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Young Muslim Women as Digital Citizens in Indonesia – Advocating Conservative Religious Outlook

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Indonesia’s millennial generation dominates the national social media landscape. Its members engage actively with political issues online, and are reported have a more ‘purist’ religious outlook than society in general.
- Instagram is popular among the young, and young women access this platform more than they do other platforms such as Twitter.
- Analysis of posts by popular individuals and groups shows that most young women call for a more conservative Islamic lifestyle in their online presence, and their socio-political concerns focus on maintaining a way of life that they interpret as virtuous.
- These young women openly supported the anti-Ahok groups in 2017 and campaigned for Prabowo Subianto in the 2019 presidential election. They used Instagram posts to demonstrate their engagement, and show their dissent or support using a “visual vocabulary” that is sometimes considered feminine or frivolous.

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INTRODUCTION

As much as 42 percent of registered voters for Indonesia's 2019 elections are aged 17 to 35 years old. These *pemuda*¹, or young people, dominate the social media landscape in the country, making up 66 percent of the 150 million social media users and spending on average 3 hours and 26 minutes online per day.²

Furthermore, they are expressly sympathetic to more 'purist' interpretations of Islam, and social media function as the main medium through which they learn Islamic moral codes.³ This paper contends however, that we should not be evaluating the Indonesian millennials as a unified group. Differences in gender, class, education level, religiosity, location and level of Internet access do matter. For instance, in a visibly devout Indonesia, urban male youths are more present in reports about Islamist groups and street politics. Members of hard-line and conservative groups like Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) are made up of mostly young men. Young male preachers are seen to be representative of how Indonesian youths redefine religious proselytization through social media.⁴

Young Muslim women, on the other hand, are rarely seen as political actors. They do however also express their views and contentions on social issues and elections, and potentially influence their followers on social media. This paper asks: How do young women express and represent their social and political concerns?

DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Where expressions of political sentiments are concerned, Facebook-owned platforms dominate the social media landscape in Indonesia. Indonesia has about 130 million Facebook users and more than 60 million Instagram users, which dwarfs the 20 million Twitter users in the country. Twitter is more popular among male users (about 65% of Indonesian Twitter users are male). In contrast, 51 percent males and 49 percent females are Instagram users.⁵ Indonesia is also Instagram's largest market in the Asia Pacific,⁶ with 70 percent of its users being 18 to 34 years old.⁷ In short, Instagram's high number of users and their balanced gender distribution makes the platform useful in studying how Indonesian youth make sense of current social and political situations.

Twitter and Instagram have different features and foci, which affect user behaviour. The most apparent difference is that while Twitter is text-based, Instagram is visual. Twitter also has a limited number of characters, requiring its users to create threads for longer discussions. Users can 'like' to show agreement, hit reply to respond to the tweet, 'retweet' to reuse the content on Twitter, and they can also opt to accompany a tweet with an image or a video. In contrast, Instagram requires the user to upload at least an image or a video to create a post. The caption accompanying the image or video can be as long as 2,200 characters. The focus on the visual encourages the receiving user to be impacted by the aesthetics of the post first before engaging with the text. Instagram allows users to treat a post as a topic within which users can comment on and create replies to each other. Public posts with hashtags can be searchable.

These differences between Twitter and Instagram generate different conversations that are distinguished by different forms of expressions (textual, visual, or audio-visual). In other words, each platform's features attract different users and afford different ways through which its users may express themselves.

POSITIONING YOUNG MUSLIM WOMEN IN INDONESIA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Young Muslim women are rarely seen as important political actors in Indonesia, and women's participation in politics are usually generalized and dominated by adult women in political parties and in policy-making processes. Young women, on the other hand, are usually seen as creative entrepreneurs or members of the at-risk group. Such a focus is understandable. There are at least two reasons for this: the depoliticization of Indonesian women and Indonesian youth generally, and the ongoing 'myth' that young people are apolitical.

