International Journal of Education, Vocational and Social Science
https://e-journal.citakonsulindo.or.id/index.php/IJEVSS
E-ISSN : 2963 4954
IJEVSS

The Phenomenon of Vulnerable Population Exploitation Going Viral on Social Media: A Social Construction of Impression Management Among Content Creators

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Abstract

This study examines the growing phenomenon of vulnerable population exploitation on social media platforms—including TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook—in which content creators publish videos featuring elderly individuals, persons with disabilities, children, and impoverished groups to generate digital revenue and audience engagement. Grounded in Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory of Social Construction of Reality and Erving Goffman's Impression Management framework, this research investigates the motivational factors driving content creators to produce such content and the social constructions these creators disseminate through digital platforms. Employing a qualitative approach through literature review and content analysis, the study draws on multiple academic journals, relevant legislation, and publicly

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accessible social media content. The findings reveal that economic incentive, social recognition, and algorithmic reinforcement are the primary drivers of viral exploitation content. Content creators strategically perform emotional staging—framing scenes of poverty, disability, and suffering—to elicit empathy from audiences and convert it into digital coins, views, and subscribers. This practice constructs a distorted social reality in which vulnerability is commodified and suffering becomes a form of entertainment. The study recommends enhanced multi-stakeholder collaboration among the Ministry of Communication and Information (Kominfo), Ministry of Social Affairs (Kemensos), and Regional Social Services (Dinsos) to regulate exploitative content, alongside greater platform accountability and improved digital literacy among the public.

Keywords: Exploitation; Vulnerable Population; Social Media; Impression Management; Social Construction.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of information technology has fundamentally transformed patterns of social interaction, including the emergence of novel forms of social expression and economic activity through digital platforms. Among the most alarming of these phenomena is the proliferation of online content that exploits vulnerable populations—including the elderly, persons with disabilities, children, and the impoverished—as a mechanism to generate income and social media engagement. This practice, colloquially referred to as 'online begging' (pengemis online), has garnered significant public attention in Indonesia and across the broader Southeast Asian digital landscape (Putri, 2023).

According to Law Number 21 of 2007 on the Crime of Human Trafficking, exploitation encompasses any action—with or without the consent of the victim—that includes, but is not limited to, slavery, prostitution, forced labor, physical oppression, extortion, and the unlawful use of a person's bodily organs or capabilities for material or immaterial gain. This legal definition is further augmented by Ministerial Regulation Number 5 of 2019 on Social Welfare Problem Bearers (PPKS), which identifies vulnerable populations as individuals, families, groups, or communities whose social functioning is impaired due to obstacles, difficulties, or disturbances. Categories within this definition explicitly include persons with disabilities, the elderly, children, and the impoverished.

The phenomenon under investigation is distinguished by the deliberate staging of vulnerability—content creators construct and broadcast scenes of suffering designed to elicit

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empathy, compassion, and financial contributions from online audiences. Activities range from elderly individuals bathing in mud, immersing themselves in filthy water, or enduring cold-water exposure for extended periods in exchange for digital gifts from viewers (Irwanto, 2023). In numerous documented cases, the subjects of these videos are not acting autonomously but are being directed by, or are under the influence of, content creators who profit from the resulting engagement.

This practice raises profound ethical and legal questions regarding the boundaries of creative expression, the commodification of suffering, and the responsibilities of digital platform operators, regulatory bodies, and the public. From a sociological perspective, it calls for analysis through the lens of social construction theory, as content creators are not merely documenting reality but actively constructing, staging, and disseminating particular representations of vulnerability to produce desired social and economic outcomes.

The present study is anchored in two principal theoretical frameworks: Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality, as applied to mass media contexts by Bungin (2012), and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of impression management. These frameworks enable a systematic examination of the processes by which content creators construct social meanings around vulnerability and strategically manage the impressions formed by online audiences.

