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SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTION IN VIRTUAL TRIBE FOR EFFECTIVE  
BRAND COMMUNITIES CASE STUDY ON INSTAGRAM  
PHOTOGRAPHY COMMUNITY

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## ABSTRACT

This research aims to figure out the process of tribe communities' foundation, the benefits gained from being a tribe member and the role of a tribe in product campaigns. This research used the social interaction theory and virtual tribe concept. The research method used involved the participatory approach and Netnography method. Data collection was conducted through online observation and literature study, while data analysis was conducted using the constant comparative technique. Data was divided into categories, and relationships between the categories were identified and then simplified in a coherent structure. The results of this study reveal the utilization of a digital community (tribe) for product campaigns on Instagram. It was revealed that people who have the same interests can congregate in cyberspace despite being geographically and demographically different. Being a member of a digital community will enable a person to increase his or her knowledge in certain fields and to be a promotional agent of a brand as well as earn money.

## INTRODUCTION

Social media is one of the well-known Internet's products. The birth of Facebook in 2004, to be followed by its worldwide expansion later in 2006 for anyone to access, more than 13 years ago is considered to mark the beginning of the magnificence of the social media era (Mattern, 2016).

People use social media to extend the reach of their social interactions. With the help of Facebook, they socialize with people from different geographical places of living, reconnect with old friends and make new

friends in the virtual world by sharing stories, information, photos and videos.

As social beings, humans need to socialize with others. They meet and engage with others through group gatherings for comfort, or to pursue common interests and hobbies, and this group subsequently becomes a community. Face-to-face meeting is often difficult to do due to distance, time or other matters.

Today's increasingly sophisticated technology offers a wide range of solutions for community development, one of which is the establishment of communities in the virtual world. With mobile devices or laptops and the Internet, communications between community members are made possible to be done intensely irrespective of time and distance because communications can be done in their spare time (Watie, 2011).

In the book *Community Media in The Information Age*, Nicholas Jankowski states that with the development of electronic and digital technology networks, virtual communities will continue to form (Prehn & Jankowski, 2002). Marshall McLuhan also predicted the occurrence of re-tribalised societies in the 1970s. The use of computer technology in social interaction that facilitates the formation of online communities has brought McLuhan's predictions to reality.

One of the social media that is extremely influential in the establishment of online communities in Indonesia is Instagram. Early in 2010, Instagram started off as a free mobile app provided for iOS-based mobile device users. It allows its users to share images, photos and videos, publicly or privately, to previously approved followers (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014). Instagram was acquired by Facebook in 2012 and has been accessible to users of Android and all operating systems since (Mattern, 2016).

The advance of new media technologies, particularly the Internet and social media, encourages the creation of virtual communities based on similar interests, problems, products or brands, placing virtual communities in the heart of marketing and brand management success (Pathak & Pathak –Shelat, 2017).

Social media can strengthen dynamic interactions between members of online communities, enabling them to tell their fellow online community members about different brands or goods. Besides branding, it is also necessary to build connections with users to foster mutual ownership (Yan, 2011).

The research questions formulated according to the data above are as follows: (1) How are tribe communities established, and what are their activities? (2) What are the benefits of being a tribe member? and (3) What are a virtual tribe's roles in a product campaign?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The social interaction theory, the new media concepts, computer-mediated communication, Instagram, virtual tribes, virtual brand communities and tribal marketing are explored in this research.

### **New Media**

New media is a participatory media, particularly with the use of the Internet to share and exchange information, ideas and experiences, and to

develop active, computer-mediated personal relationships. Social networking sites belong to this group. Its use ranges from pure to affective and emotional equipment (McQuail, 2010).

The new media discussed in this research is Instagram. Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing app that enables its users to shoot, edit and distribute (post) photos or videos to Instagram's main page and other social networks via mobile devices like iOS, Android and Windows phones.

### **Computer-Mediated Communication**

Computer-Mediated Communication Literature discusses technology and social interaction, providing explanations on the impact of technology on social interaction and interpersonal communication. CMC is a process of human communication via computers, involving people, situated in particular contexts, engaging processes to shape media for a variety of purposes (Thurlow et.al., 2004).

Susan Herring made a more classic definition of CMC: a communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers.

Thurlow stated that a new form of communication (with the Internet) allows people to communicate instantly over long distances (Thurlow et al., 2004). This study discusses communications that occur through the Internet as an intermediary that connects people residing in different areas within a virtual community.

