



Empowerment and Resistance in Instagram Posts by Independent Bookstores

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Abstract. Technology development has affected various elements of life, including the way people shop and read books. Online retails like Amazon and the innovation of e-readers seem to bring an unpromising future for brick-and-mortar books, especially independent bookstores. However, American Booksellers Association reported that there is an increase of the number of independent bookstores. Interestingly, Instagram has a significant contribution to this resurgence of independent bookstores. This paper explores the use of Instagram by two independent bookstores in Jakarta, Aksara and Post, by analysing their posts. It also examines in what way these posts can convey their identity and ideology. The result of the analysis shows that besides for promotional purposes, independent bookstores can use Instagram to support the three key ideas of independent bookstores, namely community, curation, and convening. The analysis of their posts also reveals the ideology of independent bookstores as a space of empowerment and resistance.

Keywords: bookstores · empowerment · Instagram · representation · resistance

1 Introduction

Over the last two decades, technology development has transformed many aspects of life, including the way we shop and read books. It started in 1995 when Amazon launched its online retail which gave readers the convenience to browse for titles and to buy books easily without having to move an inch away from their couch. Another invention that changed the way readers enjoy books is the launching of Kindle e-reader, also by Amazon, in 2007. The device allows readers to store hundreds of books into it and to easily read them everywhere. Inevitably, this digitalization of reading in the end affected the traditional bookselling. CNN Business reported in 2015 that Amazon had destroyed corporate bookstores like Barnes and Noble. Even when Barnes and Noble tried to compete by launching Nook e-reader, it still fails to keep up with Amazon.

The growing of online retails and the invention of e-readers seem to bring an unpromising future for independent bookstores, which are owned independently and do not have as many stores as corporate bookstores. However, American Booksellers Association has an unexpected finding. It reports that between 2009 and 2015, the number of independent bookstores in America grew by 35 percent [1]. Despite the convenience

of e-readers, it turns out that readers still prefer print books, as shown by the increase of sale in 2017 [2].

Looking at how independent bookstores manage to survive in the digital era, a Harvard Business School professor Ryan Raffaelli conducted a research on independent bookselling. To find out how independent bookstores flourish in the era of e-commerce, Raffaelli collected data through multiple sources, namely interviews, focus groups, field visits, observation, and media analysis. The initial findings that he revealed in an extended abstract [3] show how readers are still attracted to the sense of community, which is an idea offered by independent bookstores.

Moreover, in her article for Vox, Chittal [1] argued that another factor which significantly contributes to the survival of independent bookstores is Instagram. Launched in 2010, Instagram is a digital platform which “provides users an instantaneous way to capture and share their life moments with friends through a series of (filter manipulated) pictures and videos” [4]. It is currently one of the most popular social media and by June 2019, it has been downloaded more than 1 billion times. Instagram is commonly used to share pictures of food or vacations, but now readers also use Instagram to share their love for books and authors and find friends who have the same interest in reading. Using the hashtag #bookstagram, readers take photos of their books or bookshelves, edit them using the filter, and post these photos in their accounts. They also use the Instastory feature (like polling or quiz) to have interactions about books with their followers. Chittal added that this activity seems to be in line with the key strength of independent bookstores, which is to create community.

This connection between Instagram and independent bookstores is the main topic of this article. It would like to see in what ways independent bookstores use Instagram: is it only for business and branding purposes? Or do they also use Instagram as a tool to express their identity and ideology? Raffaelli [3] mentioned that there are three key values of independent bookstores, which are community, curation, and convening. This paper would like to explore how those three values are represented in their Instagram. The data are taken from Instagram posts by two independent bookstores located in Jakarta, Aksara and Post. It is expected that the result of this research will contribute to the discussion about independent bookstores, particularly in Jakarta, by focusing on their activities in digital space. Furthermore, the result of this research can provide another perspective in seeing the impact of technology toward reading culture and bookselling.

2 Research Method

This research applies descriptive qualitative research since the data are non-numerical and analysed by using a non-statistical method. The primary data are taken from Instagram posts by two independent bookstores in Jakarta, Aksara (@aksarakemang) and Post (@post_santa). The number of followers for these two bookstores became the main consideration why their Instagram accounts are chosen as the data source of this research. By June 2019, Aksara has approximately 38,500 followers and 2,528 posts, meanwhile Post has 27,700 followers and 2,096 posts. This paper discusses only the posts (including images, captions accompanying, and comments below the posts) which are relevant to the purpose of the research.

