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# Digital Communication Strategies of Homeless Accounts in Building Engagement on Instagram Platform

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## Abstract

This study investigates the digital communication strategies employed by “homeless accounts” non-formal, anonymously managed Instagram entities to build substantial engagement. Addressing the lack of scholarly attention to non-institutional media actors in Indonesia, this research examines how these accounts construct content typologies and apply strategic communication methods through a qualitative design combining non-participant digital observation and content analysis of 556 purposively selected accounts. The findings indicate that homeless accounts rely on viral-prone themes, emotional storytelling, and highly adaptive use of platform features such as reels, stories, and interactive stickers to maximize reach and resonance. These strategies collectively shape a communication pattern characterized by authenticity, algorithmic awareness, and dialogue-driven audience interaction, enabling these accounts to cultivate what may be termed a digital empathy community. The results further show that engagement is strengthened through a three-stage cycle consisting of trend-based pre-production, authenticity-centered production, and feedback-oriented post-production. This study concludes that homeless accounts demonstrate how digital influence can be generated outside traditional media structures through emotional resonance, participatory interaction, and platform-specific optimization. At the same time, concerns related to accountability and misinformation highlight the need for improved digital literacy and platform-level safeguards to support responsible communication.

## KEYWORDS

digital communication strategy; instagram; homeless media; engagement; content strategy.

## Introduction

Within Indonesia’s rapidly expanding digital landscape, Instagram has emerged as a strategic arena for diverse actors to communicate and interact with broad audiences, particularly through the phenomenon of “homeless accounts” non-formal, anonymously managed entities that operate without institutional affiliation (Apriliyanti et al., 2024). These accounts embody new forms of grassroots digital participation in which influence is built through platform affordances rather than organizational structures, allowing them to disseminate information and shape online narratives. Empirical data underscores the prevalence of this phenomenon. From a categorization of numerous identified Instagram accounts in Indonesia, a significant proportion were classified as homeless media, and these accounts demonstrated follower counts ranging from thousands to hundreds of thousands (Puspitoningrum, 2025). This shift signals how audience trust is increasingly oriented toward creator-driven authenticity rather than formal institutional authority, particularly among younger demographics sensitive to visual relevance and

narrative immediacy (Malawat & Hariyanto, 2024).

While prior studies have explored various aspects of digital participation, little attention has been given to how anonymity, emotional authenticity, and non-institutional influence function collectively as strategic resources. Previous research indicates that emotional narratives play essential roles in digital engagement, particularly in the construction of audience attachment through personalized storytelling (Cahyani, 2020). Algorithmic visibility is also noted as a key determinant in shaping content reach and audience growth, demonstrating how visual optimization and trend adaptation influence engagement flows (Chandra, 2023). Studies further reveal that framing techniques used by homeless media accounts highlight immediacy and relatability, which contribute to rapid audience interaction (Fadhilah & Nurjanah, 2024). Moreover, dialogic communication is identified as a critical component in sustaining digital communities through consistent reciprocal interactions (Permadani & Nurudin, 2023). Despite these relevant findings, no study has comprehensively mapped how anonymous homeless accounts integrate emotional mechanisms, algorithmic awareness, and dialogic interaction into interconnected strategies capable of building substantial and sustained engagement.

Based on this comprehensive background, this research focuses on analyzing the digital communication strategies implemented by homeless accounts on Instagram. The emphasis is on understanding how anonymous and non-institutional actors develop influence structures that function independently of formal media systems while maintaining high levels of audience participation. This perspective offers vital implications for understanding how digital communities operate as platform-based publics shaped by participatory culture and algorithmic dynamics (Leaver et al., 2020).

This study is guided by two research questions: (1) What types of content are published by homeless accounts on the Instagram platform? (2) How are the digital communication strategies implemented by homeless accounts to build engagement on the Instagram platform? These questions aim to identify and analyze the operational logic, narrative patterns, and strategic practices applied by these non-institutional digital actors. Accordingly, the objectives of this study are: (1) to identify and categorize the types of content published by homeless accounts on the Instagram platform, and (2) to analyze the digital communication strategies used by homeless accounts to build and sustain engagement on the Instagram platform. These objectives provide a structured framework for systematically examining the dynamics of homeless media operations within contemporary digital ecosystems.