### **The Social Interaction Theory in Social Media**

Social interaction is a reciprocal relationship in society that occurs because of communication through a certain action. Social interaction forms out of the existence of social contact and communication that go both ways (Soekanto, 2006).

The internet has changed the way humans interact socially. In particular, social media has generated new types of social interactions (Fischer & Reuber, 2011). Today, interactions are no longer established just by shaking hands, smiling and conversing face to face. Social interactions nowadays can be done by exchanging messages with words and emoticons, videos and photos or by giving likes and love virtually. Social media has changed human life and how humans interact with each other.

Three out of 4 adults in the US found it more comfortable to use the Internet for daily communication (Jones & Fox, 2009). In the past, people interacted in cyberspace expecting anonymsities (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Today, social media is used to socialize and expand friendship circles (Jones & Fox, 2009). Social media has made it as if the real world and the cyberworld have overlapped with each other (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). Social media interactions are similar to those in the real world, in that a person's real personality influences the way he or she interacts on the social media (Correa, Hinsley & Gil de Zuniga, 2009).

There are three types of social interactions that occur on social media. The first type occurs in an interdependent situation, in which individuals affect not only themselves but also others, inadvertently. The second type occurs when an individual observes the behaviour of others on social media. The final type of social interactions occurs through communication, in which information exchange through video, voice or text messages takes place

(Sunitiyoso, Avineri & Chatterjee, 2011). The community, therefore, plays an important role in the effectiveness of social interactions on social media (Fischer & Reuber, 2011).

### **Instagram**

Instagram was launched on 6 October 2010, and on 9 April 2012 Facebook acquired it. On 20 June 2012 Instagram videos were introduced, and on 12 December 2013 the introduction of Instagram Direct followed (Mattern, 2017).

According to Boyd and Ellison (2017), Instagram is a web-based social network that gives freedom to its users to choose to create public or semi-public profiles, to interact with each other and to form and modify their list of users whom they want to interact with.

Instagram is a relatively new platform of communication where users can easily share their updates by taking photos and tweaking them using filters. (Hu et al., 2014). Therefore, the photography community on Instagram grows with the increasing number of users.

### **Virtual Tribe**

Online community refers to the intense friendship of a group of people with similar interests and likes in cyberspace that removes geographic boundaries and demographic differences (Pathak and Pathak-Selat, 2017). Rheingold said that virtual communities can be shaped by individuals via the Internet based on their own choices or in response to a stimulus. Later, Lindlof and Schatzer added, a virtual community is deliberately founded by people who share the same interests and often revolves around certain texts or phrases (McQuail, 2010).

The hallmark of a virtual community is people sharing for the common good, interacting, sharing information, developing understanding and building relationships. However, virtual communities are made up of diverse Internet users, and the facts on the Internet can be anything. It is possible to duplicate (clone) different identities. Virtual communities are temporary and fragmented in comparison to offline communities (Nasrullah, 2017).

Virtual communities are communities that are independent and tend to change with lifestyle and unstable consumerism, making them unstable. The nature of virtual communities stems from the true nature of real-world communities, covering elements such as interaction, common purpose, awareness of identity and ownership, multiple norms and unwritten rules (netiquette) with the possibility of rejection and exclusion. There are also rituals in the form of expressions. What distinguishes real-world communities from virtual communities is the fact that virtual communities are easily accessible and open, while real-world communities tend to be limited and closed.

A computer-connected community tends to come with lacking awareness of connectedness with others. Even online identities are often unoriginal and designed to cover aspects of identity, such as age or gender (McQuail, 2010). Participation in online discussions and interactions often involves anonymity. Virtual communities are characterized with the lack of transparency and authenticity of the computer-mediated group and the lack

of committed members. Nevertheless, computer-mediated communication provides new opportunities to traverse social and cultural boundaries.

### **Virtual Brand Communities**

Valck in Pathak and Pathak-Selat (2017) defined a virtual brand community as an online community tied to a brand. The interaction of this virtual brand community takes place between brand and consumer (B2C) and between consumer and consumer (C2C). A virtual brand community is comprised of multiple consumers who believe in a brand, gather online and form a community that represents their identity and interests (Buditomo & Lestari, 2015).

Consumers develop a strong emotional bond with each other, and this bond plays an important role in the interaction between them because of their shared experiences with a brand (Gama & Gama, 2015).

Brand owners have no control over the community members' freedom to express what they feel about their brands. Although brand owners do not comply with the freedom of expression, the closeness between the community members and the brand owners is nurtured through discussions (Sierra, Badrinarayanan & Taute, 2016).

