
Conspicuous Compassion, Social Media and Identity: a Case Study of @dr.tirta Instagram Account during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Social media allow individuals to construct ideal online identities and one of the new ways to do this is by showing conspicuous compassion, or the flaunting of good behaviors to others. Drawing on the antecedents of conspicuous compassion, which are Need for Uniqueness (NFU) and Attention to Social Comparison Information (ATSCI), this research investigates how conspicuous compassion is portrayed by an Indonesian influencer, dr. Tirta Mandira Hudhi, in his Instagram posts. This study employs a textual analysis through the prism of semiotics to interpret the images and captions of the Instagram account @dr.tirta from 23 to 30 March 2020. The results show that @dr.tirta portrays conspicuous compassion through his social interactions, involvement in fighting the coronavirus, unique style, and his knowledge in the medical field. Results also indicate that @dr.tirta is highly susceptible to his followers, thus intentionally adjusts his image to meet their expectations.

Keywords: conspicuous compassion, social media, identity, influencer, instagram.

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity is our concept of who we are and what place we have in this world (Gilovich et al., 2013, p. 69). Identity is attained by both reflecting internally and interacting externally with others (Mead, 1934). However, as social beings, this latter interaction arguably has more significant effect on our identity than the former (Mead, 1934). This is because in our interactions with others we receive feedbacks on the way we present ourselves (Gilovich et al., 2013, p. 97). When we receive a favourable feedback, we usually see this as a cue to maintain the behaviour. On the other hand, less favourable feedbacks teach us that we need to change our behaviour. In a long term, these interactions shape the kind of identity we construct of ourselves; which usually means the identity that generate most positive feedbacks from others (West and Turner, 2009).

This process of adjusting our identity to meet others' expectations is also known as impression management or identity management (Gilovich et al., 2013). Formally, identity management can be defined as a "dramaturgic perspective on the social self", in which social interactions function as a stage where self-presentation is performed through "creating and maintaining an impression of ourselves in the minds of others" (Gilovich et al., 2013, p. 102). While in the past this self-presentation was commonly done in a face-to-face setting, the advancement of technologies allows individuals to interact and present themselves in the virtual world. This new way of self-presentation gives opportunities for individuals to create an ideal identity, even one that is far different from their offline self (Marwick, 2016). Whether that is on social media, online games or virtual chatrooms, in each of these platforms, individuals have the freedom to choose what they want to portray with the given tools such as nicknames, usernames, avatars, profile pictures, and so on (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011).

Nowadays, social media presence of individuals plays a significant role in their life as it has become a common reference to judge one's character. Employers, friends, fans, or acquaintances refer to social media to see the kind of persons that we are. Moreover, due to the lack of possible physical confrontation in the virtual world, they are not afraid to express their opinions on us either positively or negatively. Therefore, individuals become so conscious about what they share, post, or comment online as to not harm their image and hurt their identity (Chen, 2013).

One way to create an ideal identity on social media is through the act of showing off, which can be in form of wealth, success, unique abilities, or even socially good actions. This act of enhancing oneself is what sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1912)

referred as 'conspicuous consumption'. In their book, 'Showing Off in Humans: Male Generosity as a Mating Signal', Iredale et al. (2008) argued that this act of showing off is part of human nature. In ancient China for instance, Chinese aristocrats would grow out their nails to be very long in order to show that they did not have to do any hard labour and instead they had peasants who would do the work for them. While these past studies suggested that conspicuous consumption usually involved the display of wealth, recent studies (West, 2004; West in Grace & Griffin, 2006) argue that nowadays individuals tend to show their ostentatious caring (i.e. participating in social or political movements, supporting certain charities, volunteering in natural disaster reliefs, and so on) to create a positive identity. Thus, this display of altruism is often referred to as 'conspicuous compassion', 'humble bragging', or 'virtue signalling' (West, 2004; Wittles, 2010; Bartholomew, 2018).

In the past few years conspicuous compassion has been increasingly observed on social media. Social media are ideal to show conspicuous compassion as they allow individuals to post images, videos, and encouraging messages to their friends or followers on their altruistic endeavours. The framework of social media, which is referred to as the honeycomb framework, allows these contents to be shared within the networks; thus, creating conversations and relationships between the users and their followers (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Furthermore, these conversations and relationships will help the users to maintain positive reputation and favourable identity in front of the public. As such, one of the groups that are often known to flaunt their morally good activities online is public figures (Marwick, 2016). These public figures show conspicuous compassion online to promote themselves favourably, so that their supporters continue being loyal to them and allowing them to maintain their fame and wealth.

