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When Cybertroopers Shape the Crowd: Online Conformity in Indonesia

0 comments

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*Cyber troop operations in Indonesia don't persuade citizens with facts – they manufacture consensus through visibility, secrecy, and conformity. Drawing on a field experiment with over 900 Instagram users in Bogor City, **Moses H. Siregar** (recipient of the 2024/25 SEAC **Student Dissertation Fieldwork Grant**) explains how buzzers subtly shift online behaviour and why this matters for democratic accountability.*

Scrolling through social media, we often look into the comments section to see what other people think, without realizing that this habit may shape our own thoughts and feelings. It is, in fact, one way in which citizens participate in deliberative democracy, listening to different perspectives and arguments, and then making our own judgements. However, what if these public discourses are not really authentic? What if comments sections and all other

features of social media are increasingly orchestrated by paid, covert actors who flood discussions with coordinated narratives? These actors are known as *cybertroopers*, working within a network of influence operations (IOs).

From Russian troll farms during the 2016 U.S. election to Chinese propaganda networks, IOs now represent a global challenge to democracy. More than 25 countries have been found to use organized online manipulation campaigns, while at least 80 have seen broader public opinion manipulation.

Indonesia is a particularly important case. Known for its vibrant democracy and massive social media user base, it has also become a hub for political “buzzing.” These buzzers have been hired to influence elections, suppress dissent, and launch intra-party attacks. Unlike influencers (who are public and paid) or activists (who are voluntary), buzzers are covert, anonymous, and coordinated, making them distinct digital actors. Yet despite their growing prominence, one core question remains unanswered: How exactly do they shape citizen behavior and attitudes?

My research explores this question: Can exposure to “buzzers” in Instagram comment sections push ordinary citizens to conform to political narratives? To address this, I conducted a first-of-its-kind field experiment on Instagram with over 900 adult Instagram users from Bogor City, Indonesia, involving a real cyber troop to assess how online manipulation influences political behavior.

Persuasion or Conformity?

Most political science research explains influence primarily through persuasion: shifting minds with compelling information (or, in the case of buzzers, oftentimes misinformation) and arguments. But persuasion is cognitively demanding and often fails in fragmented digital spaces where users are more resistant. While cyber troop operations often utilize

persuasion, not all require persuasion to be effective. There is another primary mechanism in every cyber troop operation: political conformity.

Conformity occurs when people align their opinions or behaviour with what they perceive as the dominant group norm. On Instagram, this “norm” can be manufactured through coordinated comments that make one narrative seem popular and socially expected.

Secrecy, Visibility, and Weak Ties

How is conformity produced by these operations? My experiment points to three crucial elements: secrecy, visibility, and weak ties.

First, secrecy gives buzzers the appearance of authenticity. When anonymous or fake accounts blend into the crowd, they look like “ordinary” netizens instead of paid actors. This illusion of authenticity is integral: once secrecy is violated, effectiveness drops. Second, visibility is the buzzers’ currency: by flooding comments sections with a coordinated narrative, they craft the sense that “everyone is talking about this.” Visibility creates this conformity in public discourse. Third, weak ties help create important analytical distinctions to assess the operation’s effectiveness. Unlike strong ties (family, close friends), weak ties are distant yet relatable people (e.g. similar occupation or ethnicity). Fake buzzer accounts, with realistic photos and usernames, mimic this “weak tie” role. They seem like believable strangers whose views feel sufficiently authentic to form norms in comments sections. Anonymous buzzers, by contrast, have no ties at all, although they may also succeed in driving surface-level behavioral conformity.

The Experiment: Hiring a Cyber Troop

Between June 12–18, 2025, I conducted a randomized field experiment in Bogor City. 913 participants were recruited across 56 public locations. Creating a new Instagram account for the study, they were randomly assigned to follow one of three private Instagram accounts, each posting identical content about negative experiences with local street-level bureaucrats (e.g., corruption in schools, health services, or licensing), as seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Comparison of Profile Aesthetics and Posts Across Treatment Conditions

The key difference of the treatment conditions was in the comments sections, seen in the study set-up in Figure 2.

