

Indonesian Queers as Content Creators on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia is not a very friendly place for LGBT, and yet social media like Youtube has created a space for them to be more visible as content creators. This article looks into queer vloggers' content on Youtube and how they use the platform to make their gender and sexuality more visible. Social media has seen a transformation in the way people connect. Engaging with social media is now a staple activity of people in the 21st century. One of the unique characteristics that social media offers is its participatory nature which allows ordinary people (rather than mass media producers) to produce content, including LGBT. Youtube as one of the most popular social media seems to promote democracy and diversity due to its accessibility. However, in this article, I argue that social media has created a specific type of queers who are very urban, educated, and middle class. This is a shift from the conventional mass media where previously queers and LGBT were represented as part of the comedy and lower class. Although this change can be seen as progress in terms of representations, it is still leaving behind a broad spectrum of the reality of LGBT and their daily lives in Indonesia.

Keywords: *LGBT, Youtube, Indonesia, Content Creator, Empowerment, Sexuality*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country with the highest Muslim population in the world. Surprisingly since Islam's arrival in the 13th century, the government has managed not to implement Syariah (Islamic Law) despite the push from some of the most vital fundamentalist Islamic groups. Since the preparation of the country's independence in 1945, Islamic groups have been arguing for the inclusion of Syariah in the proposed state ideology of Pancasila. Although unsuccessful, through the course of Indonesia's contemporary history alternating Islamic groups have been campaigning for the replacement of the current secular law with Islamic law. So far, none of them have gained enough support at the national level. One of the reasons for this is the moderate Islamic groups who are championing a more tolerant Indonesia. Tolerance in this case does not only refer to peaceful relationships with people of other religions, but particularly tolerance within Muslims themselves. The latter is salient considering the diverse practices and interpretations of Islam in Indonesia [1].

However, recent years have witnessed a series of severe threats to this tolerance. There are several indicators for this intolerance, and one of them pertains to the treatment of LGBT people in Indonesia. Since 2017 there have been severe crackdowns on gay

people and the trend continues to rise [2]. All the raids were done by fundamentalist Islamic groups often claiming to represent the whole Muslim society. The rhetoric justifying the assaults cites how homosexuality is against Islamic teachings. Media coverage of verbal and physical attacks on LGBT has made the queer community more visible in ways never before witnessed in Indonesian media history. Previously under Suharto's regime, LGBT's appearances in the media were acknowledged as a part of the entertainment industry. Although still seen as a group of deviants, their media presence indicated that they were at least civilly tolerated. However, after the downfall of President Suharto in 1998, the mass media shifted to social media. Its implication on LGBT is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it disseminates awareness that LGBT is also people entitled to their human rights. On the other hand, their visibility puts them as targets, open for anyone to attack due to the anonymous nature of social media.

This article is about Indonesian queers who are content creators on Youtube. These LGBT vloggers have their platforms to reach out to people who support them. The trend to come out online may indicate that there are pockets of tolerance out there. There is also the assumed safety provided by Youtube by giving a safe distance between the vloggers and viewers.

However, social media also allows for haters and those who are uncomfortable with these vloggers coming out, to express their disagreement. This paradox makes Indonesian LGBT Youtube vloggers an exciting case study to see how these content creators navigate their way to face hate comments and online bullying while taking advantage of the platform.

This article looks into the rising phenomenon of Indonesian queers as vloggers. This article does not assume that these vloggers are representatives of their fellow queers or vloggers. What this article aims to do is gauge the bigger picture of Indonesian society in practicing what I call selective tolerance or random tolerance through the case study of these vloggers. Some of the names that appear when the keywords “Indonesian LGBT” are typed into Youtube are Jovi Adhiguna, Yumi Kwandy, and Dena Rahman. Through these people, the interplay of their intersectional identities is critically commented while using the rising intolerance within Indonesian society as a backdrop. What this article argues is that these vloggers strategize with the intersections of their identities in exchange for their assumed “lack” which is following the approved heteronormative practices.