The depoliticization of Indonesian women has its roots in President Suharto's New Order (1966-1998). The Family Welfare Guidance programme (PKK) was created as a way to structurally control and discourage female political expressions. After 1998, NGOs and organisations led by women mushroomed, directing women involvement in politics mainly into formal arenas. Meanwhile, young people were framed as being indifferent to politics. Surveys and reports often suggest that they are more inclined to do activities as a matter of self-interest.⁸ These myths have been sustained despite the increasing number of millennial female politicians.⁹ Meanwhile, young Indonesian women's increasing global visibility are often seen in relation to identity making through fashion and lifestyle, and seldom are they considered for the political influence they effectively exert.¹⁰

To be sure, devout young Muslim women in Indonesia do express their socio-political concerns online. Most millennials are digital natives who have grown up with digital technology. As citizens, they are more adept at using digital technologies to respond to the state and the government. In that sense, they can be considered digital citizens. Digital citizenship, however, does not refer only to how citizens act online. It refers also to how citizens make 'rights claims' that determine how they see themselves in relation to others and to social and political conventions in cyberspace. Digital rights claims are actions and statements that suggest 'I, we, they have the right to...' Such claims are not detached from the contexts that shape citizenship in 'real life.'¹¹ By evaluating how young Muslim women act and make claims online, we can understand how they express and engage with social and political conditions.

MAKING CLAIMS AS DIGITAL CITIZENS

Popular young Muslim women's Instagram accounts are proxies for how Indonesian young women function as digital citizens in general, for two reasons. First, Indonesian young Muslim women organise themselves into groups or *komunitas*. A lot of these groups were

founded following increased Internet access and ownership of mobile phones, and the ‘conservative turn’ in Indonesian Islam. They use digital technologies and social media like Instagram to promote devout lifestyles in accordance with their own interpretations of Islam. They are loosely affiliated with well-known Muslim organisations such as the Coordinating Body of Majelis Taklim (BKMT) and the now-banned Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). They provide space online and offline for young women to teach one another about Islam, focusing on issues specifically related to Muslim women’s daily life (veiling, romantic relationship, child-rearing), and to women’s roles in business and entrepreneurship. Although they differ in some interpretations about the practices (for instance, the hijab length that is considered correct), they actively promote a lifestyle centred around conservative Islamic doctrines. On the surface, they may seem to focus only on ‘women’s issues.’ However, they also actively respond to the political and social climate on social media, and are visibly more sympathetic towards political actors and issues affiliated to Islamist concerns that promote the unity of the Islamic community (*umat*), such as the anti-Ahok rallies in 2017 and Prabowo Subianto—the presidential candidate supported by Islamist groups such as FPI.

Second, they are popular amongst social media users in Indonesia. The examples analysed below include posts from the accounts of Dian Pelangi, Ghaida Tsurayya, Hijabers Community, Peduli Jilbab, Ukhti Sally, and Ayu Momalula. All of them are visibly devout and promote a relatively more conservative lifestyle. Dian Pelangi is a 28-year-old fashion designer and a co-founder of Hijabers Community, a popular young Muslim women’s group in Indonesia. She is also a social media influencer with 4.9 million followers on Instagram. Ghaida Tsurayya is also one of the founders of Hijabers Community, a fashion designer, and an influencer with 435,000 Instagram followers. She is the daughter of Aa Gym, a popular Islamic preacher. Hijabers Community was founded in 2010. The group has 8 chapters in Indonesian cities as of 2018, 4,000 registered members, and 111,000 followers on Instagram. Peduli Jilbab, founded in 2012, is a young Muslim women’s groups with 44 local chapters and 327,000 Instagram followers. Ukhti Sally is also a young Muslim women’s group. Founded in 2015, it now has 404,000 followers on Instagram. The founder, Ayu Momalula, is also a social media influencer and a fashion designer, with 90,800 Instagram followers.¹²

Their popularity gives them the status of ‘Influencer’ or social media celebrity. Analyses of the young women’s accounts and their political leanings, therefore, are an interesting addition to analyses of hashtag use or the prevalence of hoaxes and bot accounts on Twitter, particularly during election times. Instagram affordances require users and especially influencers like them to ‘curate’ their feed into an image gallery that illustrates how they want their followers to think about them. Such curation and appearances require care. Beyond hashtag wars and hoaxes on Twitter, the Instagram accounts of young Muslim women influencers arguably exemplify how lifestyle and political leanings are intertwined and sustained.