At the end of 2019, a new virus broke out in the city of Wuhan of Hubei Province, China. It is known as the Coronavirus Disease 2019, in short COVID-19. As the number of infected people quickly escalated all around the world, the pandemic became a global threat (Wang et al., 2020). So many efforts are made to conquer the virus. Health and medical workers with the shortage, politicians, police officers, celebrities, and common people jump into the action to protect the wellbeing of their people. In March 2020, the first confirmed COVID-19 cases were found in Indonesia. By the beginning of April 2020, all provinces of Indonesia got affected by the virus.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, several public figures have gained momentum. These people are covered regularly by the media due to their roles in sharing information about the virus and its effects on people and the society in general. One of Indonesian

public figures who have become more popular due to their COVID-related contents is Tirta Mandira Hudhi or better known as Dr. Tirta.

Dr. Tirta is an Indonesian influencer who first became well known among Indonesian youth for selling branded sneakers and managing sneaker cleaning business. His followers at that time were mostly street wear enthusiasts who enjoy following about the trends and purchase expensive and customisable shoes. When COVID-19 situation started to intensify in Indonesia, Dr. Tirta started to discuss more about the virus in his social media. As someone who also has a medical degree, Dr. Tirta is considered as a credible source of information about the virus. In addition, in his early postings about the virus, Dr. Tirta appeared aberrant, using harsh and sometimes cursing words to show his frustration about the way the pandemic is handled in Indonesia. One of his most viewed posts was an Instagram livestream on 17 March 2020. In this video, Dr. Tirta could be seen yelling and being angry at people who underestimated the gravity of the virus. This post became viral and was even picked up by the mainstream media. A week after this controversial post, Dr. Tirta's weekly followers increased by more than six-fold from around 10,000 the previous week to 623,949 the week after (Socialblade, 2020).

Based on the above-mentioned facts, this study investigates the way in which a public figure, Dr. Tirta, shows conspicuous compassion in his Instagram account. Further, this study also examines how this portrayal of conspicuous compassion contributes to Dr. Tirta's online image. To do that, this study poses two research questions, which are:

How do Dr. Tirta portray conspicuous compassion in his social media activity?

What are the roles of this conspicuous compassion towards the Dr. Tirta's image?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned above, one main characteristic of conspicuous compassion is that individuals who show this ostentatious caring to others, have the intention of showing off their compassion to the public (Wallace et al., 2018). Hence, visibility is the key to this conspicuousness (West, 2004). In order to understand this concept better, we need to know its relation to its antecedents, which are the Need for Uniqueness theory (Tian et al., 2001) and the theory of Attention to Social Comparison Information (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984).

2.1 Needs for Uniqueness

Need for uniqueness can be defined as “the trait of pursuing differentness relative to others through the acquisition, utilization and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of enhancing one’s self-image and social image” (Tian et al., 2001, p.52). This need to be different often occurs when individuals feel a threat to their identity when they perceive themselves becoming very similar to other people around them (Snyder and Fromkin in Tian et al., 2001).

Vignoles et al. (in Abosag et al., 2019) argued that some individuals like to portray themselves in a different and distinctive ways from others to attain a meaningful identification about themselves. They usually do this through a process of comparison, where they evaluate what similarities that they share with others. This comparison can lead to different results depending on the individuals. Individuals with high level of NFU will most likely reject the similarities and decide to have a behavioral change (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977). This behavioral change can be achieved through various ways, such as abilities, beliefs, personality, hobbies, possession, and group membership (Tiggemann & Golder, 2006). On the other hand, individuals with low level of NFU tend to accept the similarities and behavioral change is less likely to happen.

While categories of NFU seem to show that someone with high level of NFU strives to differentiate himself/ herself from others, Ruvio (2008) explains that the NFU actually evokes individuals to have the desire for assimilation and differentiation simultaneously. This is because at once these individuals want to be unique to stand out from the crowd, while at the same time they do not want to appear so different that others do not see them as preferable. This is because people judge the quality of others based on the common standards that they are familiar with (Ruvio, 2008).

NFU plays an important role in relation to how conspicuous compassion is displayed online. Since social media sites, such as Instagram, have the same design and layout for each user, individuals have the desire to differentiate themselves and to stand out from others (Wallace et al., 2018). According to Wallace et al. (2018), conspicuous consumption is influenced by NFU and the display of uniqueness through virtual consumption qualifies as a tool to analyze conspicuous compassion online.

