www.bircu-journal.com/index.php/birci
Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal (BIRCI-Journal)
Humanities and Social Sciences
ISSN 2615-3076 Online)
ISSN 2615-1715 (Print)
Budapest Institute

Social Media Influencers and Digital Democracy

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Abstract

Social media has given birth to new digital talents who have developed into new industries, one of which is the emergence of social media influencers. The Indonesian government even spends a large enough budget to support digital activities, especially for influencers, because according to the government, influencers are the spearhead of digital democracy. The theory used is the Elaboration Possibility Model by seeing that the use of influencers as a means of persuasion targets the peripheral route of the audience. Previous research has discussed the context of marketing and branding, so in this study, the researcher wants to see how the role of influencers in a digital democracy is. The researcher traces research related to the topic, whether carried out in Indonesia or abroad during the last five years, and then analyzes each research result through a qualitative approach with the literature study method and collects secondary data from social media, books, and scientific findings. other. This study found that in digital democracy, influencers have influence in persuading and even directing the behavior of other social media users, but they are required to have integrity, credibility, expertise, and certain suitability in influencing society. However, the involvement of influencers must also be considered properly because influencers are a new profession in a new industry in the digital age, so if they can be paid to force one thought and block the birth of another opinion or even narrow the choice of one idea, then the influencer will be in conflict. with the principles of democracy itself. Researchers hope that this research will enrich the study of influencers as well as provide an understanding that after all, social media influencers have now become a new industry.

Keywords
social media; influencers; source credibility; democracy; digital democracy

I. Introduction

Internet user penetration continues to increase. The We Are Social report in January 2021 stated that nearly 5 billion people use the internet worldwide, an increase of 316 million people in just one year. From this data, internet penetration is now 59.5% (Kemp, 2021). From the same data, it is also known that now more than 4.2 billion people are using social media, or growth of more than 13% from last year. This means that more than half of the world's population uses social media. Indonesia itself is a democratic country with internet user penetration reaching 73.7% (Kemp, 2021). Since 2019, Indonesia has also been placed as the country with the 4th largest number of internet users in the world (Internet World Stats, 2019).

Social media is an example of a relatively recent development of information technology (Marbun *et al*, 2020). The high penetration of social media has given birth to a digital lifestyle in almost all aspects of life. In democratic life, a new concept emerged called digital democracy. Digital democracy is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and *computer-mediated communication* (CMC) on all types of media (eg

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33258/birci.v5i3.6485

internet, interactive broadcasts, and digital telephones) to support political democracy or public participation in democratic communication (Hackers & Dijk, 2000). This is a potential as well as an opportunity for Indonesia. Social media plays a role in the political participation of Indonesian youth (Saud & Margono, 2021) as well as a challenge because it is closely related to ideological segregation (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). For example, the Facebook whose environment supports the formation of a polarized community, or *echo chambers* (Vicario, Bessi, Vivaldo, & Zollo, 2016). Social media allows people to no longer act as passive consumers of political propaganda, the government, or the mass media, but can now convey alternative perspectives and express their own opinions (Loader & Mercea, 2012).

In the communication model proposed by Harold Laswell, " *Who Says What in which Channel to Whom with What Effect?"*, there are five main elements in communication, namely the sender, message, media, receiver, and feedback (Laswell, 1948). The sender is someone who formulates the message, the message is an idea that must be transmitted, the media is the channel through which the message is transferred, the recipient is the person who receives the message, while feedback is the result of receiving the message. One element that must exist is the sender or source of a message. An *influencer* is a message sender who is in a new era of communication

The elaboration likelihood model explains how the credibility of the sender of a message can affect the recipient of the message. This model starts with the premise that humans sometimes evaluate messages in complex ways, using critical thinking, but also sometimes humans evaluate messages in simpler, less critical ways. These two ways of thinking are explained by Richard Petty, a psychologist from Ohio, who in his dissertation examines the effectiveness of strong messages and credible sources in efforts to convey persuasive messages. According to Petty, there are two mental routes in the form of cognitive processes that affect their attitude changes, namely the *Central Route* and the *Peripheral Route.* Elaboration, or critical thinking, occurs in the central pathway, while the lack of critical thinking occurs in the peripheral pathway. Then, John Cacioppo, a colleague of Petty's at the University of Chicago, added how the messenger can activate these two mental routes in an attempt to influence others.

