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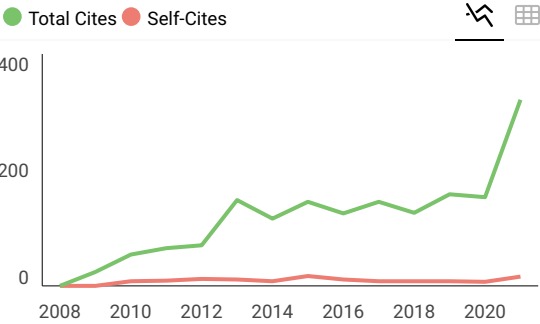
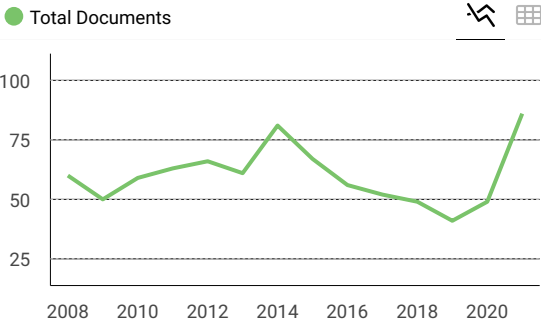
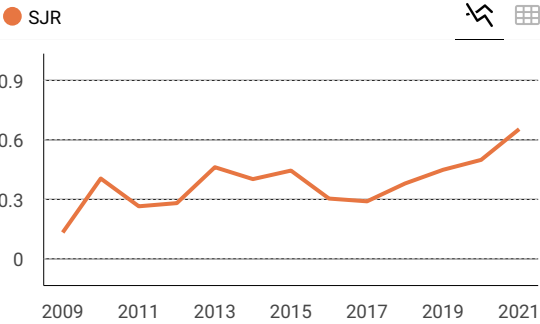
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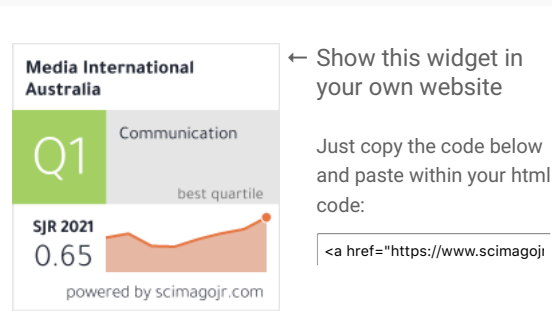
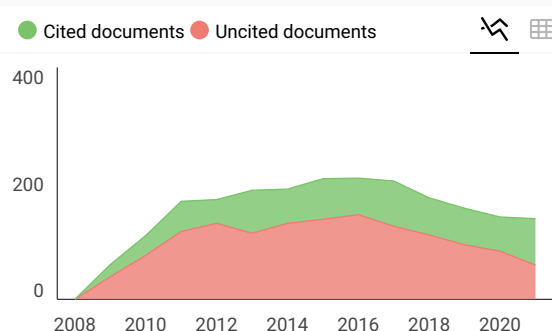
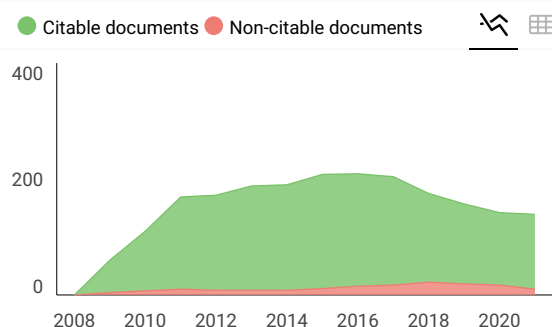
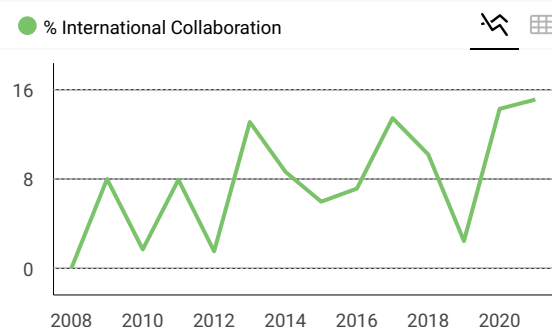
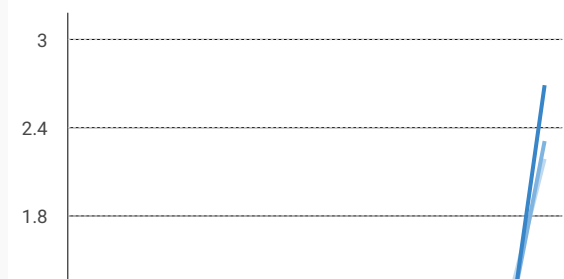
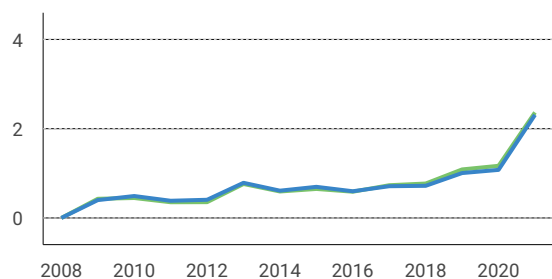
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# What do Indonesian start-ups communicate during the COVID-19 pandemic?

