A Celebgram Politicians:
Virtual Self and Political Image in the Instagram Era

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Abstract

Celebgram are required to follow the netizens preference, which are sometimes unreasonable, unlike politicians, who are also demanded to present a good image. This raises the question: How is the virtual self of a politician-influencer? And how does social media shape the virtual self of politicians on Instagram? To answer these questions, a qualitative ethnographic study was conducted, focusing on a deep understanding of the culture, behavior, and social interactions of politicians in the virtual world. Erving Goffman's dramaturgy theory and Barker's virtual theory serve as analytical tools, reinforced by theories of digital culture on social media. The findings of this study reveal the front-stage, which is not merely about presenting positive aspects but also revealing the backstage. In fact, authenticity is not a hindrance to entertainment value. The image of politicians in Banjarmasin is influenced by social media, particularly Instagram. The internet's popularity among consumers has created an environment where politicians can engage with the public in a more relaxed and authentic manner, without the concern of potentially damaging their image. The evolution of social media has profoundly impacted the world's perception of politicians' images, demonstrating hilarity is no longer considered inappropriate or taboo.

Keywords: virtual self, Celebgram Politicians, virtual ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Social media is recognized as a rapid means of information dissemination, leading to a gradual shift away from traditional media formats such as print and electronic media. In today's world, social media has emerged as a pivotal platform for communication, networking, and public awareness (Chopra, 2014). In addition to serving as a platform for self-promotion, users also play a significant role in shaping opinions and influencing others in the digital space. Individuals who were previously unknown can become influential figures for their followers and be viewed like celebrities. Social media has brought great impact to political communication, being an integral part of the career trajectories of politicians. The use of

social media for self-introduction, campaign management, and constituent relationship building has become common practice.

Among the various social media platforms, Instagram is the platform preferred by politicians. The branding by means of Instagram, also referred to as "insta-branding," has become increasingly popular due to social influences that shape people's decisions (Kocheilas, 2019). Influencers who have a significant impact on this platform have unique ways of increasing their recognition in the virtual world. They develop strategies to shape the image they want to project. The image presented may encompass both positive and negative aspects. Influencers may be from a variety of backgrounds, not only from

among artists who already had previous fame. Many individuals who were previously unknown have gained popularity after amassing thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of followers. The number of followers has become the main benchmark by which netizens determine whether an individual is a celebrity. The content uploaded to the platform is likely to receive significant engagement, with numerous likes and comments. The more unique, interesting, or even controversial, the more followers will be attracted. According to the Indonesian Dictionary, the term is controversial, referring to something unusual. In addition, not all celebgrams aim to project an image of perfection or positivity; many instead seek to embody unconventional or rebellious personas. For instance, Instagram celebrity Young Lex has effectively marketed himself as a "bad-boy", despite his personal life being private. Despite his controversial image, Young Lex's Instagram account boasts 1.9 million followers, and his personal life continues to generate significant interest among the public. However, when the content shifted to a more positive tone, the follower count dropped to 1.8 million. The study also examines how political figures or local leaders who have gained prominence on Instagram, in this study called as celebgram politician? Are their roles as celebgram influence their position as politicians?.

The theory used to analyze this study is Ervin Goffman's dramaturgy (1959). This theory is popular with the front stage and backstage that presentation on the front stage being the optimal image. Due to the self-presentation is conducted online, the authors also employs Barker's (2008) virtual-self theory, which defines the virtual self as a process of self-development that is depicted, constructed, performed, acted out, or concealed in real life to form and build one's identity in online social spaces.