## Methods

### Research Type

This study employed a qualitative design that combined digital ethnography with content analysis to examine the content types and communication strategies used by homeless Instagram accounts. The qualitative approach was selected to enable an in-depth interpretation of symbolic patterns, platform-specific practices, and contextual meanings embedded within homeless media interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Digital ethnography provided the observational grounding

necessary to understand everyday behaviors on the platform, while content analysis allowed systematic identification of thematic structures within uploaded content (Krippendorff, 2018). This combined design made it possible to capture both behavioral and interpretive dimensions of how engagement is constructed.

Methodologically, this study extends prior work by applying a large-scale qualitative content analysis to 556 homeless accounts, offering one of the most comprehensive empirical mappings of this phenomenon to date. This scale provides a deeper basis for comparing narrative patterns, visual formats, and strategic practices across accounts, thereby broadening methodological contributions to digital communication scholarship (Miles et al., 2014). The integration of digital ethnography further strengthens the robustness of the approach by capturing how content circulates within dynamic, rapidly shifting platform ecologies (Patton, 2015). This methodological synthesis positions the study as an important reference for future analyses of non-institutional digital actors

### Population and Sample/Informants

The population for this research comprised all identified homeless Instagram accounts operating in Indonesia, defined by their non-formal management, anonymity, and lack of institutional affiliation. Accounts were initially identified through a manual search using specific hashtags (e.g., #infoviral, #mediasocial) and cross-referenced with previous datasets from local digital communication studies. Employing a purposive sampling technique, 556 accounts were selected to ensure they were information-rich and representative of the phenomenon under investigation (Miles et al., 2014). The selection criteria were: (1) prior categorization as a homeless media account, (2) a minimum follower count of 10,000 to ensure a substantial audience base, (3) demonstrably active posting within the three months preceding data collection, and (4) a calculated engagement rate of at least 2%, indicating a meaningful level of audience interaction.

### Research Location

The research was conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Communication and Digital Technology (Kominfo) of the Republic of Indonesia, which provided contextual relevance for understanding the regulatory framework within which these accounts operate. The study period spanned three months, from September 8 to December 10, 2025. This location was strategically chosen due to its central role in digital communication policy, regulation, and oversight in Indonesia, providing access to relevant regulatory frameworks and policy perspectives that informed the contextual understanding of the research phenomenon.

### Instrumentation or Tools

The researcher served as the primary data collection instrument, supported by a structured coding sheet specifically tailored for analyzing Instagram content. The coding sheet was adapted from the robust social media analysis framework developed by Buchory & Sukmawati, (2022), with significant modifications to capture the unique affordances and culture of the Instagram platform (Agustriana, 2024). The instrument included the following components: (1) basic quantitative metrics (follower count, likes, comments, shares, saves), (2) content type and format (posts, reels, stories, carousel posts), (3) dominant content themes (viral information, entertainment, social trends, local information), (4) utilization of native Instagram features (hashtags, visual effects, interactive stickers), and (5) qualitative patterns of audience interaction. To ensure

reliability and validity, the coding sheet underwent content validity testing via expert judgment and inter-coder reliability testing using Krippendorff's Alpha, with a minimum target coefficient of 0.7.

#### Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted using a triangulated approach that incorporated non-participant digital observation, qualitative content analysis, and a literature review to reinforce credibility and reliability. Non-participant observation allowed the researcher to document posting frequencies, visual patterns, narrative styles, and audience responses in a natural setting without influencing account behavior (Azzahra & Masitoh, 2025). Qualitative content analysis was applied to identify symbolic patterns, textual structures, and interactive strategies embedded in the content, enabling systematic categorization aligned with the research objectives (Krippendorff, 2018). The literature review provided theoretical grounding and supported analytical interpretation by linking empirical findings with established digital communication frameworks.

