

‘Not Too Hot, Not Too Cold, Just Right’: Empathetic Communication of Indonesian Big Brands through YouTube during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

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This article is based on an exploratory study of YouTube videos related to the COVID-19 pandemic released by the official accounts of several big brands in Indonesia. By analyzing the videos released by these companies, a combination of key messages that are professionally conveyed to present the actions taken by the brands, in response to the pandemic, with an empathetic feel was found. While there is ample evidence to map out the creative processes behind these videos, our findings show that the brands aim to cover up the techniques they employ in achieving their goals, such as the sending of excessively sympathetic messages. The findings of this study provide initial empirical evidence of Indonesian companies’ tendency to assimilate the local culture of mutual assistance and the existence of branding activities that continue to be carried out during the pandemic. This article ends with a discussion of the communication processes carried out by commercial entities in challenging times.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication with the public during the COVID-19 pandemic has had various purposes and consequences. In a study conducted on the social media content produced by the population of Wuhan, China during the first twelve weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak, researchers tracked changes in the public sentiment (Zheng, Adams, & Wang, 2021). Through quantitative text analysis of the content of the Sina Weibo microblogging platform, this study found an emotional transition “from confusion / fear to disappointment/ frustration, to depression / anxiety, then finally to happiness / gratitude” (Zheng et al., 2021, p. 18) which was driven by messages circulating on the internet and other media platforms, and by their government’s handling practices. Additionally, in a survey conducted in March 2020 on the spread of memes at the beginning of the pandemic, the authors argue that “memes can evolve to be a measure of collective coping in response to stressful situations where humor is used to mitigate such effects” (Ortiz, Corrada, Lopez, & Dones, 2021, p. 169). In fact, an analysis conducted on tweets from international celebrities affected by COVID-19 suggests that this public self-presentation can build awareness about the existence of the virus, de-stigmatize people affected by this virus, and amplify prevention strategies (Mututwa & Matsilele, 2020). Responding to the studies (Nabitygrover, Cheung, & Thatcher, 2020; Nguyen, 2021) that have been carried out, this paper provides a perspective

from different timelines, geographic areas, and types of message senders to add insight to discussing texts and practices from the time of the pandemic.

This article will focus specifically on YouTube videos released by big brand owners in Indonesia. These companies communicated with the public by portraying attitudes of optimism and real action towards the pandemic. Through our research with certain keywords, we found 74 videos released by big brands in Indonesia during 2020 (March-December 2020). These brands include public companies that have been listed on the stock exchange, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies, and start-up companies that belong in the unicorn category. For the purposes of this presentation, this paper will focus on analyzing the videos that have been launched by unicorn start-up companies during this period. A total of eight videos were examined through qualitative content analysis.

The data examined in this paper is arranged in different categories based on the videos' content. Specifically, this article will answer the question: what are the implications of the thematic content of YouTube videos released by start-ups in Indonesia during the pandemic?

Why Big Brands' Videos?

The Group of Companies is one part of an economic business entity that has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The BPS report, for example, showed that Indonesia's economic growth contracted by 2.07% with the largest contraction at that time experienced by the transportation and warehousing sector (Ariyanti, 2021).

Indonesia's economic condition had improved where the economic growth contraction had reached -0.74% in the first quarter of 2021, one of which was driven by the easing of restrictions by the government. However, Indonesia's economic growth rate is still volatile mainly due to various factors such as low purchasing power of the people, low level of household consumption, and weakening of the business sector where out of 17 business sectors, there are only 3 business sectors that have strengthened, namely financial services and insurance, information and communication, health services and social activities (Arieza, 2021).

This condition shows how the Indonesian economic sector had entered a difficult period. In fact, the economic sector is the main sector in maintaining the survival of a country. Just for example, how Bangladesh has now been declared bankrupt because it has collapsed economically.

When economic conditions are difficult where the business sector is one of the backbones of the economy that is severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, how the business sector responds strategically to these conditions becomes important and interesting. Of course, from a business perspective, efforts to strategically communicate messages to the public about the condition of the company / corporation, especially in pandemic conditions, need to be done wisely.