After the data had been collected, they were analysed through the perspective of culture studies, particularly using representation theory by Stuart Hall. Hall [5] is a well-known scholar in Cultural Studies, and he has written books mainly about culture, identity, representation, and media analysis that have important intellectual influence toward humanity and social sciences. Sender and Decherney stated how through his works, Hall “showed how everyday life influenced communication at each stage of production, distribution, and reception, and he described the fluid and negotiated make up of identities.” [6]. Furthermore, they argued that in this age of digital media, Hall’s important body of work is still relevant to portray the dynamics of digital media, including social media.

Representation can be defined as re-present, to bring back an object. However, representation does not simply copy the objects in real world, but it also produces a version of it [7]. Language is a form of representation, and representation theory argues that language is not a neutral instrument but a medium charged with a political and cultural ideology. Language here is understood in the broad sense, not only limited to verbal communication but also images, facial expression, colors, and everything that can be categorized as signs. Hall’s concepts about representation as a process “by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of culture.” [5] is used to explain how Instagram posts produce meaning through images and captions. Hall’s theory is also used to see what kind of ideology is contained in the Instagram posts.

To support the analysis, Raffaelli’s finding about the resurgence of independent bookstores is used as well. In his extended abstract, he argued that “the technological shifts did not lead to the immediate displacement of independent bookstores” [3]. After he collected and analyzed data from multiple sources, his finding explains what process and mechanism which support the revival of independent bookstores. The three important values that help independent bookstores survive and even flourish are community (collective identity associated with localism), curation (which allows customers to have a more personal and specialized experience), and convening (bookstores as intellectual centers for customers with likeminded interests).

3 Analysis

This part will provide an analysis on Instagram posts by Aksara and Post. The elements of the posts that will be studied are images, captions, and comments below the posts. A short history for each bookstore will be given as well.

When it was established in 2001, Aksara bookstore instantly became a place for urban hipsters to hang out. Its original store was located in Kemang, but then later it opened two more branches in prestigious malls in Jakarta, Pacific Place and Cilandak Two Square. Not only does it sell books, Aksara also used to have a record company known as Aksara Records which endeavoured to support indie musicians. During its peak era, Aksara was synonymous with the word ‘hip’. However, in 2018, through its Instagram account, Aksara announced that it would close its branches in shopping malls, stating that bookselling in Jakarta was becoming more and more difficult and it had been facing many tough challenges [8]. Now with only one store in Kemang, Aksara has refurbished its store and become a space not only for books, but also art,

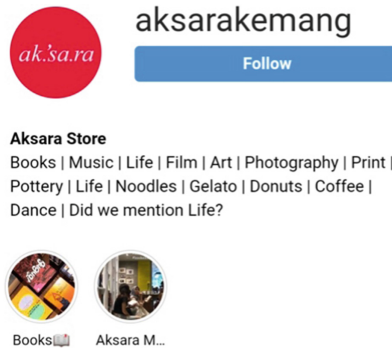


Fig. 1. Aksara's Instagram Profile

photography, cinema, and coffee shop. This alliance with other stores (whom they call 'Aksara partners') highlights the concept of community explained by Raffaeli.

Firstly, the appearance of Aksara's Instagram profile page will be discussed. As a profile picture, it uses red background with the word *aksara* ('letter' in Indonesian), stylized as *ak.'sa.ra*, written in white. In the bio section, it mentions all of the products that customers can find and purchase in the store (Fig. 1).

By mentioning the word 'life' three times, it can be implied that Aksara offers something that is bigger than products, which is life. It can also be seen in the bio page that Aksara compiles their Instagram stories into two archives: 'Books' and 'Aksara Moments'. Instagram Story is a feature that allows users to post images, videos, songs, and even polling. After 24 h, the stories cannot be viewed anymore, unless you archive them. Aksara uses this archive menu to collect the stories related with books and events so followers can view the stories again in the profile page. For the images posted in the feed, Aksara uses both photos and illustrations, and the captions accompanying the images are either in Indonesian or English.