Triangulation across these three methods enhanced the study's methodological rigor by allowing cross-verification of patterns observed throughout the dataset (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Observational insights about engagement spikes, content variation, and audience reactions were compared with coded analytical patterns to ensure consistency and validity. Literature-based theoretical insights also strengthened interpretive depth by linking observed practices with broader concepts such as dialogic communication, emotional resonance, and algorithmic adaptation (Barry et al., 2012). This multilayered approach generated a robust and credible dataset that effectively supports the study's analytical claims.

#### Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study followed the iterative interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three concurrent flows: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data reduction involved selecting, simplifying, and organizing observational notes and coded content into meaningful categories that aligned with the research objectives. During this stage, the researcher identified recurrent narrative patterns, visual structures, and interactive elements that appeared across the 556 analyzed accounts. These patterns were then carefully categorized using a coding framework that reflected emotional, algorithmic, and dialogic communication dimensions, ensuring analytical consistency grounded in established qualitative procedures (Baser et al., 2023). This process facilitated the extraction of symbolic, structural, and behavioral elements essential to understanding homeless account communication strategies.

The next stage of analysis involved data display and conclusion drawing, which allowed the researcher to visually map relationships among themes and formulate analytical interpretations. Organized matrices and thematic charts were developed to compare strategic tendencies across accounts, reveal cross-cutting narrative techniques, and isolate distinctive engagement patterns shaped by platform affordances (Miles et al., 2014). Through repeated verification cycles, findings were refined by aligning emergent patterns with theoretical constructs in digital engagement, dialogic communication, and algorithmic adaptation (Johnston & Taylor, 2022). This analytical model ensured that conclusions derived from

the dataset were trustworthy, theoretically grounded, and capable of explaining how homeless accounts construct systemic engagement within Instagram's dynamic communication environment.

## Result and Discussion

#### Content Types Published by Homeless Accounts on the Instagram Platform

The content produced by homeless accounts is dominated by themes with strong viral potential, including localized information, light-hearted entertainment, and inspirational or motivational narratives (Angelin & Paramita, 2024). These accounts frequently rely on reels, stories, carousel posts, and short-form updates aligned with Instagram's algorithmic preference for rapid, visually engaging content (Chandra, 2023). Informal language, humor, and trend-based visual elements increase relatability and support higher chances of appearing on the Explore page (Leaver et al., 2020). This demonstrates a clear strategic intent to maximize visibility by combining thematic relevance with aesthetic appeal and platform-optimized formatting.

In addition to thematic consistency, these accounts display notable agility in responding to emerging trends and audience preferences. Approximately 70% of observed content incorporated trending audio, viral templates, or visual cues designed to capture immediate attention and encourage rapid sharing. This approach aligns with the platform's algorithm, which prioritizes content that provokes quick engagement spikes (Febriyanti et al., 2024). The ability of homeless accounts to continuously adapt to shifting discourse, capitalize on platform-specific affordances, and integrate audience cues contributes significantly to sustained engagement and positions them as dynamic actors within Instagram's digital ecosystem.

#### Digital Communication Strategies Used by Homeless Accounts to Build Engagement on the Instagram Platform

Homeless accounts build engagement primarily through emotionally resonant narratives crafted to foster authenticity, identification, and personal connection with audiences. Visual storytelling techniques highlighting personal struggles, community issues, or sentimental reflections are commonly used to evoke empathy and generate meaningful emotional responses (Yulistiani, 2025). These narrative styles encourage audiences to actively participate by commenting, sharing experiences, and engaging in dialogic exchanges. This approach reflects the principles of emotional branding in digital environments, where authenticity becomes a central resource for strengthening relational bonds (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2025).

In addition to emotional resonance, platform-specific strategies play a critical role in maximizing visibility and audience reach. Homeless accounts strategically utilize Instagram's algorithmic architecture by employing consistent posting schedules, targeted hashtags, trending audio, and visually compelling aesthetic elements that align with current platform patterns (Febriyanti et al., 2024). Through this adaptive use of algorithmic cues, these accounts maintain high discoverability despite lacking formal media structures or institutional legitimacy. This approach reflects a sophisticated understanding of how digital influence is shaped by the interplay between content practices and platform mechanics (Sklar, 2021).