Messaging, especially by companies, can be with a variety of methods and channels. The use of official media channels, both conventional mass media and digital-based interactive media, is increasingly being used by corporate entities / companies. An interesting phenomenon recently is that the use of interactive media such as digital-based media and social media is increasing. Of course, some of the advantages of digital media such as social media such as interactivity allow the communication process between company entities and their audiences or stakeholders to occur directly even in real time. For example, comments on posts from companies can be received directly as *feedback* messages from companies or organizations. In addition, the delivery of

messages in the form of video (or audio-visual) will further strengthen the intention of delivering messages from the company considering that the power of images / visuals can further dramatize the delivery of the message so that the effect received by the audience (or stakeholders at large) of the company can be more impactful.

Social Media is becoming one of the most widely accessed forms today. Based on the 2022 APJII survey, social media emerged as the most frequently accessed internet content, which was 89.15%. While the most frequently accessed social media application, Youtube is ranked second in the top after Facebook with a distribution of 63.02%. (APJII, 2022). The high level of Youtube as one of the social media sites is also a consideration why videos from big brands spreading through Youtube are interesting to study.

With such conditions, companies must also start communicating intensively through channels such as the company's official website or social media. Social media channels are becoming increasingly important channels for brands to communicate with the target audience (Murdough, 2009).

Empathetic Communication

Nurlaela and Pangestu (2022) mention empathy as an essential psychological phenomenon and empathy as a form of caring allows others to feel the emotions of others. In the lens of the psychology of empathy is the experience of understanding the condition of another person from the point of view of the person putting oneself in the person's shoes and feeling what is perceived (Cuff et al., 2012). This empathy perspective itself can also be applied in the context of marketing and brand communication. The lack of empathy from the company, especially for consumers, can have a bad impact on the organization. On the other hand, when a company or organization also shows empathy, it can help to protect reputation and branding (Allard, Dunn, & White, 2016; Baker, 2017; Windahl, 2017). The nature of mutual help, care and empathy during a crisis is at the core and fundamental of some organizations, including large organizations or small and medium-sized enterprises. In a pandemic situation, business owners react and act in giving (Bin Amran, Ling, & Sofri, 2007), and in difficult times, donations increase reputation and support economic conditions (Peterson, 2016).

‘Inspirational Content’ from Indonesia in Times of the Pandemic

Through studying several YouTube videos released on the official accounts of unicorn start-ups in Indonesia, four key themes emerged (Luik, 2022). These themes were refined through a bottom-up/inductive categorization process of the eight videos that were our initial references.

Below are the results of the text analysis of the videos, which consist of four categories and several sub-categories.

‘We all are affected by the pandemic’:

- *The bitter reality faced by each company and their partners in running existing businesses, and other communities*
- *The shared emotional state of individuals who were impacted by the pandemic*
- *Companies and partners continuing to work (outdoors) with extra caution during the pandemic*
- *The pandemic requiring people to do activities from home*

Presenting actions taken:

- *Conveying the prioritization of health and safety*
- *Presenting general support for their workers*
- *Building awareness of the companies’ contributions to society and the nation*

Portraying human values:

- *Continuing to carry out one's duties is a part of serving the community, even during the pandemic*
- *Respecting everyone at the forefront of the pandemic*
- *Inviting the audience to see the positive things during difficult times*

Expressing optimism:

- *Calling for solidarity to support one another through hardships caused by the pandemic*
- *Combining a 'we can get through this together' -sentiment with each startup's brand identity*
- *Encouraging people to continue celebrating the 'Big Days' (Luik, 2022, p. 10).*

'Not Too Hot, Not Too Cold, Just Right'

One main finding obtained through our analysis is that the companies' efforts to show what was done were balanced with empathetic messages. Employing the spirit of *gotong royong* (helping each other), these videos attempt to amplify the actions the companies have taken. In other words, these messages resemble the phrase 'not too hot, not too cold, just right'. The phrase is famous from the Goldilocks story, which has been adopted in various fields of science to describe or explain an accuracy of concentration or fusion.

In investigating the results of the content categorization above, 'not too hot' can be interpreted as not overly displaying what has been done. In this case, the videos released by each company show what has been done by their employees or partners and explain what policies have been put to practice. Meanwhile, 'not too cold' means not being passive in giving comments to the public. Instead, the communicated messages attempt to be empathetic and offer optimistic invitations. The communication process not only displays or reports the actions taken but also conveys an understanding attitude towards the situation.

