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Viraling Indonesian Polluted Environment: How Pandawara Group Builds Activism through Framing and Identity on Instagram

Abstract

The rise of youth-led digital environmental movements necessitates a deeper understanding of the communication strategies that drive their influence. This study provides an analysis of how the Indonesian activist collective, Pandawara Group, builds its movement and influences public discourse through Instagram Reels. Employing a critical-social constructivist approach, this research conducts a qualitative content analysis of 137 Instagram Reels from 2024. It utilizes a dual theoretical framework, integrating media framing with the ecocultural identity framework to decode both the messaging tactics and the activist identity being performed. The findings reveal that Pandawara's Project stems from the strategic performance of a dual identity: the empathetic "Moral Guardian," built with "Morality/Ethics" frames, and the inclusive "Pragmatic Collaborator," constructed with "Middle Way" frames. This dual identity is deployed through a cyclical narrative arc that adapts to the socio-political calendar, with messaging that shifts during events such as elections or World Environment Day. The analysis further identifies a platform-specific strategy tailored to Instagram, reflecting a strategy of grassroots accountability in a non-Western context. The Pandawara communication strategy offers a template for digital activism, proving that combining moral framing with a collaborative spirit can create powerful ecosystems for social change.

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1. Introduction

In an era defined by an escalating global climate crisis, a new form of environmentalism emerged—youth-led, digitally native, and networked through global platforms (Middaugh et al. 77; Sloam et al. 683). Youth-led digital movements leverage the power of social media to disseminate messages with remarkable effectiveness (Bowman et al. 137; Gaupp and Eker 9). They succeed by transforming complex issues into short-form, visual formats that are ideal for virality and retention among younger audiences. This occurrence necessitates a deeper understanding of the communication strategies that make these grassroots efforts in mobilizing communities and shaping public opinion.

Within this global trend, Indonesia presents a critical context, as it grapples with severe ecological challenges such as coastal and river pollution while also witnessing the rise of powerful citizen-driven movements. The nation's garbage volume reached 68.5 million tons in 2021, a key factor contributing to recurrent flooding, the most frequent natural disaster in 2022 (Arief and Prawira 257). While the Indonesian government has established national policies to address this, including a goal to achieve 'zero-plastic waste in 2040,' a significant gap persists between policy ambition and local implementation (Arisman and Fatimah). It is within this context that one of the most notable citizen-driven movements has emerged: the Pandawara Group, a collective of young Indonesians known for their viral environmental clean-up campaigns (Rahyadi et al. 40). Unlike legacy campaigns, Pandawara's approach is volunteer-based and driven by social media engagement, which makes it a great example of this new wave of activism. Their primary use of Instagram Reels—a short-form, visually dynamic, and algorithmically favored feature—has played a pivotal role in crafting persuasive narratives about environmental responsibility, like #onedayonetrashbag to raise public awareness and inspire community-led action.

The phenomenon of Pandawara's Project raises critical questions about how environmental messages are constructed, perceived, and acted upon within the fast-paced ecosystem of digital platforms. To investigate this, the study first utilizes Matthew C. Nisbet's framing theory, which

emphasizes that how an issue is portrayed influences public understanding and response ("Framing Science" 54). However, frames are not neutral; they are deployed by actors to construct and perform specific identities, a dimension that requires a deeper theoretical lens. Therefore, this study integrates the ecocultural identity framework, which posits that activism is a communicative act of identity production based on core values, such as ethics of care, collective action, and corporate responsibility. Understanding the 'ecocentric identities' produced by young activists is crucial in an era increasingly defined by their leadership (Hannouch and Milstein 198-199). This dual analysis allows for a richer understanding not just of what messages Pandawara communicates, but also of what kind of activist identity they are building through those messages. This research addresses a gap in the literature, which has so far overlooked the specific ways social media features like Instagram Reels are used to perform ecocentric identities in a non-Western context.

While the Pandawara Group's significant impact has attracted initial academic attention, the existing literature reveals several critical gaps that this study aims to address. Previous research has focused on validating the effectiveness of Pandawara's social media presence, such as Alfachredz (2025), Aminulloh et al. (2024), Azmar et al. (2024), and Zuliansyah and Jatmika (2025). For instance, studies have confirmed that the group's Instagram activism translates from online "clicktivism" to real-world mobilization by using inspiring, hope-based narratives and building a strong personal brand (Erika and Alawi 40). Other work has analyzed their visual storytelling and discourse to show how they cultivate a sense of collective action among youth (Pratiwi and Farizal 300). However, these studies tend to focus on the outcomes of Pandawara's communication, awareness, and participation. A significant gap remains in the theoretical analysis of their communication strategies. No research up to date has applied a dual-framework approach to decode the interplay between their messaging techniques and the activist identity they construct. Furthermore, much of the analysis has been broad, without a systematic, in-depth mapping of the specific frames and values deployed across a large sample of their content. This study fills this gap by moving beyond a general assessment of their movement to provide a rigorous, theoretically grounded analysis of how the Pandawara's Project is communicatively achieved. By integrating Nisbet's framing theory with the ecocultural identity framework, this research offers a more

nuanced understanding of the mechanics behind Pandawara's influence, providing a deeper insight into the construction of digital environmental activism in a non-Western context ("Framing Science" 57).

