

## Front Stage vs. Backstage: A Dramaturgical and Semiotic Analysis of a Javanese Influencer's Self-Presentation on Instagram

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to investigate how a sensual Indonesian female influencer, particularly a 20-year-old Javanese influencer from Surakarta, portrays herself to the public on Instagram. This study, which is based on Goffman's dramaturgical technique, offers comprehensive insights into the sensual female influencer's frontstage and backstage behavior as well as how she is portrayed on stage. The data from Instagram was evaluated using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic triadic paradigm (1931) by comprehending the representamen, the interpretant, and the object of the data. The information gathered from in-depth interviews was then examined to obtain a more thorough understanding. This study demonstrates that the influencer consistently behaves in a sexualized way in public and in day-to-day activities, which is an act of rebellion against society's standards of modesty. While earlier research mostly focuses on the problem of women's sexualization in hypersexualized environments, this study sheds light on the sexualized conduct of sensual Javanese female influencers in Western societies, where self-sexualization is not as popular or prevalent.

**Keywords:** Influencer, self-representation, sexualization, self-presentation, Instagram

### Introduction

In recent years, as people have already been both familiar with and used to using several social media platforms, social media has 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 [1]. Communities that have emerged from 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 to a wedding photographer who shares their clients' photograph results to a cybersecurity expert on Twitter [2].

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 [3]. 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 include 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, breasts, or lips; trousers open; and other photos that mainly show the body part and skin [4].

Along with the sexualized influencer phenomenon, the potential of getting income on social media platforms plays a role in more sexualized female influencers emerging 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 [5]. Ye Chopra et al. [2] 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 labor) for monetization purposes on social media [6].

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 [7] has likewise discussed three modes of self-representation in social media: visual, written, and quantitative. (1) Visual self-representation can be a form of selfie, other images like photos we choose to share on Facebook, or 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 us 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 [8] 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 engage 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 [9]. Objectification theory by Fredrickson & Roberts [10] 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 [11], 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) [12]. Self-sexualization refers to the intention or voluntary act of females to emphasize their attractiveness by appearing in a sexualized manner [13]. The definition of self-sexualization itself fully portrays and is in accordance 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 [11] do not merely indicate that the precursor of self-sexualization is increased body surveillance—the yield of self-objectification—yet there are three other precursors: exposure to media, need for attention or popularity, and internalization of sexualization. An analysis of the influence of media consisting of content objectifying women in a sexual way by Ward et al. [14] elucidates that reality TV programs contribute to US undergraduate students' self-sexualization. Ramsey & Horan [15] 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 [16].

Women in a hypersexualized culture tend to self-sexualize themselves [13]. 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 [11]. For instance, in Western cultures, messages sexually objectifying women are seen to be a usual and common thing, even in a youth environment [17]. The yield of a qualitative study by Papageorgiou et al [18] 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 hypersexualized 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 [19], which examines social interaction and human behavior, and the theoretical framework of Charles Sander Peirce's semiotic triadic model [20], 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 behavior.

## **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 the 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 [19], 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 was conducted in Surakarta, Indonesia, and the interview was done with a 20-year-old Javanese influencer who had been chosen as the participant 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 of the participants of this study are Indonesian-speaking influencers posting content of photos and videos on social media that depict a sexualized manner who also live in Surakarta, for accessibility of the researcher to interview the participants.

As a basis for conducting analysis, the data was obtained through in-depth interviews and analysis of photos and captions from Instagram. This interview is only carried out by two parties, namely the interviewer and the interviewee. The data obtained was the interview transcript and visual and textual representation of the influencer on Instagram. 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 [19] and the triadic model of the semiotic framework by Charles Sanders Peirce, which is to enable analyzing the meanings conveyed within the data. This semiotic triadic model also includes the concepts of the *representamen* (the form that the signs take), an interpretant (the sense made of the sign), and an object (a referent) [21].

## **Results 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 [19].

The representation reveals the self-representation on Instagram (public space) of her wearing 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 is the influencer's personal brand, and her public persona depicts sexuality. However, as the influencer as the interviewee herself states, "*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.*" 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 photos and videos, whether they are 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 her posts on Instagram 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 personal freedom and confidence. The influencer in the interview says, *"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."* The interviewee declares that she actually has no particular intention to post her photo on Instagram; however, she posts photos or videos that she thinks 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, *"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."* Emphasizes that she wants her Instagram account to be filled with content of her sharing her outfit style with her followers since her female followers constantly ask about her outfit.

In spite of that, given that she lives in an area where Javanese culture is highly valued, the interpretation 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.

The second post posted on the influencer's personal account shows that the representation 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* 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 tells: *"Untuk sekarang, saya sering posting untuk kerjaan, posting foto foto saya, chat dengan teman saya, dan untuk menambah relasi."* She mentions that she utilizes her social media account and posts photos for work (endorsement), posts her own photos, directly messages her friends, and gains relationships with other users.