Raffaeli explained that independent bookstores encourage the idea of localism, "a network of small business owners, inventors, policymakers and citizens focused on creating and sustaining local economies" [3]. Aksara adopts this idea and uses its Instagram to promote local, small business. Its post on November 3, 2018 recommends La-La Records, a small record store which specializes in vinyl records. Another post on September 29, 2018 is also a form of promotion for a noodle restaurant which becomes one of Aksara partners, Mee Pandjang Umur, and a post on August 31, 2018 explains about Kinosaurs, a microcinema which features great films from Indonesia and other countries.

Going back to its root as an independent bookstore, Aksara regularly holds activities which involve customers' participations, such as book discussions and workshops. The invitations for these activities are posted in their Instagram feed. For example, a collage workshop was held to celebrate its April-August curation theme "A Woman of Her Own". The workshop invitation was posted on April 2, 2019 and accompanied by a poster made by Vantiani with an explanation about the activity and how to register (see Fig. 2). A number of hashtags are also used in this post, such as #awomanofherown, #readmorewomen, and #womencharactersinliterature. In Instagram, hashtags make the

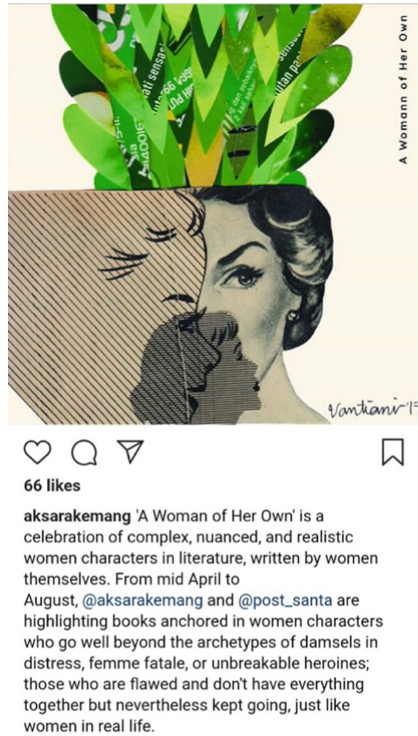


Fig. 2. “A Woman of Her Own” invitation and poster

search of a certain topic easier, and they also become a digital marketing tool for businesses and organizations. By using the hashtags mentioned above, Aksara promotes their workshop activity. Not only for promotional purposes, the hashtag #readmorewomen and #womencharactersinliterature can also attract other readers who share the same interest in literature written by and about women. The hashtag #readmorewomen, particularly, asks for more support for more books about and by women since the hashtag is in a form of imperative sentence. In the caption accompanying the post, the idea of ‘convening’ is emphasized in the sentence “We hope that you’ll come home not only with a collage and fresh books to read, but also with new friends.”

After the events were held, Aksara then posted the photos from the events, sharing the moments to its Instagram followers. Figure 3 shows photos from “Books and Matcha”, a literary discussion about Japanese authors. The caption of the post says that the discussion was held to welcome the new curation theme and in the discussion, participants were encouraged to share their favourite Japanese authors and their personal experience reading them. Again, the concept of ‘convening’ is emphasized in the caption, “We were moved by the openness and intimacy in the room, from people most of whom had never met before that day.” This sentence suggests that the same interest in books (in this case books by Japanese authors) has the ability to bring people together. Although the participants had not known each other previously, they could have an intimate and open



Fig. 3. "Books and Match" discussion

discussion because of the likeminded interests. The casual setting of the discussion, as shown by the photos, contributes to the intimacy of the discussion as well.

Another key point that contributes to the survival of independent bookstores is curation. Different from major chain bookstores like Gramedia and Peripus that basically sell books from various publishers and for different kinds of readers, independent bookstores carefully select the titles of the books they are selling. Every four months, Aksara launches a specific theme for their book collection. They introduce the theme in their Instagram posts and also invite readers to participate in the activities related to the theme (for example, "A Woman of Her Own" theme and the collage workshop, as shown in Fig. 2).