To provide a systematic analysis of this movement, this research pursues several key objectives. First, it identifies the dominant framing strategies and core ecocentric values in the Pandawara Group's 2024 Instagram Reels. Second, it analyzes how specific media frames intersect with ecocentric values to construct a distinct digital activist identity. The study then assesses how different actors (citizens, companies, government) are positioned within these frames to either reinforce or challenge this identity. These integrated patterns of framing and identity performance are examined to reveal the broader strategies of youth-led digital environmental activism. The result seeks not only to describe Pandawara's communication strategy but also to offer insights for other environmental communicators, digital activists, and researchers interested in the convergence of media, youth engagement, and sustainability.

2. Theoretical Framework: Media Frames and Activist Identities

When discussing the mechanics of modern digital movements, an analysis must look beyond the construction of the message to the identity of the messenger. Framing theory explains the strategic "how" of communication, such as the tactics used to make a message persuasive (D'Angelo et al. 11; Jones and Peterson). On the other hand, the perspective in theory of identity explains the "why," which are the underlying values and relational goals driving the activist (Parks; Thomas). This strategic intersection looks different depending on an activist's social location, whether they are operating from a position of privilege (agent rank) or on the marginal side (target rank).

Nisbet's concept of framing can be synthesized with the perspective of social location; a frame can be understood as the communicative tactic used by those in agent ranks to wield their privilege as a "megaphone," amplifying the voices of the marginalized and challenging powerful institutions ("Framing, the Media" 220). A frame may be used by individuals in target ranks as a powerful tool for self-advocacy, framing their personal experience with injustice as a matter of universal right and wrong to build solidarity. For agents, the choice of frame can be a deliberate strategy to overcome the barrier of 'dysconsciousness,' which is the unawareness of one's own privilege (Bergkamp et

al. 3). For targets, framing is a way to articulate their lived experience and build the collective identity necessary for their movements to thrive (Suyemoto et al. 22). Therefore, an integrated perspective that examines how media frames are deployed based on activist identity and social location offers a more nuanced and powerful way to analyze movements like the Pandawara Group.

The choice of platform for digital activism is not neutral. The technical features and 'affordances' of a given social media site shape the communication strategies that are viable upon it (Ilten 2; Santos et al. 132). In Indonesia, there were 143 million social media users at the start of 2025, equating to more than half the total population (Kemp). Within this landscape, Instagram stands as a dominant force, among the younger demographics that form the core of modern activist movements. The Pandawara Group has leveraged this reach to build a community, amassing a significant following of 3.8 million by July 2025 (Pandawara).

The specific affordances of Instagram Reels—being short-form, visually-driven, and algorithmically favored—are more conducive to certain message frames than others. This visual medium encourages the performance of an identity that is action-oriented, by showing clean-ups, and affective, by conveying hope or frustration through music and facial expressions (Knox 60; Soares 349). This affective nature is conducive to the "Morality/Ethics" frame, which in turn is the primary tool used to construct the empathetic "Moral Guardian" identity. Furthermore, Instagram's design may foster a more supportive environment compared to other platforms, support the use of the "Middle Way" frame, and showcase collaboration to build the inclusive "Pragmatic Collaborator" identity. Its interface limits negative feedback mechanisms, offering only positive emoji reactions and de-emphasizing the comment section. This structure can reduce the immediate visibility of online harassment, which is a significant barrier to activism, particularly for those expressing non-dominant identities. (Johnson and St. John III 91; Wolfe et al. 418). Therefore, the technology is not merely a neutral container for the message, but an active agent in shaping which frames are used (Milan 1-2), which identities are performed, and how a movement like Pandawara can achieve viral growth.

To understand the digital movement of Pandawara, three key elements are employed in the analysis. The first is the message strategy, where the analysis of media frames reveals the explicit

persuasive tactics being used (Nisbet, “Framing Science” 60; Nisbet, “Framing, the Media” 218). The second element is the activist’s goal, where an examination of the ecocentric identity being performed uncovers the underlying values and relational motivations of the communication (Hannouch and Milstein 199; Lachance and Przygoda 556). The third element is the technological context, as the specific affordances of the Instagram platform shape which frames are used and which identities are most effectively performed (Derr 2; Karpus 126). These three components—framing, identity, and platform—are not separate but deeply interconnected. Therefore, this integrated perspective provides the necessary foundation for the methodology of this study. The following sections will apply this synthesized framework to the case of the Pandawara Group. This approach will allow for a systematic decoding of the mechanics behind their communicative success, offering a framework of strategy for understanding modern digital activism.