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 front stage [19]. The influencer's Instagram caption on figure 3 provides a glimpse into her backstage because she reveals her relationship with her mother by stating that she sent her mother some of the sensual pictures she used to share publicly. The representment 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; it is necessary for them to dress in a way that covers fully or some part of their body and wear some loose clothes. The caption on Figure 3 could be interpreted as her mother might not adjust 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: *"Enggak, sih. Saya bukan tipikal orang yang peduli dengan orang lain. Kalau mama papa saya membolehkan, berarti saya boleh,"* this statement means that the influencer does not care about other perceptions toward her posts on the



Internet, and her parents are welcome for her daughter to post photos in a sexualized manner. The influencer also mentions that there are no differences in her appearance in front stage and backstage: "*Kalau tata cara berpakaian, saya memang berpakaian seperti itu.*" The influencer states that she dresses the same way as on Instagram.

## Discussion

This study aims to explore the representation of sensuous Javanese influencers on Instagram and the presentation in both front stage and backstage. The emergence of influencers in social media has been drastically rising [3]; 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 the body, such as legs, belly, lips, and breasts [4]. Our findings of the representation of the Javanese sensuous influencer on Instagram indicate that photos representing most of the photos posted on her account show some of her body parts focused on her breasts, although, in the influencer's opinion, she does not find any of her photos sensual at all.

Self-sexualization comes with its intention and voluntary act [13]. 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 [11][15][16]. The data of this study show that the intention behind 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 self-sexualization but 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's sexualization is a crucial part for financial success in an online platform [6][4].

The representation of self in social media may not depict the reality of someone, and people tend to choose which self-representation that is appropriate to show publicly, following the customs and rules of society [7][19]. On the other hand, this study shows the opposite; the obtained data



of this study reveals how the influencer behaves in a sexualized manner in either the front stage (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 most of her self-representation on Instagram doesn't represent modesty in clothing. This study, with its argument of the representation and presentation of a sensuous female Javanese influencer, helps to better understand 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.

The findings also indicate that the distinction between sexualized representation and fashion-oriented self-expression cannot always be determined solely from the visual appearance of an Instagram post. In the participant's account, clothing, pose, body shape, caption, and commercial context interact in producing meaning. A photograph that is intended by the influencer as an outfit post or a "cute" image may nevertheless be interpreted by viewers as sensual because it highlights particular parts of the body. This difference between intended meaning and audience interpretation is important because social-media representation is not controlled entirely by the person who uploads the content. The audience actively gives meaning to the visual signs displayed in a post. Therefore, the influencer's personal intention to share her outfit does not necessarily eliminate the possibility that the post is understood as sexualized content by followers, strangers, or members of her local community.

This condition demonstrates the complexity of self-presentation on Instagram. The influencer constructs a recognizable online identity through repeated visual choices, including fashionable clothes, body poses, and photographs that emphasize confidence in her appearance. At the same time, this identity is shaped by the expectations and reactions of other people. The participant's practice of asking friends whether a photo looks "cute" before posting shows that self-representation is not entirely individual. Instead, it is negotiated with peers who may affirm, influence, or validate the image that she wants to present. In this sense, Instagram becomes not only a platform for displaying the self, but also a social space

in which identity is continuously evaluated and adjusted through interaction with friends, followers, and potential business partners.

The findings further suggest that the boundary between frontstage and backstage may become less clear in the context of social media. In conventional social interaction, individuals may reserve particular aspects of themselves for private spaces and present a more controlled role in public. However, the participant's statements indicate that her clothing style and personal behavior are relatively consistent in both online and offline settings. Her frontstage appearance on Instagram is therefore not completely separate from her backstage identity. Although Instagram photographs are still selected, posed, and edited before being uploaded, they may reflect an aspect of her everyday preferences rather than an entirely fabricated persona. This does not mean that all social-media content represents reality in a direct way. Rather, it shows that online and offline identities can overlap, especially when individuals openly perform the same style, values, and forms of self-expression in both settings.

Moreover, the participant's relationship with her parents provides an important context for understanding her representation. The acceptance she perceives from her parents appears to give her confidence to maintain her preferred style despite possible criticism from neighbors, relatives, or wider society. Family approval may function as a form of personal support that allows the influencer to prioritize her own decisions over communal expectations of modesty. Consequently, her online representation can be understood not only as a commercial strategy or an effort to attract attention, but also as an expression of autonomy. Her case illustrates that cultural norms do not affect every individual in the same way. While Javanese values of modesty may remain influential in the surrounding environment, the participant interprets and responds to those values through her own experiences, family relationships, career interests, and personal understanding of fashion.

## **Conclusion**

Self-sexualization behavior of an influencer on social media, where it is also considered a public space, can be perceived as the action of being against the cultural norms and values when surrounded with people who highly uphold the norms of modesty, like in Javanese culture. Meanwhile, as previous literature has scrutinized the phenomenon of sexualized practices of influencers on social media, the sexualized manner on Instagram benefits

the influencer and the other side (the company) for monetizing the self-representation of sensual influencers since it is effective to get the attention of the audience. From this study, it could be stated that the self-representation of someone in public, like on 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 to a larger community and had limited information since only one participant was scrutinized and interviewed in this study. Therefore, further study is needed to reach more participants to get various perceptions.

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