The objective of this study is to analyze online self-presentation or virtual-self conducted by the Vice Mayor of Banjarmasin, Ananda, for his term of office 2025-2030. The observation period was limited to the time when Ananda was running in the 2024 for regional elections. The author identifies Ananda as celebgram politician with 95,700 followers on his Instagram account, @hj.ananda. Following his election as Deputy Mayor of Banjarmasin, the number of his followers continued to increase. The way this celebrity politician presents himself online differs from most other politicians, making him an interesting subject for further exploration.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a virtual ethnography qualitative approach. This approach asserts that the internet is a culture shaped by the practices, symbols, and meanings created by its users (Hine, 2015). According to Hine, ethnographic studies examine not only the technical aspects of the internet but also how people interpret, use, and understand this technology in their lives. By using this research method, the authors dedicate significant time to studying Ananda's Instagram account as the research subject to gain an understanding of how virtual-self of celebrity politicians functions. The authors conduct observations by analyzing content as text and the meanings contained therein. In addition, data was collected from conversations in the comment section. To support the research findings, interviews were conducted with the subject and netizens who are residents of Banjarmasin City and voters in the 2024 election.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The term "celebrity politician" is introduced by the author to describe politicians who also have a notable presence on Instagram. Ananda is one of those whom the author considers to fall into the category of celebgram politician. Ananda's career trajectory began in politics and then became popular in social media. In terms of the number of followers, it cannot be compared to national-level influencers because this study is focused on the city of Banjarmasin. Ananda, a politician from the Golkar Party, ran as a candidate for Deputy Mayor of Banjarmasin in the 2024 local elections and successfully received the most number of votes with his running mate, M Yamin, the candidate for Mayor of Banjarmasin. Previously, in the 2019 local elections, Ananda also ran as a mayoral candidate for Banjarmasin. At that time, his opponent, Ibnu Sina, emerged as the winner. As a politician, Ananda is very active on social media and acknowledges that he is a celebgram. In the 2019 elections, Ananda faced a strong opponent on social media, fellow politician and social media influencer Ibnu Sina, who had already served two terms as mayor. In contrast, in the 2024 local elections, Ananda leads on social media compared to his other political opponents. Politicians or leaders are generally expected to appear credible and authoritative, as stated by Burhan Bungin (2018). Leadership branding is necessary to demonstrate a strong and cohesive personal identity, as well as a clear vision and mission in leading others in their duties. Ananda, however, presents the opposite. Ananda consistently produces content typical of modern celebgra: exciting, interesting, and often funny. Ananda's content before and during the regional election campaign remained consistent with his style. It only became more intense with activities involving his constituents. As Ananda and his running mate advanced in the race, his campaign team also created an official account. Her friends are also in line with what Ananda has been showcasing all along, young and cheerful.

Table 1: Analysis and Virtual Ethnography

Level	Analysis Object
Media Space	The authors study the features provided by Instagram
Media Archive	The authors view content as text and meaning.
Media Object	The authors view the content of user activities and interactions, as well as interactions between users.
Experiential stories	The authors connects the virtual world with the real world. They conduct in-depth interviews with famous politicians and 15 internet users who can provide additional information.

(Source: Nasrullah, R ,2017)

Based on the results of the study, it indicated that Ananda's virtual self was genuine or authentic. It is evident in the content, which seems relaxed and spontaneous. This is also emphasized during the in-depth interview.

> *"Ulun (I) on Instagram is real. My love for K-pop is not about trying to impress Gen Z because K-pop fans are genuine." (Interview with Ananda,2025)*

(Source: Ig @hj.ananda, 2024)

Ananda admits that the virtual self he shows on social media is his real self, and he is not shy about showing his love for K-Pop on social media. His captions make readers smile thanks to his use of Banjar language, his native language.

What Ananda posted was actually liked by internet users, and he continued to make people smile with his content even after he was elected as Deputy Mayor of Banjarmasin. Instead of receiving negative comments, his funny appearance actually attracted positive comments.
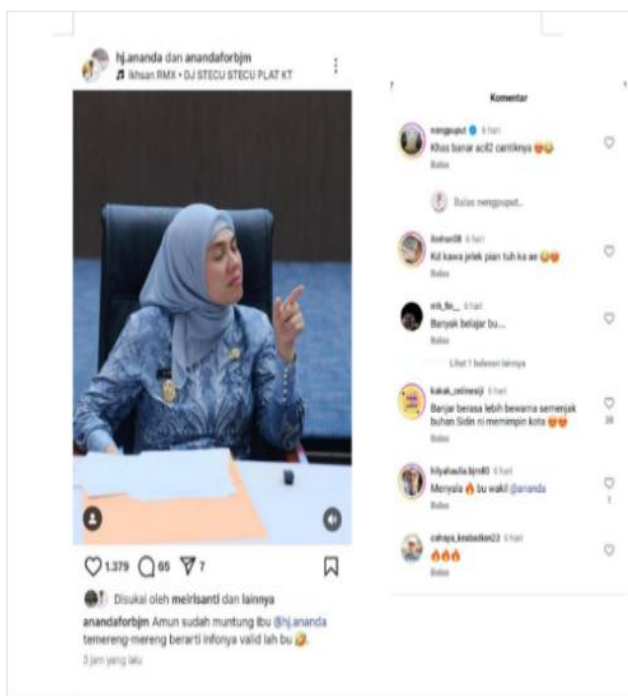
(Source: Ig @hj.ananda, 2025)

"It is beautiful, Mam." Your presence brings color to this city, said netizens in the comments section after seeing Ananda upload a photo of herself pouting.

Based on interviews conducted with a random netizen but it were residents of Banjarmasin City who also participated in the 2024 regional elections, it was determined that the majority of the respondents had met him in person. As stated by Azizah, a celebgram.