The central route involves the elaboration of messages. Elaboration itself is the extent to which someone carefully thinks about the relevant arguments in a persuasive message (Griffin & Sparks, 2019). The term elaboration refers to the degree to which audience members evaluate the message critically; and *likelihood* refers to the fact that the amount of elaboration, or critical engagement with a message, can vary (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2018). According to ELM, the level of engagement is the key to understanding and explaining how advertising affects attitudes towards a product or brand (Petty & Cacioppo, 1980, 1986).

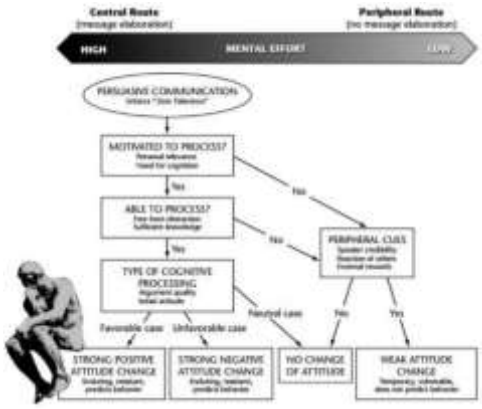


Figure 1. *Elaborate Likelihood Model*

In the illustration above, we can see the process that occurs on the *Central Route* & *Peripheral Route* to persuade. Although it seems like two different routes, they are one unit that explains the level of a person's mental process in evaluating a message. The elaboration scale reflects the examination of an argument on the left side (*central route)*, while the right side describes beliefs that are not based on the message content (*peripheral route*). A message is usually accepted as a middle ground between these two poles, and in fact, there is always exchange or mutual influence between the two. The more we feel connected to the content of the message or idea being conveyed, the less likely we are to be influenced by others. Vice versa, the more we are affected by the appearance of the messenger, the less likely we are to be influenced by the content of the idea itself (Griffin & Sparks, 2018).

Based on the elaboration possibility model, an influencer is an example of an attribute in communication that will target the audience's peripheral route. An influencer can persuade an audience and generate a positive attitude if he or she has credibility and fulfills the general cues of peripheral messages.

Research on *social media influencers* (SMI) has been done a lot but mostly discusses the role of SMI in the realm of *marketing* or *branding* and examines the effects received by the audience. So what about in the context of digital democracy? What is the role *of social media influencers* (SMI) in digital democracy? This study aims to explain the role of *influencers* as senders of persuasive messages in digital democracy in Indonesia, as well as to provide an understanding for the public that *social media influencers* are a new industry-oriented profit.

II. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach, namely research that uses language for cases and contexts, examines social processes and cases in their social context, and looks at the interpretation or creation of meaning in certain settings (Newman, 2014). This type of research is a literature study, which is a series of activities starting from collecting library data, reading, and taking notes, to then be processed into research material (Zed, 2004). Researchers conduct literature studies by reading various books, journals, and other publications related to the research topic being discussed to produce an article regarding a particular topic or issue (Marzali, 2017). This study will analyze 5 national and international journal articles published in the last 5 years with the keywords " *social media* ", " *social media influencer* ", " *source credibility* ", and " *digital democracy* ".

Descriptive content analysis was conducted on journals related to the research theme. Journal selection is based on relevance to the theme and also the period of publication. The limitation of the period was carried out by the researcher by considering the novelty of the research. To strengthen the research results, the author also collects data from social media related to the topic *of social media influencers* and digital democracy, especially what has happened in Indonesia over the last 2 years, as well as other sources in the form of books and research reports related to the research theme.

