing virtual and in-person educational workshops.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in the role of women in society are increasingly visible along with the development of technology and socio-economic conditions (Vardhan, 2020). One phase that often becomes a significant turning point in women's lives is when they enter the role of mothers. Based on the results of initial interviews with informants, this transition is often accompanied by challenges such as difficulty in having children, social pressure, and postpartum depression. In addition, the policies of several companies that do not provide flexibility for female workers after having children have resulted in many women being forced to leave the workforce or seek more flexible alternative jobs. This condition creates inequality in access to economic resources, which leads to reduced financial independence for women (Yadav & Unni, 2016).

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened this condition. Data from the Ministry of Manpower released through the satudata.kemnaker.go.id website on October 26, 2020, noted that as many as 1,542,507 workers were laid off (PHK) during the period April-August 2020. Working women also felt this impact, especially those who need flexibility in working to be able to take care of their families. Without adequate structural support, many women turn to informal employment or seek alternative, more flexible economic opportunities. This reinforces the urgency of empowering women through work models that balance domestic responsibilities and economic participation.

On the other hand, technological developments and increasing internet penetration in Indonesia open up new opportunities for women to remain economically productive (Alatas & Sutanto, 2019). In addition, the We Are Social report shows that in January 2024, the number

of active social media users in Indonesia reached 167 million people or around 60.4% of the total population.

This phenomenon reflects the shift in social interaction to the digital world, where individuals can communicate, share information, and form virtual communities (Barus, 2015). The concept of "cyberspace" introduced by Radloff (2005) describes digital space as a new reality that allows individuals to participate in various social activities, including chatting, discussing, and running a business. Interactions in cyberspace encourage the formation of virtual communities, where individuals with similar interests can gather, share experiences, and support each other (Herna, 2022). Therefore, virtual communities are not only a means of social interaction but also a place for women to gain access to information, job opportunities, and emotional support (Rheingold, 2000).

In the context of empowerment, virtual communities have become one of the effective forms of digital empowerment (Ibrahim, 2019). A study by Vardhan (2020) showed that online communities such as artisan communities on blog platforms can empower their members economically through sharing features and increasing the number of followers, which ultimately contributes to business strategies. Interaction in virtual communities also plays a role in the exchange of experiences and knowledge, which can strengthen individual capacity (Kadeswaran et al., 2020). Thus, virtual communities can be a powerful tool in encouraging women's economic independence, especially in the increasingly growing digital economy (Kulsum, 2018).

In this study, the virtual community analyzed was the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community. The Sahabat Ibu Pintar community was chosen because it has a large member base spread throughout Indonesia, allowing for a wider empowerment reach. In addition, this community also has various empowerment programs that are considered more diverse than other communities. The programs offered not only focus on improving the economy through brand ambassadors and Key Opinion Leaders (KOL)/Influencers, but also include digital skills training, self-development, and networking opportunities with the wider community. This

community operates on various digital platforms, such as Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp. Through interactions on social media, mothers can join virtual communities that share similar interests, with the main goal of earning additional income from home. In addition to the economic aspect, this community also provides opportunities for women to build self-confidence, improve digital skills, and expand their professional networks (Dwityas et al., 2023).

Along with technological advances, empowerment models and patterns have also changed (Kenkarasseril Joseph, 2013). Oyelude & Bamigbola (2013) emphasized that the digital world is developing very rapidly, so it is important to understand how technology can be utilized in empowerment efforts. In the context of digital empowerment, becoming a content creator on social media is a form of independence that can have a significant impact on individuals who participate in it. With the increasing need for digital content, women who join virtual communities such as Sahabat Ibu Pintar can optimize social media as a source of income as well as a place for self-expression (Kabeer, 2021).