These conservative young Muslim women’s accounts engage in socio-political issues in two specific ways. First, they blur the boundaries between broadcasting, mobilization, and image management by mixing personal interests, style, and performances of religious

virtues. Second, when expressing political preference and concerns about socio-political conditions, they rely on visual aesthetics or a pleasing appearance,¹³ which often distracts casual readers from understanding their socio-political stance. Their social media feeds are often dominated by items that are considered feminine or girlish. This can be due to the colours dominating the images (usually pink, purple, and pastel colours), the objects in the images (dominated by selfies, fashionable poses, and ethereal landscape), and the high number of advertorials.¹⁴ The two features are visually represented in ways that undermine their significance in influencing fellow young Muslim women's social and political leaning, making them seemingly disinterested in discussing public matters. Below, two instances related to the Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017 and the recent 2019 General Election illustrate these two characteristics.

The Jakarta gubernatorial election rounds in February and April 2017 marked the rise of Islamist populism in Indonesia. The candidacy of Basuki Purnama or Ahok, the then-incumbent governor, suffered from a viral video of him allegedly making blasphemous claims in October 2016 and from subsequent attacks from Islamist groups like Islamic Defender Front (FPI) and Safeguard the Indonesian Ulema Councils Fatwa (GNPF-MUI). The two male-dominated groups were seen as representatives of the two rallies held on 4 November 2016 and 2 December 2016—later known as the 411 and 212 rallies, respectively.¹⁵ These male-dominated events engendered a debate about the clear absence of Muslim women at the rallies.¹⁶ While discussions on newspapers and television focus on FPI and GNPF-MUI as well as the lack of representation of Muslim women in the rallies, the young Muslim women Influencers were actively showing their support on Instagram with aesthetically pleasing images to communicate to more than 5 million followers their support for the rallies.¹⁷ During the election rounds in 2017, they deployed the hashtag #MuslimVoteMuslim as a way to undermine the popularity of Ahok, who is a Christian.¹⁸

The recent general election on 17 April 2019 demonstrated similar strategies. Dian Pelangi openly showed her support for Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno,¹⁹ and a few hours before polling opened, she uploaded a series of pictures on her Instagram account of her meetings with the two candidates at her boutique. In one photo, Dian was sitting next to Prabowo wearing a long blouse in beige, a colour that matched the shirt Prabowo was wearing. The next showed Prabowo walking around Dian's design studio and shop, chatting with workers. This was perhaps to highlight his support for the creative industry.²⁰ The post received more than 170,000 likes and 1,600 comments, most of which responded positively to Dian's support for the candidate.²¹ The caption revealed Dian's gratitude after meeting Prabowo, and she ended it with a wish for Prabowo's good health. Although the caption did not directly indicate that she voted for Prabowo, her followers would understand her suggestion: "God willing, he is a leader we can trust (*pemimpin amanah*)", as one commenter said. Another said: "Pray more for him, God willing we will have a different president tomorrow." Despite the fact that Dian did not respond to her followers' comments, they kept pouring in to show their excitement over Dian's post and their support for Prabowo.

On election day, Dian uploaded a post with a series of photos with Sandiaga Uno,²² again receiving positive feedback from her followers with about 89,000 likes.²³ Her caption

expressed her happiness when meeting Sandiaga, for his visit to one of her design spaces, and specifically for the “inspiration and appreciation” the vice-presidential candidate gave her. This suggested a connection of Sandiaga’s entrepreneurial vision to hers. Ghaida Tsurayya, on the other hand, used quotes and videos featuring her father, the preacher Aa Gym, reminding her followers to maintain a peaceful election process.²⁴ She also uploaded photos of herself with #salam2jari, showing her support for Prabowo. In one photo, she wore a hijab and a long dress in baby blue colour and a beige overcoat. Wearing a pair of dark sunglasses, she stood in front of a wall painted with what looked like an Italian storefront doors and windows.²⁵ She posed like it was a fashion shoot. Another upload was a selfie taken with her husband, showing their inked fingers on election day. Ghaida showed her ‘salam 2 jari’ sign with her right hand.²⁶ Although the posts seemed self-centred or frivolous, the captions and the hashtags actually demonstrated her political preference. One caption said: “Whoever the president may turn out to be, this should be a personal decision that will be judged in the afterlife. In the name of God, may we remain united #indonesia #salam2jari”.