For further analysis of Pandawara’s strategy, this study also draws on the concept of environmental populism. Populism is understood here by its core elements: a framing that pits “the people” in a moral battle against “the elites” (Meyer 846). In this study, populism is treated not as a fixed ideology but as a communication style used to mobilize public support. Within science and environment-related contexts, the “elites” are often portrayed as unaccountable institutions or experts disconnected from the common sense and everyday experience of “ordinary people.” As Meyer argues, this populist challenge is not pathological (850); it can also be a democratic tool for challenging elite domination on egalitarian and justice grounds, which is vital for understanding movements that aim to hold powerful institutions accountable.

3. Methodology

This study is positioned within a critical-social constructivist approach. This approach posits that language does not simply mirror the world but actively constitutes it through discursive and representational practices (Weldes 217). This perspective mandates an analysis that moves beyond surface-level communication to interrogate how such constructions of meaning enact and reify relations of power. This paradigm allows the study to both interpret the meaning of Pandawara’s communication and critique the power dynamics they engage with. Flowing from this

paradigm, the study employs a qualitative content analysis of the Pandawara Group's Instagram Reels to understand how meaning, frames, and identities are constructed and performed through communication. The analysis is guided by the framework of Nisbet's media frames[1] ("Framing Science" 57) and the ecocentric identity values from Hannouch and Milstein (199).[2] A dual-lens approach that aligns with the critical-constructivist paradigm by enabling an analysis of both communicative tactics and the underlying power dynamics and value systems being challenged or promoted.

The data for this study consists of all Instagram Reels videos published on the official Pandawara Group account (@Pandawaragroup). Reels were chosen over static posts because they integrate music, voiceovers, facial expressions, on-screen text, and cinematic transitions—elements that can amplify emotional appeal, establish urgency, and direct viewer interpretation (Balint 72). This study uses a census sampling method within a defined timeframe, meaning the sample includes all 137 videos posted to the account between January 3, 2024, and December 27, 2024. A comprehensive one-year sample was selected to allow for a robust analysis of temporal trends and to observe how Pandawara's communication strategies might shift in response to specific socio-political events, such as elections or global observances like World Environment Day.

A systematic coding process was conducted to analyze the 137 videos in the sample. The coding framework was primarily deductive, with the analytical categories derived from the established theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review. Each video was coded according to three distinct sets of variables: Media Frames, Ecocentric Values, and Actors. The first set, Media Frames, utilizes Nisbet's typology[3] ("Framing Science" 58) to identify the core persuasive strategies Pandawara employs. The second set, Ecocentric Values, adopts the framework from Hannouch and Milstein to analyze the underlying principles and activist identity being performed (200). The third set, Actors,[4] identifies the primary individuals, groups, and institutions to understand to whom a voice is given in these narratives. Table 1 provides a detailed operationalization of each variable, including its definition and representative examples from the Pandawara context, to ensure a transparent and replicable analytical process.Table 1. Variable Set for Analysis

Variable Set	Indicator	Description

1. Actors	Pandawara	The primary narrator; frames the issue, performs the clean-up action, and delivers the call to action.
	Citizen	Portrayed in dual roles: as the source of the problem and as the solution.
	Private Sector	Framed as collaborative partners and enablers of solutions.
	Government	Depicted as a target for accountability and as a potential collaborator.
2. Media Frames (Nisbet, "Framing Science")	Morality/Ethics	The issue is framed as a moral obligation, a matter of right vs. wrong, and social responsibility.
	Middle Way/ Alternative Solution	Focuses on practical solutions and collaborative efforts across citizens, government, and communities
	Public Accountability and Governance	Emphasizes government roles, transparency, and institutional responsibility in managing environmental issues.
	Social Progress	The issue is framed as part of social advancement and improving quality of life for a better future.
	Economic Development	Frames environmental issues in terms of economic benefits, green innovation, or long-term productivity
3. Ecocentric Values (Hannouch and Milstein)	Intersectionality	Connecting environmental justice with social justice movements and the uplifting of diverse, marginalized voices.
	Collective over Individual Action	Emphasis on movement-based action to create positive environmental change, rather than focusing only on individuals.
	Climate Optimism	A deliberate stance of optimism and hope as an activated response to eco-anxiety, focusing on the potential for change
	Corporate and Political Responsibility	Focus on the obligation of large polluters and government actors to address the environmental crises they caused.
	Ethics of Care	Expressing care for the three interconnected pillars: the Environment, the Community, and the Self.
	More-than-Human Connection	Being with, having empathy for, receiving energy from, and feeling driven by the more-than-human world

The analysis of the coded data was conducted in two distinct stages. First, a quantitative frequency analysis was performed to identify the dominant patterns in media frames, ecocentric values, and actors present in the sample. This was followed by a more interpretive qualitative analysis of the intersection between these codes to understand how they co-occur in constructing a distinct activist identity. To ensure the consistency of this process, a subset of the data was coded by two researchers, with any discrepancies resolved through discussion to establish a reliable coding scheme. The study focuses on the single case of the Pandawara Group, which means its findings may not be generalizable to other contexts. Furthermore, the content analysis method cannot determine the creators' private intentions or how different audiences actually receive the content.