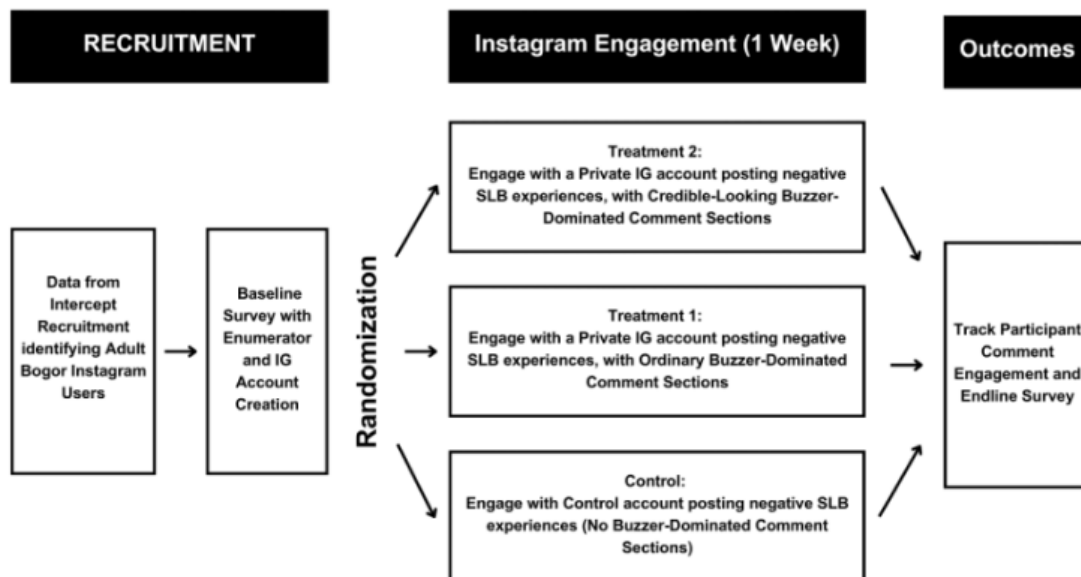


Figure 2: Study Set-Up

For the treatments, the key difference was in the way buzzer profiles were operationalized. Fake buzzer accounts used realistic photos, usernames and followings, while anonymous buzzers had no profile pictures, unclear usernames and no followings.

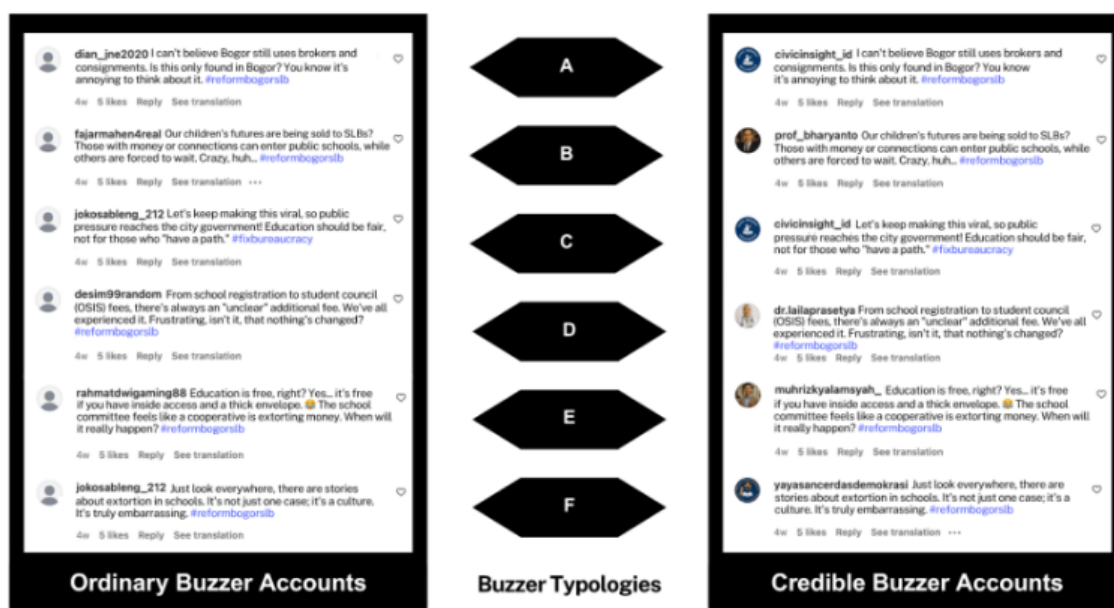


Figure 3: Anonymous (left) and Fake (right) buzzer account comments examples

Each experimental day, buzzers posted 10 coordinated comments per post. Participants freely engaged with these accounts for one week, during which their comments were tracked and coded. They completed an endline survey measuring changes in attitudes and perceptions.

