

Bookstagram Community's Book Review: A Reciprocal Ethnography Study

I Gede Satwika Bayu Darma, Sherina Friskila Nurtiara, Rebecca Amanda, Rosi Nindyana,
Moh. Naufal Rifki Meisandy

Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia

dharmabayu@student.ub.ac.id, officialtiara@student.ub.ac.id, rebeccamnda@student.ub.ac.id,
rosinindyana@student.ub.ac.id, naufalmeisandy@student.ub.ac.id

Abstract

This article aims to deliver the results of our study on one of bookstagram community's activities, namely book review. The study focuses on how the activity serves as a tradition that shapes the community's identity. Employing reciprocal ethnography approach, we found that the book review activity (which is done repeatedly and continuously) is a form of invented tradition that confirms the community's motive to influence readers to read and understand the reviewed books in various perspectives, in addition to getting in touch and creating bonds with other book readers. The review is a process carried out by bookstagrammers (nickname for bookstagram community's members) to deliver their understanding about certain books in different point of views. In addition, discussion and talks on Instagram elicited by the bookstagrammers' reviews in the form of comments show that this tradition has significantly become a part of the community's identity.

Keywords: Bookstagram Community, book review, reciprocal ethnography

Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menyampaikan hasil studi kami pada salah satu kegiatan Komunitas Bookstagram yaitu bedah buku. Kajian difokuskan pada bagaimana aktivitas tersebut menjadi tradisi yang membentuk jati diri komunitas tersebut. Dengan pendekatan etnografi resiprokal, kami menemukan bahwa kegiatan bedah buku (yang dilakukan berulang-ulang dan terus menerus) merupakan salah satu bentuk tradisi ciptaan yang mengonfirmasi motif komunitas tersebut untuk mempengaruhi pembaca agar dapat tertarik membaca dan memahami buku yang dibedah dalam berbagai perspektif, selain sebagai sarana untuk saling berinteraksi dan saling mengenal satu sama lain diantara para penikmat buku. Bedah buku adalah proses yang dilakukan oleh para bookstagrammers (sebutan bagi para anggota komunitas bookstagram) untuk menyajikan hasil pemahaman mereka tentang buku tertentu dari berbagai sudut pandang. Selain itu, diskusi dan perbincangan di Instagram yang dipicu oleh ulasan-ulasan para bookstagrammers berupa komentar menunjukkan bahwa tradisi ini telah menjadi bagian yang signifikan dari identitas komunitas tersebut.

Kata kunci: Komunitas Bookstagram, bedah buku, etnografi resiprokal

INTRODUCTION

With over 1 billion users worldwide (Omnicores, 2020), Instagram is currently the fastest growing social media platform. A significant number of users have used this social media as a forum of discussion and review, including those who love to spread the vibe of reading books via the so-called "bookstagram" (Pope, 2019). Referring from *The Guardian* (2019), the

popularity of bookstagram community can be justified through the use of tag that, "has been used on over 35m Instagram posts, and even the more popular bookstagrammers have upwards of 100,000 followers (for comparison, the Instagram for the New York Times book section has about 69,000 followers). Their posts are usually related to book reviews, discussion, or book suggestions".

However, comparing with other Instagram influencers who can earn much money from their posts, bookstagrammers usually aren't paid for their content because they, usually, simply share about books or reading activity because of their interest. Anyone can start a bookstagram account for any motive. Some of the reasons are, "(a) you are excited about books and want to try a new hobby linked to books; (b) you have a blog or business relevant to books, and you want to use Instagram to generate publicity; (c) you might get some free book swag from authors or publishers; (d) you might get affiliate commissions from companies looking for reps via bookstagram" (TCK Publishing, n.d.).

Each bookstagrammer has their own story with this online community. In her personal website, Sintia Astarina (an Indonesian bookstagrammer who has approximately 15,300 followers) explained that she did not have serious purpose in joining bookstagram. When she knew about bookstagram, she felt like it was a heaven for her. Therefore, she did not hesitate to make a bookstagram account (Astarina, 2017). Another bookstagrammer, Jordan Moblo (@jordys.book.club), a 35-year-old bookstagrammer from Los Angeles, said that Bookstagram has become his "favorite creative outlet." He said:

"It's really quirky—you discover all these mini worlds are here," he says. I discover new books, I feel like I'm getting an education in writers that I wouldn't usually read, and I'm making friends with whom I keep in touch on a regular basis. There are so many ways of using this to your advantage."