Based on the theory of uniqueness, nonconformity, and consumer behavior (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977), NFU can be seen as having three dimensions, which can be described as follows:

Creative Choice Counterconformity indicates that individuals’ desire to be perceived as different by others and seek social differentness. These individuals achieve social differentness by making selections that are likely to be considered good by their

social group or the public. On the consumer behavior, a goal-directed consumer that focuses on displaying their personal style accomplishes this through the purchase of goods that are new, original, or unique.

Unpopular Choice Counterconformity is similar to the creative choice. However, instead of attaining desirable goods that the social norm prefers, these individuals make unpopular choices that risk social disapproval, yet establish their distinction from other people. This is not limited to purchasing goods, but can also be reflected in negative actions, like breaking the rules or challenging existing norms. Unpopular Choice Counterconformity mostly occurs when individuals fail to achieve differentness through socially appropriate manners. Yet their actions can also lead to an enhanced self-image like the Creative Choice Counterconformity.

Avoidance of Similarity is another dimension of NFU. In this dimension individuals lose interest in the goods they have purchased or would stop using them because they have become common. By doing this, they avoid becoming less unique and reestablish their status of being different. Therefore, consumers with a high level of NFU would monitor other people's possessions in order to avoid similarity. This is actually an indication that attaining a distinctive self-image in the public is often short-lived. This concludes that in order to achieve social differentness individuals need to have the eagerness to change their behaviors and preferences all the time, either through avoidance, disposition, or devaluation.

2.2 Attention to Social Comparison Information

The other antecedent to conspicuous compassion, is Attention to Social Comparison Information (ATSCI). ATSCI is a study that is based on the Theory of Self-Monitoring by Snyder (1974, 1979) but was further developed by Lennox and Wolfe (1984). This latter study indicated that attention to social comparison information is related to social anxiety. They conclude that people scoring high in ATSCI are aware of the reactions of others to their behaviors and are concerned about the nature of those reactions (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). By this understanding it can be said that ATSCI relates to an individual's level of sensitivity to social comparison cues (Kim et al., 2016). The need for individuals to compare themselves is innate, meaning that this behavior happens naturally. By comparing oneself, individuals can conduct better self-evaluation as well as self-enhancement (Gibbons and Buunk in Kim et al., 2016).

The research conducted by Lennox and Wolfe, was further analyzed by Bearden and Rose (1990) and resulted in the confirmation of the validity of ATSCI. Basing their

analysis on Snyder's theory of self-monitoring, Bearden and Rose (1990) argued that ATSCI was recognized as a distinct variable in the construct, due to its positive relationship to social anxiety. Aside from social anxiety Bearden and Rose (1990) also explained that individuals with high level of ATSCI tend to show neuroticism and fear of negative evaluation. This means that individuals with high ATSCI care about what other people think of them and make them continuously seek for clues of people's reactions.

Bearden and Rose (1990) further argued that high level of ATSCI is motivated by the following factors: (1) behavioral cues that refer to for instance what people look like based on their clothing or makeup; (2) the judgement by important people or group of people towards products and services and their appropriateness of the consumption; (3) the structure or social rewards and sanctions within a group, meaning the common reaction or responses from the group when consuming goods; (4) and lastly the attributions about likely reactions of group members to the individual's behavior.

Results of the study by Wallace et al. (2018) indicate that ATSCI is positively associated to conspicuous compassion. Meaning that individuals who are aware of views from others on social media platforms are likely to present an idealized self on social media through conspicuous compassion. High ATSCI makes individuals susceptible to others, making them more interdependent on their social network, and due to their desire to fit in, individuals with high ATSCI are prone to conduct conspicuous compassion with the hope that their action would leave a popular impression others (Wallace et al., 2018).

These two theories of NFU and ATSCI become the framework of analysis of Dr. Tirta's Instagram postings, which will be discussed in details in the discussion section.

III. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a textual analysis of Dr. Tirta's Instagram postings, which were analyzed through the prism of semiotic. Textual analysis is when "we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text" (McKee, 2016). According to Griffin (2013) it is a method that requires the researcher to take a closer look at the text in order to explore and attain details about it without adding any presuppositions.