III. Results and Discussion

This study analyzes 5 journals from previous research conducted in the period 2017 to 2021 with the keywords " *social media* ", " *social media influencer* ", " *source credibility* ", and " *digital democracy* ", as summarized in table 1.

The first study to be analyzed was the research conducted by Brorsson & Plotnikova (2017). Based on this research, *influencers* on social media are considered to be the most popular marketing strategy in this digital era. Based on the *word-of-mouth concept* where an individual is able to influence others, now with the global reach of social media, companies are leveraging the role of *influencers* to convey content about their *brand* and promote it online. But choosing the right *influencers* is a challenge for these companies. For this reason, the researcher aims to identify the effects of *social media influencers* with different characters and how they are received by the audience. This study uses a literature review of branding theory, communication, and online *influencer characteristics*. This study uses an experimental design with a qualitative approach to investigate the perceptions of respondents who receive messages conveyed by influencers through Instagram. The researcher used the purposive sampling technique and collected data by direct interview technique with 20 participants. First of all, the researcher distinguishes between male and female influencers. Then each of them will be seen for their integrity, activity, and social status. The study found that audiences prefer influencers who are transparent (not covering up their personal lives) and have honesty or integrity. Influencers are expected to provide honest opinions and not appear to be mere promotions. In addition, influencers are also expected to be active on social media or appear every day, especially if the influencer is being part of a project or campaign that the audience has been waiting for (eg a weight loss project, etc.). Audiences will follow the development of the influencer. But in the end, this study also concludes that the success of a *social media influencer* in posting information depends on the perception of the audience's acceptance.

The next research is research conducted by Knoll and Mathes (2017). Celebrities often *endorse* products, brands, and political candidates or health campaigns. Research conducted by Knoll and Matthes investigated the effectiveness of the *endorsement* using a meta-analysis technique from 46 studies published up to April 2016 involving 10,357 participants. The variables analyzed in this study were negative information, expertise, attractiveness, credibility, trustworthiness, likability, familiarity, and performance. Researchers found that celebrities who promote products that match their characteristics will get a positive effect than when promoting products that do not match their characteristics. Male celebrities are judged to be preferable to female celebrities. Audiences turned out to prefer less overt promotions. In addition, actors are considered more attractive when compared to models, musicians, or presenters. Audiences also prefer the promotion of unfamiliar objects over familiar ones. And the last finding of this research is that promotions by celebrities are still inferior when compared to the quality of the packaging, the appreciation for the product, and the strength of the brand itself.

Furthermore, Kholis *et al* (2019) in their research argues that in the digital era, social media supports a democratic society because it allows the channeling of freedom of expression and opinion. Social media is considered independent media that is not controlled and is not owned by the political elite or media giants in Indonesia. Researchers use descriptive qualitative methods to find out Instagram *influencers* in Malang use their freedom of expression and opinion. The selection of Instagram *influencers* is based on the number of followers which must be more than 5000 people with hundreds to thousands of likes, viewers, and comments on their posts. These influencers must be at least 20 to 34 years old. Researchers found more than 20 influencers with traits that met these criteria. The data collection technique used is by interviewing these *influencers* to find out how they exercise their right to freedom of expression and opinion. Researchers found that influencers use freedom of expression and opinion to show their identity which refers to the work they have. While some *influencers* use their freedom of expression to attract the attention of others and create conversations on their social media. However, in this study, it was found that influencers in Malang were not interested in using their freedom of expression and expressed their opinion to criticize the government. They said they were not interested in politics. What's interesting about this research is that *influencers are afraid of* using social media to criticize the government for fear of being prosecuted. In this case, the researcher suggests the Indonesian government provide clear rules for the use of social media as a means of expression and opinion for the future of democracy in Indonesia.

