

## The Use of Instagram and X Social Media in Managing Public Awareness of Viral Content in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

*In the digital age, social media has emerged as a dominant force in shaping public discourse. This research investigates how Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) are utilized to manage public awareness regarding viral content in Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through in-depth interviews and digital observation of five viral cases spanning social, political, environmental, and cultural issues. The study applies Agenda Setting Theory and Public Communication Theory to analyze how each platform influences users' perceptions. Findings show Instagram is effective in building emotional engagement through visual storytelling, while X serves as a dynamic forum for fast-paced opinion exchange. The contrast in platform characteristics influences how users interpret and respond to viral issues. The study concludes that while social media plays a significant role in shaping awareness, the impact varies depending on users' digital literacy and critical engagement. The research highlights the need for media literacy in navigating complex information ecosystems and calls for responsible communication strategies in digital spaces.*

**Keywords:** Instagram, Public awareness, Social media, Viral content, X (Twitter)

### INTRODUCTION

Social media has undergone a transformation into the main channel for information distribution and public opinion formation in the digital era. Interactions on social media are not bound by spatial and temporal limitations, thus accelerating and facilitating the process of information exchange (Pinalis & Agus Triyono, 2025). Based on Datareportal (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024), there are 139 million social media users in Indonesia, or about 49.9% of the population, with an annual growth rate of 6.8%. This phenomenon reflects a shift from the dominance of conventional media to digital media, where the process of collective awareness is becoming faster and more decentralised. In this context, social media not only acts as a channel for interpersonal communication but also as a discursive space that allows the public to raise, debate, and disseminate issues in real-time (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

In recent years, viral content has become the focal point in the dynamics of digital communication. This phenomenon of virality arises not solely due to the importance of the issues discussed, but rather due to the interaction between content appeal, speed of dissemination, and the power of algorithms. Social media prioritises algorithmic logic that favours popular content over the most informative. In other words, what appears to be most liked or shared will be displayed more frequently, creating a reinforcement effect known as algorithmic amplification (Pariser, 2017). As a result, virality can occur due to emotions rather than substantive value, and this poses a serious challenge in the effort to cultivate critical public awareness. Platforms like Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) play a prominent role in this ecosystem. Instagram is known for its visual power that builds emotional closeness, while X serves as a fast-paced, text-based public conversation space.

In Indonesia, Instagram has become one of the most frequently accessed platforms, with an average usage time of over 3 hours and 18 minutes per day, making it a strategic medium for building visual closeness with the audience (Alfiyyah & Triyono, n.d.). Instagram allows users to build narratives through images, infographics, and short videos that touch emotions. Meanwhile, X offers an open debate space that stimulates discursive participation. Both create mechanisms

of virality through algorithms and user interactions that enhance the visibility of issues through engagement metrics such as likes, comments, retweets, and shares. However, virality does not always guarantee depth of understanding. Viral phenomena are often triggered by emotional or sensational narratives, leading to the risk of misinformation, instant activism (clicktivism), and unfounded perception biases (Mutsvairo & Bebawi, 2020; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

In the context of Indonesia, viral phenomena such as #SaveRajaAmpat, #PercumaLaporPolisi, and the #IdulAdhaCore meme demonstrate how social media serves as a tool for shaping opinion and social awareness. Social media users from the Gen Z cohort often become the main actors in bringing these issues to life through reposts, threads, or online discussions. This generation grows up in a digital ecosystem that shapes their mindset and influences the way they see the world. However, behind the high digital penetration, the level of digital literacy among the Indonesian population is still relatively low. Data from Kominfo and Katadata (2023) show that Indonesia's digital literacy index stands at 3.54 on a scale of 5, with critical thinking and digital participation as the weakest components. Another issue is that not all users have the capacity to distinguish between personal opinions, factual claims, and manipulated information. Many users simply follow the viral trend because they want to be part of the conversation, without truly understanding the context or validity of the information.

This is exacerbated by the presence of filter bubbles or digital echo chambers. Filter bubble refers to the tendency of social media algorithms to only display information according to user preferences, causing individuals to only believe the information they have been consuming and ignore other opposing sources (Putri, 2023). Research conducted by (Ayuningtyas et al., 2025) also stated that filter bubbles have been proven to affect internet users' behaviour, reducing the diversity of information they access and weakening critical engagement. This condition makes users tend to be exposed to views that align with their own preferences, thereby reducing the likelihood of critical thinking towards different perspectives. In this situation, public awareness that should be formed reflectively and rationally can instead become trapped in a cycle of emotional reactivity.

