

Beyond Mutual Consent and Degradation of Human Values:

Lessons Learned

FROM INDONESIA'S TIKTOK BEGGING CHALLENGE PHENOMENON





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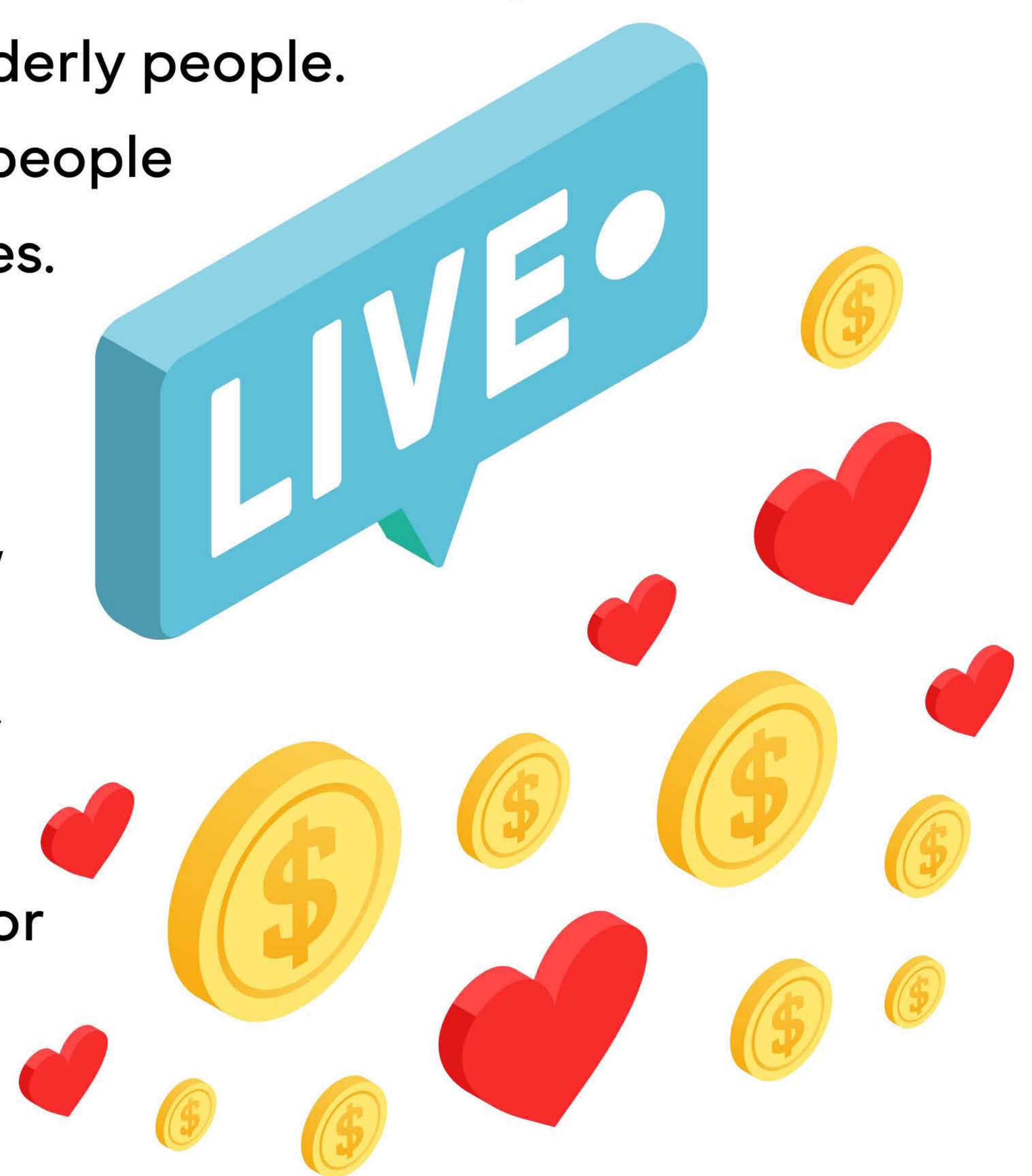
Introduction