In the same year, Awang *et al* (2019) also researched millennials in Malaysia who are often judged as a generation that has concern for the environment. On the other hand, millennials are the largest generation of social media users. In the millennial era, what is called a *social media influencer was born*. The researcher sees that previous research has discussed a lot about *social media influencers* in the context of *endorsements* as a celebrity. It is still rare for research to discuss *social media influencers* for non-profit purposes, especially those related to the environment. This research was conducted in Kota Kinabalu Malaysia in 2018 using quantitative methods with data collection techniques through a survey of a sample of the population of social media users born from 1981 to 1996. The results show that there is a significant relationship between the intention of caring for the environment with source credibility (expert and trustworthiness).

Recent research conducted by Casero (2021) stated that interactivity will determine the characteristics of social media. Connections between social media users will create networks and have an impact on political conversations on digital media. In a *hybrid media system,* discussions in digital media can influence mainstream media and offline political life. In this context, determining who and how to choose *social media influencers* is crucial. The purpose of this research is to identify *influencers* with their digital authority to determine political conversations on Twitter. The research was conducted in Barcelona, using machine learning by analyzing big data from 127.3 million *tweets.* From this study, it was found that in the digital space, the political elite and the media are the actors who have the highest authority. They then act as *influencers* in the context of political debates on Twitter. However, this study also found that the monopoly of the political elite and the media in the digital space is starting to end. The citizens of Barcelona are actors with high authority who threaten the existence of the political elite and even journalists. Connectivity and horizontal communication patterns that are built, as well as the ease of participation in the digital space, encourages people to be involved in political conversations. However, this research also found that democratization and public debate in the digital space are still limited. This study also finds the importance of the external socio-political context that

influences the authority of public debate on Twitter. This is based on several reasons, the first is that different political conditions will produce different dynamics of influence, depending on how the network or political community in which the political conversation takes place. In addition, the socio-political context also influences the authority of political actors. When political conditions are ongoing, conversations on Twitter are dominated by political conversations, and the actors who dominate the conversation space are actors in the political system (candidates, parties, or other politicians). And the last reason is that the external conditions in which political actors have authority outside the digital space have a greater influence than the conversations that occur on Twitter.

From previous studies in table 1, it is known that *social media influencers* can have a certain influence on the audience. SMI is required to have integrity and frequently post content. To generate a positive response from the audience, SMI in must-have characteristics match the object being promoted. Although most of these studies look more at the effect of SMI in the context of *branding*, the research conducted by Awang *et al* (2019), shows that *influencers* also have a role in promoting non-profit social-themed content such as content that cares about the environment.

In the context of democracy, research conducted by Kholis et al (2019), saw that *influencers* have the opportunity to exercise their right to freedom of expression and opinion on social media. But most of them use that freedom to present themselves according to what they want, which is in accordance with their work. They are also active on social media to create interesting conversations for their friends. The political theme is not an interesting theme for them so *influencers* do not take advantage of the influence they have on social media to criticize the government. An interesting finding from the research here is that *influencers* are afraid to give criticism, which is contrary to democratic principles. However, if it is related to the results of research two years earlier that to get a positive response from the audience, an *influencer* must-have characteristics that match the posted theme. So when the *influencers* in this study are not interested and do not match the political theme, and one day they create content about politics, chances are that they will not generate a positive response from their audience.

Table 1. Previous Research

Year	*Researcher*	*Title*	*Method*	*Research result*
2017	Alexander Brorsson & Valery Plotnikova	Choosing the right social media influencer	Literature review of branding theory, communication, and *online influencer characteristics*.	Integrity and frequency of appearing on social media are the main characteristics seen of an *influencer*. The success of an SMI in posting information depends on the perception of the audience's acceptance.
2017	Johannes Knoll & Jörg Matthes	The effectiveness of celebrity endorsements: a meta-analysis	A multilevel meta-analysis by looking at celebrity *endorsements* in the context of profit and non-profit marketing	*The endorsement* made by men who match the *endorsed object* produces the best response, while female models who do not match the *endorsed object* will produce the most negative effect.
2019	N Kholis, N Husna, G Asavitri, Y Prisca	Creating Democratic Society: How do Malang's Instagram Influencers Use Their Freedom of Expression and Speech?	Qualitative with data collection using interview techniques	Instagram influencers in Malang use freedom of expression and opinion in two ways, namely to show their identity related to work and to generate conversation. However, no results were found for influencers to use their power to criticize the government because they have no interest in politics