But how to achieve 'just right'? While there are combinations of creative processes which are of course difficult to formulate, in the end the message creator or creative team has the qualitative measures to carry out the message creation process. For example, the video "Yang Terutama" [The Most Important] from an eCommerce start-up depicts a story of a single father and his daughter who works in another city bonding during the pandemic. This short video focuses on the improving relationship between the hospitalized father and his daughter who must return home to care for him. Of course, there is also a branding component to this narrative. This video displays empathetic communication through emphasizing feelings and emotions and thus manifesting human values. However, this video reduces the idea of communication to simple actions and expressions of optimism. This suggests a practice of 'just right' that emphasizes the values important to society at that time. Video Scenes from "Yang Terutama" [The Most Important] is shown in Figure 1 to 5.

Another example from a ride-hailing video combines empathetic communication messages with optimistic calls to serve the community. Entitled "*Aman Beraktivitas dengan Protocol Kesehatan*" [Doing Activities Safely with Health Protocols], this video emphasizes operating with caution and highlights the importance of implementing health protocols. This video even aligns the drivers with workers fighting against the spread of the virus and caring for victims in the front line. The messages to continue being optimistic and supporting each other are the other key points in this video. Once again, the application of 'just right' is very subjective, with various factors amplifying the important role played by the company.

A Video Scenes from "ride - hailing" is shown in Figure 6 to 10.



Figure 1. Pepi's discussion with neighbors



Figure 2. Pepi sees a picture of her mother



Figure 3. Pepi video calls with his father



Figure 4. Pepi discusses with his father



Figure 5. Pepi holds his father's shoulders



Figure 6. Theme-related message display



Figure 7. Drivers follow health protocols



Figure 8. Application view



Figure 9. Drivers following protocol guidelines



Figure 10. Drivers doing activities

From our initial exploration of the content of these videos, our findings indicate that 'just right' is a multiplicity rather than a uniformity. In other words, 'just right' carries different meanings for different companies, rather than one unifying meaning for all. Due to the companies' processes of creatively configuring signs and symbols, the components / categories we have come up with are not definite but rather like raw materials that become guidelines for creating messages and content.

Empathetic Communication as a Key Message for Indonesian Big Brands

The pandemic has had a significant impact on many sectors and communities. During a tough situation due to the pandemic, building a sense of optimism as well as building a sense of confidence needs to be conveyed to the public, including by corporates / company brands. Of course, consciously or unconsciously, communicating this kind of message is also a strategy used by a brand in response to the situation that occurs. Empathy hints that we can feel what the other person feels. Strive to position as experienced by others.

Empathy also influences the emotional spread, or an automatic and universal emotional process in which emotions are transmitted through verbal and non-verbal behaviors and expressions between one person and another.

One interesting thing related to the use of empathy communication by a brand is that when a company empathizes with the company's consumers, there is a tendency to start producing better services and products so that in the end it can have an impact on increasing consumer perceptions of the company's brand and services (Indria, 2022).

Implementing empathy will allow producers or a company or organization to be able to understand what the needs of customers or families are and ultimately have a greater opportunity of excellence to make the product or goods or services produced not just fun to have but become a must-have product (Coppola, 2017). This cannot be separated because brands can communicate consumer needs through messages based on empathy communication. The message in the communication of empathy can influence the consumer's psychologist to always remember the Brand. Empathy allows us to convey the message in a way and attitude that will make it easier for the recipient to accept it.

Companies need to creatively and informatively convey the message that needs to be conveyed to consumers or audiences so that the perception of consumers or audiences can be in line with what the company expects (Bititci et al., 2004). The use of creative aspects through video is one of the effective methods. Video-based communication has a more complete experience, compared to other forms of communication such as call audio because audio has a lower chance of matching emotional reactions and imitations to posture.

CONCLUSION

By examining these exploratory findings further, this paper provides an initial view of the 'just right' in communication processes during the pandemic. Our findings indicate a pattern of communication processes that combine empathetic and optimistic expressions with displays of what the companies have done in response to this pandemic. In addition, the combination of these key messages in the videos also proves the nature of 'just right' to be a multiplicity.

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