Ben Murtaugh observes that queers in Indonesian media have undergone several phases. The different stages provide a strategic indicator regarding the journey of LGBT acceptance in Indonesia. Under President Suharto’s regime, queers were tolerated and not problematized publicly. This was reflected through queer characters in the media which dominated the comedy genre. Humor seems to cover up the problems of discrimination. Comedy turned queer marginalization into a laughing matter. Most queer characters were played by cisgender celebrities who took the opportunity to showcase their acting ability through the queer characters that they were playing. The visibility of the characters does not indicate full acceptance because LGBT people are being represented by heterosexuals in the media.

After Suharto stepped down from power, Indonesia entered the reform era. The genres of LGBT movies got more diverse. The themes of the film entered into a severe discussion about accepting homosexuality as a part of sexual orientation. The reform era has witnessed the development of digital technology. It joined Indonesia in 1995. In the 21st century the internet has seen vast growth. Its affordability contributes to its widespread in Indonesia. It has changed the dynamics of the mediascape. Social media is now as important as mainstream mass media. The nature of social media affects the development of

genres and the type of representations available for LGBT. Through social media, queer Indonesians do not have to be represented by heterosexuals. Youtube channels are flourishing with diverse content associated with LGBT but this time they are speaking on their own behalf. Queer content creators are speaking out about their marginalization [3].

2. METHODOLOGY

This research looks into Youtube videos from three Indonesian queer vloggers, Dena Rahman, Jovi Adhiguna Hunter, and Yumi Kandy. It is a critical discourse analysis of their contents. Critical discourse analysis looks into how and why people say what they say. It is not merely a descriptive analysis, but necessary in the sense that their speech is governed by a combination of their agency and the social structure that regulates them. James Paul Gee argues that, “Language allows you to be things”[4]. It is through language that these vloggers construct themselves. Their videos are the trajectory of their process of becoming whoever they want to be. In a critical discourse analysis the researcher tries to trace the motivation and social constructs that produce a speech.

The approach used in the research is queer theory. In this article queer theory is used as a way to identify oppressions suffered by the queer vloggers. It is also about the empowerment and negotiations that intertwine in the discourse of these vloggers. Queer theory operates in a similar manner to feminist theory where researchers try to expose oppressive practices that marginalize women, while simultaneously looking into how women exercise their resistance. Both feminist theory and queer aim to identify how domination and resistance work. As an analytical framework queer theory does not stand alone. It is operated within a social and cultural framework to deconstruct the oppression that they experience and underline the strategies that they use to express their empowerment [5].

The social theoretical framework used in the analysis is Bourdieu’s capital [6]. The concept of capitals introduced by Bourdieu is helpful in answering research enquiries in this article regarding empowerment. Why do these queer vloggers feel empowered to expose themselves on Youtube? What do they throw in as their bargaining chips? What do they have that can make up for their lack of proper heteronormative lifestyles? The operation of Bourdieu’s theory about capital in social research is actually flexible and helpful to identify inequality. Once the capitals are identified, it is evident that those

who do not have them will suffer social injustice. In this research, identification of the capitals is carried out by searching for recurring patterns in the discourse.

The term queer is used here for inclusivity. According to Halperin in Greenough, “queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without essence” [7]. Following Halperin’s definition, the word queer can be more inclusive as an overarching term. However, in many intellectual conversations the term LGBT is frequently employed as a shortcut to denote a group of people who do not follow heteronormative practices. Although common in use, the term LGBT can be slightly problematic when a person’s sexual identity is not included in the abbreviation, such as pansexual, demiromantic, or asexual. Therefore, queer will be used more frequently in this article. In curating themes and keywords for the discussion, the choices are meant to be indicative rather than comprehensive.

3. LET’S MEET THE QUEER VLOGGERS

Jovi Adhiguna’s channel is called *Jovi Adhiguna Hunter*. His videos on this channel do not dwell on issues of his queer status. Instead he lets his viewers into his daily life, which is very common for Youtube vloggers to do. Most of his content is about lifestyle and consumption. However, his appearances in the videos let the viewers witness his claimed androgynous identity. He likes to wear skirts and dresses, and apply makeup. In one interview he states that he does not want to become a girl. He claims that he is a male, albeit a male who likes to dress fluidly in terms of gender. Among his daily activity videos, there will be one or two videos addressing people’s comments regarding his gender identity and his seeming disregard for gender boundaries. He would use the word “educating” to refer to what he is doing when addressing discriminative comments from his viewers. He says, “People keep calling me transvestite, they just don’t know.” (“Aku dipanggil bencong, mereka nggak mengerti kali ya”) By “educating” his viewers he is implementing his cultural capital and setting himself on a higher level since he is the educator. His cultural capital comes from his fluency in queer knowledge being one himself. This is a strategic message that implies intolerance comes from being uneducated. He also refers to one of his duties in making videos as to “teach tolerance.” He also says,