4. Analysis of Results

The analysis of the Pandawara Group's 2024 content reveals a strategic and multi-layered communication approach. To present these findings, this chapter will first map the prominence and roles of the key actors involved. The distribution of actors across the sample shows that while Pandawara positions themselves as the central narrators, ordinary citizens are featured far more prominently than corporations or government officials. This choice reinforces a core message of a grassroots, community-driven movement. Table 2 provides a quantitative overview and description of the primary roles each actor plays within Pandawara's framing. As the creators of the content, Pandawara (45.9%) is the most visible actor, appearing in every video as the narrators and primary agents. Their identity as five young men cleaning polluted environments provides a consistent and authentic core for their brand.Table 2. Frequency of Actor Involvement. Source: Research Analysis.

Actor	Frequency (n=137)	Percentage (%)
Pandawara	137	45.9%
Citizen	71	23.9%
Company	49	16.4%
Government	28	9.4%
Others	13	4.4%

The second most prominent actor, the Citizen (23.9%), is crucial to Pandawara's narrative strategy. Citizens are portrayed in a dual role: they are sometimes shown as the source of the problem, such as individuals caught littering, but are more often celebrated as the solution. Videos frequently highlight the thousands of volunteers who join their clean-up events, constructing an identity of a powerful, decentralized, and citizen-led movement. Companies (16.4%) are positioned almost as collaborative partners. They are framed as enablers who provide funding, resources, or employee volunteers for clean-up events, such as the "Green Employee Involvement" program with PLN Group. This pragmatic framing constructs companies as part of the solution, a key element of Pandawara's collaborative identity. The Government (9.4%) has the most limited role among the main actors. They appear strategically, often as targets for criticism and accountability, such as during the 2024 election campaigns when Pandawara critiqued the waste from political

billboards. While shown as collaborators, their presence is episodic and often tied to specific political moments rather than being a consistent feature of the clean-up narratives.

Specific actors are positioned within certain media frames and associated with particular ecocentric values. The content mapping reveals a highly strategic allocation of roles of every actor represented. The Government actor, for instance, is almost positioned within the “Public Accountability & Governance” frame, directly linking them to the ecocentric value of “Corporate & Political Responsibility.” Companies are associated with the “Middle Way/Alternative Solutions” frame, where they are constructed as collaborative partners and most often linked to the value of “Collective Action.” In contrast, the Citizen actor is represented more broadly, appearing most frequently in “Morality/Ethics” frames that emphasize an “Ethics of Care” and in content designed to mobilize “Collective Action.” Table 3 provides a detailed cross-tabulation and demonstrates that Pandawara embeds different actors within specific narrative structures to perform distinct and consistent roles, a key element of their communication strategy.Table 3. Actors Association with Media Frames and Ecocentric Values

Actor	Media Frames	Ecocentric Values								
	Morality / Ethics	Middle Way	Public Account-bility	Social Progress	Colle-ctive Action	Inter-sectio-nality	Ethics of Care	Corp./ Pol. Respon-sibility	Climate Optim-ism	More-than-Human
Pandawara	40	33	7	14	89	67	22	25	41	19
Citizen	25	15	2	10	55	30	15	5	20	12
Company	3	29	1	5	20	5	1	10	10	2
Government	2	4	7	3	5	2	0	15	3	0

The analysis of the strategic patterns in table 3 reveals that Pandawara’s identity is not a monolith but is performed through three dominant relational dynamics. These interactions with citizens, companies, and the government provide qualitative evidence for how specific actors are aligned with certain frames and values. The following sections will examine each dynamic in turn: the Pandawara-Citizen dynamic, the Pandawara-Company dynamic, and the Pandawara-Government dynamic.

The most frequent and foundational interaction is between Pandawara and Citizens, which is key to building their grassroots identity. This combination appears most often within a “Morality/Ethics” frame, which appears in 25 contents. It is also associated with the value of “Collective over Individual Action,” which is present in 55 videos featuring citizens. This strategy is illustrated in the

content from February 18, 2024, a video in which more than 3,100 volunteers joined a beach clean-up. By showcasing these massive turnouts, Pandawara proves its motto that “everyone is needed,” constructing an identity of a powerful, decentralized movement. This dynamic is made more complex by also portraying citizens as the source of the problem. For instance, the video from April 14, 2024, calls out an individual caught dumping trash into a river, while another from August 4, 2024, sarcastically criticizes the trend of people discarding items from past relationships. This dual strategy of celebrating citizens as heroes while also correcting their behavior allows Pandawara to build a powerful, relational bond with its audience as both a peer and a necessary moral guide.

Pandawara-Citizen approach is a powerful application of environmental populism, which frames issues as a moral battle between the pure people and corrupt elites. By positioning citizens as the protagonists of the clean-up narrative, Pandawara’s strategy performs what scholars describe as a democratic “corrective function.” The group uses the power of the people to make political elites “see” the demands and values of the public. This populist mobilization can be understood as a response to a perceived “voicelessness” felt by communities who believe their concerns about environmental degradation are ignored by formal state channels. In this framing, the mobilization of thousands of citizens is not just for the clean-up itself; it is a political act that asserts the people’s right to their “ecological belonging” and serves as a powerful demonstration of public will.