Besides uploading content, creators often use TikTok's live feature to interact with their fans directly. This feature gives fans access to give gifts, often known as TikTok Gifts, to their favorite creators. The system of giving gifts is not difficult^[1]. Viewers only need to buy TikTok coins which can later be used to buy various kinds of gifts. From Rose-shaped gifts (1 coin), Lollipop-shaped gifts (10 coins), and Heart-shaped gifts (100 coins) to the most expensive of all, Lion-shaped gifts (29999 coins) and TikTok Universe-shaped gifts (34999 coins)^[2] can be bought using the coins. Later, creators, who receive these gifts, can withdraw the coins into rupiah. 1 TikTok coin itself is worth Rp 250. Thus, if a creator manages to get a Lion or TikTok Universe prize, the creator can get money ranging from Rp 7,499,750 to Rp 8,049,000^[3].

Of course, this feature invites a lot of interest from content creators. The more people who follow them on TikTok, the greater the range of income that can be achieved. Various types of live content are done by creators. Such as streaming their favorite games, selling their products, or, more often than not, holding challenges. As if they never run out of ideas, there is always something new in these ideas for the creators to go viral. Recently, in January 2023, the type of TikTok live challenge content that took Indonesian netizens by storm was the begging challenge by taking a mud bath by elderly people.

In this live challenge, there are several elderly people people who will take turns and sit in mud puddles.

If the number of viewers reaches the specified targets, they will splash their bodies bodies with the mud. The more viewers who watch, the bigger the media they use to splash their bodies with mud. This phenomenon quickly stole netizens' attention as it was considered dangerous content that should not be done for the sake of earning money.



The purpose of this case study is to dig deeper into the phenomenon of the TikTok begging challenge that victimized marginalized groups in Indonesia. Hopefully, this case study could see the bigger issues to be reflected in creating a safe and secure digital platform for users, especially for marginalized groups. This study case argues that there are three matters that we can learn from this phenomenon: 1) indirectly, viewers also have their own role in perpetuating harmful content, 2) there is a loophole in the existing harmful content regulation and in the code of ethics for content creators, and lastly, 3) the role of the government, through its cyber patrols, and TikTok, through its content moderation team, in monitoring harmful content in the digital space is still not maximized. This case study explores all the angles that have driven the persistence of these harmful live challenges: the role of multi-actors, stakeholder policies, and what should be done by all actors involved.

Content Creator and Talent of TikTok Begging Live Challenge: Possible Motives

Based on the interview done by an Indonesia TV program, both Sultan Akhyar (content creator of the mud bath TikTok live challenge) and grandmother Sari or Nenek Sari (talent of mud bath TikTok live challenge) had agreed to do the challenge with Nenek Sari's consent. Nenek Sari's consent was given without any coercion, though it was given to do the challenge that was against by all netizens. For citizens, this live challenge is a form of degradation of human values. The main reason why both decided to go blind on the accusation is that the income earned by both of them is much more decent than Nenek Sari's previous earnings as a farmer. By doing this live challenge, they can earn Rp 9,000,000 in an instant. According to the agreement, the two will split the earnings equally for both parties. From Nenek Sari's point of view, this job is not detrimental because it can help pay for her household needs, pay for her children's education, and help pay her debts, even though she has to shiver in the cold. Meanwhile, according to Sultan, he is even considered a hero in his village because he can help many elderly through the live mud bath challenge^[4].

However, even though consent has been given and the income has been shared equally, there are several things that may be a strong reason or motive for creators and talents to end up creating the content. The first fundamental motivation is economics. There is a high possibility that the economic situation of creators and talents is not sufficient^[5]. This condition, combined with a limited number of employment opportunities^[6], can also lead to frustration for creators, so they ultimately choose to beg through the TikTok platform. Income generated by begging through TikTok has been found to reach millions of rupiahs per day^[7]. Virality on the internet means making easy money. Bearing in mind Nenek Sari's statement, as long as money is easily available, criticism from various parties doesn't need to be cared for.