With the interdependence of social and economic resources, a brand community develops greater heterogeneity among members, which will become a destabilizing force (Sierra et al., 2016). Thus, marketing strategies involving a community will be beneficial for the company owning a brand. First, the company does not need to pay a large amount of promotional costs. Second, the strong relationship between the brand and consumers occurs naturally. Lastly, creative innovation ideas may be born from the love of the community members to the brand.

### **Tribal Marketing**

Tribal marketing is a marketing approach to social media by searching for communities formed by common interests and preferences in the virtual world. The information is used by brand communication to create communication messages aimed specifically at only one target group with the aim of building a strong, productive and long-term relationship (Pathak & Pathak-Selat, 2017).

According to Kozinet (in Pathak & Pathak-Selat, 2017), tribal marketing depends on the relationship between individual customers and their affective dimensions. It is important to not only build relationships with consumers but also maintain and enhance the relationships. Social bonds should be formed, and good relationships between brands and customer communities should be fostered continuously to enable brand co-creation.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The methodology employed in this research was netnography. Netnography is participant-observational research, the data of which can take three or more forms as follows: (a) data directly collected by the researcher; (b) data generated through the capture and recording of online community events and interactions; and (c) data inscribed by the researcher (Kozinets, 2010).

## **Research Subject**

Research subject refers to something that is examined in research, be it a person, object, or institution (organization). Research subject basically will be subject to conclusion of research results. In the subject of this study is a research object. The subject of this research was a virtual photography community.

## **Research Object**

Research object is the nature of situation of an object or person, or the focus or target of research. The nature of the situation can be the nature, quantity, and quality that can be behavior, activities, opinions, views assessment, attitudes pro-cons, sympathy-antipathy, and can be a process. The object of the research conducted was to describe the activities of virtual photography community BUKAN ASAL JEPRET JAKARTA, which earned income from photographs of products to be campaigned. The sampling technique used was the purposive non-probability sampling technique. Sample was taken based on criteria relevant to the research objectives. The sample consisted of tribal chiefs, deputy chiefs and members with participatory observation (Kriyantono, 2012).

## **Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted through online observations. The data was obtained from members of photography communities on Instagram, BUKAN ASAL JEPRET JAKARTA and SOBAT BUKAN ASAL JEPRET JAKARTA, and the communication between members was conducted via WhatsApp.

## **Data Analysis**

The data collected was analysed using the constant comparative technique. According to Kriyantono (2012), qualitative research is research that uses inductive thinking, which is a way of thinking that departs from the specific (empirical facts) to the general (level of concept). Qualitative data analysis that was conducted started with the analysis of the data collected from observations and online media literature. Then, the data was classified under specific categories.

The constant comparative analysis was carried out in the following stages: (1) classifying events (data) under several categories, then the data were compared to one another; (2) expanding categories so as to avoid category overlaps; (3) simplifying the data and integrating it into coherent theoretical structures that enter, will be interconnected or logically related (Kriyantono, 2012).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Rapid development of communications technology has made communication through new media (ICT) a necessity and important part of human life. Internet-related communications technology such as social media connects people interpersonally across cultures, nations, time and space (Luthfia, Rosidah, & Sofian, 2018).

Internet and social media data trends in 2019 with a total population of 268.2 million in Indonesia, the number of active social media users was

recorded at 150 million or 55.9% of the total population, and 80% of those or 120 million were recorded active using social media Instagram (Hootsuite, 2019).

The number continues to increase every year, the constant rise of the number of Instagram users is considered by some parties as an opportunity to convey messages or information of an organization or business, especially to targeted audience in the community.

### **The Process of Establishing Tribal Communities and Tribal Activities**

The success of iPhonesia as a photography community in Indonesia has inspired other similar photography communities. One of them is BUKAN ASAL JEPRET (BAJ), an Instagram community with account @bukan\_asaljepret that was initiated by Pury on 9 November 9 2016.

This photography community was founded by Pury, along with her husband, out of love for photography and a wish to expand her friendship network of people with similar interests online in the midst of her busy life as a housewife.

With a total of 15k followers (as of April 2018), BAJ has become a photography community home to all members who take pictures using digital single-lens reflex (DSLR), mirrorless or smartphone cameras. This community is coordinated by admins @ochadisa1, @deefatahilla, @mrs.achmady and @nadiputi and moderator #teamBAJ.