The research aims to: (1) identify and analyze the motivational factors that drive content creators to produce exploitative content featuring vulnerable populations; (2) examine the social constructions that emerge and are reinforced through such content on digital platforms; and (3) contribute evidence-based recommendations to policy stakeholders, platform operators, and advocacy organizations toward the mitigation of this phenomenon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Exploitation of Vulnerable Populations

The concept of exploitation, within the context of Indonesian law, is broadly defined under Law Number 21 of 2007 as the utilization of another person's capacities or physical conditions against their interests or in violation of their rights, for the purpose of material or immaterial gain. Within the welfare science literature, exploitation of vulnerable groups has been documented primarily in offline contexts—particularly the organized deployment of elderly individuals and persons with disabilities as street beggars by criminal syndicates (Putri, N.A., 2020). Putri's study of the Lampung Regional Police's interventions against exploitation-based begging networks

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found that law enforcement employed pre-emptive, preventive, and repressive strategies, though significant challenges persisted due to limited investigator capacity and community reluctance to report such activities.

The emergence of social media platforms as sites of exploitation represents a significant evolution of this phenomenon. Whereas traditional begging exploitation operated in physical public spaces, contemporary digital exploitation operates across virtual platforms with far greater reach, lower accountability, and more complex monetization mechanisms. Content creators on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram are able to generate digital coins, advertisement revenue, and subscriber income by amassing the emotional responses of large audiences to staged or directed displays of vulnerability (Ghani, 2023).

The legal and regulatory landscape has been slow to adapt to this digital dimension of exploitation. While Indonesian law provides robust frameworks for addressing physical exploitation, the virtual staging of vulnerable populations in revenue-generating content occupies a more ambiguous legal space—one that necessitates interdisciplinary collaboration among Kominfo, Kemensos, regional social welfare departments, the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM), and the platforms themselves.

Social Construction of Reality in Mass Media

Berger and Luckmann's foundational work, The Social Construction of Reality (1966), posits that human beings do not simply perceive an objective reality but actively construct their understanding of the world through social interaction, language, and institutionalized practices. Reality, in their framework, is simultaneously externalized (individuals produce social worlds through their actions), objectivated (these productions take on an objective character independent of individuals), and internalized (individuals reabsorb this objectivated world as the structuring context of their subjectivity).

When applied to mass media and social media contexts, this constructivist model—as developed by Bungin (2012) in his work on Methodology of Qualitative Research—holds that media do not merely reflect social reality but are powerful agents in its construction. Social media platforms, through algorithmic amplification, audience engagement mechanics, and content creator incentive structures, create what Bungin describes as a 'simultaneous sociological process': a process in which the media channel mediates between the source and receiver in ways that construct reality more rapidly, broadly, and pervasively than face-to-face interaction.

In the context of online exploitation content, content creators occupy the position of

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source and message-constructor simultaneously. By selecting, staging, and framing scenes of vulnerability, they externalize a particular version of social reality—one in which suffering is visible, immediate, and emotionally compelling. Through repeated exposure and audience engagement (likes, shares, comments, and donations), this constructed reality becomes objectivated: it begins to appear natural, authentic, and representative of broader social conditions. Audience members internalize these constructions, forming opinions and emotional dispositions that further drive engagement and, thus, creator revenue.

Rizkiandi's (2022) study of begging phenomena in Mataram City offers a relevant precedent for understanding how social construction operates in relation to marginalized livelihoods. Rizkiandi found that begging, over time, became socially constructed among practitioners as 'waiting for alms' (penunggu sedekah)—a redefinition that normalized the activity and provided practitioners with a positive self-concept. Content creators engaged in online exploitation similarly engage in constructive reframing, positioning their content as charitable exposure, social documentary, or advocacy—rather than exploitation—in order to justify their practices to audiences and themselves.

Impression Management in the Digital Context

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory conceptualizes social life as a theatrical performance in which individuals strategically manage the impressions they create in the minds of others. In Goffman's framework, actors perform on a 'front stage' (the public presentation space) while preparing and strategizing behind the scenes on a 'back stage.' Key impression management techniques include idealization (presenting an idealized version of oneself or one's situation), mystification (maintaining audience distance to preserve awe or sympathy), and dramatic realization (making one's performance particularly vivid and compelling).

Applied to social media content creation, impression management theory explains why creators invest considerable effort in staging, editing, and curating content involving vulnerable populations. The 'front stage' consists of the published video—carefully crafted to maximize emotional impact, authenticity, and audience engagement. The 'back stage' involves the technical and strategic preparation: selecting the most photogenic or emotionally evocative subjects, scripting interactions, optimizing posting times, and analyzing engagement metrics. Audiences who encounter the finished content experience a carefully managed impression—one designed to elicit specific emotional responses, including pity, admiration for the creator's apparent generosity, or moral outrage that paradoxically drives further engagement.