With the high use of social media and the existence of virtual communities in Indonesia, this study aims to explore interaction patterns, member roles, and communication patterns in the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community related to the empowerment programs they run. In addition, this study also aims to understand how this community can become a model for digital-based women's empowerment and provide recommendations for policy makers and digital industry players in creating a more inclusive digital economic ecosystem for women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyberspace and Virtual Community

Cyberspace or virtual world is a reality that is formed from interactions that occur when we carry out internet-based CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) (Zhao et al., 2021). As in the original reality, the interactions between two or more people form a new reality. Cyberspace can also be interpreted as an Imaginary Location (a place where electronic

activities are carried out) and also as a virtual society that is formed through communication that is established in a computer network (Radloff, 2005).

In the era of Society 5.0, technology is increasingly integrated into various aspects of human life, including in the process of social interaction (Sung et al., 2019). The development of the internet and computer devices allows individuals to communicate beyond the boundaries of space and time. By using social media, individuals can interact with others in various parts of the world (Fan et al., 2017). This interaction forms a new reality known as virtual reality. As in the real world, individuals who share similar interests tend to gather in groups and then form communities (Skakun, 2024).

At the secondary tier of typology, online communities are classified according to the structure of their collective member interactions (Widyaningrum, 2021). This focus on relational orientation illustrates the manner in which the community's connections and organizational frameworks are established.

In the second level of typology, virtual communities are categorized based on how the overall community relationships are organized (Widyaningrum, 2021). The relationship orientation framework characterizes the nature of connections established among community participants. Communities initiated by individuals primarily foster and strengthen interpersonal or vocational bonds between participants; meanwhile, communities backed by organizations focus on cultivating positive interactions between their participants and the supporting institution (Herna, 2022).

Women Empowerment

Empowerment enables individuals to gain sufficient strength to influence and participate in controlling institutions that impact their lives (Kabeer, 2021). According to Sharma (2003), empowerment aims to enhance economic productivity within communities, generating increased income and value. To create this added value, individuals need improved access to four key elements: resources, technology, markets, and demand (Melhern et al., 2009). In this context, capability encompasses being: enabled, knowledgeable, inspired, presented with

possibilities, perceptive of opportunities, collaborative, cooperative, aware of choices, decisive, and willing to embrace.

Women's empowerment involves elevating women's roles and status in society and strengthening women's organizations (Kadeswaran et al., 2020). It is about increasing women's autonomy, giving them resources to improve their economic situation, and recognizing the barriers they face (Melissa et al., 2015). Empowering women does not create conflict with men but promotes gender equality by helping women realize their abilities and encouraging harmonious coexistence (Kenkarasseril Joseph, 2013).

Digital empowerment has risen alongside the growth of digital technologies (Halpern, 2015). According to Melhem et al. (2009), empowerment in this digital age is a multi-stage process that enhances networking, interaction, and collaboration, while strengthening the skills of people and groups to become active contributors within the information society.

This is possible by improving human to human relations through machine to machine. In more detail than the explanation by Tasli (2007) regarding the elements of empowerment that are practiced in social media, if summarized, they are as follows:

1. Brand Story or share story is an empowerment effort carried out by directing the story behind the product and the story behind the process undertaken. This activity is carried out by showing existing problems and the importance of change through stories on social media.

2. Brand Mission is an empowerment effort intended to share the mission of empowerment.

3. Product Samples are products or services produced that are uploaded on social media to strengthen empowerment programs.

4. Community Development is an empowerment effort including outreach, invitations, volunteer recruitment, activity information and stakeholder meetings.

5. Mixed Media is the publication of information to the public through various channels.

6. Memorable Content and Packaging is an empowerment effort by uploading content creatively and consistently. This content management looks at the use of hashtags and taglines to gain attention, including paying attention to upload times.

7. Differentiation is a diverse empowerment program in the form of innovation or something different from other ideals around it. This situation can make the empowerment program survive and develop.

METHOD

The research method used in this research is the netnography method. Netnography is a qualitative method that is methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology (Kozinets, 2002). The netnography method observes general guidelines and ethnographic traditions while adapting them to the unique circumstances of cyber culture (Kozinets, 1998). Kozinets (2015) reveals that the netnography method focuses on researching virtual communities, this method is a special type of online ethnography, so it requires participation. active researcher in the observed virtual community.