Nevertheless, social media also holds great potential to drive social transformation by serving as a tool for digital mobilisation, disseminating critical education, and providing a more inclusive space for public engagement. In the past five years, social media has proven to be an effective tool for mobilising social movements in Indonesia, particularly through creative strategies such as hashtags, visual images, and campaigns sensitive to public issues (Ema & Nayiroh, 2024). Instagram has become an effective medium for mobilising spontaneous protests through visual narratives that are easy to follow and disseminate in cyberspace, allowing for rapid public participation in addressing social issues (Kahar, 2025). X has become a medium of aspiration and a tool for disseminating online social movements (Sitorus, 2021).

The key to all of this is how users interpret, filter, and respond to information wisely. Therefore, understanding the character differences of platforms like Instagram and X becomes important, as both mediate issues in very different ways: one is visual and emotion-based, and the other is text and discussion-based. Both not only spread messages but also create ecosystems of meaning and perception. Academically, research on social media and public awareness is still dominated by quantitative approaches or single-platform studies. This research adopts a qualitative approach to delve deeper into users' experiences and perceptions of viral issues. The focus is not only on the type of content or the frequency of engagement but also on the social processes that occur behind the scenes—how users filter information, articulate responses, and form collective attitudes.

By taking case studies from five viral issues in Indonesia and comparing two main platforms, this research is expected to provide conceptual and practical contributions to understanding digital public communication. The uniqueness of this research lies in the

comparative approach between Instagram and X in the context of viral issues in Indonesia, focusing on the differences in visual and textual communication patterns that influence the formation of public awareness. Unlike previous studies that are generally quantitative or focused on a single platform, this research uses a qualitative approach to deeply explore social dynamics and user responses, and it integrates agenda-setting theory and public communication theory to thoroughly analyse cross-platform digital interactions. In this context, the research aims to analyse the role of social media—specifically Instagram and X—in shaping public awareness of viral issues. The study also seeks to understand the differing characteristics of each platform and user responses to viral content, using the framework of Agenda Setting Theory and Public Communication Theory as the basis for analysis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. *Agenda Setting*

The Agenda Setting Theory was introduced in 1968 when the US presidential election campaign was studied (Shabira & Faidlatul Habibah, n.d.) Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw were the first to introduce the agenda-setting theory. This theory emerged around 1973 with its first publication titled "The Agenda Setting Function of The Mass Media" in Public Opinion Quarterly No. 37. Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw then became the main figures of this theory when researchers tested it four years after the research (1968-1972) (Tambusai et al., n.d.) According to McCombs and Shaw, as quoted by Griffin (2010), mass media has the ability to direct public attention towards certain issues by shifting their agenda into the public agenda. This means that the media can influence people's views and ways of thinking about certain issues. They emphasise that the media plays a role in shaping public perception of what is considered important; we tend to give more value to issues that are highlighted and emphasised by the media (Friska, n.d.).

### B. *Social Media*

According to Kaplan and Haenlein, social media is a collection of internet-based applications developed based on ideological and technological principles, which allow users to create and share content. In the realm of governance, social media is utilised for various purposes, such as disseminating policy information, educating the public, and encouraging public participation in the decision-making process (Liz et al., n.d.) Social media has characteristics that distinguish it from other communication media, namely the ability to convey messages to many people simultaneously, rather than just to a single recipient (Wahyuni Purbohastuti, n.d.) Generally, social media has various functions for its users, such as serving as a means of communication and more. One example is the ability of individuals to quickly disseminate messages to a wide audience in order to viralize an issue (Astari, 2021). According to (Ambar, 2017), communication experts define social media as follows: According to Philip Kotler and Kevin Lane Keller (2016), social media is a means that allows consumers to share various types of content, such as text, images, audio, and video, both with other users and with companies, and vice versa. According to the McGraw Hill Dictionary, social media is a tool used by individuals to interact with each other through the creation, sharing, and exchange of information and ideas within a network and virtual community. Furthermore, according to Varinder Taprial and Priya Kanwar (2012), social media is defined as a platform that facilitates individuals to socialise online by sharing content, news, photos, and more with others. Then, according to Mark Hopkins (2008), social media is a term that not only encompasses various new media platforms but also includes systems like FriendFeed, Facebook, and other social

networking platforms. The essence of this concept is the existence of media platforms that have social elements and function as public communication media. Others, according to Chris Brogan (2010), refer to social media as a collection of modern communication and collaboration tools that open up opportunities for various forms of interaction that were previously inaccessible to the general public.