In short, the examples of Dian and Ghaida suggest political support informed by a similar trend of Islamist mobilisation in support of Prabowo’s candidacy. Their support was framed using religious utterances and indirect support for the candidate of their choice. Dian’s position in the Islamic fashion industry, Ghaida’s family connection, as well as the more conservative Islamic lifestyle and persona they have maintained online foreground their political leaning, making it seem ‘natural’ for their followers to support the considerably more ‘Islamic’ candidate.

There are two key takeaways from the examples. First, they specify how Indonesian young women navigate and operate in the landscape of seemingly genderless political analyses. Political sentiment analyses based on Twitter usage would do well to be accompanied by an in-depth digital ethnographic evaluation of Instagram. There is a need to be more aware and flexible in looking for political expressions and engagements on different social media platforms. Instagram’s emphasis on visual affordances requires a higher level of personalisation. To the extent such personalisation is a strategy for politicians to create distraction from policy-based discussion,²⁷ the personalisation of young Muslim women may be a way to make sense of socio-political conditions.

Consequently, to understand how social media become a space for young women to make claims as digital citizens, we need to understand their preferred forms of expression (images and video) and how they use particular visual vocabulary. Young women on social media are proficient in knowing what attracts most attention from their followers. Unlike with Twitter, self-expression and engagement with followers on Instagram require young women to be skilful in image editing and visual language. Colour palettes, facial expressions, poses, and image composition are as important as the political claims they are making. ‘Frivolity’²⁸ should not be equated with indifference to socio-political conditions.

CONCLUSION

Let us return to the question the paper posed in the beginning. How do young women express and represent their social and political concerns? The young women discussed here have organised and promoted a more conservative Islamic lifestyle, while their socio-political concerns focus on maintaining a way of life that they interpret as virtuous. With regards to recent political events, that stance means supporting the 411 and 212 rallies and promoting Prabowo's presidential candidacy. They use Instagram posts to demonstrate their engagement, and the way they show their dissent or political support rely on "visual vocabulary"—which is often considered feminine or frivolous.

As stated earlier, we should not lump the young into one category, such as 'Indonesian youth' or 'millennials'. The practices they are involved in as digital citizens vary based on gender, religion, class, and other factors. The case study of young Muslim women here is also specific to those living in urban areas, middle-class, educated, with enough digital and visual skills and literacy to understand and disseminate their social, political, economic, religious interests and concerns. Lastly, studying how Indonesian youths use Instagram with qualitative and ethnographic methods contributes excellently to quantitative and big-data analyses of Twitter.

¹ This paper conflates the term 'millennial' with 'young people' (*pemuda*), as the two terms are often used interchangeably in Indonesia today. According to Law on Youth of 2009, youth in Indonesia is defined as those aged 16 to 30 years old. The definition of millennials, however, is a bit more diverse. Pew Research Center defines millennials as those who were born between 1981 and 1996, or those who are now 23 to 38 years old (see <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>). In recent years, however, the term millennial has been used in Indonesia to mark voters younger than 40 years old (see Budi Irawanto, 'Young and Faithless: Wooing Millennials in Indonesia's 2019 Presidential Election', ISEAS Perspective, 2019, No.1, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_1.pdf).

² "Digital 2019 Indonesia." Internet. We Are Social & Hootsuite, February 3, 2019. <https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-indonesia-january-2019-v01>.

³ Yuniar, Resty Woro. "How Social Media Inspired Indonesia's Born-Again 'Hijrah' Muslim Millennials." South China Morning Post, April 6, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3004911/how-social-media-inspired-indonesias-born-again-hijrah-muslim>.

⁴ Carolina, Juke. "Indonesia's Muslim Youth Find New Heroes in Instagram Preachers." Public Radio International, March 29, 2019. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-03-29/indonesia-s-muslim-youth-find-new-heroes-instagram-preachers>.

⁵ "Digital 2019 Indonesia." Internet. We Are Social & Hootsuite, February 3, 2019. <https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-indonesia-january-2019-v01>.

⁶ Ganesha, Amal. "Instagram Has 45 Million Users in Indonesia, the Largest in Asia Pacific." The Jakarta Globe, July 27, 2017. <http://jakartaglobe.id/news/instagram-45-million-users-indonesia-largest-asia-pacific/>.