When Pandawara interacts with Companies, they perform a pragmatic and solution-oriented identity. This dynamic is constructed almost exclusively within the “Middle Way/Alternative Solutions” frame, which is the context for 29 of the 49 videos featuring corporate actors. For example, the collaboration with PLN Group on June 4, 2024, framed the company as a partner providing resources and employee volunteers for Pandawara’s large-scale clean-up events. Notably, this framing sidesteps any critique of the companies’ own potential roles as polluters, instead positioning them exclusively as positive enablers of the solution. This approach allows Pandawara to access crucial resources for their clean-ups, constructing an identity of being effective bridge-builders rather than radical critics. This performance reflects the value of “imperfect sustainability,” demonstrating a strategic willingness to work within existing systems to achieve tangible change, even if it requires navigating the complexities of corporate partnerships.

The interaction with the Government is the most strategic and often confrontational, which is a key element of Pandawara's environmental populist strategy. This approach casts Pandawara in the role of a "critical watchdog" for civil society by positioning the government as the unaccountable "elite." In this narrative, the government is framed as an institution that is disconnected from the reality of the pollution crisis and slow to respond, with its inaction running contrary to the interests and "common sense" of "ordinary people." The data shows that all 7 instances of the "Public Accountability & Governance" frame are used when the government is the focus, performing the value of "Corporate and Political Responsibility." This is exemplified by the satirical video from January 22, 2024, critiquing waste from political campaign billboards. The relationship depicted is rarely one of collaboration; instead, it is one of demanding action. This interaction is also temporal, peaking during the 2024 elections, demonstrating a political approach that leverages the media cycle to amplify critiques and hold institutions accountable. The confrontational stance stands in stark contrast to the collaborative approach used with companies. The strategic logic appears rooted in the different roles these actors are assigned: companies are framed as pragmatic partners needed to secure immediate operational resources, making collaboration essential, whereas the government is positioned as the ultimate authority responsible for systemic policy change, making public pressure a more effective tactic.

This strategic alignment of actors, frames, and values in Pandawara's communication strategy is further reinforced through a consistent visual language that communicates the message with immediate emotional impact, as detailed in table 4. The visual elements are not incidental but are deliberate tactics used to construct specific frames and perform a visually-driven activist identity. For instance, wide drone shots are frequently used to show rivers covered in waste, visually constructing the problem as an overwhelming crisis and justifying the use of a "Pandora's Box" frame, as seen in the video from April 22, 2024. Conversely, close-up shots focus on the emotional and physical toll of the work, such as a member's expression of disgust at a river's smell or their visible exhaustion after a clean-up, which are key to building the "Morality/Ethics" frame by fostering empathy. The power of community is visualized through shots of massive crowds of volunteers working together, such as the beach clean-up with over 3,100 people, which visually reinforces the "Middle Way/Alternative Solutions" frame. Bold text overlays are used to state a

problem or call to action directly, such as “Our world needs change,” framing the content with a sense of urgency.Table 4. Samples in Coding for Key Visual, Narrative, and Dominant Frame

Video Date & Topic	Key Visual & Narrative Elements	Dominant Frame	Primary Ecocentric Value(s)	Implied Activist Identity
January 22, 2024: Political Campaign Waste	Fast cuts of abandoned political banners; sarcastic tone; caption directly questions presidential candidates.	Public Accountability and Governance	Corporate and Political Responsibility	The Moral Guardian: empathetic, spiritually connected, and bearing witness to environmental harm.
June 4, 2024: Collaboration with PLN Group	Upbeat music; shots of corporate employees and Pandawara working together, smiling; clear branding of the partner.	Middle Way/ Alternative Solutions	Collective over Individual Action	The Critical Watchdog: holding power to account, representing the skeptical and demanding voice of the citizenry.
June 15, 2024: "Ocean of Trash" Clean-up	Slow-motion shots of volunteers amidst overwhelming waste; somber music; caption is a prayer for forgiveness.	Morality/ Ethics	Ethics of Care, More-than-human Connection	The Pragmatic Bridge-Builder: inclusive, solution-oriented, and willing to collaborate with powerful actors to achieve tangible results.

The visual language is reinforced by a carefully curated set of narrative and audio-visual elements, which also contribute to the framing strategy. The choice of music is a primary tool for setting the emotional register; videos making a moral appeal often use somber, cinematic music, as in the video from June 15, 2024, which featured a caption written as a prayer. In contrast, videos showcasing collaborations use upbeat, motivational music to create a positive atmosphere. The narrator’s tone of voice also shifts, becoming sarcastic and critical when targeting government inaction within a “Public Accountability” frame but hopeful when celebrating volunteer efforts in a “Social Progress” frame. The captions accompanying the Reels serve as a direct narrative tool, delivering the video’s main thesis or call to action. For example, a caption may directly question a political candidate’s environmental commitment or provide a stark statistic about the amount of waste collected to emphasize the scale of the problem. The strategic alignment of these audio and narrative elements with the visual content creates a cohesive and persuasive message.