*by Jandy Luik*

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**Jandy Luik** 

Petra Christian University, Indonesia

## Abstract

This article aims to explore the media content during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the pandemic-handling videos released by start-up companies in Indonesia through their official YouTube accounts. As start-ups were also experiencing the impact of the pandemic, one of their biggest challenges was to communicate optimistic messages to the public with the right content and context. Therefore, this article examines the contents of the videos released by start-up companies during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Drawing from the data collected between March and December 2020, this qualitative study finds four inspirational media themes: 'we all are affected by the pandemic', the appearance of human values, presenting action taken, and optimistic expressions. Further, this article discusses the arrangement of inspirational statements and acts of empathy, which are predominantly mixed with brand identities and echo the value of *gotong royong* (mutual assistance).

## Keywords

inspirational content, public communication, media communication, empathetic communication, new media, start-up companies indonesia, COVID-19 pandemic

## Introduction

This article explores the nature of media content by examining the official YouTube channels of technology-based start-up companies in Indonesia. Specifically, it focuses on the videos released by these companies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As reported by *BBC Indonesia*, in response to the spread of COVID-19, the Indonesian government (both central and local) decided to limit human movement under the guidelines of Large-Scale Social Restrictions issued by the Ministry of Health (Virus Corona, 2020). These social restrictions severely limited mobility; roads were empty, airports were closed, and land and sea travel were affected. At the same time, economic activities also received great shocks that manifested in the

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### Corresponding author:

Jandy Luik, Department of Communication Science, Petra Christian University, Q Building, Room 607, Jl. Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, Indonesia.

Email: jandyluik@petra.ac.id

contents of the videos from five start-up companies reportedly valued the highest in Indonesia, namely (alphabetically arranged), Bukalapak, JD.ID, Gojek, Tokopedia, and Traveloka. In 2020, these companies released videos related to the COVID-19 pandemic through their official YouTube accounts. Videos from these particular companies were selected because they were released during the first few months after the pandemic outbreak in Indonesia. Moreover, these videos were launched amid polarized discussions on prioritizing health or the economy during the implementation of large-scale social restrictions. In addition, during that time, these emerging companies were relying on the movements of their riders or 'partners' to remain functional. In other words, these larger companies' public communication activities, including their YouTube videos, can significantly promote the Indonesian public's optimism amidst the pandemic.

The remainder of this paper will follow the subsequent structure. The first part of the article will discuss the importance of media content during a crisis. Next, the article will outline the methods used to analyse the media messages that are its focus. Then we will present the findings, discuss their significance, and draw conclusions to include a summary and provide researchers with the implications related to inspirational media content in unforeseen difficulties.

## Background

Earlier health crises have shown that health management is made more difficult when the public has been influenced in negative ways by media reporting and messaging, both online and traditional media channels. For instance, learning from the previous similar experience in 2009, a review of media dramatization in the H1N1-related studies on news coverage concludes that 'media may have—inadvertently—contributed to heightened risk perceptions through a high volume of coverage and an unbalanced emphasis on the threat of H1N1' (Klemm et al., 2016: 17). Using secondary data from the selected 13 prior content-analytic studies, Klemm et al. (2016: 14–15) found that 'huge media attention was not parallel to the trajectory of the epidemic, i.e. reflecting the number of infections, but was instead rather event-oriented', and that 'efficacy information, despite being the second most prevalent information in news on H1N1, was far less prevalent than threat information'. The takeaway point here is that the previous study, together with other related studies on communicating health through media (Vasterman and Ruigrok, 2013; Yu et al., 2011; Zillmann, 2006), evidently reminds us that media messages at times of crisis like a pandemic are a key to shaping public's perception, in which that perception can shape public's feelings and behaviours toward the crisis.

Besides the risk of dramatization of media coverage, there is a risk of misinformation on digital platforms. Concerning global technology companies' content moderation policies in handling misinformation during the pandemic, there is a call for more transparent content moderation strategies, which aim to not only provide more reliable content but also increase public trust (Baker et al., 2020). The main reason is that 'the transmission of false and misleading information, whether shared intentionally or not, can influence beliefs and result in "real-world harm"' (Baker et al., 2020). The stress on the critical role of (online) media content in influencing users and society at large has brought the policy of content moderation by the social media giants under scrutiny.

Back to the subject of this study, the previous instances indirectly share a concern for the significance of media content for the public in times of crisis, including the current COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study pays attention to media messages that promote the public's optimism in facing the pandemic. A concrete example of this situation is a study of memes and collective coping regarding with the COVID-19 pandemic in Puerto Rico (Ortiz et al., 2021). As the pandemic has become a stressful time for individuals, Ortiz et al. (2021) argue that 'memes can evolve to be a



themes. The themes themselves were then more abstractly analyzed to discover the overarching themes.