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Laily (2022) has noted that digital platforms, particularly Instagram, function as spaces where users engage in active identity construction and impression management. In the case of content creators who exploit vulnerable populations, this identity construction frequently involves positioning the creator as a benefactor, activist, or compassionate witness—roles that enhance the creator's social capital while simultaneously obscuring the exploitative dimensions of the content production process.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a systematic literature review methodology combined with content analysis of publicly accessible social media content. The qualitative approach was selected in recognition of the interpretive complexity of the phenomenon under investigation—the social and motivational dimensions of online exploitation cannot be adequately captured by quantitative measures alone (Herdiansyah, 2010; Mulyana, 2013).

The research framework draws upon the Sequential Explanatory Method (Sugiyono, 2013; Tanzeh, 2009), which integrates qualitative and quantitative data collection approaches in a sequential fashion—first gathering and analyzing qualitative data to construct theoretical frameworks, then drawing upon quantitative dimensions (such as engagement metrics and viewer response patterns) to corroborate and refine the qualitative findings. For the purposes of this study, the primary emphasis is placed on the qualitative literature review phase.

Data sources comprise three categories: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles from SINTA-indexed and internationally accredited databases, prioritizing publications from 2012 to 2023; (2) relevant Indonesian legislation and ministerial regulations; and (3) publicly observable social media content from TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, selected based on their exemplification of the phenomenon under study. Content was analyzed using a framing analysis approach (Bungin, 2012) to identify patterns of representation, emotional staging, and audience response construction.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (1992) interactive model, comprising three concurrent processes: (1) data reduction, through which relevant material was selected and condensed; (2) data display, through which findings were organized into coherent thematic structures; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, through which interpretations were iteratively refined in light of emerging evidence. Triangulation of data sources was employed to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of findings (Mappiare, 2009; Bungin, 2012).

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Motivational Factors Driving Exploitative Content Creation

The analysis identified three primary categories of motivational factors that drive content creators to produce material featuring the exploitation of vulnerable populations: economic incentives, social recognition, and algorithmic reinforcement.

Economic incentives constitute the most immediately observable driver. Social media platforms operate monetization systems—including TikTok's gift and coin mechanisms, YouTube's advertising revenue, and Instagram's partnership programs—that directly reward high-engagement content. Content featuring vulnerable individuals in emotionally evocative situations (bathing in mud, exposure to cold, public displays of poverty) consistently generates high engagement rates, as audiences are psychologically predisposed to respond to apparent suffering (Ghani, 2023). Creators who discover this engagement dynamic are incentivized to intensify and repeat it, creating a feedback loop in which the economic reward structure of the platform actively encourages more extreme displays of vulnerability.

Social recognition operates as a secondary but powerful motivator. Content creators in the Indonesian social media landscape frequently frame their exploitation content within narratives of charitable action—presenting themselves as individuals who are 'helping' vulnerable populations by bringing attention to their plight. This framing allows creators to accumulate social capital in the form of moral reputation, community respect, and audience loyalty, even as the actual subjects of their content derive minimal benefit from the exposure. The social construction of the creator as benefactor is central to this dynamic (Goffman, 1959; Rizkiandi, 2022).

Algorithmic reinforcement constitutes a structural driver that operates largely beyond individual creator awareness. Platform algorithms on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram are designed to maximize engagement by amplifying content that generates emotional responses—including the distress, pity, and moral arousal triggered by images of vulnerability. This algorithmic amplification creates a selection environment in which exploitative content is not merely tolerated but actively promoted, reaching wider audiences and generating greater economic returns than comparable non-exploitative content.

Social Constructions Produced Through Exploitative Content

The analysis of exploitative content through Berger and Luckmann's social construction framework reveals three principal constructions that are generated and reproduced through this phenomenon.

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First, exploitation content constructs vulnerability as spectacle. Through the technical affordances of social media—high-definition video, real-time streaming, comment interaction—suffering is transformed from a private condition into a public performance. The elderly person bathing in mud ceases to be an individual human being in distress and becomes, through the mediation of the platform, a visual stimulus designed to produce a specific emotional and behavioral response in the audience. This spectacularization of vulnerability is consistent with Bungin's (2012) analysis of how mass media construct reality 'faster, more broadly, and more evenly distributed' than lived social experience.