This curation process also includes the process of selecting which books should be posted in the Instagram feed in order to construct the identity of independent bookstores. This next post exemplifies the selection of book titles by Aksara bookstore:

Figure 4 is an Instagram post from November 7, 2018 and the images show three books from Latin America literature which have been translated into Indonesian. These books are published by Marjin Kiri, a progressive independent publisher which focuses on books containing critical ideas mainly about politics, history, philosophy, and economy.



Fig. 4. Latin American literature books translated into Indonesian

Another post, published on December 16, 2018, shows a book entitled *The Art of Feminism*. The caption accompanying the image says “It is 2018 and (once again) women are on the march.”, referring to the rising feminist movements in many parts of the world, and the rest of the caption gives a brief description about the book. Not only the captions, but the arrangement of objects in Instagram posts is also significant in communicating a certain meaning. The books in the two posts are set in solid-color backgrounds and positioned in the centre of the frame. This arrangement provides a clear view for the audience to see the book covers entirely. From the selection of the book titles posted in their Instagram account, it can be inferred that Aksara emphasizes its identity as an independent bookstore that concentrates on books with non-mainstream critical issues.

Next, this paper will discuss Instagram posts from Post bookshop (as stated in their Instagram bio, instead of ‘bookstore’). Post was established in 2014 and in contrast with Aksara whose main store is in a prestigious area, Post is located in Santa traditional market. Since the beginning, the owners of Post have decided to sell selected books in limited stock. The titles picked are from independent publishers and not sold in major bookstores. Besides selling books, Post also regularly hosts book discussions, book launchings, and writing workshops.



Fig. 5. Post's Instagram profile page

Before discussing the posts, this part will describe Post's Instagram profile page (as seen in Fig. 5). The profile picture used is the bookshop logo: the word 'post' in black with yellow background. The bio states that Post is "your local independent bookshop and publisher at @pasarsanta's upper floor". Furthermore, the bio provides the opening days and hours and the e-mail address. Post also puts their Instagram stories into two archives with titles 'Got questions' and 'Online Order'. The first archive includes the important questions related to the bookshop business, meanwhile the second archive contains instructions if the followers want to order books online. Similar to Aksara, the images posted in Post's feed are photos and illustrations. However, Post only uses Indonesian for the post captions.

In its Instagram posts, Post highlights the warm and intimate atmosphere of the bookstore. A number of posts showcase the interior of the bookshop, from the bookshelves to the furniture inside the shop. The post published in January 12, 2019 (Fig. 6) is a photograph that showcases one corner of the bookshop, which is the table on the center. The caption below the image says, "Post's central table, where customers can sit reading, or having a chat while drinking coffee from the neighbour [store]. In the photo are Vidy and Tejo, his friend. Vidy is a long-time customer and enjoys works from Juan Pablo Villalobos, Ryu Murakami, and Sabda Armando...". The photo along with the caption emphasizes the concept of 'convening': a bookstore as a place for people to gather and discuss the same interest. Also, by mentioning the name of the customers, a personal relationship with the customers is maintained. It constructs an image of an independent bookstore as a friendly, intimate space, not just a place for selling and buying books. Another thing to note is that heavily-colored filters are not applied in this post, showing the naturalness of the bookstore situation.



488 likes

post_santa Meja tengah Post, tempat pengunjung bisa duduk membaca, atau mengobrol sambil minum kopi dari tetangga. Yang terlihat itu Virdi dan Tejo temannya. Virdi pelanggan lama Post yang sangat suka karya Juan Pablo Villalobos, Ryu Murakami, juga Sabda Armandio. Mereka tadi bercerita sedang menumpuk niat untuk membuat perpustakaan masyarakat di Cileungsi yang diberi nama Luar Kurung. Semoga betulan kejadian ya, Virdi dan Tejo .

Fig. 6. One corner of Post bookshop

Just like other independent bookstores, Post also consistently holds events which ask for customers' participations. The invitation of the events is usually posted in Instagram, but not only to inform the followers about the upcoming events, the invitation post is also accompanied by a long caption that illustrates the background of the event. This kind of caption provides their followers with knowledge and information about the books discussed in the events.

The post published on May 13, 2019 (as seen in Fig. 7) is an invitation to an event titled "Rereading Women of Taman Siswa". The invitation poster is dominated with pink colour, which is often associated with femininity, and the word 'perempuan' (women) is written in the biggest font to emphasize the theme of the discussion. The hashtags used in this post are #MembacaUlang, #SejarahPerempuan, #PerempuanTamanSiswa, and #WanitaTamanSiswa. The use of hashtags related to the theme will enable customers to find other posts with the similar theme.