2019	Siti Fatimah Lailatul Qadrina Awang, Sharifah Nurafizah Syed Annuar, Imelda Albert Gisip	The effect of social media influencer on pro-environmental intention	Quantitative (survey)	There is a significant relationship between the intention of caring for the environment with the credibility of the source (expert and trustworthy).
2021	Andreu Casero-Ripolles	Influencers in the Political Conversation on Twitter: Identifying Digital Authority with Big Data	Quantitative content analysis	Political and media elites are expanding their leading role as influencers in the digital environment. This research also finds that in the digital public debate, new actors emerge so that they are no longer monopolized by one political elite and the media.

This statement is also supported by findings from research conducted by Casero (2021), that political theme influencers (especially when a political event is taking place) are political actors. However, on social media, there are now opportunities for people outside of actors or political elites to be involved in political debates and even have considerable authority. But in this case, of course, it all depends on the socio-political factors that are happening somewhere.

To strengthen the results of the study, in this study the researchers analyzed *influencer posts* on social media about a topic, namely Omnibus Law. The topic was chosen because the use *of social media influencers* to support government policies had received a negative response from some people because it was considered contrary to democratic principles. *Influencers* are considered paid to direct the public to support policies that should be free from bias and coercion from any party.

Source: Instagram Inul Daratista

Figure 2. *Inul Daratista Promotes Omnibus Law through Instagram*

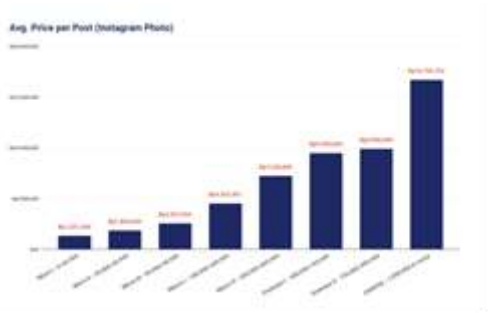
Source: Twitter Ardhito Pramono

Figure 3. *Ardhito Pramono Clarifies After Promoting Omnibus Law*

From the two pictures above, it is known that the use of *Social Media Influencers* on social media to support government policies occurs in Indonesia. Inul Daratista is a singer with 14.4 million *Instagram followers*, while Ardhito Pramono is also a rising singer with 522,000 followers on Twitter. Inul's post about his support for the Job Creation Act (Omnibus Lawa) has been seen by hundreds of thousands of Instagram users. In his post, Inul openly promoted the Omnibus Law, which at that time was a polemic. As an *influencer*, Inul is expected not to direct the public to approve government policies that should be launched after deliberation and discussion with many parties according to democratic principles, moreover the Omnibus Law at that time was a law that received many rejections from the public. The same thing happened to Ardito. Even a few moments later, Ardhito clarified and apologized for promoting the Omnibus Law.

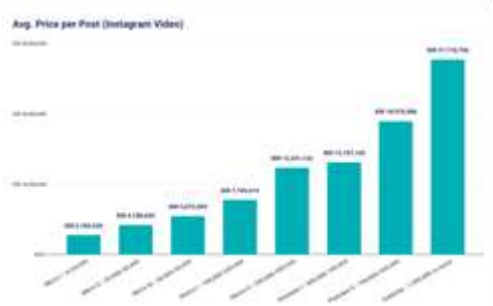
Based on previous research, and from case studies of examples of the application of *influencers* in the realm of social media, it can be understood that the role of *influencers* cannot be doubted and is even considered to have a very large role by some advertisers, be it for marketing, branding, social movements, to political. If we return to the Elaboration Possibility Model, these *influencers* are a means of persuasion targeting the peripheral audience route with the principle of "liking". *Influencers* who are liked by certain audience groups will have an impact on them, they can even move or change behavior. That's why *influencers* with a large number of followers will be paid a high price because they are considered to be liked and able to reach more people.