Any member joining the BAJ community through an Instagram account will be encouraged to follow the Instagram account, and the WhatsApp group, of the SOBBAJ community of their respective local area. This is due to the fact that the BAJ community does not have any leader, and the SOBBAJ BUKAN ASAL JEPRET community, or in short SOBBAJ, management covers not only Jakarta but also other cities in Indonesia, such as Makassar, Bekasi, Depok, Bogor, Semarang, Surabaya, Riau Islands, Bandung and Kediri.

The SOBBAJ Jakarta community houses BAJ members residing in Jakarta and Tangerang. Lety Leiza serves as a tribal chief, usually called “*kepala suku*” or in short, *kepsuk*, and the team is responsible for maintaining the good relationship between community members of Instagram account @sobbaj\_jakarta and SOBBAJ Jakarta’s WhatsApp group.

Each SOBBAJ tribe was initially headed by the founder of SOBBAJ’s account, but for some reason, the lead now is handed over through heir appointment. The appointed heir should be a respected person for his or her above-average photographic skills as well as ability and willingness to take the lead of the community.

The structure of the SOBBAJ community consists of a tribal chief (*kepsuk*) in charge of being a bridge between SOBBAJ members and the BAJ community and a deputy tribal chief (*wakepsuk*) who must assist the chief if he or she is absent. Internal and external affairs are handled by the Public Relations staff.

The internal Public Relations staff takes care of offline meet-ups, sharing sessions in WhatsApp group and other affairs related to issues within the community. The external public relations staff is in charge of finding external speakers for sharing sessions in WhatsApp group, arranging offline meetings

with other communities, organizing workshops and drawing up proposals for brands to work with the community.

Not only are they active in online interactions, BAJ and SOBBAJ members are also active in participating at offline meetings, chatting somewhere to exchange ideas, experiences and photographic skills/techniques and hunting photo objects or certain photo themes at coffee shops, old towns and various other points of interest.

Most members who follow BAJ's Instagram account are women of various backgrounds, professions and ages. Most of them are housewives and owners of online shops, but there are some who work as office employees, medical workers, educators and civil servants of governmental institutions.

According to the results of observations and field interviews, there are two interrelated reasons why members join the BAJ and SOBBAJ communities. Firstly, they join the community to get acquainted with people who share the same interests in photography in the hope of improving their photographic skills enabling them to post interesting photos on Instagram.

The second reason they join the community is to expand their network and make the number of their Instagram account followers grow. One's popularity on Instagram is determined by the number of followers. For online shop owners, an increase in the number of followers means a greater opportunity for successful purchase transactions. For some other members who do not own any online shop, they try to increase the number of followers or popularity to gain prestige, although some surreptitiously want to grow in popularity to become influencers later on.

Interaction plays a leading role in the digital culture. Good photos but low interaction will not increase the number of followers and likes significantly. Members, admins, moderator and *kepsuk* as well as the whole SOBBAJ management team have a part in facilitating interactions of all members every day.

Tribal activities are performed every day. First, the moderator will post on BAJ's Instagram account the post theme for upload every morning to increase the uniformity of members' upload, usually accompanied by a unique hashtag. Furthermore, each SOBBAJ board will remind members of the post theme on the Instagram account or WhatsApp group by inserting each SOBBAJ hashtag. Take SOBBAJ Jakarta for example. Usually the management team will remind members to add hashtags #sobbaj\_jakarta and #baj\_jktpunycerite for the post theme.

In each post, each member is required to greet at least 3 other members to be rewarded with encouragement to continue to take pictures. To make it even more interesting, BAJ also provides opportunities to online shop or personal accounts to sponsor BAJ's daily theme.

The sponsoring accounts will provide the prizes and choose the account with the best photo with each member participating in the giveaway being required to follow the sponsoring accounts and mention them in the caption and the winner being obliged to post the photo of the prize from them with a mention of them and BAJ.

At the end of the day, an account with the best photo of the day will be selected by the admins, moderator or sponsor to be featured in BAJ's Instagram account grid. The account winning the previous POTD (photo of the day) will select a new POTD-winning account to be featured in



SOBBAJ's Instagram account grid, for example that of SOBBAJ Jakarta, and comment on the selected photo.

In posting photos other than the same theme, it is mandatory for each member to follow and mention sponsoring accounts, if any, mention at least 3 friends in every post and use the same hashtags.

There are some other rules that must be obeyed. The rules are: accounts are not private, free but non-frame photo sizes, do not display any photo containing violence, cigarettes, liquor or pornography, do not display any photo with statues, cartoons or animals unless defined as a theme, are only limited hands-in frames except in the designated theme, and, most importantly, post self-made photos. Any member caught to have posted a photo that is not his or her own work or to have stolen the work of others will be subject to social sanctions, be excluded from the community and have his or her cheating act exposed to the public.