“That’s what I do on my Youtube channel. I educate people and let them know.” [Vice 1 August 2018].

Dena Rahman was known as a child actor. However, she grew up realizing that her male body does not represent her gender. She got the first surgery for her breast implant in 2014. In one interview, Dena Rahman identifies herself as a transgender person. She said that before the operation she always felt that she was in the wrong body. Her Youtube channel is called *Bebi Talk*. Bebi is short for *bebas bicara*, the Indonesian language for “free to talk”. She started making Youtube content in 2019. The content is predominantly about interviews with people who are like her or people whom she invited to elucidate issues that she is championing like sex education and sexual behaviours covering topics like BDSM and orgasm. As she is transitioning to become a female, she is also currently known as a shoe designer. In one of her interviews she said that although her body now suits her female gender, she does not want to appear ultra feminine. This refers to the fluidity of gender that does not necessarily conform to social expectation.

Yumi Kwandy is one of the contestants for Indonesia’s Next Top Model. She got eliminated from the competition in March 2021 after making it to the big five. She and her girlfriend have a Youtube channel called Yumsky’s Diary. Her girlfriend’s name is Chika Kinsky who works as a DJ. In an interview with Deddy Corbuzier, a famous TV celebrity, they both identified themselves differently despite being in a homosexual relationship. Chika Kinky claims to be bisexual, and Yumi Kwandy calls herself a pansexual. Yumi argues that being a pansexual is different from a bisexual. As a pansexual Yumi says she is a person who can only fall in love based on emotional closeness and she argues that she can be in a romantic relationship with anybody within the broad gender spectrum, including transpeople. Whereas Chika claims that she can only engage in a relationship with either a man or a woman. She has a son from her previous relationship. Their first Youtube video talks about their coming out and the challenges they have to face in regards to their sexuality.

3.1 Queer Vloggers as Model Minorities

Model minority was initially (and continues to be) used to label Asian Americans in response to their marginalization and stereotyped identity. So in compensation for their migrant minority status, Asian Americans are perceived to strive to thrive with their achievements, in order to join the melting pot of the

American Dream. The strategy used by these vloggers is similar in terms of foregrounding their achievements to compensate for their minority queer status. The achievements are meant to invite the viewers to pay attention to other things going on in their lives. These vloggers know that one of the reasons people watch their videos is to hear about their coming out and to find out how queer people live and practice their gender-fluid lives. One of the messages that the videos try to get across is that they are just people, but with achievements and privileges.

Jovi Adhiguna Hunter is a successful entrepreneur (he partly owns Street Boba, a bubble tea café) and he shows that in his vlogs. In one of the videos he tells his viewers that he has bought a holiday house in Bali, “Guys, I’m so happy that my long life dream to own a holiday house in Bali finally came true. Thank you, God. Work hard and dream big, you all”. To own a property in Bali in the age of mid-twenties is an achievement indeed. During his trip to Bali to stay in the new house, he keeps referring to how busy he is despite being in Bali for a holiday. He took his whole family to Bali and his mother commented, “You work all the time.” In this video, being busy is a sign of success. Staying active during the pandemic (the video is dated 2 July 2021) serves as an indicator of surviving professionally. At the end of the video he states that if things go well with his business he is looking forward to buying a second-holiday house. So material resources here are associated with his success [8]. It all ties up with the rest of his video list which shows purchasing power and lifestyle in the form of worldwide travels to places like Morocco, Paris, and New York, to name just a few. As symbols of upward social mobility (and in Jovi Adhiguna Hunter’s case, social acceptance), consumerism and lifestyle are powerful social tools to define an acceptable status, which is being a member of the middle to the upper class. This would balance his other level of being queer. His economic capital is the stepping stone to build a bridge to other capitals, such as a network of supportive friends and business projects.