⁷ "Instagram Users in Indonesia," NapoleonCat, 2018, <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/instagram-users-in-indonesia/2018/10>.

⁸ See Central for Strategic and International Relations' Survey results, 'Ada Apa Dengan Milenial? Orientasi Sosial, Ekonomi dan Politik', https://www.csis.or.id/uploaded_file/event/ada_apa_dengan_milenial_paparan_survei_nasiona

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⁹ Nainggolan, Bestian. "Peluang Petarung Politik Perempuan Milenial." Kompas.Id, April 12, 2019. <https://kompas.id/baca/utama/2019/04/12/peluang-petarung-politik-perempuan-milenial/>.

¹⁰ Bucar, Elizabeth. "How Muslim Women Use Fashion To Exert Political Influence." The Atlantic, February 1, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/muslim-women-fashion-political-influence/550256/>.

¹¹ Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert, *Being Digital Citizens*, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015.

¹² Follower counts were correct as of 19 April 2019.

¹³ For brief discussion of what visual aesthetic entails, see <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/visual-aesthetics>

¹⁴ Advertorials or advertising editorials are advertisement that include popular social media user's recommendation of the product. Such personalization of commercial products is on characteristic of Internet celebrity's or influencer social media accounts. For detailed explanation on influencers and advertorials on social media see Crystal Abidin's article 'Visibility labour: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram' (*Media International Australia*, 2016).

¹⁵ Fealy, Greg. "Bigger than Ahok: Explaining the 2 December Mass Rally - Indonesia at Melbourne." Indonesia at Melbourne, December 7, 2016. <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/bigger-than-ahok-explaining-jakartas-2-december-mass-rally/>.

¹⁶ See Lailatul Fitriyah 'Where were the women in 212 protest?', *The Jakarta Post* (<https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2016/12/15/where-were-the-women-in-212-protest.html>), and Sabina Satriyani Puspita, 'The 212 protest: Beyond the presence of women', *The Jakarta Post* (<https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2017/01/04/the-212-protest-beyond-the-presence-of-women.html>)

¹⁷ Examples of Dian Pelangi's posts supporting the 411 and 212 rallies: https://www.instagram.com/p/BMX_pORAT6g/?hl=en&taken-by=dianpelangi and <https://www.instagram.com/p/BNhAO1rgvea/?hl=en&taken-by=dianpelangi>. Examples of Ghaida Tsurayya's support for 212 rally <https://www.instagram.com/gdaghaida/p/BNf5fQMhwpZ/?hl=en> and <https://www.instagram.com/gdaghaida/p/BNrNojVB3Cf/?hl=en>. Examples of Hijabers Community support for 411 rally <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMZIs0DBBEr/> and <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMZLiplBRLd/>. An example of Peduli Jilbab's support for 411 rally: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMX9ZJdAIK8/>

Examples of Ukhti Sally post supporting the 212 rally: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BNgBNzXjvNk/> and <https://www.instagram.com/p/BNgX431DhUX/>. Examples of Ayu Momalula supporting the 411 and 212 rallies: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMYPM3YBd3j/> and <https://www.instagram.com/p/BNgaCTUhwXc/>

¹⁸ See <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQg9dnOgkFB/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQhO8-MgWja/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQNffOkhvVG/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQNcnPshsvX/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQS6kOqFpFQ/>

¹⁹ See 'Mengorek Pandangan Politik Dian Pelangi' (<https://www.era.id/read/NQUO5k-mengorek-pandangan-politik-dian-pelangi>)

²⁰ See <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwUgLCRnkV/>

²¹ As of 19 April 2019

²² See <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwVhe9GHioV/>

²³ As of 19 April 2019

²⁴ See <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwUDlnyn2Yj/> and <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwUOEVWHqek/>

²⁵ See <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwUEehdnTcu/>

²⁶ See <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwWISqJHST0/>

²⁷ See Budi Irawanto, 'Making It Personal: The Campaign Battle on Social Media in Indonesia's 2019 Presidential Election', ISEAS Perspective, 2019, No. 28

(https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_28.pdf)

²⁸ Abidin, Crystal. "Aren't These Just Young, Rich Women Doing Vain Things Online?": Influencer Selfies as Subversive Frivolity." *Social Media+ Society* 2, no. 2 (2016).

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