One of the activities done by the bookstagrammers is book review. A book review (or book report) is a type of criticism in which a book is evaluated based on material, style, and merit. It is a type of literature review which is also done in newspapers or in academic environment. According to Arlene Fink (2002) a literature review is "a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners." This finding bridges the relation between the study about book review as a contemporary cultural practice and the practice done by bookstagram community. In view of cultural practice, the book reviewing activity conducted by bookstagrammers can be identified as tradition, because: first, it is done repeatedly and continuously by them. Second, the bookstagram community, as a group, is established or verified by this activity, and third, the group members recognize it as something that has a certain value and needs to be done (Simon, 2016). A group of people who share something in common is a community. The bookstagram community is defined by the shared characteristics of the people in it and/or by the power of the links between them. They are somehow similar, who feel a sense of belonging or interpersonal relation.

In regard to the aforementioned explanation, we decided to conduct a study on book review activities in cultural perspective by getting to know the motive and the significance of the community for bookstagrammers, given the fact that they are the activists

who intend to spread out the interest of reading.

METHODOLOGY

Book review done by bookstagram community can be perceived as social activity involving tradition. Thus, we apply reciprocal ethnography proposed by Elaine Lawless. Lawless (1993) argued that reciprocal knowledge, in the best sense, is exchanging and developing knowledge based on conversation and shared/reviewed/re-examined knowledge. The use of reciprocal ethnography approach to analyse the book review tradition done by bookstagram community is expected to reveal the motive behind the tradition they do in their bookstagram account. Lawless (1993) extended the idea of reciprocal ethnography more into a collaborative process among performers, consultants, folklorist, scholars and the public in general which involves a series of dialogues as a part of the interpretation (Titon, 1980). Lawless (1993) proposed some steps to conduct reciprocal ethnography. Firstly, the folklorist returns to the group being studied. It means that the folklorist is involved in the group that is being studied to get more information from the member of the group, thus the interpretation is more accurate. Secondly, the folklorist brings the analysis to the group which is part of the collaborative process. The recent analysis is discussed with the member of the group. Lastly, the folklorist ascertains the response to be in line with the interpretation. Therefore, the implementation of data analysis includes: (1) interviewing (online) the members of the community (2) clustering the data

based on the chosen topic (3) interpreting the data and (4) confirming data interpretation by doing further discussion with the members of the group.

FINDING(S) AND DISCUSSION

Applying purposive sampling, we gathered ten bookstagrammers, they are Anggarani (the owner of @herwayoflife), Alya (the owner of @alyaalebooks), Dyantie (the owner of @bookshereads), Lala (the owner of @lalabookland), Mutia (the owner of @mutiaindahns), Jenny (the owner of @kangenpuisi), Al Rizky Pratama (the owner of @ikyreads) Afy Zia (the owner of @splendidwords), Rita (the owner of @onlymelavrita) and Sintia Astarina (the owner of @sintiawithbooks). The chosen bookstagrammers serve as informants for our research. They are chosen from different background and number of followers to see if the book reviewing is and has been a tradition among the bookstagram community, either they are new to the community or have been there for a quite a long time. We are elaborating the interpretation using Lawless (1992) steps of reciprocal ethnography, involving collaborative process between the researchers and the informants to gain the exact interpretation we intend to formulate.

Regarding the motive, there are a lot of different opinions raised by the informants. First, Dyantie said that her motivation to make Bookstagram account was for gaining more enthusiasm in reading. Different from Dyantie, Lala shared that her motivation was actually just sharing about reading. However, the big goal

was actually to get people to enjoy reading more. Because she knew that the country is reportedly having low reading interest. Her account also exists for “experiments” to confirm it. She hoped her bookstagram account could become a gathering place for readers. From those opinions, we can conclude that bookstagram community is formed from personal interest about reading, but then it is intended to influence other people to enjoy reading more.

There are many bookstagram accounts that have their own content characteristics. At this point they can be called as content creators, because content creators are people who are responsible for the contribution of information to any media and most especially to digital media. They usually target a specific end-user/audience in specific contexts (Sarah, 2018). Regarding this context, our informants have their own opinions. Rani said that her content comprises book reviews, quotes from books, book recommendations and responses from fellow bookstagrammer about her post. Another bookstagrammer, Lala, said that in addition to book reviews she also discusses anything related to the book with her followers. Completing her fellow bookstagrammers’ opinions, Alya adds that the delivery of the content depends on who has the account. Generally, it is just to set the tone for the feeds. Differences in feeds characteristics make readers recognize these informants as bookstagrammers.