Second, exploitative content constructs a false moral economy around generosity and suffering. Audience members who donate digital gifts to content creators featuring vulnerable subjects experience themselves as participants in an act of charity. This construction of audience members as benefactors, mediated through the platform's gift-sending mechanics, creates a moral economy in which the act of watching suffering and pressing a button is equated with meaningful social care. The actual distribution of economic benefit—in which creators capture the vast majority of audience donations while the featured vulnerable individuals receive minimal direct support—is obscured by this construction.

Third, exploitative content normalizes the instrumentalization of vulnerable populations. As audiences are repeatedly exposed to content in which elderly individuals, persons with disabilities, and impoverished children are positioned as objects of emotional stimulation rather than as rights-bearing subjects, a social norm is gradually constructed in which the use of vulnerable populations for entertainment and economic gain is perceived as acceptable or even virtuous. This normalization operates through the process Berger and Luckmann describe as institutionalization—the gradual sedimentation of practices into taken-for-granted social routines.

Impression Management Strategies of Content Creators

Content creators engaged in the production of exploitative social media content deploy sophisticated impression management strategies that are consistent with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework. Analysis of documented content patterns reveals several recurring performance strategies.

Emotional amplification involves the deliberate staging and intensification of emotional cues within content. Creators select moments, settings, and subjects calculated to maximize audience emotional response—preferring the most visually compelling displays of suffering, the

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most sympathetic subjects (elderly women, young children with disabilities), and the most emotionally resonant narrative framings (abandonment by family, extreme poverty, physical incapacity). This strategy corresponds to Goffman's concept of dramatic realization: the actor makes their performance particularly vivid and compelling to ensure that the impression conveyed to the audience is forceful and unambiguous.

Moral positioning involves the framing of the creator as a compassionate witness or active philanthropist rather than as a commercial operator. Creators routinely incorporate verbal or textual statements of concern, solidarity, and charitable intention into their content—'I am sharing this because society needs to know,' or 'your donations will help this grandmother'—regardless of whether their actions produce substantive benefit for the featured individuals. This front-stage moral performance serves to preempt criticism and maintain audience goodwill.

Authenticity performance involves the construction of an impression of unmediated, documentary reality. Creators often employ aesthetic conventions associated with citizen journalism and documentary film—handheld camera movement, natural lighting, unscripted-seeming interactions—to suggest that audiences are witnessing unfiltered reality rather than staged performance. This authenticity impression is particularly consequential, as it suppresses audience skepticism and enhances the emotional impact of the content.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the phenomenon of vulnerable population exploitation on Indonesian social media platforms through the theoretical lenses of social construction of reality and impression management. The findings demonstrate that this phenomenon is not merely the product of individual creator malfeasance but is structurally embedded in the economic incentive systems of digital platforms, the psychological dynamics of online audience engagement, and the broader social constructions that frame poverty and disability as sites of moral and emotional spectacle.

Content creators exploit vulnerable populations through sophisticated impression management strategies that construct them as compassionate actors while instrumentalizing the suffering of the elderly, persons with disabilities, children, and the impoverished for commercial gain. These strategies produce social constructions that normalize the commodification of vulnerability, construct false moral economies around digital charity, and gradually institutionalize the instrumentalization of marginalized populations in the public imagination.

The implications of these findings extend to multiple stakeholder domains. At the policy

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level, the study recommends the development of integrated regulatory frameworks that bridge the jurisdictions of Kominfo, Kemensos, Dinsos, and Komnas HAM to address the virtual exploitation of vulnerable populations with the same seriousness accorded to physical exploitation under existing Indonesian law. At the platform level, the findings call for algorithmic reforms that de-incentivize exploitative content and the development of robust community reporting mechanisms for content involving vulnerable populations. At the civil society level, enhanced public digital literacy programs are recommended to equip audiences with the critical capacities to recognize and resist impression management strategies employed by exploitative content creators.

Future research should extend this analysis through empirical fieldwork with content creators, affected vulnerable populations, and policy stakeholders to develop a richer, evidence-grounded understanding of the lived dynamics of this phenomenon and to evaluate the effectiveness of proposed regulatory and educational interventions.

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