Data released by GetCraft (2020) classifies influencers into 8 categories, ranging from Micro I, Micro II, Micro III, Macro I, Macro II, Premium I, and Premium II, to *celebrit*ies. Netcraft categorizes *influencers* based on the number of followers so that *influencers* can more easily determine prices for brands. Data was taken from 714 *influencers* who are members of GetCraft by random sampling and calculating the average price of each common post format on Instagram, namely photos, videos, and Instagram *stories*.



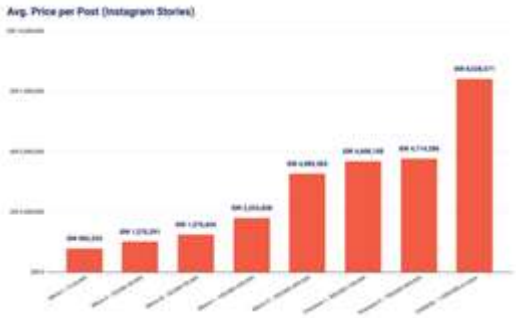
Source: GetCraft

Figure 4. *Influencer Pricing for Instagram Stories*



Source: GetCraft

Figure 5. *Influencer Pricing for Instagram Photo Content*



Source: GetCraft

Figure 6. *Influencer Pricing for Instagram Photo Content*

For one *instastory post*, an influencer at the Micro I level charges a price of around Rp. 900,000 while the most expensive at the Celebrity level sets a price of Rp. 8 million for one piece of content. *Influencers* Micro I was able to reach 1,660 people, Micro II reached 3,631 people, Micro III reached 7,514 people, Macro I reached 15,968 people, Macro II reached 36,245 people, Premium I reached 61,819 people, Premium II reached 87,067 people, and Celebrity was able to reach 347,807 people.

The price is cheaper than posting photos on Instagram, for Micro I *influencers* they set a price of IDR 1.3 million, while the highest for celebrities, they set a price of up to IDR 16 million. For photo content types on Instagram, *influencers* Micro I was able to reach 1,659 people, Micro II reached 3,615 people, Micro III reached 7,227 people, Macro I reached 15,587 people, Macro II reached 35,993 people, Premium I reached 62,029 people, Premium II reached 87,986 people, and Celebrity reached 345,020 people.

As for video posts, the cheapest *influencers* set a price of Rp. 2.7 million, and the most expensive they set a price of up to Rp. 27.7 million. *Influencers* at the Micro I level were able to reach 1,596 people, Micro II reached 3,650 people, Micro III reached 7,461 people, Macro I reached 15,804 people, Macro II reached 35,722 people, Premium I reached 61,023 people, Premium II reached 86,742 people, and Celebrity was able to reach 357,758 people.

Social media has been proven to give birth to a new industry, namely what is called *social media influencer*. A new profession in the digital era that allows a person to earn income by influencing others to take a certain action. *Social media influencers* (SMIs) represent advocates of independent third parties who shape audience attitudes through *blogs*, *tweets*, and other uses of social media (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2010).

The birth of *influencers* as an industry has been realized especially by the Indonesian government since the emergence of this phenomenon in 2017. The Indonesian government even made a special budget that reached tens of millions of rupiah to use the services of *influencers* on social media. Data released by Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW), states that in total since 2017 the government has spent at least Rp 90.45 billion on digital activities involving *influencers* (Indonesia Corruption Watch, 2020).

Source: Indonesia Corruption Watch, 2020

Figure 7. *Indonesian Government Expenditure Budget for Influencers*

The size of the budget issued by the Indonesian government cannot be separated from the opinion that digital democracy currently allows participatory communication from the public, which is different from the previous conditions when public policy communication was *top-down*, and influencers are the spearhead of the current digital democracy (Setyawan, 2020).