Netnographic research methods are aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of virtual community life from the researcher's perspective (Briandana & Christanto, 2023). In the context of netnography, the digital people studied are generally known as netizens or netizens in the realm of social media (Kozinets, 2012).

Kozinets (2015) added that if the steps above were summarized into three steps, namely: Entrée, data collection, and analysis and interpretation. This is in line with the netnography procedure recommended by Kozinets, namely:

1. Entrée: formulation of research questions and identification of appropriate online communities for study.

2. Data Collection: Live copies of computer-mediated communications of online community members and observations of community members, their interactions, and their meanings.

3. Analysis and interpretation: classification, coding analysis, and contextualization of communicative actions. All these steps must be taken in accordance with research ethics.

The research subjects of this study were the virtual community "Sahabat Ibu Pintar" consisting of 8 people. The informants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Becoming a member of the community for at least 1 year.

2. Having participated in programs held by the community at least 3 times.

3. Actively using social media for at least 2 years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that interactivity in the virtual community of Sahabat Ibu Pintar plays an important role in the process of women's empowerment. This interactivity is formed through three main aspects, namely user-to-system, user-to-user, and user-to-document. These three aspects allow community members to obtain information, build networks, and increase their economic and social capacity.

Interactivity in the Sahabat Ibu Pintar Community

1. User-to-System Interaction

Interaction between users and systems in this community occurs through various digital platforms, such as Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp, and the Orami application. Community members access information about empowerment programs, register for training, and get job opportunities as brand ambassadors and Key Opinion Leaders (KOL)/Influencers. The ability of members to utilize digital technology is a major factor in the success of empowerment in this community.

"I first learned about this community from Instagram. At first I just saw the information in the story, then I clicked the link in the bio and registered through the Telegram application. Since

then, I have been actively participating in various programs offered." (Dina, member of Sahabat Ibu Pintar, 30 years old).

"The system is very helpful because there is a training schedule and program details that can be accessed anytime. I usually register for webinars and follow campaigns through the application." (Diandra, housewife, 34 years old).

2. User-to-User Interaction

Interaction between community members plays a key role in building solidarity and sharing experiences. Through communication that occurs in Telegram and WhatsApp groups, members can provide emotional support, share job opportunities, and help each other in developing digital skills. In addition, this community encourages collaboration between members in creating digital content that can increase their exposure and involvement in the world of digital marketing.

"I often ask and discuss with other members in the WhatsApp group. For example, if there is work from a brand, I can ask my friends how to create interesting content." (Rini, momfluencer, 28 years old)

"I joined this community because a friend invited me. At first, I just joined the Telegram group, but after interacting with other members, I felt more confident to join the program and make money from home." (Sari, housewife, 32 years old)

3. User-to-Document Interaction

This interaction includes how community members interact with shared content, such as articles, video tutorials, and training materials. Members who are active in reading and understanding the information provided have a greater chance of succeeding in the empowerment program. In addition, involvement in digital campaigns and document-based training helps members improve their skills in creating engaging and commercially valuable content.

To analyze interactivity, member roles, and communication patterns in the Ibubusibu virtual community in empowerment efforts, researchers describe the results of observations and interviews using netnographic methods (Kozinets, 2015). The coding stage is carried out by grouping the results of observations and interviews from informants into certain categories and

assigning codes to these categories. At the noting stage, the researcher marks important things in the observation and interview data that are relevant to the research objectives. The next abstracting stage is carried out by identifying existing concepts and constructing an understanding of the meaning. The researcher carried out the checking and refinement stage by combining the results of observation findings and the results of informant interviews. The researcher elaborates the explanation elaboratively at the generalizing stage.