Similarly Dena Rahman also points out how she is busy living her fulfilled life as a female. Being busy with a packed schedule seems to be a sign of productivity. There are photoshoots and interviews that she conducts as a public figure and celebrity. In one of the videos, she attended the World Press Freedom Conference in 2020. The video is dated 3 January 2021. There is also a testimony from the Dutch ambassador for Indonesia regarding Dena Rahman’s attendance at the conference and how well she presents. Unlike Jovi Adhiguna Hunter’s vlogs,

Dena Rahman’s list of videos does not focus on glamorous purchases and first-class travels. She introduces herself as an intellectual and intelligent woman. Her videos mostly have an educative nuance. She is sharing knowledge with her viewers. The atmosphere is that of having critical discussions about current issues. Intelligence is her power to deflect people’s attention from scrutinizing her transgender status. One of her latest videos dated 30 June 2021 is given the hashtag #WeAreHuman. In the video she engages in discussion with two other transwomen, Asha Darra and Millen Cyrus. The purpose of the video is to introduce to the general public, as the hashtag suggests, that transgender people are just like everyone else. Dena Rahman claims in one of her videos that there is a kind of “fear of the unknown” when straight people are faced with the existence of queers in Indonesia. Here, Dena Rahman’s video acts as the bridge that closes the gap between cisgender and transgender, by giving cis people insight into what they have been wondering regarding trans people. Her list of videos is not just with transgender but other Indonesian celebrities who are not queer. Hendri Yulius Wijaya argues that part of the queer strategy in Indonesia is to build connections and links that will be their social and emotional support [9]. The social cohesion that Dena Rahman’s develops serves as evidence of her membership of the “normal” people, or as the hashtag claims that she is also human. Dena Rahman says, “I am a member of the LGBT community and I can [still] contribute to the world.”

Yumi Kwandy as a model, talks about how she navigate her pansexual status and her modelling profession. She says that her modelling agency is aware that she has a steady female partner (*pacar*). She says, “My agency knows [about my sexual orientation]. But they asked me not to expose it or blow it up.” (*jangan terlalu terang-terangan*). It may sound ironic that she said this on Youtube for public viewing. However, what Yumi Kwandy says is precisely a reflection of the character of Indonesian people. Anything can be made a shared secret, as long as there is no official announcement, because then Indonesians would feel compelled to comment. Not only that, the general public will be forced to take sides and pass judgments because everybody needs to appear to champion the truth and the ideal, regardless of what those are. A quick example would be the erotic *dangdut pantura* singers who perform for small gigs around the coastal areas of Java. They are tolerated as long they do not make a nationwide appearance, like on a national television station. This explains Inul Daratista’s case when her erotic dance caused

controversy because it was aired on national televisions, while at the same time local performers were tolerated [10]. Considering the backlash against LGBT around 2017, the condemnation directed at Yumi Kwandy is probably expected. However, her gradual coming out on Youtube, after she got voted out of Indonesia's Next Top Model, could be a strategy to ease into her bigger coming out with a broader audience. Another way to comment critically on this gradual coming out is that it suggests the level of unpredictability of Indonesian society and Yumi Kwandy is testing the water.

3.2 Queer Religiosity and Morality

These three vloggers at one point or the other will mention God or touch upon religious issues in their videos. It is interesting how the topic of God appears with regards to their sexuality and their queer status. Yumi Kwandy is a Christian, but she said unsupportive comments from her "haters" would come in the form of quotes versus verses from the Alquran most of the time. This clearly shows the hegemonic pressure from the majority of the Islamic population. It is also about the overpowering domination of Muslims in Indonesia. They give the impression of a large group of people who are easily offended and would be the first to feel insulted should a person from a different religion expresses a disagreement regarding their religious practice (one example is the Christian woman who went to jail because she complained that the call for prayer from the mosque is too loud [11]). In addition to the Indonesian public, on a more personal level Yumi Kwandy also mentions that her mother is very religious. To counter her mother, Kwandy sought and consulted a person who was a spiritual leader to justify her sexuality and got the answer, "as long as you can love someone else it's better than only loving yourself." Her effort to seek spiritual support is as strong as the religious arguments used against her. She mentions how her mother, "Bathe me in water mixed with flowers" (*mandi bunga*) to cure her sexuality supposedly. She also says how her mother asked for help from their family priest to perform some exorcism since she thinks that her daughter is cursed.