Just like Aksara, Post selects and organizes their book collection conscientiously (in fact, the two bookstores cooperate in planning the regular theme). The curation of the books can be seen in their Instagram posts, like the post published on May 17, 2019 (Fig. 8). The image in this post shows a number of book titles published by three independent publishers, namely Ultimus, Tanda Baca, and Dialog Pustaka. Books by independent publishers usually discuss sensitive and even controversial issues that cannot be accepted by major publishers; consequently, these books rarely can be found in major bookstores. On the other hand, independent bookstores offer opportunities for these



Fig. 7. Invitation for “Membaca Ulang Perempuan Taman Siswa

books to be sold, supporting the idea of localism which supports fellow local businesses. Another thing that can be noted from this post is how the books are arranged with solid color background so followers can see all of the covers clearly.

Not only talking about books and literary scene, Post also ask their followers to discuss current critical issues in their posts. In a post published on September 21, 2018 (Fig. 9), cooperating with @neverokayproject, Post invites their followers to share their ideas about how to stop sexual harassment in workplaces. The responses to this post are various. One follower states that to avoid sexual harassment, strict policies should be applied in the office. Meanwhile, another follower suggests the use of CCTV to monitor any misconduct that might happen in the workplace. Not only using its Instagram for business purposes, Post also uses its feed to talk about important social issues with a hope that the discussion will broaden the followers’ perspective and even offer solutions to the problems.



418 likes

post_santa Selamat memulai akhir pekan teman-teman. Buku-buku dari Ultimus baru saja tiba kembali, termasuk judul barunya yang berisi tulisan-tulisan dari pengembaraan Asahan Alham. Juga baru tiba esai-esai Irfan Afifi yang diterbitkan penerbit Tanda Baca dan penelitian Sudarno tentang politik kolonisasi pemerintah Hindia Belanda yang diterbitkan penerbit Dialog Pustaka.

Fig. 8. Books by independent publishers sold at Post



283 likes

post_santa Beberapa waktu lalu kami berkenalan dengan teman-teman @neverokayproject, inisiatif yang memperjuangkan agar ruang kerja bisa bebas dari pelecehan seksual. Saat mereka hendak mengadakan give away buku sebagai bagian dari kampanye mereka, kami tentu senang untuk bisa turut mendukung sebisanya. Jadi teman-teman, silakan mengunjungi Instagram mereka (@neverokayproject) dan ikuti tantangan IG story mereka untuk informasi lebih lanjut.

Fig. 9. Post’s Instagram post about sexual harrasment in workplaces

4 Conclusion

Finally, the analysis of Instagram posts by Aksara and Post shows how by adapting to technological changes, independent bookstores can maximize the use of social media to promote not only their business but also to support the values of community, curation, and convening. Furthermore, instead of resisting the technological shifts, independent bookstores can explore many features of Instagram to build a certain set of characteristics with which they want to be identified and to have more interactions with their customers anytime and anywhere (compared with a face-to-face interaction that requires specific time and place).

Furthermore, Instagram posts by Aksara and Post also convey the ideology of independent bookstores as a place of empowerment and resistance. By posting photos from their book-related events, both Aksara and Post show that these events not only strengthen the communal sense but also provide their customers with new knowledge and skills. Meanwhile, the resistance against mainstream publishing can be seen in their curation of books. Books posted in their Instagram accounts are books containing sensitive and even provocative issues which cannot be found easily in major bookstores. Besides the images, the captions that accompany them also help in constructing this concept of resistance. Through the captions, the customers are introduced to challenging topics and asked to participate in giving solutions to real problems in society.

Despite the swift development of technology, independent bookstores manage to survive with their own business mechanism and ideology. This paper manages to explore that phenomenon by focusing on the activities of independent bookstores in online platform. However, there are many more possible topics about independent bookstores in Indonesia that can be explored and discussed through diverse perspectives, for example Urban Studies and Marxism. Hopefully, this research can be a starting point for further studies about independent bookselling and publishing in Indonesia.

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