> *"I have met her before, and he's just as smart and cheerful as ever. No difference at all." (Interview with Azizah, 2024)*

The same statement was also conveyed by Lani, a radio announcer in Banjarmasin, who revealed that Ananda has the same skills in public speaking as seen in person, on social media and on television.

> *"Having good public speaking skills, as seen directly on social media and television" (Interview with Lani, 2024).*

Netizens also like entertaining content, as expressed by Rizki, a celebgram.

> "*I like the content (Ananda) because it's funny and entertaining. Even though the topics discussed are actually serious, we watch it to the end" (Interview with Rizki, 2024)*

From this statement, it is clear that celebgram politicians must continue to consider their engagement when creating content. This is essential to ensure that their content receives attention and attracts interaction in the form of likes, comments, and shares. Politicians will always be in the spotlight because interaction occurs not only on social media but also in the real world. The author also noted a finding that merits attention: Dinda, a college student, noticed something different when she met Ananda in person.

> *"I have met her before, but his image and character on social media feel very different from my experience meeting him in person. On social media, he appears friendly, warm, and close to the community.".(Interview with Dinda, 2024)*

However, on the other side, Dinda also understood that the circumstances at that time did not allow for intense communication.

> *"Become a well-known figure brings along responsibility to remain professional. I also understand that the different impression may arise because I am meeting people for the first time under certain circumstances, but there are some significant differences." (*Interview with Dinda,2024)

From these findings, the author concludes that the demand to perform in line with the image presented by celebgram politicians has become inherent and will be a consequential for being a celebgram politician. Once politicians have built their image on social media, they must be consistent in the real world.

The authors found that the frontstage and backstage, as defined by Goffman in his dramaturgy, may occur in anyone since everyone has their own reasons for presenting themselves in a particular way or having different personalities. While there are established guidelines for creating a virtual self for politicians on social media platforms, the focus on positivity in the content is not the only positive aspect. Therefore, Goffman's use of the term "front stage" does not imply that it exclusively showcases

positive or favorable events. It also encompasses the occurrences behind the scenes. The virtual personas of politicians on social media are authentic representations of their personal brands, and there are no restrictions on the use of spectacle in these online presentations. This finding contrasts with Barker's theory (2008). He asserts that the development of a virtual self involves the creation, construction, presentation, or concealment of an identity, whereas celebrity politicians do not attempt to create a new identity but rather emphasize the existing persona they have as individuals. When individuals transition into the role of celebrity politicians, they typically continue to preserve their existing image or identity.

This finding aligns with Samovar, La & Porter, RE's (2009) digital culture theory, which posits that social media can influence beliefs, values, and attitudes in society. Politicians, as individuals with established reputations and perceived leadership qualities, are not immune to the potential pitfalls of social media. Indeed, based on interviews with netizens, there is a clear preference for the authentic appearance. The hilarity behavior of politicians on social media has evolved into a form of entertainment for them.

(Ananda's appearance during the campaign, Source: Ig @hj.ananda, 2024)

Politicians are not only judged by how they appear on social media, but also by how they behave in the real world. Voters acknowledge that social media helps them to further recognize the candidates they are going to vote for, but another important factor is the candidates' track record. This is also proven by the fact that influencers are nominated as candidates not because of their large number of followers, but because of their personal potential.

One thing that came to the authors' attention in this study, regardless of Ananda's true nature in his content, is that the author believes Ananda's true nature is part of his brilliant strategy to reinforce or solidify his image in society, and he has succeeded in doing so.

(Source: Ig @hj.ananda, 2024)

"*Ulun (I) want to be known as a touchable politician*: (Interview with Ananda,2024)

As Ananda stated, (ulun means I in Banjar language) he is to be known as a politician who is "touchable." A politician who does not maintain a distance from the community. By maintaining a genuine appearance, he aims to ensure that his professional image aligns with his personal identity. However, he acknowledges that while the influence of the media is significant, there are other factors that contributed to his election alongside M. Yamin as Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Banjarmasin, including his track record, party machine, and funding.

CONCLUSION

The virtual self of the celebgram politician, Ananda is authentic, which is why celebrity politicians are able to reveal their behind-the-scenes lives to the public. A genuine persona may consider vulnerabilities as assets. However, this does not imply a lack of regulations, as the content disseminated, particularly during electoral campaigns, will be evaluated based on personal values, party values, and societal values.

Social media has changed the world's perception of a politician's image, showing that hilarity is not considered inappropriate or taboo. Netizens are tired of image-building. Celebrity politicians who appear with an imperfect appearance is considered entertaining and genuine.

A large number of followers are not enough to bring impact to number of votes without serious social media management with supporting content. A politician's personal competence is very important to develop. To get the expected feedback, politicians must be consistent with their image in real life. They should not be referred to as content governors, mayors, or content politicians.

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