Various activities take place in the WhatsApp group of each local SOBBAJ community, especially SOBBAJ Jakarta. Members chat in the WhatsApp group every day to discuss given themes. If the chat leads to negativity like gossiping or vilifying something or someone, the chief and the team will immediately give a warning. If a member violates the rules, he or she will be sanctioned and expelled from the group. Additionally, his or her account will be blocked from SOBBAJ as well as BAJ.

To strengthen the bond between SOBBAJ Jakarta's WhatsApp group members, a weekly session is held to get to know more closely one of the members. Members are welcome to tell about themselves, and every other member is welcome to give as many questions as possible. When interacting, BAJ and SOBBAJ members address fellow members as "*kakak*" (brother/sister) regardless of age and gender.

### **Benefits of Being a Tribe Member**

Initially, this community was established for its members to pursue their hobby, socialize and use social media in a positive way. With time, however, this community turns out to be able to provide its members with an opportunity to improve their photographic skills/techniques through free online sharing sessions facilitated by BAJ through SOBBAJ, especially SOBBAJ Jakarta.

In every online sharing session, a person with a considerable photographic skill is invited to the group to become a speaker for a period of 2 hours. A sharing session usually covers a photographic technique. The speaker will give examples for his or her explanations using his or her published works. This session is wrapped up with a question and answer session.

After the sharing session ended, members will be challenged to post photos based on themes suiting the materials delivered at the sharing session for the next week. A winner will be chosen by the speaker and featured on SOBBAJ Jakarta's Instagram account, and if there is any sponsoring account, he or she will receive a prize from that account.

In commercial terms, BAJ through SOBBAJ, especially SOBBAJ Jakarta, is benefitted from its close cooperation with several brands such as Advan and Natur as well as start-up companies, one of which is Shopback.id, in that it is allowed to take part in their regular campaigns via social media or even

new products launch events. Community members have the opportunity to win some money and products as a form of appreciation for their participation in the product campaigns conducted by the brands.

### **Virtual Tribe Roles in Product Campaigns**

Some time ago, BAJ photography community was asked to get involved in the campaigns of smartphone product brand Advan and hair product brand Natur. The brand communication staff of each product got in touch with the contact listed on BAJ's Instagram account profile. The message was then forward to the chief of a SOBBAJ tribe, who by chance was part of SOBBAJ Jakarta.

The Brand Communication Staff offered cooperation deals and provided information relating to the benefits and a number of requirements to be discussed by parties involved. The chief passed the information shared by the Brand Communication staff of both products to the external Public Relations Staff, who later took care of technical matters of the cooperation with the brands and passed the information to members through the Instagram account or WhatsApp group.

For example, Natur launched an online campaign called #kuatdariakar targeting women who wanted to have healthy hair. Natur teamed up with SOBBAJ Jakarta through BAJ to challenge SOBBAJ Jakarta members to post photos of Natur hair tonic, shampoo and hair mask with hashtag #kuatdariakar given free beforehand.

The best photo would be selected and featured in the official Ninja instagram account by Natur brand communication team and then rewarded with Natur products and some cash as a form of appreciation. BAJ and SOBBAJ Jakarta participated in the handbook making of Natur's digital campaign #kuatdariakar.

More than 9,900 posts using hashtag #kuatdariakar were posted on Instagram, some of which were from the photo challenge held in collaboration with photography communities such as SOBBAJ Jakarta.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this study reveal that people who have the same interests can congregate in cyberspace despite being geographically and demographically different. There are two benefits of being a member of a digital community (tribe), namely the opportunity to increase knowledge in the same field and the opportunity to promote a brand and make money. It can be concluded that a virtual community is very important because the members can jointly build a brand.

In this case, the Instagram community "SOBAT BUKAN ASAL JEPRET" was able to build branding for mobile brand Advan and shampoo brand Nature through its photos and captions that could affect consumers.

It is suggested that the community should provide all members with the opportunity to gain knowledge, enjoy paid promo, participate in workshops and take part in sharing sessions determined by proximity to tribal chiefs and structural members. It is also suggested to conduct further research on brand tribes that have the chance to be sought by the industry to promote its product.

## Managerial Implication

A brand company can draw on the knowledge on how virtual tribes and their activities are established, the benefits received by tribe members and the role of a tribe in product campaigns to build loyalty to tribes or perhaps form its own tribes for promotional purposes. The knowledge will also enable the brand company to launch a campaign expected to go viral with the use of social media.

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