### *C. Public Communication*

Public communication is often considered communication that involves many people. This communication process can occur directly or indirectly. Directly, a communicator speaks directly to a large audience without intermediaries or media. Whereas in indirect communication, the communicator uses media as a tool to convey messages and reach a wider audience (Christian I. R Gustaaf B Very Y, 2021). According to Ruben and Stewart, every public communication process has three main objectives: to convey information that enhances understanding (cognitive), to evoke feelings or emotional attitudes (affective), and to encourage action or behavioural change (conative). These three effects are clearly evident in the viral issues observed in this study. Effective public communication always considers the audience. Basic information that needs to be known about the audience is their geographical conditions (2014:394). This is in line with the general view in communication, which states that effective communication depends on the communicator's ability to understand their audience. Meanwhile, Ruben and Stewart also explain that building arguments or persuasion aims to convince the audience to agree with a certain opinion or take a certain action (2014:396). From this perspective, we can understand that in public communication, the communicator has full control over the communication process. One characteristic of public communication, according to Ruben and Stewart, is that the source of communication has full control over determining the message conveyed and disseminated to the audience ((Mucharam, 2022).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at gaining a deep understanding of the utilisation of social media platforms Instagram and X in shaping public awareness of viral issues in Indonesia. This approach allows researchers to explore the meanings, perceptions, and social interpretations that naturally emerge in the digital space. Qualitative research emphasises the importance of originality, the use of humans as the primary instrument, and inductive data analysis that depicts reality based on the context occurring in the field (Triyono, n.d.) According to Creswell (1998), the qualitative approach is relevant when researchers want to understand phenomena in depth based on the perspectives of participants, especially in complex and dynamic social contexts such as social media. The research was conducted from May to June 2025. The focus of the research is limited to five viral issues that have developed in Indonesia through the Instagram and X platforms, with issue categories covering social, political, cultural, and environmental fields. The selection of these two platforms is based on their different communication characteristics: Instagram with a visual-emotional approach and X with a text-argumentative approach. This research targets the Generation Z group as the main subjects, as they are the dominant users of social media who actively voice their opinions and show engagement in digital discourse. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, digital observation, and online documentation (Fatah Raden, 2021)

Interviews were conducted with five purposively selected informants, namely active Instagram and X users who had been involved in the dissemination or discussion of viral issues. Observations were made on the dynamics of the spread of five identified viral issues, such as the

#SaveRajaAmpat campaign, public figure cases, and socio-political hashtag movements. Documentation data were obtained in the form of screenshots of posts, discussion threads, and interaction graphs (likes, shares, and comments), as well as relevant digital archives to strengthen the interpretation of the findings. The collected data were analysed using the interactive Miles & Huberman model, which includes the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction is carried out by sorting relevant information based on the focus of the study. The presentation of data is organised thematically to show patterns of social media users' responses to viral issues. Conclusions are drawn inductively based on field findings, then interpreted through the framework of agenda-setting theory and public communication theory.

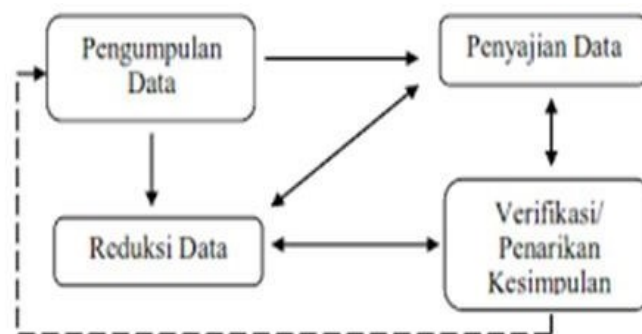


Figure 1. Data Analysis Workflow

Source: Sugiyono 2022

To keep the data accurate, we use a triangulation technique that involves comparing results from digital observations with interviews and documents, and checking our findings against scientific literature. This procedure ensures that the analysis results are not only descriptive but also academically accountable.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research examines five viral issues in Indonesia during the period of May–June 2025, namely: (1) #SaveRajaAmpat, (2) Fraud by Aldy Maldini, (3) Jennifer Coppen Case, (4) Jokowi–Prabowo Meme by ITB Students, and (5) Idul Adha Core 2025 phenomenon. These five issues were analysed through in-depth interviews with five informants from the Gen Z demographic and digital observation of activities on Instagram and X. The discussion was structured around four main focuses: responses to the viral issues, the role of each platform, user characteristics, and the influence on public attitudes.