In textual analysis, texts are defined as visuals, written, or spoken messages. The goal of textual analysis is to make sense of the message and the meaning we make of the text, which can be a reflection of our society (Allen, 2017). The process of textual analysis can be seen in a systematic way. It consists of identification of textual elements, construction of provisional meaning, and deconstruction of meaning (Stern, 2013). Identification of elements talks about identifying the text, being able to recognize its literal characteristics. In the next step the construction of meaning, the researcher organizes his/her findings into different categories. Lastly, deconstruction of meaning focuses on the cultural assumption that the researcher explores and that can either sustain or subvert the meaning (Stern, 2013).

This study uses semiotics to decipher meaning from Instagram posts, posted by Dr. Tirta. Semiotics is the study of signs, and how meaning is drawn out of these signs (Chandler, 2017). These signs and symbols can consist of words, typography, performance, visuals, food, clothing, structure, non-verbal communication, emoticons or forms of media (Delp, 2019). The mentioned things alone have no meaning, only when we add interpretation to them that they will suggest meaning (Chandler, 2017). A model of semiotics that is used in this study is the model proposed by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. As shown in Figure 1, in Saussure's system of signs, a sign has two aspects, one being signifier and another is signified (Chandler, 2017).

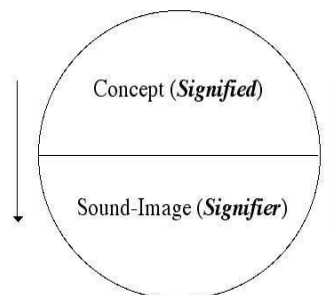


Fig.1. Saussure's Dyadic Model of Meaning

The arrows represent the interaction between signified and signifier, the result or the action of such interaction is referred to as the sign (Chandler, 2017). The signifier is understood as an expression or representation of an object, whereas the signified is the

meaning or content it creates (Gaines, 2010). The signified can further refer to a connotative meaning or denotative meaning (Gaines, 2010). Simplified, signifier is what gives that meaning, this can be through sound, word, or an image, anything that indicates the physical existence. And signified is what is evoked in the mind or mental concept of the one who perceives. For instance, an apple, we associate an apple as red or green, round, has a leaf, and associate it with the word 'apple'. Signified, or the mental concept of the apple can be a fruit, health, teacher's pet or even technology.

Semiotics is used to study all phenomena in the meaning making, which include how the meaning maker creates symbols in their communications and how the receiver interprets those symbols (Chandler, 2017). However, this particular study concentrates solely on the way Dr. Tirta creates his messages to create his identity online. Therefore, this study examines these messages from the sender's point-of-view, and not the audiences' point-of view.

Samples for the textual analysis were collected by employing a purposive sampling technique of Dr. Tirta's Instagram posts from 23 March to 30 March 2020. This period was chosen since this was the period when suddenly his number of followers spiked following his viral live Instagram video. While Dr. Tirta makes an average of five posts per day in his Instagram account, this study only focused on his most liked post of the day within the above selected period. Thus, the analysis was limited to eight posts by Dr. Tirta and coded them into the three categories of NFU, which are creative choice of counterconformity, unpopular choice of counterconformity, and avoidance of similarity and ATSCI.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

From the eight post that were analyzed with the construct of NFU and ATSCI, seven out of eight postings fulfill at least three components (out of four) of conspicuous compassion. There are even three postings that fulfill all components of conspicuous compassion. The following are the detailed explanation on how Dr. Tirta postings show the components of NFU and ATSCI:

To show creative choice of counterconformity, dr. Tirta often emphasizes his differentness through messages and symbols that signify his connections with people of high status, his

expertise in the medical field, and his personal wealth. In his posts he often shows pictures of him being with a prominent figure. This can be seen for instance in his post on 24 March 2020 (See Figure 2) where he posted a picture of him with Iwan Dwiprahasto, a well-known professor of Pharmacology who recently died of COVID-19. This post was followed by a caption where he described his close relationship with the professor whom he considered as a mentor during his studies at Gadjah Mada University's School of Medicine. This posting also serves as a re-instatement of his medical background, which is both seen as prestigious and a credible source of information about the COVID-19.

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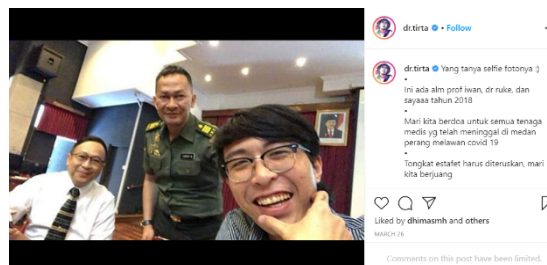


Fig. 2. Dr. Tirta's Instagram Posting on 24 March 2020.