"The materials shared in the community are very helpful. I often watch video tutorials about digital marketing shared in the group. From there, I learned how to increase engagement on Instagram." (Vina, freelancer, 27 years old)

"Every time there is a new campaign, I always read the guidelines provided. This is important so that I can understand the rules of the game and optimize the opportunities available." (Diana, freelance mother, 35 years old)

Member Roles in Digital Empowerment

The roles of members in the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community depending on their level of involvement and experience. Some of the main roles in this community include:

1. Program Participants

    New community members usually participate in available training programs and campaigns. They learn how to create digital content, build personal branding, and improve their digital marketing and communication skills.

    "Initially I just wanted to learn how to create more interesting content. After attending several webinars in this community, I began to understand the importance of personal branding and marketing strategies on social media." (Erna, housewife, 29 years old).

2. Influencers and Brand Ambassadors

    Members who already have experience in digital marketing can become influencers or brand ambassadors. They play a role in promoting products and services, both for the community and for various brands that collaborate with Sahabat Ibu Pintar. This position provides

significant economic opportunities for community members, especially for those looking for additional income from home.

"After a few months of being active in the community, I started getting offers to collaborate with brands. I learned how to create interesting product reviews and understand how to increase engagement on Instagram." (Ayu, momfluencer, 27 years old)

"Being a brand ambassador makes me more confident in speaking in front of the camera. I also learned how to build a loyal audience, so that brands are more interested in working with me." (Sinta, mother of two, 32 years old)

3. Mentors and Community Admins

Members who have reached a certain level of expertise are often given the role of mentor or community admin. They are responsible for mentoring new members, managing interactions within the community, and ensuring that the information shared is relevant and useful for all members. With this role, the community can continue to grow and maintain the quality of empowerment provided.

"As an admin, I am responsible for ensuring that campaign information reaches members clearly. I also often help new members understand the rules of cooperation with brands." (Fauzia, community admin, 35 years old)

"Being a mentor in this community gives me the opportunity to share knowledge with other mothers. I feel happy to be able to help them improve their digital skills and see them succeed." (Lidya, community mentor, 33 years old)

Impact of Empowerment in Virtual Communities

Based on the results of the study, empowerment in the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community has a positive impact on its members in the following aspects:

1. Increased Economic Independence

The empowerment programs in this community have helped many women to earn additional income through work as influencers and brand ambassadors. With the training

and mentoring provided, community members can be more confident in monetizing their expertise in digital marketing.

2. Strengthening Social and Professional Networks

Interactions in the community not only build solidarity between members, but also open access to a wider professional network. This allows members to get more job opportunities, both inside and outside the community.

3. Increasing Digital Capacity and Creativity

Through various trainings and programs offered, community members can improve their digital skills, including in creative content creation, digital marketing strategies, and social media analysis. These skills are not only useful in the context of the community, but can also be applied in various other fields of work.

Challenges in Digital Empowerment

Although the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community has provided many benefits to its members, there are several challenges that need to be overcome to increase the effectiveness of the empowerment program, including:

1. Different Levels of Digital Literacy

Not all community members have the same level of digital literacy. Some members still have difficulty accessing and understanding digital technology, so they need more guidance and basic training.

2. Competition in the World of Influencer Marketing

With more and more individuals entering the world of influencer marketing, the competition for job opportunities is getting tighter. Therefore, community members need to continue to develop unique skills and strategies to remain competitive in the digital market.

3. Sustainability and Consistency of the Program

In order for the impact of empowerment to last in the long term, the community needs to ensure that the programs offered are sustainable and continuously updated according to technological developments and member needs.

Discussion

The results of this study have several important implications for developing digital empowerment strategies, including:

1. Optimizing Training Programs.

   To increase the effectiveness of empowerment, communities need to provide more structured training programs that are tailored to the level of digital literacy of members.

2. Strengthening Collaboration with External Parties.

   Partnerships with brands, organizations, and educational institutions can help expand job opportunities for community members and increase the credibility of the community in the digital realm.