Key Findings: Conformity Over Persuasion

Participants exposed to buzzer-dominated comments sections were significantly more likely to mimic buzzer behaviour in their own comments, using similar language, tone, length and narrative. Attitudinal effects were minor and inconsistent. Private beliefs about bureaucrats shifted only slightly more negatively, but views of public opinion shifted more clearly. This implies that conformity is powerful in changing shallower behaviour and perceptions, such as what people observe of others. Stickier attitudes requiring more explicit belief revision required persuasion to shift more deeply.

The effects of buzzer exposure were generally homogeneous across demographic groups, particularly across educational attainment and behaviour. This suggests that cyber troop operations bypass the usual cognitive defense mechanisms when forming shallower behaviour and attitudes that need little conscious thought. In other words, even those normally resistant to persuasion can be nudged into conformity. In this study, ordinary anonymous buzzers were generally more effective in driving behavioral conformity. By contrast, credible fake buzzers were more effective in shaping attitudinal conformity, especially public meta-perceptions (what participants believed most people think).

Why This Matters

While persuasion and conformity usually go hand in hand, the foundation on which buzzers operate is conformity, while persuasion is more secondary. This is a significant shift for political science, where persuasion has long dominated the study of social influence. Buzzers succeed because they create visibility. By flooding comment sections, they create an illusion of consensus and a perception of the in-group echo chamber of a particular public discourse. Ordinary users scanning the comments may feel pressured to conform or be reluctant to post an opposing view.

The effects observed may seem modest, such as changes in comment tone, word choice, or perceived consensus. Yet in politics, even small margins can decide important political outcomes like elections. Buzzers don't need to persuade everyone; they just need to tip the scales of public discourse. The small effects observed within a short period of time on a small scale may also indicate that buzzers, more present in our daily lives with a greater volume of visibility, may generate greater impacts than what was detected in the experiment.

Implications: Indonesia and Beyond

Indonesia's digital ecosystem makes social media users especially vulnerable to cyber troop operations: Massive social media penetration (over 200 million users), low digital literacy in some demographics, and high demand for cheap political campaigning tools. Buzzers are now a normalized feature of Indonesian politics, in elections and in daily perceptions of governance, policy, and legitimacy. By demonstrating how buzzers trigger conformity, my research helps explain why Indonesian democracy feels increasingly shaped by "manufactured consensus."

This is the first known study to offer causal evidence of the effects of cyber troop operations on citizen behaviour and attitudes, by directly measuring how exposure to real buzzers shifted what people say and think online. This study also addresses a long-standing gap: how can we truly measure the impact of influence operations? By integrating a real cyber troop intervention with a randomized design, this study shows a viable way to isolate causal effects. Finally, this study advances theory by re-centering political conformity as a primary mechanism of social influence. For decades, persuasion has dominated explanations of how people are influenced. Yet conformity, often working hand in hand with persuasion, better explains cyber troop operations. In fact, cyber troops illuminate conformity itself: they are built to engineer consensus cues. Thus, political conformity offers an alternative explanation

and a newly illuminated mechanism to better understand how influence operations leverage digital environments.

Most counter-disinformation programs teach citizens to filter misinformation and disinformation. But buzzers work also work through *conformity*. Citizens must be taught to recognize engineered consensus cues within online public discourse. Higher transparency in campaign spending and stricter enforcement of digital campaigning regulations are required. My study prompts us to reconsider how influence operations work in the digital age. The battle for democracy may increasingly be fought not only in the corridors of power, but also in the Instagram comments sections we often ignore.

**The views expressed in the blog are those of the author alone. They do not reflect the position of the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre, nor that of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

***Banner image by the author.*

About the author



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Moses H. Siregar is an MSc candidate in Political Science (Political Behavior) researching the role of cyber troop operations in shaping political conformity in social media.

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