5. Discussion

5.1. Decoding Digital Activism: The Pandawara Strategy

A primary finding of this study is the overwhelming dominance of the “Morality/Ethics” frame, which serves as the communicative engine for mobilizing collective action. This finding provides empirical depth to previous analyses, which identified that Pandawara’s Project relies on pathos, or emotional appeal, to engage its audience (Febriyanti et al. 365). The effective use of visual

storytelling to cultivate a sense of collective action, as noted in Febriyanti et al., is thus achieved through the specific, consistent deployment of this moral framing. However, by applying a dual framework, this study extends beyond identifying pathos as a general strategy; it reveals that the moral frame is used to perform an “ethics of care,” a core ecocentric value that builds a relational, rather than purely emotional, bond with the audience.

This approach also contrasts with the previous research by Rahyadi et al. on Pandawara’s TikTok content, emphasizing the development of parasocial interaction as a key motivator for pro-environmental behavior. While their TikTok strategy may focus on building a personal connection with viewers, this study found that the Instagram Reels strategy is geared more towards constructing a broader collective identity through “visual-moral” narratives. Therefore, the dominance of the “Morality/Ethics” frame is not just an emotional tactic but a performance of a specific activist identity, designed for the visual, community-oriented affordances of Instagram, which aligns with the broader understanding of social media’s role in disseminating environmental awareness campaigns.

The second most dominant strategy is the use of the “Middle Way/Alternative Solutions” frame, which serves as the primary vehicle for performing the most frequent ecocentric value, “Collective over Individual Action.” The content consistently showcases collaboration with a wide range of actors, presenting environmentalism as an inclusive, achievable, and socially rewarding activity rather than an individual burden. A recurring format is the corporate collaboration, such as the “Green Employee Involvement” volunteering program, where upbeat music and visuals of diverse people working together frame the clean-up as a positive, joint venture. This extends to large-scale community events, like the beach clean-up during the Samudra Eco Festival, which mobilized over three hundred volunteers. This framing constructs Pandawara’s identity as “Pragmatic Collaborators” and bridge-builders, positioning them as non-confrontational conveners who bring different parts of society together—a role that reflects the need for synergy between government, communities, and the private sector identified by Harmono and Nurhamzah (25).

While Pandawara excels at creating synergy with citizens and companies, this study’s findings on the Pandawara-Government dynamic complicate this collaborative narrative and offer a crucial perspective on the activism context. The results show that the government is most often framed

not as a proactive partner, but as a strategic target for accountability within a “Public Accountability” frame. This bottom-up approach provides a counter-narrative to traditional policy recommendations, including those by Harmono and Nurhamzah (25) and Rahman et al. (91), which tend to emphasize strengthening top-down, government-led partnerships. This study suggests that Pandawara’s power and legitimacy may stem from its ability to position itself as an independent watchdog that can fill a perceived gap where official waste management policies have not yet been fully effective. This approach, while focused on local Indonesian issues, reflects the global mechanism of “bypassing locality” identified by Luckner, where informal civil society movements use social media to build influence over formal state channels. Much like the global Fridays for Future movement (Lozano-Díaz and Fernández-Prados 448), which gained momentum in response to perceived government inaction, Pandawara’s rise can be seen as a localized expression of this same dynamic, where young digital citizens step in to address failures they witness in their immediate environment. The broader implication is that in Global South contexts, where citizen trust in formal institutions may be limited, digital movements can create powerful, alternative mechanisms for public accountability (Sharma et al. 661). Therefore, the “Pandawara’s strategy” serves as a significant case study for understanding how digital civil society in Southeast Asia can function as an independent watchdog, using social networks to challenge state institutions and create alternative mechanisms for public accountability.

This study’s temporal analysis reveals that the “Pandawara’s strategy” employs a distinct, cyclical narrative arc. Rather than a single, fixed narrative, Pandawara’s communication strategically oscillates between three primary poles: collaborative approach, critical accountability, and moral mobilization. During politically charged moments like the 2024 elections, their narrative arc shifts decisively toward a “Climate policy/power battle.” In this phase, the dominant frame becomes “Public Accountability & Governance,” performing a “Critical Watchdog” identity. Conversely, during significant moments like World Environment Day, the arc builds to an emotional climax where the “Morality/Ethics” frame is used to perform a “Moral Guardian” identity, focusing on universal themes of shared responsibility and empathy.

Bridging these poles of critique and moral appeal is a recurring “Collaborative Arc” that defines the solution-oriented aspect of their strategy. During periods aligned with corporate CSR cycles or

community festivals, the narrative arc moves towards an optimistic path where the “Middle Way/Alternative Solutions” frame becomes dominant. This phase showcases tangible progress through partnerships and constructs the “Pragmatic Collaborator” identity. This reveals a three-part narrative strategy: Pandawara uses political critique and moral appeal to establish the need for action and then uses the collaborative frame to demonstrate how that action can be achieved. This adaptive, cyclical storytelling is a key component of their communication strategy, providing a powerful template for sustaining audience engagement and mobilizing action in a dynamic digital environment.