3. Using Technology to Increase Interactivity.

   Utilizing technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and data analysis can help communities provide more personalized program recommendations and increase member engagement.

The interactivity that occurs on social media networks causes user to system, user to user, and user to document interactivity, making it possible for prospective Sahabat Ibu Pintar members to finally find the Sahabat Ibu Pintar virtual community. After joining, mothers have access to self-development programs and brand collaboration owned by the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community. The interactivity of mothers in program allows the formation of smaller groups which allows for the opportunity to earn more income and a wider network as momfluencers. According to Vardhan (2020) empowerment in the digital world through the use of social media encourages empowerment actors to be more self-committed to themselves, enabling them to continue moving forward by improving human to human relationships through machine to machine. This is in line with the results of participant observation conducted by researchers. The development of technology and communication

allows information to spread freely on the internet, including tips on becoming a content creator, however, it is not certain that individuals will be interested in learning it. By joining the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community, the human to human relationships that exist between fellow mothers enable self-commitment within themselves to learn together to become empowered mothers even from home as content creators. This relationship will also open up various opportunities for mothers to be more financially empowered. This situation is also supported by the empowerment programs provided by Sahabat Ibu Pintar, which in the process allows mothers to join a specific communication network, making it possible to exchange targeted information.

In terms of user to document interaction, likes and comments made by fellow members will increase the engagement value of an account. Some collaboration jobs with brands require a minimum engagement value, or, even if a minimum value is not requested, the engagement value is a form of report that needs to be sent to the brand when collaborating. That's why one of the reasons for joining the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community is also wanting to increase exposure. This value will be visible in the account insights report. Exposure value is the barter value or exchange value between Sahabat Ibu Pintar members and the brands they collaborate with. If the value is good, the possibility of long or greater cooperation will also be wide open.

The interview results show that the presence of this community has a positive impact on women in obtaining additional sources of income from home. Many members who initially only wanted to learn about digital marketing then developed into influencers or brand ambassadors who earn income from collaborations with various brands. This shows that virtual communities can be an effective bridge in supporting women's economic transformation in the digital era.

However, there are several challenges that need to be considered in this empowerment model. One of them is the digital literacy gap among community members. Not all members have the same skills in using digital technology, so more systematic and inclusive training

needs to be provided. In addition, competition in the world of influencer marketing is also getting tighter, so the community must continue to provide education to its members so that they can compete professionally in this industry.

Overall, the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community has shown that virtual communities can be an effective tool in empowering women, especially in the economic and digital skills development aspects. Interaction within the community, whether in the form of user-to-system, user-to-user, or user-to-document, plays an important role in creating an environment that supports women's growth and independence in the digital era. However, to increase wider impact, a more comprehensive strategy is needed to overcome existing challenges and strengthen collaboration with various parties.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community exemplifies the evolving role of virtual communities in women's empowerment in Indonesia, especially in the context of economic and digital skill development. As a community backed by an organization and oriented toward increasing the economic value for its members, Sahabat Ibu Pintar stands out for enabling women across Indonesia to access new sources of income and expand their digital competencies—all while providing flexibility to work from home. The wide geographic reach and diverse membership base further underscore its significance in closing gaps in opportunity and access for women in the digital era.

Empowerment within this community is fostered by robust interactivity patterns encompassing user-to-system, user-to-user, and user-to-document exchanges. Such interactions cultivate a supportive environment for knowledge sharing, network building, and the improvement of digital marketing and content creation skills. This multidimensional interactivity is crucial in fostering not just individual growth but also collective advancement within the group.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms that the synergy between legal empowerment, supportive digital communities, and informed public discourse is essential for driving sustainable and inclusive empowerment for women in Indonesia. The case of the Sahabat Ibu Pintar community illustrates how virtual platforms, when strategically supported, can be powerful catalysts for real economic, social, and psychological empowerment, helping to construct a broader safe space for women in both the digital and real worlds.

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