The narratives and interactive practices used by these accounts also facilitate the formation of what can be termed a "digital empathy community." Through sustained dialogic exchanges, including direct message responses, comment

engagements, and interactive story features such as polls and question boxes, audiences experience a sense of belonging and emotional investment in the shared narratives (Place, 2019). This relational shift transforms audience participation from transactional interactions into deeper, more enduring community bonds. The consistent reinforcement of shared experience enables homeless accounts to cultivate affective loyalty, which becomes a key mechanism for sustaining long-term engagement (Hanifah et al., 2022).

The communication strategies identified in this study can be systematically categorized into a three-stage model: pre-production, production, and post-production. The pre-production stage involves continuous monitoring of trends, audience sentiment mapping, and strategic scheduling aimed at aligning with algorithmic rhythms. The production stage emphasizes the creation of content that balances authenticity with interactive cues tailored to audience expectations. The post-production stage includes rapid feedback responses, assessment of engagement metrics, and iterative refinement of future content strategies (Miles et al., 2014). These findings demonstrate that homeless accounts operationalize digital empathy as a core strategic resource, distinguishing their engagement cycles from those of institutional media actors and providing a conceptual model for understanding non-formal digital influence.

The findings demonstrate that homeless accounts develop sophisticated communication strategies combining emotional authenticity, narrative personalization, and algorithmic optimization to build substantial audience engagement. Their approach aligns with theories of emotional branding and narrative communication, where identification and emotional resonance form the basis of audience loyalty (Chakti, 2019). The emphasis on authenticity responds to shifting expectations among younger demographics who prioritize relatability over production polish (Malawat & Hariyanto, 2024).

Compared to formal media institutions, homeless accounts rely on decentralized and adaptive communication models that prioritize community-driven interaction. Their use of algorithmic features such as hashtags, trending music, and visual effects further strengthens visibility within platform architectures (Fadhilah & Nurjanah, 2024). This extends understanding of how non-institutional actors appropriate platform functionalities to cultivate influence without structural authority.

Conceptually, this study extends existing frameworks of digital influence by demonstrating that emotional authenticity and algorithmic adaptation can substitute for

institutional credibility in generating sustained engagement (Nopianti & Triyono, 2025). This insight illustrates how participatory digital spaces reward relational resonance rather than hierarchical authority, highlighting the evolution of trust-building in online environments. The emergence of hybrid influence models within decentralized content ecosystems reinforces broader discussions on media democratization and platform governance (Gershon, 2024).

Nevertheless, challenges remain. The anonymous and unregulated nature of homeless accounts introduces risks related to misinformation, limited accountability, and potential misuse of influence (Marler, 2022). These issues underscore the need for platform-led interventions and digital literacy initiatives to support ethical content practices and enhance the reliability of information dissemination within digital communities (Mahesh, 2025).

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that homeless accounts on Instagram employ sophisticated strategies that generate substantial engagement outside traditional media frameworks. Their success is shaped by emotional authenticity, algorithmic optimization, and participatory communication practices that collectively foster digital empathy communities. These communities develop through continuous narrative interaction, reinforcing relational bonds that function independently of formal media structures.

The novelty of this study lies in theorizing homeless accounts as non-institutional digital empathy communities structured through a three-stage engagement cycle that redefines how trust and influence are constructed on Instagram (Salma & Albab, 2023). This conceptualization contributes to ongoing discussions on media democratization by highlighting the strategic capacities of anonymous actors who operate within decentralized platform ecologies (Leaver et al., 2020).

Acknowledging limitations including single-platform focus and Indonesian contextual boundaries, this study recommends future research to utilize longitudinal analysis of strategy evolution and comparative platform-based investigations (Johnston & Taylor, 2022). Further research on ethical considerations, misinformation risk, and audience perception of anonymous media actors would provide valuable understanding for navigating the implications of rapidly expanding informal digital communities (Marler, 2022).

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