Furthermore, to ensure trustworthiness, researcher triangulation was carried out during the coding process. Since qualitative content analysis involves some degree of text interpretation, triangulating the categorization processes with other researchers is one of the solutions for the trustworthiness issues (Cho and Lee, 2014; Elo et al., 2014; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). We applied the following suggestion: 'one researcher is responsible for the analysis and others carefully follow-up on the whole analysis process and categorization', afterwards, 'all the researchers should subsequently get together and discuss any divergent opinions concerning the categorization' (Elo et al., 2014: 5).

## Findings

Through the qualitative content analysis of the existing videos, four specific themes of inspirational content emerged, namely: 'we all are affected by the pandemic', the appearance of human values, presenting action taken, and optimistic expressions.

### *'We all are affected by the pandemic'*

The first theme out of the studied videos is the empathetic message that 'we all are affected by the pandemic'. All the studied videos highlighted this key theme. They presented a similar pattern that the earlier duration of the videos was dominated by the general presentation of this 'bitter reality' and followed by conveying the message that individuals, society, and companies were impacted by the pandemic. This way of emphasizing the theme in the videos varies through different categories.

The first category is conveying bitter reality. In this category, the key message shown is an empathic feeling of the unpleasant reality faced by each company, its partners in running existing businesses, and other communities. The bitter reality was that companies can only accept this situation; however, they must continue to struggle against it. The codes seen in this category were an inevitable situation and an income crisis. In the videos, there are examples such as the written texts: '2020 dipenuhi dengan kata pertama' (translated as: '2020 is filled with the words: for the first time') (Traveloka Video #2, 2020), and 'Setelah adanya pandemi ini, jelas membuat tamu menjadi berkurang' (translated as: 'after this pandemic had just started, it is obvious that the hotel guests become fewer') (Traveloka Video #1, 2020).

The second category found was the shared emotional state presented in most of these videos. From the analysis, five out of eight videos highlighted the shared feelings of individuals who were impacted by the effect of the pandemic. The codes that appeared in the sample videos were feelings of disappointment, reflection, happiness, awe, and reconciliation. To be more specific, an example from the data includes the expression of a woman who was upset because she could not travel, which was accompanied by the visualization of the cancellation of travel plans (Traveloka Video #1, 2020). Another example is a daughter who was reflecting alone in the house while her father was hospitalized (Tokopedia Video #1, 2020). Moreover, we also found that the video from Tokopedia (an e-commerce platform) presented more emphasis on this shared emotional feeling as their YouTube video took a setting of a daughter (mid 20's) who finds herself alone in a house waiting for her father.

The next category relates to the continued operation of the companies amid ongoing social restrictions. This category aims to emphatically assure the viewers that the companies and partners are continuing to work (outdoors) with extra caution during the pandemic. The studied videos



to list on the Indonesian Stock Exchange, after their successful in the Initial Public Offering (IPO) (Pertiwi, 2021). Additionally, the other companies are still operating, and maintain an active (digital) media presence vis-à-vis the public.

## Conclusion

To sum up, this article argues that during the COVID-19 pandemic, high-valued Indonesian start-up companies presented their inspirational public communications containing empathetic messages and acts of service, accompanied by their brand identities. The impression found from their released YouTube videos is that they are intended to promote optimism and echo *gotong royong* value to the Indonesian public. We also argue that this way of presentation intends to make the companies relate (affectively) with the public, who are struggling with the pandemic. Specifically, the four themes – ‘we all are affected by the pandemic’, the appearance of human values, presenting action taken, and optimistic expressions – represent a form of media communication that involves a highly subjective approach dependent on the context of the sender and the momentum of delivering it.

Still, there is a set of further questions for future exploration. A comprehensive communication study including the effects on the audience or audience’s reception will contribute to our knowledge in understanding the communication of inspirational messages to the public with the right content and context. Additionally, about a year after the release of the videos, two of the companies have merged, and one of them listed on the Indonesian Stock Exchange. Thus, a further study may also explore the relation of this form of public communication and the long-term strategic plan of the companies. Furthermore, one may ask whether this narrative of empathetic communication and branding-optimistic expressions will become a major mode of communication by the businesses in reaching out to their public during the pandemic. Nevertheless, this current study offers an entry point to understand what has been said to the public during the pandemic.

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## ORCID iD

Jandy Luik  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2521-012X>

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4. Traveloka Video #1 (2020, May 16). #JalanBersama: Traveloka dan Mitra Hotel. <https://youtu.be/2kLnolYo0lY>

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7. Bukalapak Video #1 (2020, August 17). #BerjuangBareng untuk merdeka dari sikap pesimis. <https://youtu.be/HdGH2Jn1m9U>
8. Tokopedia Video #1 (2020, October 3). Yang Terutama #SelaluAdaSelaluBisa. <https://youtu.be/5TAaWz-PDm4>

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