Figure 2. Aldy Maldini's clarification  
Source: Instagram @aldymldni



Figure 3. The Case of Jennifer Coppen  
Source: Instagram @jennifercoppenreal20

In general, the informants showed a critical attitude towards viral issues. They do not immediately believe the information that spreads but instead first verify it through comments, other sources, or credible news accounts. An Indian stated that he would read comments and seek other perspectives before believing or sharing a viral issue, while Anjuli emphasised that not everything viral is true, so it needs to be rechecked through several accounts. Instagram and X show different patterns in managing viral issues. Instagram excels in terms of visualisation and emotional appeal. Visuals such as

infographics, reels, and personal testimonials can create emotional closeness that fosters public empathy.

On the other hand, X functions as a real-time discussion space, where issues develop through threads, comments, and retweets that quickly and openly showcase the dynamics of public opinion. Dhea stated that Instagram builds empathy, while X creates social pressure through trending topics. Interview and observation results revealed differences in user characteristics on each platform. Users on X are more vocal and reflective in responding to issues, while Instagram users are more passive and tend to only share visual content. Anjuli mentioned that Instagram users responses are shorter and more visual, whereas on X, users tend to write long comments or engage in open discussions. This finding is reinforced by Sephtian, who stated that "X is widely used for rational discussions, whereas Instagram spreads visual information more quickly." To clarify the differences in characteristics between the two platforms, the following comparative table is presented:

Tabel 1. Comparison of Instagram and X in Addressing Viral Issues

Aspect	Instagram	X (Twitter)
<b>Communication Style</b>	Visual and emotionally driven narratives	Text-based and argumentative
<b>Dissemination Speed</b>	Moderate (depends on algorithm and visual appeal)	Fast (through threads, retweets, and trending topics)
<b>Form of Participation</b>	Reposting, likes, and story-sharing	Comments, threads, and extended discussions
<b>Content Dominance</b>	Infographics, reels, carousels, and testimonials	Opinions, satire, criticism, and analytical threads
<b>Emotional Impact</b>	High (e.g., visualizations of victims, empathetic photos)	High in critical and sarcastic discussions
<b>Effect on Public Opinion</b>	Builds public sympathy	Encourages debate and demands for change

Source: Results of Interviews and Researcher Observations (2025)

Furthermore, this research also proves that social media is not only a space for disseminating information but also capable of changing people's attitudes and behaviours. Some respondents stated that they had taken concrete actions after being exposed to viral issues, such as signing petitions, donating, or sharing educational information. This study shows the role of social media as a tool for digital mobilisation. Dhea emphasised that changes in public attitudes greatly depend on the strength of the message and how deeply the public understands the issue, rather than just following trends (FOMO).

The connection to the agenda-setting theory is evident in how certain issues become the focus of public attention because they are continuously raised and disseminated by users and major accounts. In the case of Raja Ampat, for example, content from the accounts @greenpeaceid and @najwashihab was able to raise ecological awareness in a short period of time. The theory of public communication is also relevant because it shows that emotional engagement, open discussions, and



debates on X indicate a process of opinion formation and social consensus digitally.



Figure 4. Hashtags #saverajaampat  
Source: Personal Documents



Figure 5. Greenpeace ID Petition  
Source: Website greenpeace.org

However, the positive role of social media is not without the challenge of low digital literacy. Data from Kominfo and Katadata (2023) shows that the national digital literacy index only reached a score of 3.54 out of 5, with the critical aspect being the weakest component. Many unverified viral pieces of information spread widely, making society vulnerable to hoaxes, biases, and information manipulation. Therefore,



it is important for users, especially the younger generation, to develop habits of verification and critical thinking before spreading or believing in any content.

These findings reinforce the position of social media as a discursive space that not only disseminates messages but also shapes opinions, actions, and even public identities collectively. However, the impact still heavily depends on the quality of user participation and the responsibility associated with managing the flow of information.

#### *A. Pattern of Viral Issue Dissemination on Instagram and X*

Observations of five viral issues revealed a distinct pattern of information dissemination between Instagram and X. Instagram tends to rely on visually emotional content packaged through carousel formats, reels, and infographics. The dissemination of information on Instagram tends to follow a pattern of virality based on visual aesthetics and short narratives, such as touching quotes or short videos lasting less than a minute. For example, in the #SaveRajaAmpat issue, posts featuring photos of natural beauty damaged by tourism activities became the main trigger for public engagement.

Meanwhile, X shows a pattern of dissemination based on discussion and open debate. The issue goes viral not just because of the sensation but also due to the emergence of threads or comments containing strong arguments, data, and even political satire. For example, in the case of the Jokowi–Prabowo Meme by ITB students, the virality was triggered by a long debate regarding the ethics of freedom of expression and political involvement on campus. Temporal patterns also show that X tends to trigger public reactions more quickly within one to two hours after the issue arises, whereas Instagram takes longer but has a longer content lifespan due to its visual nature.