On the other hand, because influencers are an industry, the use of influencers in implementing democratic principles and creating digital democracy is still influenced by the amount of material that revolves behind them. Whereas the nature of democracy as a system of society and state and government emphasizes the existence of power in the hands of the people, namely government of the people, government by the people, and government for the people. Meanwhile, digital democracy refers to the implementation of these principles in the digital space. A number of experts believe that communication and information technology or technology is a potential factor to encourage the development of democracy, and facilitate a leap in the context of political democracy (Becker, 1998).

From a technological perspective, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, social media is defined as a website or computer program that allows people to communicate and share information on the internet using computers or cell phones. So the presence of social media can not be avoided in everyday life. Social media has even influenced many aspects of our lives. The penetration of social media that continues to grow from year to year

shows that the emergence of this technology has been felt by more and more people. The presence of social media is also inseparable from the development of supporting infrastructure devices such as cellular devices, smartphones and networks. The ease of access to social media then makes the effects of the presence of social media spread more widely. *Social media influencers* are believed to be a means to reach many people who are connected through social media. New faces are born that are not recognized through television and conventional media, but are known on each person's mobile device.

From a communication perspective, we can see that the communication model proposed by Harold Laswell, " *Who Says What in which Channel to Whom with What Effect?"*, which divides five main elements in communication, namely sender, message, media, receiver, and feedback, can also be applied in discussions about *influencers* and digital democracy. *Influencers* act as senders of messages through social media with the recipients, namely other social media users, which allows for direct feedback on the messages conveyed by the *influencer*. But in this case, of course, the recipient is not passively waiting for a message to arrive from the sender. In social media information is sought and even *influencers* issue messages that other social media users really want to hear. Furthermore, to be a sender of messages that can be well received by the recipient, *influencers* are required to have certain qualifications such as credibility, integrity, expertise, and compatibility with the message conveyed. *Male* and female influencers have different effects and the way they convey the message also affects audience acceptance.

From the community's perspective, there needs to be awareness that *influencers*, who are often references and even guidelines for doing things, are part of the industry in the digital era. Not always the opinions of *influencers* can be trusted and followed. *Influencers* are not only models to promote a product, campaign, or a lifestyle and social influence, but are also often used by politicians and policy makers to influence the public. In a democratic society, it is important to check information and listen to opposing opinions in order to avoid the negative effects caused by the role of *influencers* on social media.

V. Conclusion

In digital democracy, *influencers* are persuasion actors who are able to influence society by targeting the peripheral route of the audience, namely the information processing route that does not require depth of mind. *Influencers* that are liked by the audience will have the potential to influence and even change certain behaviors. *Influencers* will be seen for their integrity, credibility, expertise, and suitability in influencing the community. *Influencers* are also required to have a high frequency in accessing social media and conveying information. However, *influencers* are expected to display less advertising and be more honest in their opinions. There is a great opportunity because through social media, anyone can participate to express their aspirations, in accordance with the principles contained in democratic values. If in the past political opinions were controlled by the political elite and the media, now the public can play a role and have a stake in conveying their voices. *Influencers* with their power to reach many people can be used as a trigger for the birth of alternative views in the digital democracy space. However, if not considered properly, the involvement of *influencers* can backfire for digital democracy, especially in Indonesia. After all, *social media influencers* are a new profession in a new industry in the digital era, so if they can be paid to force one thought and block the birth of another opinion or even narrow the choice of one idea, then *influencers* will actually be against the principles of democracy itself.

Researchers hope that these findings can enrich the results of research on influencers and digital democracy in the digital era, as well as provide an understanding for readers that *influencers* can not only be seen as a communication phenomenon but also a new industry which in its implementation, after all is seeking profit. The researcher realizes that this study has limitations in analyzing the variables in previous studies, for that it is necessary for further, more comprehensive and in-depth research to see the role of social media *influencers* in digital democracy.

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