Within the scope of this communication analysis, the “success” of this communication strategy is defined by its demonstrable ability to generate high levels of digital engagement and mobilize thousands of volunteers for real-world, collective action. While this study does not analyze the logistical outcomes of the collected waste—a valid question in the context of national waste management systems—the model’s effectiveness is measured here by its capacity to translate online messaging into large-scale civic participation.

The ability of Pandawara’s movements to challenge established power dynamics is not just a political choice but is intertwined with the technical and cultural environment of their chosen social media platforms.

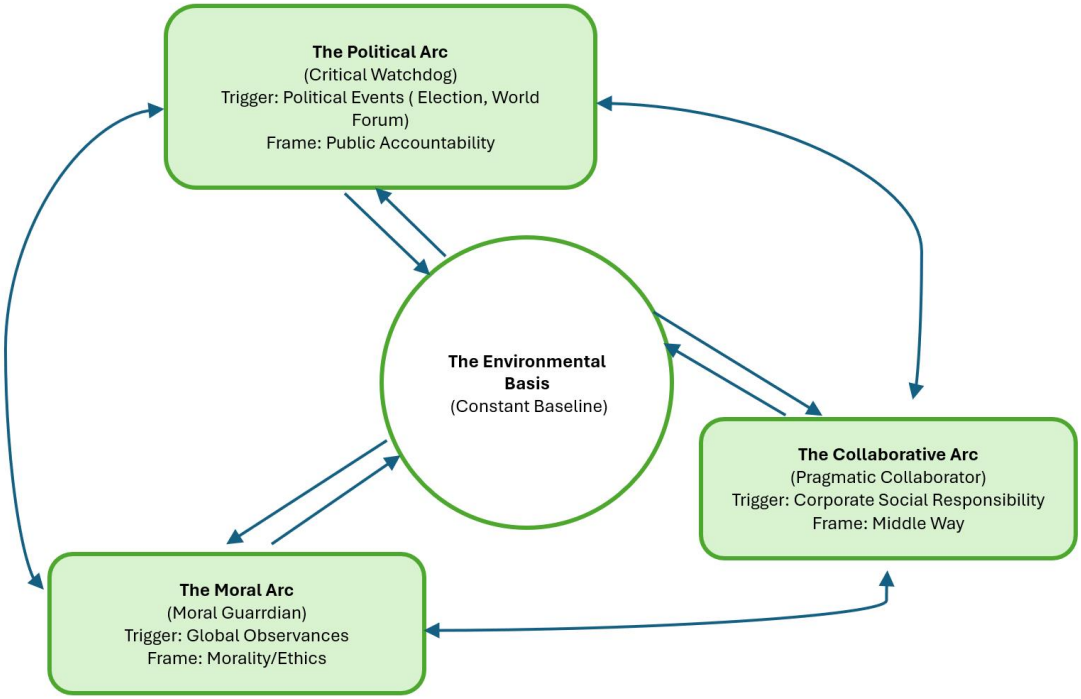


Figure 1. The Cyclical Narrative Arc on Pandawara Digital Activism

This study's findings highlight that the visual and algorithmic affordances of Instagram Reels are uniquely suited for the "Morality/Ethics" frames that are central to Pandawara's identity. Their Instagram strategy is geared more towards constructing a broad, collective identity through visually powerful moral narratives. Therefore, the "mechanics of virality" for Pandawara are not accidental; they are the result of a deliberate alignment between their framing strategy, their identity performance, and the specific communicative potential of Instagram Reels.

The platform's 'affordances' actively shape the interplay between the frames used and the identities performed. The specific features of Instagram Reels—being short-form and visually-driven—are particularly suited for frames that rely on emotional and communal connection. For instance, the platform's visual nature is highly conducive to the "Morality/Ethics" frame, which in turn is the primary tool used to construct the empathetic "Moral Guardian" identity. Similarly, its community-oriented features support the use of the "Middle Way" frame, which showcases collaboration to build the inclusive "Pragmatic Collaborator" identity.

5.2. The Populist Tightrope: Navigating the Risks of a People-Centric Narrative

While this study demonstrates the characteristics of Pandawara's communication strategy, their heavy reliance on specific frames presents a significant long-term challenge: the risk of being trapped in a form of left-wing environmental populism (Fu 2). In this context, populism can be understood as a communication style that constructs a narrative pitting a virtuous, common-sense "people" (or the citizen) against a corrupt or incompetent elite (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 157; Sconfienza 210). The findings of this paper show that the building blocks of this populist framing are already central to Pandawara's strategy: the overwhelming dominance of the "Morality/Ethics" frame and the constant positioning of the Citizen as the hero create a powerful 'us vs. them' dynamic. This approach closely mirrors the discourse of global activists like Greta Thunberg, Greenpeace, or whose frames climate change as a "moral crisis" and a "power battle" between the people and a failed political establishment (Fonseca and Castro 535; Moscato 275; Schwab and Combariza Diaz). By giving voice to a public that feels excluded from formal decision-making, Pandawara challenges elite domination on justice grounds and forces the state to "see" the demands of its citizens. This approach taps into a powerful sense of "ecological belonging"—the people's right to a healthy environment—and positions Pandawara as a legitimate agent of public will in response to a perceived failure of the state (Middeldorp and Le Billon 328).