To show **unpopular choice of counterconformity**, the most common message/ symbol that Dr. Tirta uses in his postings is his 'eccentricity'. This eccentricity can be seen mostly in his style of clothing, hair color and the language he uses in his postings. The choice of appearance and speech that he chooses to use are signifiers that give signified meaning of his unpopular choices in comparison to social norms, but that still contributes positively to his popularity.

For instance, in the postings that he made on 23 March 2020, Dr. Tirta, wears loose black pants with many pockets, a typical street wear look. Underneath his medical scrubs, he wears a long-sleeved denim dress shirt. This combination of tough, cool, and stylish streetwear with the medical scrub can be seen as an unpopular choice, because it gives the impression that the doctor's attire is unprofessional and that there is no effort put in maintaining cleanliness as part of the job requirement. At the same time, this look also speak to his audiences that doctors can be 'cool' and 'approachable'.

The most common symbol regarding **avoidance of similarity** is found in his captions when he addresses uncommon messages and, in his pictures, when he portrays himself not aligning with the social norm.

This can be observed for instance, in his post from 29 March 2020 (see **Figure 3**), where he posted a picture of himself in the hospital where he was the patient. The signifier black shorts and long-sleeved shirt indicated that though Dr. Tirta is in the hospital he refuses to wear the patient scrubs and chooses to wear his own clothes, pointing to the fact that he does not want to be like everyone else, but finds his own way by avoiding the norm and do his own thing, which is very common for him. This 'dissimilarity' is also strengthened by his purple hair, which is so different than the hair colour of common Indonesians.



Fig. 3. Dr. Tirta's Instagram Posting on 29 March 2020.

Signs and symbols of **attention to social comparison information** is mostly shown in his captions and choice of words. He would explain how he conforms to the norms commonly held as important by the Indonesian society, such as religiosity and humbleness.

For instance, in his post from 30 March 2020, he showed an x-ray photo of his diaphragm and stated that the damage was the consequences of smoking. In the caption he said "Makasih ya Allah karena diberi sakit, agar saya tersadar dari kebodohan saya sendiri" (Thank you God that You gave me this sickness, so that I am awoken from my own stupidity). This statement can have the signified meaning that Dr. Tirta is actually showing humility, by admitting his mistakes. At the same time the signifier "Allah" implies that Dr. Tirta is a religious person who understands that God wants to protect him from his stupid decision by inflicting the pain of smoking. Most people might not associate someone like Dr. Tirta to be religious, but on top of the other identities that he portrays, religion seems to be an important one.

Based on the above-mentioned examples, it can be derived that that in accordance to the theory of conspicuous compassion Dr. Tirta clearly practices conspicuous compassion in his Instagram posts. This is mostly done through the display of his material possessions (such as his expensive collection of shoes), his social interactions with prominent figures, and his prestigious education background. At the same time, Dr. Tirta also portrays a rebellious character, which can be seen as eccentric but can also potentially be perceived as unique by his audiences. All of these seem to reoccur frequently throughout his posts, either through images or captions.

At the same time, Dr. Tirta's posts also indicate that he is susceptible to his followers and that their reactions and expectations are what influence his image. Like the posting on his lung condition shows, his conversation with them acknowledges his bad behaviours and realization of what the audiences expect he learns from these shortcomings. This is actually in line what Ruvio (2008) explained that people who do conspicuous compassion aims to be different and similar simultaneously.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this study was to explore how conspicuous compassion is practiced by an Indonesian social media influencer and how it influences his image. Using a qualitative research method with a textual analysis approach, this study analyzed eight Instagram postings of @dr.tirta.

By considering two theories of conspicuous compassion, namely NFU and ATSCI, it can be concluded that Dr. Tirta's Instagram posts fulfill all components of these two theories (creative choice of counterconformity, unpopular choice of counterconformity, avoidance of similarity, and *attention to social comparison information*). At the same time, results also show that Dr. Tirta continuously adjusts his portrayal of conspicuous compassion, which potentially affect his online image positively.

As Indonesia is one of the top countries using social media, there is little research done regarding Indonesian social media influencers and the way they portray themselves online. Therefore, this study endeavors to provide some insights to the behaviors of Indonesian online users, particularly how social media influencers use conspicuous compassion to enhance their image online. While this study only scratched the surface of this topic, it can be a starting point for more research on this topic. In the future, it will be interesting to conduct an audience analysis of how followers make meaning of conspicuous compassion done by the influencers.

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