Dena Rahman, as a Christian (she was a Muslim before she converted into Christianity), reinterprets the bible to suit her needs as a transwoman. During her interview with Daniel Mananta in a video dated 20 November 2020, she argues her case how the bible can be read repeatedly and reinterpreted differently every time. She says, "I think what God wants to teach us

now, with the queer movement happening, is for us to be the best version of ourselves." She uses her agency to interpret what God's plans are for her as a transgender person. This is in accordance with what Harari mentions about people saying anything they like about what they believe about God, because nobody can confirm it with God. People can only guarantee it with other people. Which is why Harari calls it a belief, because it is something that you can believe independently of any data and evidence [12]. In Dena Rahman's case she is using it strategically by reversing the discourse. She claims that God loves her as she is. This is in opposition to what people say about God not accepting queer community because it is sinful. The interview demonstrates that the rhetoric about God can be reclaimed and rephrased to fit into any condition. This is also what anti-queer people do, they claim God's phrase to justify their opposition to the queer community. In this case agency and resistance consists of a series of claims and reclaims.

Jovi Adhiguna shows his religiosity in his videos through his prayers. In his culinary vlogs he prays before he eats. He also mentions God's name whenever he is being grateful for something. This is in line with what Tom Boellstroff argues regarding Indonesian gay muslims' attempt to find the middle ground between their religion and their sexuality [13]. Jovi Adhiguna in his videos does not have any problem reconciling his Christianity with his queer identity. In one video dated 13 January 2016 he responds to his hate comments. The video gives him a chance to state his values and moral stance. He says, "Don't talk about sin if you still talk about thighs [as in sexual thoughts of perverts]." His 'model minority' values are obvious when he said that he checked the accounts of his haters. He responded to his haters, "You're not doing anything (in terms of achievements)." He starts comparing himself with his haters by saying how far he has gone with his Youtube channel and the number of subscribers and followers that he has on social media. Achievements and moral stance are his defense in facing negative responses. He preaches wisdom like, "Just be yourself because everybody else is taken". He also says, "I don't hurt other people's feelings if they don't do anything to me." This statement refers to comments about him from people who do not even know him. He is well versed in talking back with repertoire of speeches commonly heard on social media. Although it may sound like his lines are a cliché, his words of moral wisdom are evidence of how narratives of empowerment do spread as a counterbalance to reports of discrimination and marginalization. This is the power of digital

technology where the discourse of oppression and its potential for resistance are equally available online.

3.3 Queer Middle-Classness

The three vloggers in this article are evidence of how middle-classness is a common denominator between them. Hendri Yulius Wijaya in his research on assemblage as part of queer empowerment, identifies that middle-class gay men predominate in his list of informants [9]. Luther and Loh also mention middle-classness as the dominant setting of queer movies and production [14]. In linking it with Bourdieu's habitus, middle-classness is the habitus that provides them with the discourse and narratives of self-love and support. Jovi Adhiguna says that his family is very open to his gender preferences. He says, "My mum says I have to be successful so that people won't have anything to say against me." From the content of the videos, material support from his family is evident. Although he seems to earn his own money, it all started with intergenerational wealth which provides him his initial capital. Similarly Yumi Kwandy also indicates that she is well equipped. She talks about her parents giving her a car when she has to live on her own. Her university is also an expensive private institution. The modeling competition that she entered (Indonesia's Next Top Model) is a representation of glamor on television and social media, that it is inevitable to associate Yummy Kwandy's status with middle-to-upper classness. Dena Rahman, like Jovie Adhiguna, has her family's financial and moral support for her to transition into becoming a female. She comes from a family who works in the entertainment industry (her father was a dancer). Symbols of middle-classness are abundant in the videos of these three vloggers. This supports Bourdieu's argument that social and cultural capitals create inequality. Middle-class queers have more opportunities to be visible and fight for social equality. Unfortunately, not all queers are middle class.