The context also overlaps with the psychological problems of creators who do not bother to raise funds^[8] by working as is commonly done. Just begging on TikTok allows them to get the income they want without realizing that what they are doing violates moral values and humanity. This statement is supported by psychologist Ifa Hanifah Misbach, who stated that begging for TikTok is a depiction of a person's mental state of being unable to delay gratification: "I try as little as possible, but I want as many results as."^[9]

The next notion is a clue that talent isn't really tech-savvy or technologically literate^[10]. In fact, there is a suspicion that the talent doesn't really understand consent. Talent may not fully understand how jobs, regulations, and policies apply. Perhaps their understanding is limited to agreements where content is paid for after it is produced. This is also the "homework" for many stakeholders, especially digital literacy activists, as there are still many social issues related to digital technologies that the wider community does not understand yet. Actors can use this ignorance as a loophole to take advantage of marginalized groups. This includes creating immoral content that goes viral on the internet.

TikTok and the role of For Your Page's algorithm

It is also important to understand how TikTok's algorithm works in displaying content to each of its users. This is because both algorithms and the pattern of user behavior are the combinations that produce trends on TikTok. The algorithm is a part of TikTok's role as a platform that can manage data. TikTok algorithm is personalized for each account^[11]. This personalization has multiple reference databases, including video models viewed, user interaction patterns, details of video content viewed, and account settings such as preferred language and account owner location. Also, TikTok tends not to repeat content that users have marked as disliked content^[12]. This data forms a recommendation system to be sent to each account's For Your Page. In fact, repetition of such content can lead to strengthening user beliefs^[13] in the content consumed. TikTok's algorithm can also increase the spread of harmful content. Research^[14] related to TikTok's algorithm showed that it encourages content that promotes waiting disorders and self-harm among US teenagers. This indicates that TikTok's algorithm itself helps the spread of harmful content, including TikTok live challenges.

Viewers and how they perpetuate harmful content

Aside from the role of TikTok's algorithm that helps the spread of harmful content, it should be understood that other TikTok account users can also be a factor in perpetuating malicious content. Because the position of other users as viewers also determines how similar content persists, is replicated, or quickly disappears. Many agree that begging for content on TikTok disrespects or undermines human values^[15], acts immorally, or ignores social norms. This humiliation is not only perpetrated by the creators (and talents), but can also be perpetrated indirectly by the viewers, especially those with money. It is feared that these viewers end up "supporting" similar content by giving money (via TikTok's gifting feature) to gain empathy. This is dangerous to the extent it could motivate creators and talent to keep making similar content, or to make it even worse.

Why do viewers who donate out of empathy play an important role in the sustainability of similar content? Another factor to explain is the issue of age-based psychological characteristics. According to TikTok's data, the platform's user age group is dominated by young adults^[16] aged 18-24 (39.91%), followed by those aged 13-17 (27.27%). increase. 25-34 years old (25.11%), and the rest are users over 35 years old. This shows that begging content works by asking content audiences for empathy^[17] on a platform dominated by the working age. Personality traits in this productive or working age group tend to be more empathetic than other age groups. There are many targets that can be attacked with this sense of empathy, potentially perpetuating this dangerous content.

Not only do viewers donate out of empathy, but there are also some viewers who blatantly support harmful content. Viewers in this category will demand similar challenges, or even will demand more disturbing ones, such as asking the talents to drink muddy water^[18]. Viewers have a role as a "demand supplier". The presence of this type of viewer also determines whether content will survive on the platform or not. The viewers' role in demanding for such content then maintains the trend of online begging challenge, by keeping the content viral and continuing the discussion about it. Another Tik Tok Begging Live Challenge content creator, Sadam Husain stated that, as long as immoral content goes viral, he will continue to create similar content^[19]. If similar content stops being viral, he will not continue it. This could indicate: (1) virality plays a role in similar content and (2) there is an opportunity to create other trends that are potentially worse.