#### *B. An examination of the digital literacy levels of users in relation to viral issues*

From the interview results, it was found that the majority of informants tend to not immediately trust viral content. This indicates a level of critical awareness, although not all can be categorised as having high digital literacy. Informants like Anindian mentioned that they trust accounts with a "blue check" or those recognised as reliable sources more. However, the tendency to verify the truth of information remains limited to manual searches, rather than systematic factual cross-checking. In this context, digital literacy refers not only to the ability to read and understand content but also to think critically about narratives, biases, and the economic and political motives that may be hidden behind the dissemination of an issue. In line with the UNESCO report (2022), weak aspects of digital literacy can lead to baseless emotional reactivity and the spread of misinformation.

#### *C. The efficacy of collective responses and concrete actions*

Another intriguing finding is how social media encourages collective responses that extend beyond the digital world. In the case of #SaveRajaAmpat, respondents stated that after being exposed to the issue, they not only reshared the content but also signed online petitions and followed environmental campaign accounts. Dhea stated:

*"If the issue makes me angry or sad, I don't just repost."* Sometimes I even find out which organisations can help and join in the donation. A similar situation occurred with the Idul Adha core issue, where public discussions about etiquette, privacy, and content boundaries became a space for public reflection on digital culture and ethics. The discussions that emerged on X were largely educational and reflective, reflecting the maturity of some users in interpreting social phenomena.

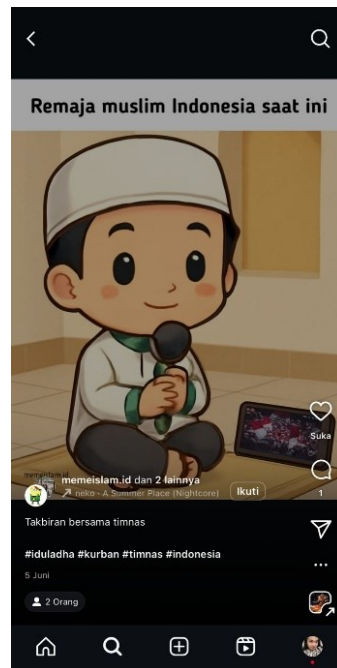


Figure 6. Indonesian Netizens' Posts About Eid al-Adha Core 2025  
Source: Instagram @memeislam.id

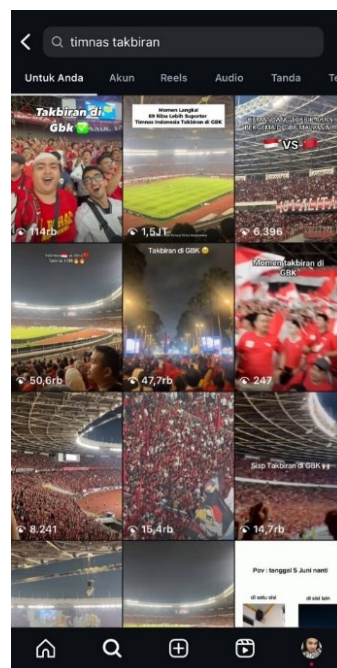


Figure 7. Indonesian Netizens' Posts About Eid al-Adha Core 2025  
Source: Personal Documents

Nevertheless, it can be said that, although social media is often criticised as an empty space filled with fleeting trends, in certain contexts it is capable of fostering meaningful public engagement and even real actions in the offline world.

## CONCLUSION

This research shows that social media, particularly Instagram and X, plays a significant role in managing public awareness of viral issues in Indonesia. Through a descriptive qualitative approach with data collected from digital observations and in-depth interviews, it was found that both platforms have unique strengths in shaping public opinion. Instagram tends to build emotional engagement among users through strong visual content such as infographics, testimonials, and short videos. This visual nature makes Instagram an effective tool for evoking sympathy and public attention, especially towards social issues that require an affective approach. Meanwhile, X (formerly Twitter) is more effective as an open discussion space that allows for the rapid and argumentative formation of public opinion. Long threads, trending topics, and text-based communication styles make X a discourse channel that emphasises critical reflection, sarcasm, and collective pressure. The research findings also indicate that the characteristics of users on both platforms influence how viral issues are understood and responded to. Instagram users are more reactive and affective, while X users are more reflective and deliberative. This variation directly impacts the pattern of issue dissemination, forms of participation, and the depth of public engagement with viral issues.

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