In the case of Jovi Adhiguna, Dena Rahman and Yummy Kwandy, their social status provides them with the privilege to compensate for their marginalized queer identities. The intersections of these vloggers' identities are interesting to dissect because it plays a role in the way they present themselves in the video. They alternate the showcasing of their queer status with their privilege. Being queer internet celebrities coupled with their social background provide them with the necessary social ammunition to face rejection and disapproval. For example, Jovi Adhiguna and Yumi Kwandy are university graduates, they are from

Universitas Telkom and Universitas Pelita Harapan, respectively. Dena Rahman has a master's degree in design. She got her graduate degree in Bologna, Italy. Jovi Adhiguna and Dena Rahman converse fluently in English. The language represents their global exposure and privileged social status.

From their interviews, it shows that they are well equipped with knowledge of queer politics. Jovi Adhiguna and Dena Rahman can debate and argue eloquently in defense of their queer status. Yummy Kwandy on the other hand, employs a different strategy. She exposes her relationship with her girlfriend on Youtube and claims that she gets support from her viewers. Unlike Dena Rahman and Jovie Adhiguna, who are morally supported by their family, Yummy Kwandy's parents have not entirely accepted their daughter's coming out. However, this is supposedly compensated by support from her viewers and subscribers. Throughout their Youtube channels, Jovi Adhiguna, Dena Rahman, and Yummy Kwandy are engaged in what Wijaya calls "world-making" [9]. In the queer digital world, they are creating a queer support system. Jovi Adhiguna is often surrounded by family and friends. Dena Rahman surrounds herself with like-minded people. Yummy Kwandy does this by showing her affection to her girlfriend: kissing and hugging her on camera. Again this would not be possible if Yummy Kwandy is just a regular person. Her celebrity model status has contributed significantly to her Youtube queer world making with her girlfriend.

4. CONCLUSION

Jovi Adhiguna, Dena Rahman and Yummy Kwandy have demonstrated how they employ their social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital to come out as queer. They are all well educated academically. They come from middle-class families. They have day jobs as prestigious professionals by millennial standards, and they are all YouTubers and influencers. These are all highly regarded identities that serve to close the gap created by their queer identities.

Due to exposure to the outside world which they achieve from their professions and lifestyles, they are well aware of their own queer self-identification. There is no confusion nor discourse of soul-searching for their queer identities. They are well versed with their own choice of words to name their queer status. Jovi Adhiguna is gender fluid, Dena Rahman is a transgender, and Yummy Kwandy is pansexual. They demand to be treated accordingly. For example, Jovi Adhiguna gets angry whenever people identify him as a transvestite (*bencong*) or a ladyboy. Yummy Kwandy

insists that she is not a bisexual and she knows how to explain her pansexual character. Dena Rahman is also conversant in arguing against her transgender marginalization particularly within religious discourse. From this information it would not be an exaggeration to conclude that they must have taken a painful journey to learn and understand, and then argue in defence of their queer status. The learning process is gained from opportunities provided by their social status and middle-class environment. Additionally, the internet has provided the platform which gives them a space to debate against negative comments and to seek support from their viewers.

Digital technology has provided the queer community with a wealth of opportunities to increase their visibility and seek acceptance and approval. My research has proven that although they are part of a minority group, they continually strive to be a model minority by showcasing their achievements and demonstrating their knowledge in queer politics and strategy. This may seem harmless. However the effect could be detrimental to other members of the queer community who do not possess the capital to exhibit their achievements nor the means to come out. “Ordinary” and lower-class queers are doomed to stay in the closet because they do not have any capital to compensate for their lack of approved sexuality. This explains our acceptance of queer celebrities, but not the queer who is our next-door neighbor. This is not to say that the trend of representing model minority and middle-classness is terrible. It is merely to contemplate whether the internet is genuinely accommodating in that regard. What is stopping the diversity of queer representations in digital media? Perhaps if the internet is already rife with the politics of everyday lives, then the ordinary queer should have a chance somewhere in the future? This article closes with a set of questions that will hopefully be answered in a positive manner in the future.

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