Viewers who give gifts out of empathy and who actually want creators to do worse challenges are in the same position in raising the demand for similar content. The point is in the act of giving gifts (known as saweran, "throwing money") to creators when they perform an action. In other words, the viewer's motives are actual actions, not intentions. Of course, no one could judge someone's intentions. What we all need to understand is that giving gifts is the primary goal of immoral content creators. They don't need to check if the giver is gifting with empathetic intent to discourage similar content, or if it's actually driving them even crazier. Creators will continue to act as long as they have received the gift or other offering they still want.

Response and Next Steps

TikTok Ver.

In response to this phenomenon, TikTok representatives^[20] in Indonesia also issued several statements. TikTok Indonesia only issued formal statements such as how they were concerned about the talent in the mud bath content. They encourage TikTok users not to participate in activities that could endanger them. It will be good if TikTok viewers can contribute to making TikTok a safe and secure place for everyone. Viewers can play a role by reporting content that is considered harmful through the available report features. However, to what extent can this response reduce the production of harmful content?

This case study tried to see a similar case. TikTok begging live challenge in Indonesia is not the first begging content in TikTok. This type of content had been done before by displaced families in Syrian camps^[21]. Using the same method, they put their children in front of the camera to beg in TikTok live to gain financial support. This phenomenon invited curiosity and suspicion from many.

BBC tried to report 30 accounts yet TikTok did not take the report seriously. Those accounts were still given access to TikTok for they didn't violate any regulations. More than that, TikTok turned out to also earn bigger profit from the content. The money received by these families is only a small fraction of the whole profit generated by the content. Based on the result of the investigation, approximately, TikTok took 69% from the charity raised raised from the content^[22].





Judging from the formal statement of TikTok Indonesia's representation and similar cases, of course TikTok as a platform still has a lot of homework to do in creating a safe and secure digital space. We also tried to take a look at platform policies and found a Code of Ethics for social media, content creators, and bloggers^[23]. The Code of Ethics developed by Norwegia sets out a number of rules and responsibilities for creators, such as providing honest information to the best of its ability (both knowledge and positioning in content submission), vouching for the validity of the sources used, and providing honest clarifications if needed. Unfortunately, there is no code of ethics for authors that specifically prohibits the creation of content that degrades human values. This state branches into two: 1) the need to update the community guidelines to reflect rules related to ethical content, and 2) the importance of personal guidelines for multiple stakeholders involved in the platform. A code of ethics for social media, content creators, and bloggers can be a good first step. It is therefore important for Indonesia to adopt and update several elements of the Code of Ethics.

TikTok can also play a role in setting policy for the platform by technically and ethically reinforcing the role of Content Moderators^[24] as an internal team of the platform. The repetition of several live challenge incidents in recent years has left TikTok with content that may be deemed dangerous and/or contain risks and demeaning human values. In fact, the role of Content Moderators on TikTok is to ensure that the platform addresses objectionable or disturbing content that may contain violent imagery, animal cruelty, hate speech, violent extremism, or content that exploits or harms children. We hope that platform can really optimize the performance of Content Moderators as an internal part of it. They are at the forefront of monitoring content on TikTok to ensure it complies with applicable Ethics Codes. In the long run, we hope another immoral challenge (perhaps even worse than the current one) doesn't repeat itself^[25].

Confusion could be seen from how the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo) responded to the phenomenon^[26]. Kominfo couldn't quickly decide on whether the TikTok begging challenge can be categorized as negative content or not. This is because the content is not included in six types of harmful content acknowledged by the Government of Indonesia (GOI)^[27]; pornography, gambling, radicalism, hoaxes, terrorism, prostitution, and/or violence against children. In fact, such content can fall into the category of harmful content to the extent that it exploits the elderly, children, people with disabilities, and/or other vulnerable groups through begging on social media. This is also reflected in the government sector, where the Ministry of Social Affairs (Kemensos) issued Circular Letter (SE) Number 2 of 2023 concerning Controlling Exploitation Activities and/or Begging Activities that Utilize the Elderly, Children, Persons with Disabilities, and/or Other Vulnerable Groups^[28]. Another action taken by the Indonesian government was to visit the home of Nenek Sari to provide empowerment in the form of business facilities and infrastructure. Hopefully, this assistance can improve her economic condition^[29]. This paper argues that this is not a solutive action considering that Nenek Sari is only one of several content talents who are willing to beg through TikTok live challenges. On the other hand, in response to the government's statement to stop this harmful content, Nenek Sari stated that she will only stop if the government is willing to cover her living expenses^[30].