Although bookstagrammers have their own reasons for creating their accounts, they have something in common which is creating bonds with others who love reading. According to

Alya bookstagram community is a paradise for book lovers because she can share the value of books that she has read, get many friends who like books, have friends to read together, and even send a package to each other. This statement also seems to be supported by Jenny who really likes to read a book, and wants to interact more with other people. Furthermore, bookstagram offers more than just a place for sharing book reviews. Another informant, Afy, said that due to her interest in photography and reading, she is able to express those hobbies through bookstagram posts. This is in line with Rita and Rani who claim to really like reading and photography.

Taking into account about reading habit, public literacy in Indonesia is worrying. According to UNESCO, the reading interest of Indonesian people is very alarming, only 0.001%. That is, out of 1,000 Indonesians, only 1 person is avid reader. Different research titled *World's Most Literate Nations Ranking* conducted by Central Connecticut State University in March 2016, Indonesia was ranked 60 out of 61 countries about reading interest, just below Thailand (59) and above Botswana (61). In fact, in terms of infrastructure assessment to support reading, Indonesia's ranking is above that of European countries (Devega, 2017). This has also become Dyantie's main reason of creating a bookstagram account, that is, “For gaining the enthusiasm in reading, and because the quality and quantity of reading books is getting low.” This intention is the same case with Lala, whose main goal is to be able to invite more and more people to read books. These reasons are what

determine their contents in their accounts.

One of the ways to promote interest in reading, which is also the main thing that characterizes bookstagram community, is posting reviews about books. One of the informants, Mutia, even has a regular schedule for posting a book review at least once a week. In fact, the activity of reviewing book can also be mutually beneficial for several parties. For example, one of the informants, Rizky, conducts book reviews by collaborating with the book authors directly or book publishers who have just published the book. This can be even more persuasive for the audience to read the reviewed book.

Bookstagrammers are influencers for their followers. They are often asked about book recommendations, especially by those who want to start getting into the world of reading. This is where the role of bookstagrammers to provide book recommendations is significant, and this has become one of the main contents in Rani's and Lala's bookstagram accounts. Furthermore, Lala also often discusses tips related to reading or books, such as how to take care of books. In order to anticipate bookstagram followers who start reading and get bored during the process (of constantly hooked to books), Afy gives interlude in her posts. In addition to book reviews and tips, she also discusses drama reviews, drama recommendations, and random talk sessions. She is very aware that to realize her goal in spreading the reading virus, as a bookstagrammer who is also an influencer, she must be able to understand the feelings or behavior of her followers, so that they do not see

that being someone who loves books is boring.

Bookstagrammers have their own ways of interacting with each other or with their non-bookstagrammer followers. Lala, claimed that she is excited with the interaction created in the bookstagram environment, "Because it means that my post was seen", she said. It is similar with Afy's statement, "To be honest, I'm so happy if someone is responding to my post because at least it means my post isn't just one-way. Sometimes both (on target and appreciated)." Most of them interact through the comments column and direct messages to show mutual support and advice about recommended books to read. This is what has been done by Rani, Alya, and Mutia. Alya added that fellow bookstagrammers usually support each other's accounts. She said, "(we) promote other bookstagrammer's accounts in our own accounts and Instagram stories with various creations and categories such as bookstagram books, books abroad, or theme feeds."

Interactions among bookstagrammers does not only happen online but also offline in the form of community activities. Rita and Rizky, for example, who are members of Malang Bookstagrammers Community, informed that sometimes they are involved in organizing a meetup and sharing book session. There are also bookstagrammers who favor person to person interaction. Rita, for example, prefers to interact personally. She said, "I have a lot of other friends who can talk about books. It's more personal, but still talking about books, some friends are well-known writers, and I

also get knowledge from them.” On the other hand, Sintia chooses to interact with fellow bookstagrammers through an online messaging service, WhatsApp. She said, “We created a WhatsApp group and discussed about books.”

Book review has become an invented tradition for the members of bookstagram community, both the bookstagrammers or the followers, because it is done repeatedly and continuously. In this case, bookstagrammers also serve as influencers because they use their knowledge, authority, social position, and/or relationship with others to affect their followers to get into reading books.

CONCLUSION(S)

Making the most of collaborative process between researchers and informants, reciprocal ethnography study on book review activities done by bookstagrammers has revealed several things. There is a link between the invented tradition of book review and its influence to the readers, the bookstagram followers. The tradition is an effort to attract the readers to get into reading and understand the recommended books in different ways. The bookstagrammers’ efforts to maintain interaction with each other and with their followers by sharing, talking, and discussing about books in various ways have shaped the identity of bookstagram community.

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