Although this populist framing is exceptionally effective for initial mobilization and building a loyal community, it carries inherent risks that could limit Pandawara's long-term impact on systemic change. This reliance on a populist framework places the movement on a difficult "populist tightrope" (Hatzikidi 50). While highly effective for mobilization, a communication style built on a simple moral dichotomy carries significant risks that could limit long-term systemic impact. By focusing on a simple moral dichotomy of good citizens versus bad elites, the populist frame can oversimplify complex environmental problems that require nuanced policy, economic, and scientific solutions. A strong anti-elite or anti-government stance, while powerful for mobilizing a base, can also risk alienating potential allies within government and industry who are necessary for implementing the large-scale policies (Davis et al.). This creates a direct tension with the

"Pragmatic Collaborator" identity that Pandawara also performs. The critical question for the movement's sustainability is whether a narrative built primarily on moral outrage can evolve to engage with the complex, "technocratic" governance needed for lasting change (Strømsnes et al. 404; Thörn et al.).

Therefore, the future challenge for the "Pandawara strategy" is to navigate this 'populist tightrope.' The movement must maintain the authentic, people-centric, and moral narrative that grants them their legitimacy and mobilizing power, while simultaneously finding ways to engage with the complex details of policy without losing their grassroots identity. Their ability to evolve from a purely populist mobilizer into an actor that can also influence complex, systemic solutions will be the test of their long-term success. Pandawara thus serves as a crucial case study of both the immense potential and the inherent risks of environmental populism in the digital age.

6. Conclusion

This study portrayed how the Pandawara Group's digital activism is not accidental but rather the result of an adaptive communication strategy. By applying a dual framework of media framing and ecocultural identity, this research has provided a deep, mechanistic explanation for how Pandawara has achieved viral reach and real-world impact. The analysis of 137 Instagram Reels from 2024 demonstrates that their strategy is built on the performance of a dual activist identity: they are simultaneously empathetic "Moral Guardians," using "Morality/Ethics" frames to build a loyal community based on an "ethics of care," and "Pragmatic Collaborators," using "Middle Way" frames to showcase inclusive, solution-oriented partnerships. This dual identity is not static but is deployed through a cyclical narrative arc that strategically adapts to the socio-political calendar. Pandawara intensifies its "Critical Watchdog" role during elections and its "Moral Guardian" role during cultural moments, with messaging that shifts during events such as elections or World Environment Day. The findings also highlight the importance of their Global South context, where their grassroots, bottom-up approach of holding institutions accountable serves as a powerful form of digital civil society in a landscape where citizen trust in formal policy may be limited.

The "Pandawara strategy" offers a template for the future of environmental communication. It proves that by strategically combining moral framing, a collaborative spirit, and a platform-specific

understanding of identity performance, youth-led movements can bypass traditional gatekeepers and create powerful, self-sustaining ecosystems for social change. However, the strategy presents a future challenge: navigating the 'populist tightrope' of environmental activism. The movement must maintain the authentic, morale-driven narrative that built its community while also finding ways to engage with the complex, technocratic policy details necessary for long-term systemic change. This research provides insights for activists, organizations, and scholars seeking to understand and replicate the mechanics of digital activism in an increasingly connected world. On the other hand, as a content analysis, this research decodes the communication strategy but cannot definitively determine audience reception or the logistical outcomes of the clean-ups. It is an avenue for future ethnographic or impact-assessment research. Future studies could conduct a comparative analysis across different platforms to explore how their unique affordances shape activist identities.

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[1] Nisbet defines media frames as interpretative storylines that simplify complex issues by emphasizing certain dimensions to define a problem, its causes, and its potential solutions (“Framing Science” 57); the specific typology used in this analysis is adapted from his work.

[2] Hannouch and Milstein define ecocentric identity values as the core principles shaping an identity that rejects human superiority and embraces interconnection with the biosphere (199). This study adopts the six values identified in their research: Collective over Individual Action, Intersectionality, Climate Optimism, Corporate and Political Responsibility, Ethics of Care, and More-than-human Connection.

[3] Nisbet’s typology is a framework designed to understand the communication dynamics of public debates surrounding science and policy. It identifies a consistent set of generalizable frames, or interpretative storylines, that appear repeatedly across different issues (Framing Science, 58). A key aspect of the typology is that these frames are „valence neutral,“ meaning a single frame—such as Morality/Ethics or Economic Development—can be used to argue for, against, or a neutral position on a given topic.

[4] Actors refer to the primary individuals, groups, or institutions given a voice in the narratives. This categorization (which includes Pandawara, Citizens, the Private Sector, and the Government) was developed by the author for the specific context of this study to systematically analyze representation in the content.

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