Just like usual, the government has taken these actions only after Indonesian netizens blew up the case on social media and pressured them to take action. In fact, in its response, Kominfo also claimed that they often monitor contents that are circulating on social media using three methods^[31]; through an automatic machine or Automatic Identification System (AIS), Cyber Patrol, and also reports from the public. This then raises the question, to what extent Indonesia's cyber patrols are effective in monitoring harmful content circulating on social media? The pattern where the government will only respond to negative content only after it goes viral on social media is like a vicious circle that continues to be repeated without any effort to stop it.

The mud bath live challenge is not the only type of harmful content that people are willing to do in order to go viral on the internet. Around January 2023, there was also a new form of harmful content emerged in social media. The challenge was to crash yourself into a passing truck. A teenager died because he was desperate to make his content viral on the internet^[32]. The idea that going viral can bring fame and easy money seems to have taken root among people who are willing to pay for the content with their lives. Many types of harmful content that are still roaming free in the digital space should quickly make it onto the government's radar for further reflection and action. The government needs to maximize its cyber patrol program, which it claims is always actively monitoring. Maximizing monitoring through cyber patrols is important so that the government can swiftly respond to harmful content, without having to wait for viral public pressure first. In addition, this monitoring can also show the real situation that transparently shows the amount of harmful content that is still hanging around, which is still ignored by the government. This will help the government realize the importance of improving digital education to the public as internet users, especially content creators who are willing to sacrifice their lives to go viral on the internet.

At the same time (01/23), through Kominfo and in collaboration with Bareskrim Polri, the government issued a statement regarding their cyber patrols. However, instead of being used to tighten surveillance amidst the abundance of harmful content, Kominfo seems to only maximize efforts to protect government interests. This can be seen from how the maximization of cyber patrols is used as a security strategy related to the 2024 presidential election. Surveillance on social media will be conducted 24/7 using a cyber drone surveillance system that can read numeric and alphabetical characters. This system is used to prevent and detect hoaxes and hate speech^[33]. It would be great if the government would put as much effort into monitoring harmful content in the digital space as they have put into guarding 2024 elections.

How the mud bath live challenge does not fall into the category of harmful content also indicates a gap in government policy. So, in addition to maximizing cyber patrols, the government also needs to see this phenomenon as a sign that there is an urgency to update regulations related to harmful and negative content. How content creators always have new ideas for circumventing harmful content policies indicates the potential for something similar to happen again in the future. Therefore, a discussion on how the government will prevent and deal with similar issues needs to be held immediately. Until this case study was written, other than pragmatic measures taken by the government to defuse criticism from the public, there has been no action taken by the government to end this vicious cycle.

Conclusion

The emergence of the begging phenomenon in the TikTok live challenge Indonesia shows that this is not only a matter of consent that has been given and the degradation of human values. More than that, this phenomenon also shows that there are more significant problems. First, it is not only creators and talents who perpetuate harmful content, but also the viewers. Second, it is common knowledge that digital space is gray and has no clear boundaries. This indicates that loopholes in regulations will always exist. Thus, efforts to continue maximizing regulations must never stop for the goal is to minimize the potential emergence of new harmful content ideas. Finally, the role of the government and digital platforms in improving digital literacy and monitoring the circulation of harmful content in the digital space is necessary so that a safe and secure digital space can be realized, especially for marginalized people so that their consent can be avoided from any kind of exploitation.



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